

## Change your habits, Change your life

by Susanna Halonen

*Finding it tricky to stick with your self-improvement plans? Susanna Halonen has a strategy to get you on track:*



I used to think happiness and success were driven by the goals I set. If I set the right goals and worked hard on achieving them, I would be happy and successful. I tried this approach for years, yet I failed to reach my goals. That's when I knew something had to change. That's when I realised my problem was my actions.

Around 40 per cent of your daily actions are based on habits. That means that if you master your habits, you'll master your life. Clearly, this was a memo I hadn't received. I'd forgotten about my habits and hadn't noticed how some of them had taken me away from my goals. That's when I knew it was time to change my habits.

Charles Duhigg, author of *Power of Habit*, identifies three different parts to the habit loop that's ingrained in your brain. In order to kill a habit or build a new one, you need to study the habit loops in your own brain. Start by identifying the three components of the number one habit you want to change.

### **1. What triggers your habit?**

This could be the time of the day, a location, a person or the people around you, an action or a specific emotion. This is your cue for the habit. For example, the cue could be getting up in the morning (an action) or going to dinner with your best friend (a person).

### **2. What behaviour or routine follows this cue?**

This is basically what we usually call the habit. For example, drinking morning coffee could be the behaviour that immediately follows your cue of getting up. Having a glass of wine could be the behaviour that always accompanies going out with your friend.

### **3. What craving is your habit satisfying?**

This is the reward you get from doing the behaviour in your habit loop. For example, when you drink coffee right after getting up, your reward is you feeling more alert.

When you have wine when you're with your friend, the reward might be feeling more relaxed, having great conversations and laughing loads.

Each habit, regardless of how simple or complex it is, will have this habit loop in place.

The craving that occurs whenever you're subject to the cue is an actual neurological craving in your brain. Because you've done the behaviour so many times with the same cue and the same reward, the neural pathway for the habit is so strong that it sets you off on autopilot whenever you're subject to the cue.

That's why it's difficult to change old habits. You actually need to change what's in your brain. You need to change it repeatedly until the habit loop gets encoded into the subconscious part of your brain.

### **4. So how do you get started?**

First, identify one habit that's holding you back from your goals. Identify the trigger and reward that's associated with the habit. Then, think about which new, better behaviour could replace this bad behaviour – whilst keeping the trigger and the reward the same.

For example, I used to have morning coffee first thing to wake up. It wasn't good because it shot my cortisol levels through the roof and I started to stress before the day had even begun. This made me unfocused and unproductive. I had to find an alternative to wake up my body and mind.

I resorted to hot water with lemon and ginger – and 15 minutes of yoga. Now, when I wake up, I add lemon and ginger to a hot cup of water, and get on the mat for 15 minutes of yoga. This wakes my body and mind up in a completely different way, and gives me a much more sustained type of energy for the day.

Now, identify one new habit that will help you to reach your most important goal. Come up with a trigger for it and a behaviour that gives you a reward. For example, my most important goal right now is to write more.

So after my morning yoga, I have a light, quick breakfast and then immediately start the day with 30 minutes of writing on my laptop. Sometimes it has a focus, sometimes I just write whatever comes to mind. But I always do it when I open up my laptop, and it always gives me a sense of achievement because I'm making the time to do something that fulfills and develops me.

If you want to reach your goals and change your life, start by changing your habits. With the right habits in place, nothing will stop you.

As Tony Dungy said, "Champions don't do extraordinary things. They do ordinary things, but they do them without thinking, too fast for others to react. They follow the habits they've learned."

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