

'Why people don't change: Making and breaking habits'

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"Most of the time what we do is what we do most of the time.
Sometimes we do something new" (Townsend & Bewer,
2001, p.2)

A psychological explanation of 'habit'

William James (1890) advised us to '*make habitual and automatic, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can.*'

Signal contingent diary studies such as Wood, Quinn & Kashy (2002) showed that about 45% of behaviours listed by people in their diaries were repeated in the same physical location almost every day.

Habits are a cognitively efficient means of self-regulation. The unconscious (automatic) control of many actions and decisions frees up cognitive and self-regulatory resources for the pursuit of goals and activities requiring conscious control.

A psychological explanation of habit

- Habits develop as people repeatedly perform an action in response to a particular cue and thereby form direct associations in memory between that performance context and the action. What might act as a cue? A previous action, a thought, a feeling, a place, a person.
- Once a habit is formed, perception of the context directly cues the behaviour. Even if the context cue is perceived outside of conscious awareness.
- Whilst we may begin to repeat a behaviour because we are pursuing a goal (protect the environment, satisfy hunger, lose weight), or following instruction (parental instruction to brush teeth), over time the action can become dissociated from the goal so that context alone can cue it.
- Habits are quick to activate in memory over other alternative actions and slow to modify.

We are aware of our habits

- People are able to report on the extent to which something they do is a habit because we can ask them about the experience of ‘automaticity’
- The Self-report Habit Index (SRHI, Verplanken & Orbell, 2003) includes 12 items such as;
- Doing X is something;
- “I start doing without realising I am doing it”
- “I do without thinking”
- “That would require effort not to do”
- “I do frequently”

How long does it take to acquire a habit?

- Using the SRHI, a study by Philippa Lally (2009) investigated how people developed habits over time.
- 96 people were asked to choose a healthy eating, drinking or exercise behaviour they did not do already and that could be performed on a daily basis in response to a salient event/context (cue).
- People chose actions such as 'drinking a bottle of water with lunch', 'eating a piece of fruit with lunch', 'eating a piece of fruit when watching the TV in the evening', walking for 10 minutes after breakfast' etc.
- The average number of days of repetition to form a habit plateau was 66 days (range 18-254 days).
- About half the participants did not perform the behaviour consistently enough to reach automaticity.
- Exercise behaviours took much longer to plateau than did eating and drinking behaviours.

Consequences of behaving habitually

- When we encounter the cue or context in which we have repeatedly performed the action, we may perform the action even in opposition to what we intended to accomplish and without regard for what we currently value.

We are more likely to behave in accordance with our habits (both good and bad) when we are distracted or our self-control resources are depleted.

Distraction promotes reliance on habits by occupying working memory so that people are locked into habits. Habit intrusions such as driving to work when intending to go shopping are more likely when people are preoccupied (Reason, 1990).

Self control resources refer to our ability to exert control over our thoughts, emotions and behaviours. These resources can be depleted so that people have insufficient capacity to exert control over habits (Baumeister, Muraven & Tice 2000).

Pascoe et al (2009) depleted resources by having people use their non-dominant hand for a range of daily tasks. Whilst doing so, participants increased their performance of both desirable (gym going) and undesirable (alcohol use) habits.

If so much is habitual how can we change it?

- Recognise habits for what they are- behaviours that are automatically triggered. Do not make inferences about the causes of one's own behaviour; "I keep snacking so I must need sugar"
- Because habits lead us to be less aware of alternative means of meeting a goal, we need to encourage information search about alternatives.
- Identify, avoiding or removing cues and contexts that cue the habits. Exploit naturally occurring changes in one's environment to allow old habits to 'die out'. Target new residents to an area who do not have context specific habits. Simple changes to cues- e.g. smaller plates cue smaller portions.
- Effortful inhibition or substitution of habit response when the cue is encountered. May be tricky in the long run if it leads to preoccupied thinking or self-control is depleted. Support with other mechanisms or rewards.

Forming new habits

- Appropriate methods of changing beliefs and values by persuasion is a first step. Habits develop by initiating behaviour and repeating it in a stable context. People need to develop positive beliefs about an action/product and intend to try it. They then need to repeat the action.
- Incentives to try may be helpful only if the reward incentive is not highly contingent on the behaviour. We want to develop an association between cue and behaviour, not behaviour and reward. Infrequent or unlikely rewards are better!
- Recent work on implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1993) suggests that we can speed up the process of habit formation by forming a very specific intention to perform a particular action X in a specified context Y (place or time). This increases the likelihood of remembering to act and puts in place the link between context and action in memory.

Summary

- Habits are useful and the formation of habits consistent with current goals and values is a good thing.
- However, precisely because habits enable us to act ‘without thinking’, especially when we are distracted by other thoughts, they also lead us to ‘get stuck’ in patterns of behaviour that we may no longer value.
- To deviate from habits we need to exert effortful self-control not to respond to the cue, whilst allowing a window of opportunity to develop new habits for more valuable behaviour.