

A Creature of Habit

Andrea Harkleroad, LCSW

As the New Year arrived, many of us followed the time-honored tradition of making resolutions to improve ourselves in some way. Ordinarily, I disdained from ever trying to make one for myself, as I know that most New Year's resolutions never even make it into spring. But this year, was different in part because I have begun reading [The Power of Habit](#) by Charles Duhigg. Duhigg explains not only how habits form but just how powerful they can be at determining many of our actions throughout each day. "Perhaps," I thought, "if I can understand WHY I bite my nails or how to make exercise a healthy habit, then I stand a fighting chance of being successful!" It was heartening to think that I might actually be successful at creating some positive change for myself, that perhaps I wasn't entirely a creature of habit.

Duhigg points out that our brains are assaulted by a huge number of decisions or choices that must be made from moment to moment as we go about our daily lives. In order to free up our processing power in our brains, many of those decisions that we regularly make become automatic routines or habits. I don't have to think about how I brush my teeth or take a shower as those habits are so deeply ingrained that my awareness of each step has faded. The whole point being that a habit is the brain's way of taking a shortcut to save effort so that you can focus upon more complicated tasks that require intense focus. **A Duke University study determined that 40% of the actions we take during the day are not based upon well-thought out decisions but are actually habits.** What we choose to wear each day, which radio station we listen to in the car, which coffee place we visit before work are likely all habits we've become comfortable with and rarely vary. Thus, if you really want to change a habit, you must first become aware of each time you do it.

Examples of studies were given in [The Power of Habit](#), in which a group of people were

asked to track what they ate all day long, every day. As you might imagine, this was pretty annoying to have to do but for those diligent folks who did manage to write it all down, an odd phenomenon occurred. Participants who tracked every morsel of food actually lost weight! Not because that was part of the study, but the simple act of tracking their daily food intake was enough to bring awareness back to something that had been a habit for many of the participants. Once you become aware of your habit, it becomes possible to make changes. And if you even go so far as to record what you're eating and when, you may begin to note a pattern for yourself. "Hmmm....I tend to eat a ridiculous amount of sugary food at about 3:00 pm every day. Why is that?" Maybe that's when many of your coworkers gather in the kitchen for cookies and gossip. Further investigation is then needed to determine what is driving the habit. Is it the social interaction or is it the sugar you eat? Duhigg notes that determining what is driving your behavior or "the reward," can sometimes be tricky to figure out. You've got to experiment with different options to see if that has any effect. "If I eat a yogurt instead of cookies, does that make a difference? Or if I socialize with others but skip the cookies, how does that feel?"

My own bad habit of avoiding workouts was coming to an end, I resolved but in order to create a positive habit, I figured it would be best if I analyzed my own previous attempts to see what helped and what did not. I knew that it did actually make a difference as to whether or not I joined a gym vs. working out on my own. On my own, I found myself stopping earlier and working out less often. "Good enough!" I would think to myself... except that it really wasn't. There is a powerful effect that occurs when you're surrounded by people who are doing the same thing that you're doing. This enhances your own belief that change is possible. Peer support (or pressure) is certainly a powerful motivator and might also create some additional positive momentum.

Continuing my self-assessment, I was forced to admit that I am prone to unrealistic expectations. I want to be good at whatever I'm attempting **immediately**, which is why I will never try to learn golf, as I would be the person who chucks her clubs straight into the nearest pond in frustration. Setting some realistic goals is critical for success, particularly if you're a bit of a perfectionist like me. I decided to add two workouts during the week as I already had a Saturday workout in my routine. I knew that if I aimed too high and planned for daily workouts, I was more likely to give up the first time I ran into problems.

Quarterly Quote

"Laziness is nothing more than the habit of resting before you get tired."

—Jules Renard

The timing for my new "habit" is also important to consider. While I am most decidedly NOT a morning person, I knew from past experience that it was too easy to excuse myself from working out at the end of the day because I was hungry, tired, stressed, etc. In fact, Duhigg notes in his book that you should really think of willpower like it's a muscle. If you've been flexing it all day long by saying "No" to surfing the internet instead of working on your project, avoiding those tasty doughnuts that someone brought in to the break room, or even stopping yourself from gossiping with your coworker, etc. then chances are good that when quitting time rolls around, your willpower "muscle" is a limp noodle – exhausted and ready for bed.

After weighing all of these factors, I finally

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A Creature of Habit, Continued

decided to try waking up a half an hour earlier and work out at home. True, it wasn't the gym but I wanted to see if I could do this on my own. Getting up a little earlier wouldn't change my morning routine THAT much since it would be the very first thing to do and had the added benefit of location! Plus at that time of the morning, I am typically too groggy to be able to rationalize my way out of it. I've found that by setting out my workout clothes, my hair tie, my water bottle, shoes and socks that working out was pretty much of a done deal by the time the alarm went off and I rolled out of bed. By envisioning what I would do in the

morning before my shower, I was better able to head off most of the potential problems that might sabotage my efforts. In fact, Duhigg encourages people to anticipate all of the potential problems you might run into and then create a plan of action for dealing with them. This helps solidify the likelihood of success. So I decided that if I caved in and let myself sleep longer on a workout morning that I would be obligated to exercise the very next morning. I could still keep to my twice-during-the-week schedule without feeling like a failure and giving up on the whole plan.

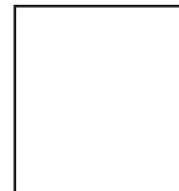
So far, I'm only 4 weeks into my new "routine". Whether or not that becomes a habit remains to be seen; however, I do feel that I have deeper understanding about habits and the power they have over our lives. This understanding has enabled me to feel more in control of my choices and while I remain a creature of many habits, this isn't necessarily a bad thing after all.

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