

Creating Effective Learning Habits

Habits are a series of actions, thoughts or emotions we do in the same order on a routine basis. Researchers estimate that between 40-50% of our daily actions are done out of habit. Creating habits is our brains way of exerting less mental effort to do the things we routinely do.

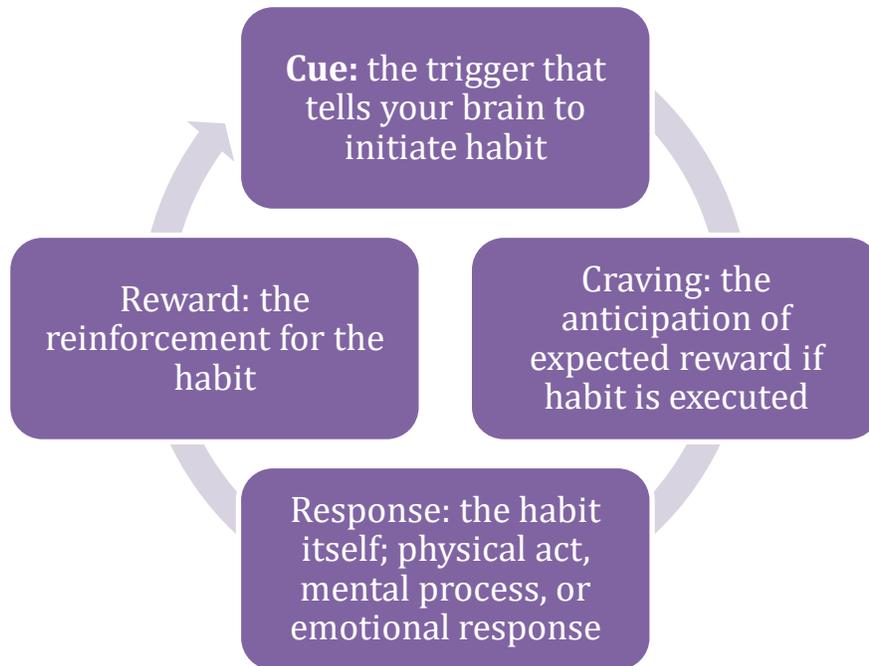
Reflect on the following: What habits do you imagine effective students might have?, What habits do you currently have that are helping you feel like a productive and effective learner?, What habits do you currently have that are standing in your way of being a productive and effective learner?, What new habits would you like to implement into your learning routine?

Our habits are very individual. Reflecting on where you are and where you'd like to be with your habits is crucial to any habit formation plan. Ask yourself:

What's your why?: Altering your habits starts with the desire to want to change. Understanding why you want to implement a new habit is imperative to starting that habit. Consider the habit you're hoping to implement and why that is a habit you'd like to execute.

What's your how?: Once you've understood your why it's important to set your sights on understanding your how - how do you intend to follow through with this habit. It's important to set in place a plan that is very specific, clear, and reasonable so that you're giving yourself the best possible opportunity to successfully establish the habit you're seeking.

The 4 Steps of Habit Formation



Strategies for Creating Positive Learning Habits

Make the cue obvious

Be aware of your habits: Reflect on your habits and understand the conditions that trigger them. Track your habit for a number of days to try to determine any patterns. Once you've come to better understand the conditions that trigger your habit then you can start to manipulate them to give you the results you desire.

Habit-stack: When trying to establish a new habit pair it up with a consistent existing habit to leverage the momentum you already have.

Use your environment: Identify the cue the triggers your habit and then alter your environment to make that cue as obvious as possible.

Make the craving attractive

Bundle habits to share the cravings: Existing habits come with well-established cravings. Pair a new habit with an existing habit and share the cravings and the positive feelings associated with it.

Find your people: Surround yourself with others who are seeking similar personal improvement or, even better, who are already demonstrating habits that you seek to establish for yourself. Find a friend that has successful learning habits and arrange to spend as much time together with them as possible so that you are inspired to follow their lead.

Seek out the craving: Be really intentional about identifying and highlighting the craving for any intended habit and seek it out.

Make the habit easy

Remove barriers: Remove as many barriers to your habit as possible so you can make it easier to follow through. Consider what barriers are currently in your way and determine how to eliminate or minimize them.

Start small: When trying to establish a new habit, rather than jumping right to your desired goal behaviour, take smaller steps to get there. This approach will allow you to feel successful along the way which provides the consistent reward that is so important for successful habit formation.

Harness momentum: Habit formation starts slowly and takes time to establish but once you experience some success the habit ball really gets rolling. Once you're feeling confident with your first small step towards your habit, start to add to it or stretch your expectations a little at a time. Don't jump too far because then you risk missing your mark and losing momentum.

Make the reward satisfying

Win early: Our brains crave reward and make increased effort to follow through with a desired behaviour in an attempt to get it therefore, it is essential to make the reward as obvious and satisfying as possible. Rewards can be either intrinsic or extrinsic.

Keep track: Track your behaviour in order to provide tangible evidence of your progress. This will also provide data about necessary habit adjustments.

Change your perspective: How you view the likelihood of successfully establishing a new habit goes a long way to determining whether you will reach your target behaviour. It is important to believe that you can and that you will achieve your goal rather than you can't and you won't.

Find an accountability buddy: Find a friend whom you trust and tell them what you are trying to do. This raises your level of accountability and thus, increases the likelihood of you successfully following through.

Strategies for Breaking Counterproductive Learning Habits

Make the cue invisible

Track your habit paying close attention to the circumstances that lead you to follow-through with the behaviour. Once you feel confident that you've identified the cue that is triggering it, do what you can to remove it or alter it so its impact is lessened.

Make the craving unattractive

Craving the reward that comes with your habit is one way that your habitual behaviour is reinforced so negatively altering the craving can help to eliminate the unwanted behaviour. Consider ways to make the craving significantly more unattractive.

Make the response difficult

Our brain has been wired to move ahead with the habit response as soon as the cue triggers the craving response. This happens subconsciously and, without even thinking about it, you will find yourself in the midst of your habit behaviour. However, if you make the response more difficult you buy yourself some time to recognize your action and to consciously decide to resist.

Make the reward unsatisfying

Carefully consider what reward you are getting as a result of following through with the habit you are trying to change and find a way to remove the short-term gain in order to make the habit immediately unsatisfying.

Keys to Success

Patience is key

As with anything new, it will take awhile to feel confident that you've established your new desired habit. Be kind to yourself along the way by setting clear, reasonable goals and patiently working towards them. Your new habit will not be formed overnight. Approach the process with the long-range in mind and each day show up for yourself knowing you are one step closer to forming your desired habit.

Repeat, repeat, repeat

Forming a new habit is all about repetition. The length of time it will take to establish a new habit varies widely by person and behaviour but one thing that always remains true is that repetition is vitally important to the process of establishing long-term habits.

Get back on the horse

Missing your habit once has no long-term impact on your future habit formation unless you let that slip get you off track completely. In fact, there are a lot of lessons to be learned from the experience. Ask yourself, "what happened today that got me off track and what can I do differently tomorrow?". You shouldn't expect to fail but you should plan for it just in case. Consider all possible barriers to following through with your habit formation plan and pre-emptively come up with plans for going over or around them.

Plan for action by reflecting on the following: What learning habits do you intend to implement or change? And how do you intend to do so? Write down 1 habit goal and your plan for reaching it to help improve your habit formation success.

"You'll never change your life until you change something you do daily. The secret of your success is found in your daily routine." -John C. Maxwell

References

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Duhigg, C. (2014). *The power of habit: Why we do what we do in life and business*. Toronto, ON: Doubleday Canada.