

BETTER HABITS, BETTER YOU

FORM NEW HABITS AND
MAKE THEM STICK

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you can have it all

Better habits, better you

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act but a habit — Aristotle.

Extremely successful people of all times have one thing in common - they give great importance to their daily routines and habits (learn more [1](#), [2](#), [3](#)).

Empirical research estimates that up to 45% of our daily actions are based on habits. (learn more [1](#))

It does not matter if we are talking about getting more things done at work, leading a healthier lifestyle or mastering a new skill, - those who manage to control and optimize their habits tend to achieve higher results with less effort.

This post will provide some insight into the **concept of habits** and highlight several useful tricks that will help you to **form new good habits and make them stick**.



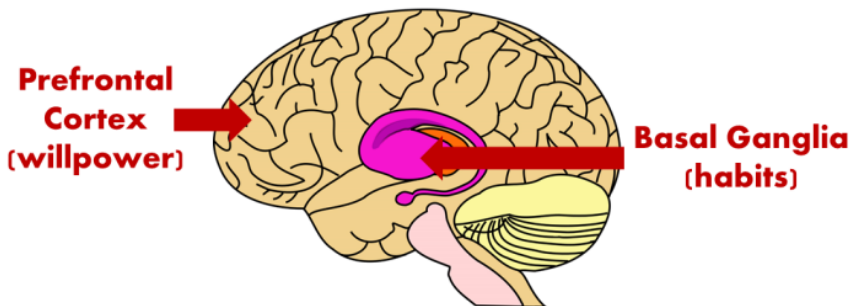
1. How does the brain work?

To understand the importance of habits, let's start with some basic **insights from cognitive neuroscience**.

Our brains have a powerful habit-forming system. The brain section called - the **basal ganglia** - is tasked with programming a **repetitive day-to-day behavior**. Its activity does not require much energy. Therefore, we hardly even think about taking a decision and just follow our instincts. Brushing your teeth in the morning; waiting for a green light to cross the street or doing groceries. For most

people these actions just happen “on autopilot” without spending any effort on a decision-making process.

The **prefrontal cortex** is a section of our brain that is responsible for **self-control** and willpower. It is in charge of everything related to conscious, reasonable decision making. Unlike the basal ganglia, this part of our brain is able to take long-term consequences of our actions into account. Going to the gym twice per week to keep fit; studying lectures during the whole semester not to be overloaded during the exam period or waking up early in the morning to go jogging before work. All these actions are rational decisions that correspond with our long-term objectives.



However, taking the right decisions all the time requires spending a lot of energy. Therefore, the prefrontal cortex gets tired very fast and the **basal ganglia usually overpowers it**. That is why very often we find ourselves coming back to our “autopilot” behavior: ending up at McDonald’s after a strict diet, scrolling down a facebook newsfeed instead of writing a thesis or watching another episode on Netflix instead of reading a book you can not finish for last two months (learn more [1](#)).

What is wrong with the prefrontal cortex and why is it so weak? An influential willpower/ego depletion theory suggests that **willpower is a limited resource**, which means that when the energy for mental activity is low, self-control is typically impaired. A lot of supporting evidence of willpower/ego depletion theory has accumulated over the last decade, however, further research is still needed to draw definite conclusions. (learn more [1](#))

What we do know for sure is that willpower should not be treated as something

given. Otherwise, **willpower is like a muscle**; it takes work and discipline, but you can build your willpower up through creating new habits and changing existing ones. (learn more [1](#), [2](#)).



2. How long does it take to form a new habit?

If you google this question, you will see many articles and websites mentioning a definite time period of **21 days**. However, it is nothing but a **common misconception**.

It started in the 1950s when Maxwell Maltz - a plastic surgeon - noticed that normally it took his patients about 21 days to adjust and get used to their new situations (appearance/physical condition). Later this fact was published in his book about self-development - Psycho-Cybernetics - that became a multimillion-copy bestseller and instantly spread the "21 days" myth across the globe (learn more [1](#)).

Unfortunately, in reality, there is no simple answer to the question above. How long it takes a new habit to form can **vary widely** depending on individual behavior, personality type and circumstances. Famous Lally's study on habit formation indicates that it took anywhere **from 18 days to 254 days** for people participating in her research to form a new habit (learn more [1](#)).

To sum up, **set your expectations appropriately** and try to **be patient**.



3. What is a habit?

According to Charles Duhigg - an author of a best-selling book called The Power of Habit, there is a simple 3-step pattern that every habit follows ([learn more 1](#)).

Sometimes it is called “**3R’s of Habit Change**”:

- 1) **Reminder** - an external cue that causes an overall spike in your brain activity (alarm ringing)
- 2) **Routine** - a certain activity you are performing when faced a particular cue (brushing your teeth)
- 3) **Reward** - a benefit that you receive after completing the routine (fresh teeth)

Each element is equally important and should be addressed while forming a new habit ([learn more 1](#)).



4. How to form a habit?

- **Analyze your potential**

Before introducing any new habits into your daily routine, you need to do your homework - **find out your current habits** and understand how you can **improve them**.

It can be done simply by **observing your own behavior** for several days (learn more [1](#)) and writing down your actions during each hour of the day. Consider using apps like [Moment](#), [Break Free](#) or [Rescue Time](#) to track your phone/computer usage.

After several days, you will **identify some patterns** of your behavior that you might not necessarily like. Spending the first 20 minutes after waking up checking your phone; listening to the radio for 3 hours per day while commuting; or getting snacks from a vending machine downstairs when you feel tired? If it

sounds familiar, you have just identified a high-potential improvement area to introduce new habits. This is a place to start.

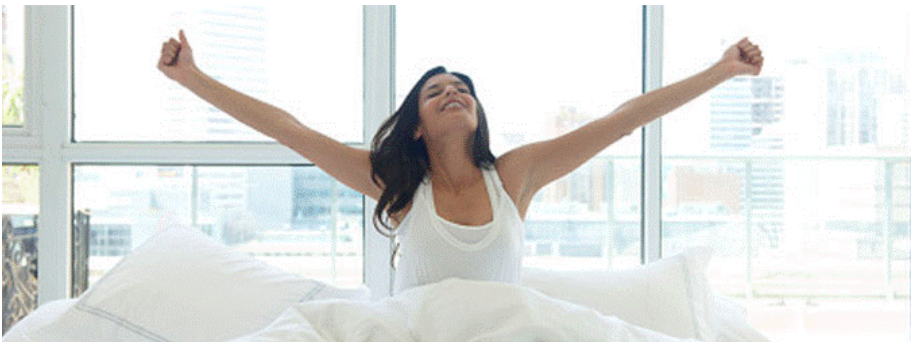


- **Start slow**

Do not try to change all your habits at once. Overnight success never happens when we speak about habit change. True **results can be achieved only step by step**.

One possible way is to focus first on habits that **disturb you the most**. You can also divide all your habits into **smaller groups** associated with different parts of the day and work only with one group at the same time.

Start with optimizing your morning routine: replacing the old habits you are not happy with the new ones (reading newspapers instead of watching tv-series during breakfast) or introducing completely new habits (waking up 20 minutes earlier to do morning exercises). When you feel confident about your new morning routine, you can start optimizing the next group of habits - your end-of-the-day routine.



- **Keep it small**

Undoubtedly it is very important to have big goals. However, to achieve them we need to **work with small daily habits**. An author of famous book “Mini habits” - Stephen Guise - introduces the concept of tiny objectives that require little effort to achieve but still make some progress towards your big goal. He calls them mini habits (learn more [1](#), [2](#)).

The greatest hurdle we face is **going from inertia to mobility**. Mini habits make this important step much easier, which increases the overall likelihood of success. If you are studying a foreign language - commit to learning 3 new words a day and not 30; If you want to add morning exercises to your daily routine - start with a 15 min early work-out and not 45.

Moreover, when you are **already in motion**, you need **less willpower to continue** your actions. It means that you can always overwork your mini habit threshold: learn 30 new foreign words a day instead of 3 and do a 45 min morning workout instead of 15.

You can also **increase your mini habit threshold** step by step while making progress and feeling more comfortable about your willpower.



- **Adjust your environment**

One more way to make the first step easier is to adjust your external environment. Make sure that you can **reach your goal with the least possible effort required** and otherwise, introduce **additional barriers to overcome to follow temptation**.

Do you want to read daily news regularly? Set Bloomberg as your home page so you would see it every day when you open a browser. Are you trying to stop checking your Whatsapp notifications every 5 minutes while working? Put your phone away in your bag so you would not see it at all. Do you want to work out more often? Keep your sports clothes in your car so you would be always ready to hit the gym.



- **Use if-then planning**

Have you heard about “if-then planning”? This technique is uniquely useful when it comes to resisting temptation and building good habits because it can introduce two crucial concepts of any habit - reminder and routine - at the same time.

It was found that **91% of people who used if-then planning stuck to their exercise program opposed to 39% who didn't**(learn more [1](#)). Moreover, this technique works great for all spheres of our life because it **affects our subconscious mind**. When we form if-then statements, our brain will unconsciously scan our environment for “if” cases. When “if” case actually happens, “then” case will be triggered automatically without requiring much willpower (learn more [1](#)).

If X happens, then I will do Y. X can be a time (Monday at 9 a.m)/ a place (at work)/ an event (Friends’ birthday) /an emotional condition (feeling stressed) /a company (colleagues). Y is the specific action you will take whenever X occurs. If it’s Saturday morning, I go to the swimming pool; If I am on the train, I read a book; If I am in the supermarket doing groceries and I see chocolate, I won’t buy one; If I feel tired, I go to meditate for 1 minute; If I am with my colleagues, I speak English.



- **Mix your habits**

Try to **connect your desired habits with other habits** or routines that you already have. The power of so-called habit stacking or piggybacking is well-known by psychologists for a long time (learn more [1](#)).

If it is morning, you go for a run; If you are running, you are listening to flashcard to learn new foreign words. Therefore, if it is morning, you go for a run & listen to flashcards to learn new foreign words



- **Have a plan for obstacles**

Think about the obstacles that might prevent you from your new habit and **take preventative actions** to overcome them. Use If-Then approach for this purpose. The most common obstacles to consider are: time, pain, weather, space, costs, self-consciousness.

If I overslept and I do not have enough time to see a TED lecture during my

breakfast, I do it during my lunch. If it is raining and I do not feel like running outside, I go to the university gym and run there.



- **Track your progress**

A simple chain method forms a rhythmic philosophy that helps significantly to master your desired habit. Get a big calendar, hang it on a wall and start crossing days when you made it work. You see your chain growing and soon it becomes a game. You start to compete with yourself. The only rule is **not to break the chain** (learn more [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

Otherwise, you can simply use a notebook /excel file or one of existing habit tracking apps: my favourite ones - [Coach.me](#) and [Productive](#). Some apps ([Habitica](#), [Superbetter](#)) even prototype a real game experience to make the process more fun. Check out more habit tracking apps [here](#).

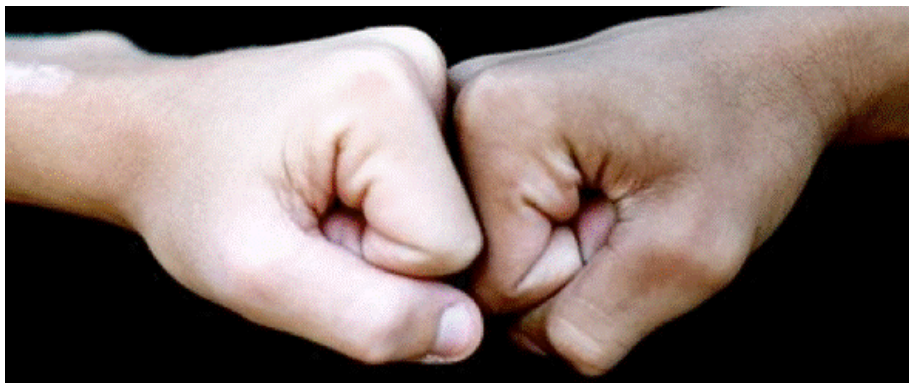


- **Share your progress**

Normally we are more adhere and committed to our decisions when other people

hold us accountable for our behaviors. Therefore, seeking an **accountability partner** who will help you stick to your commitments might be a great idea. Also, you can always join online communities /forums/groups related to a certain habit change.

Some people might feel even more committed if they report and share their success/failure results daily with **abig social group** (blog, Twitter, Facebook, email, or friends at work).



- **Reward yourself**

Another interesting behavioral tendency connected with habits is **waiting for the reward**. Since we are used to the certain activity and we know the expected result, our mind starts to anticipate the reward even before receiving it.

Rewarding positive habits and **redirecting rewards from negative habits** will make it easier to achieve progress.

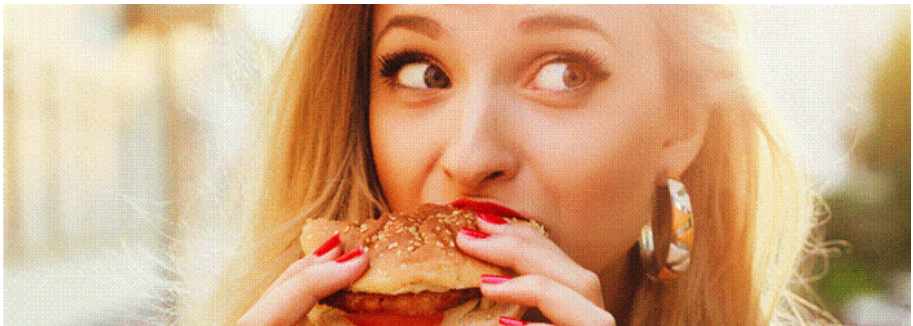
Every week when you finally manage to go to the swimming-pool, treat yourself with a tasty smoothie right after. Commit to staying in all Friday evening, if you smoked a cigarette when you were not supposed to do so. If you succeed with reading 4 pages every day for 30 days in a row, make it a rule to go shopping.



- **Eliminate “What the Hell Effect”**

Be aware of “What the Hell Effect” and do not let it happen. In psychology “What the Hell Effect” helps to explain habit failure and how seemingly a **small setback often leads to giving up on all the progress achieved**. The “what the hell effect” can be applied to any sort of goal-setting or willpower task, but it’s most commonly associated with dieting/smoking/gambling.

Setting mini goals that are realistic enough and easy to achieve will definitely help you to avoid “What the Hell Effect”. However, it is even more important to change your mindset and **focus on how often you succeed** rather than on the fact of failure.



As a traditional final motivation booster, check this [TED-talk](#) about breaking bad habits given by a well-known psychiatrist Judson Brewer .

Thanks for reading and good luck with new habits that will make you better!

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