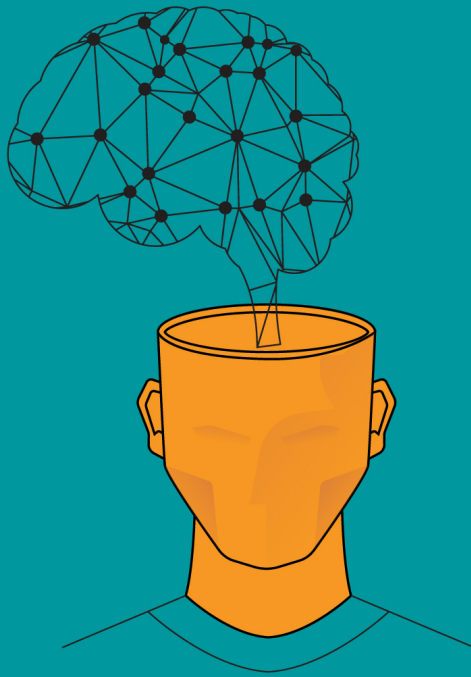


SUMMARY

ULTRA LEARNING

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Summary of «The Power of Habit» by Charles Duhigg

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An inside look at how the human brain influences our everyday decisions and how we can unlock our potential and adapt our habits to enact positive change.



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Introduction

How many times do you find yourself deciding to start working out more, begin eating healthier, or finally quitting cigarettes? You become successful for a few days, weeks, maybe even months, but suddenly the craving for your former habit becomes so great that you succumb and you fall back into your old habits. It happens all the time, right? We find ourselves wanting to make a change, but we find it too hard to keep those changes long-term. If you find yourself nodding your head or agreeing with that statement, then you already know the power that habit has on your life.

Throughout *The Power of Habit*, you'll find out just how you can break those bad habits and form new, positive ones. Through learning how the human brain influences our everyday decisions, you'll learn exactly how our habits control our actions as well as how they influence our society. But, you'll soon be equipped with the knowledge to overcome the power of habit and adopt new ones that can lead to a positive, life-changing lifestyle.

The Habit Loop

Think about your morning routine. How do you begin your day? Perhaps you drag yourself out of bed at some ungodly hour, trudge yourself to the kitchen, grab the coffee pot, and start filling it with water. Do you ever stop to ask yourself “what do I do next?” No, of course not! That’s because your brain has formed a habit that allows you to act like a robot to get things done. So, you immediately pour the water into the coffee maker, place the pot, pour the coffee grounds into the filter, and hit the “on” button. Of course, more sophisticated coffee makers run on a timer nowadays, but regardless of your routine, perhaps it’s making your morning smoothie or grabbing your protein shake to head to the gym, you never have to stop and think about your next step.

While that coffee is what makes a lot of us get out of bed in the morning, how does our brain allow us to make that coffee without even thinking? Some of us are probably still half asleep! The answer is that our habits are wired in the primal region of our brain near the spinal cord within a structure called the basal ganglia. To understand how this area helps us form habits, let’s take a look at the group of MIT researchers who studied the activity of mice.

Placed inside of a T-shaped maze, the mice had to find their way to a piece of chocolate placed at the end of the maze. Additionally, researchers tracked the brain activity of the mice as they made their way to the chocolate. Eventually, the mice learned to memorize how to get to the chocolate by entering the maze and turning left. As they learned this, their brain activity decreased. This process of turning a sequence of actions into an automatic routine is called “chunking” and has an evolutionary role that allows our brain to save energy and perform our everyday tasks more efficiently.

Every habit can be broken down into three parts called “the habit loop.” A habit first begins with a cue, or a signal that triggers the habit. Let’s say it’s

your alarm clock ringing that triggers your brain to determine which steps to take next. Then comes the routine which is just the set of actions you take. So that's when making coffee on autopilot comes in. Your routine becomes getting out of bed and walking to the kitchen to begin setting up your coffee pot. Finally, you get the reward, sipping that hot cup of delicious coffee which allows you to wake up and continue your day. Once you enjoy the reward, your brain activity begins to increase again and reinforces the link between the cue and routine.

According to Duhigg, habits are “the choices that all of us deliberately make at some point, and then stop thinking about but continue doing, often every day.” So when you think about it, how many of your daily decisions are based on habit? If you remember, habits are automatic, so a better question might be “how many decisions do you make without even thinking about it?” You'll soon realize that no less than 40 percent of choices are actually habits. Now it's time to learn how to harness the profound power of habit.

The Golden Rule of Habit Change

Morning and afternoon routines become an essential part of your life as you work your daily grind. For instance, you may have a specific coffee shop that you frequent every morning to get your daily caffeine fix. Maybe you have a routine of stopping by the gym every day after work. These routines eventually become habits, and while these habits are harmless and actually healthy, it shows just how easy it is to adopt unhealthy habits as well. Perhaps instead of stopping by that morning coffee shop, you stop by that morning McDonald's and instead of ordering coffee, you order a sugary sweet tea and a sausage and egg biscuit.

Once you realize you might be putting on weight due to your morning McDonald's fix, you'll see how increasingly hard it becomes to drive past your usual spot without stopping. You might find yourself stopping "just this last time" or driving past and becoming grumpy for the rest of the day. Kicking a bad habit is hard because of the craving you develop for the reward at the end of the habit loop. Each morning you crave that rush of sugar as you sip that sweet tea and that savory sausage biscuit that sticks to your gut. So to conquer bad habits, the habit loop must be adapted.

Duhigg discusses the case of Ray, the owner of Sea on the Range, a surf and turf restaurant. What was once a successful business is now a dwindling business because of the habits of Ray and his employees. Working close to 80 hours a week, Ray has picked up a drinking habit where he indulges in a double whiskey at the end of a long day to take the edge off. While he's not an alcoholic, he finds himself craving his drink earlier and earlier in the day, sometimes he even indulges in a cold beer before the end of the day. His drinking habit has begun to affect not only his patience but also his profits. When Ray indulges in a drink or two, he finds himself becoming less and less patient with his employees who tend to ignore customers looking for a drink refill. His short fuse has caused Ray to scream at employees in front of customers and has contributed to his inability to keep

good workers. It's clear that Ray needs to change his habits to turn his business around.

An essential part of changing your habit is identifying each element of the habit loop. For instance, Ray was able to specify the cue which was the end of a stressful day, the craving became the burn of the whiskey, the routine was sipping his double whiskey, and the reward was the relaxation he felt after indulging in his drink. This leads to what Duhigg considers the "Golden Rule of Habit Change:" Don't change the cue or reward; change the routine (the craving then must also change). Just a small change in the habit loop can have a life-changing impact.

So, how can Ray change his routine to stop his drinking habit? Well, Ray is one of the lucky ones to own a \$25,000 pool in his backyard. So instead of craving the burn of the whiskey, Ray can begin to crave the smell of chlorine and the feeling of the water washing away the sweat of a long day. Replace his sips of whiskey with laps in the pool and Ray can replace his drinking habit with swimming after a long day of work. This is why programs like Alcoholics Anonymous are so successful. Rather than relieving stress at the bar, participants relieve their stress by attending meetings and venting or commiserating with other members of the program. However, simply replacing a routine might not be enough, Duhigg advises people like Ray to focus on nurturing his new craving, if we dwell on the cravings that drive our routines, it will be easier to maintain our habits.

Adopting Keystone Habits

Change can be scary and can be met with skepticism by those who fear to change the most. If you work at a major company, you know how scary it can be to implement new policies and change the direction of the company. Typically, these new CEOs are initially met with skepticism as people question the direction the CEO is going, and Paul O'Neill experienced just that when he took over Alcoa in 1987, an aluminum company that had seen better days.

You can imagine the response O'Neill received when delivering the news that he would no longer be focusing on profit and revenue; instead, he would make workplace safety his number one priority. Investors began to question O'Neill's credibility, one even went so far as to immediately call up a client and say "The Board put a crazy hippie in charge and he's going to kill the company." Stakeholders and shareholders were not on board and did not like his approach, but O'Neill knew the importance of changing the habits of the company, and he set out to do just that. He also recognized that some habits are more important than others, and these habits are what Duhigg considers keystone habits.

Keystone habits suggest that we don't necessarily have to change every single thing; instead, we can focus on one or two priorities that lead to success. These few priorities begin to act as "small wins" which then spill over to other areas and create more small wins. Prioritizing just one or two keystone habits can begin a domino effect of positive change within a company. O'Neill chose to prioritize worker safety, which forced managers and employees to think about how to make the manufacturing process safer and determine how to communicate these safety suggestions. The result would be a productive, profitable organization. By suggesting employees focus on one keystone habit, O'Neill recognized how disrupting habits around one thing would spread positive change throughout the rest of the company.

So how did O'Neill's changes affect the company? Well, would we be mentioning it if it weren't a success? Of course not! Despite their initial doubts, O'Neill's approach became a huge success. After his retirement in 2000, Alcoa's annual net income had become five times greater since O'Neill took over.

But changing keystone habits can be implemented by individuals as well, not just giant corporations. For instance, Michael Phelps, the Olympic Gold Medalist Swimmer, adopted visualization and calming techniques as his keystone habits. He believes his ability to visualize his success and calm his nerves is what made him stand out above the rest. Additionally, research suggests that developing keystone habits when trying to lose weight can become critical for adopting healthy habits. Focusing on just one habit like keeping a food journal can become a small win that acts as a domino effect for other small wins to take root. These small wins can lead to big, positive lifestyle changes.

The Significance of Willpower

Replacing bad habits with good ones all sounds good in theory. Sure, replace your whiskey with a swim. Replace your cigarette with a piece of gum. Replace your weekend television binge with an outdoor hike! It all sounds easy, but if you've found yourself trying to quit smoking or lose weight, then you know how hard it is to adopt these new habits. That's because our willpower is essential in building important habits. Duhigg states that no other keystone habit is more important than willpower.

In the 1960s, Stanford conducted a famous study that brought in a large number of four-year-olds into a room, one by one. In the room was a table, and on that table was a yummy marshmallow that many four-year-olds find hard to resist. The researchers gave each child a choice. Either eat the marshmallow or wait a few minutes and receive two marshmallows. The researcher then left the room for 15 minutes. It turns out that only about 30 percent of the children managed to withstand the craving of eating that tiny delicious marshmallow.

The most significant part of the study came years later when researchers tracked down each participant, who were now adults, and found that those who exhibited willpower and waited the full 15 minutes ended up having the best grades in school, were more popular on average, and were less likely to develop bad habits like drug addiction. Additionally, more studies have found similar findings. For instance, a 2005 study of eighth-graders revealed that those who exhibited high levels of willpower had better grades and were more likely to get into highly selective schools.

But willpower isn't something that we are born with, rather willpower is an ability. With time and practice, we can train and harden our will.

Researchers from Case Western Reserve University conducted a study that asked participants to refrain from eating a cookie, while others were not.

However, those that refrained found themselves later struggling to focus on completing a puzzle, showing that their willpower was exhausted. But like

anything, practice makes perfect, and you can strengthen your willpower over time.

For instance, the major company of Starbucks found that many of their employees had the willpower to put a smile on their face and be kind to their customers. However, once a stressful situation occurred, such as a customer yelling and complaining, most of their willpower became drained and they would soon lose their ability to smile and stay kind. After some research, Starbucks executives determined that employees were more likely to keep their cool if they were mentally prepared to handle unruly customers and stressful situations. To help their employees, they developed the properly named LATTE method which outlines a series of steps to take when employees find themselves in a stressful situation. Listen to the customer, Acknowledge the complaint, Take action, Thank the customer, and Explain why the situation occurred. By practicing this method, Starbucks baristas learned exactly how to approach stressful situations and became more likely to keep their willpower and cool during these situations.

The LATTE method can be adopted into your everyday life as well, maybe not exactly, but it certainly can be used as a guide to creating your own method. For instance, Duhigg discusses an example of hip replacement patients who would have to undergo painful exercises to recover from surgery. Patients who wrote down their plans on how they would overcome these obstacles were much more likely to conquer the obstacles. So while they didn't quite use the LATTE method, they set a plan and mentally prepared them for painful scenarios.

The Significance of Belief

Why is it that individually it becomes harder to form a new habit? Going to the gym after work might be much harder to do by yourself, but it becomes much easier when you incorporate a gym buddy. If you've ever worked in an environment where new policies are implemented, you will realize how much easier those policies are implemented when everyone is on board. If there's opposition, or someone holding you back, then trying to adopt a new habit becomes much harder. Well, that's because Duhigg introduces another ingredient that is necessary for forming new habits. That ingredient is belief.

We discussed the group Alcoholics Anonymous in a previous chapter, and while replacing their habit of going to the bar to go to a group setting was successful, many needed more than just a habit replacement to see real change. Additionally, Alcohol Anonymous incorporates the belief of a higher power to help participants believe in something bigger than themselves that is rooting for their success.

Not only is belief important, but Alcohol Anonymous has the advantage of a group setting which Duhigg suggests is one of the main reasons participants see success. You see, people are more likely to believe in groups. For instance, let's go back to 1955 when a woman named Rosa Parks sparked a civil rights movement when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. Many might be surprised to learn that Rosa Parks was not the first person to refuse to give up her seat, but why was she the one to spark such outrage and a year-long boycott?

Well, one of the main reasons was that Rosa Parks was well known throughout her community and had an array of friends that she relied on. From being the secretary of the local NAACP chapter to involving herself in a youth organization at a neighborhood Lutheran church, she seemed to do it all and still find time to help local girls with their gorgeous, debutante gowns. She became so active in her community, that her husband

commented that she ate dinner at potlucks more than she ate dinner at home. But how does this relate to the idea of belief?

Well, once Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus that day, her strong social ties influenced the people through peer pressure. It's not enough to just believe in a cause, there needs to be people who actively support that cause. When her network of friends and acquaintances began to participate, it became harder to opt-out. However, once their participation began to fall off after some time, the final piece of the puzzle was set in motion, and that was Martin Luther King Jr.'s advocacy for nonviolent protests and asking participants to forgive their oppressors. The call to action formed new habits as people began to organize church meetings and peaceful protests. But most importantly, a group of people believed that change could happen. Willpower isn't enough to spark a change, belief that change can happen is equally important.

Habits Become Your Responsibility

Once we recognize the need to change our habits, it becomes our responsibility to take the necessary steps to do so. To prove this point, Duhigg introduced two cases in which people were taken to court over mistakes they made that escalated due to their habits. The first one being Brian Thomas, who in 2008 strangled his wife to death after experiencing what scientists refer to as sleep terrors.

Clearly distraught after realizing what he had done, Thomas immediately reported himself to the police where he awaited trial. During his trial, researchers proved that those who experience sleep terrors might get up during the night and act upon their impulses; however, during a sleep terror, all brain activity is shut down which leaves only the primitive neurological regions active. During Thomas' sleep terror, he was in a state where he believed he was acting out against a criminal in the house, he believed he was strangling a burglar who was trying to attack his wife. His defense introduced in court, was that when Thomas believed someone was harming his wife, it triggered an automatic response to protect her. In other words, Thomas was acting upon a habit.

The second case that Duhigg introduces is that of Angie Bachman who was sued by the casino company, Harrah's, for half a million dollars for failing to pay her gambling debts. Bachman had already lost her house and million-dollar inheritance due to her gambling problem. Knowing that Bachman had a gambling problem and had already declared bankruptcy, Harrah's continued to send her offers of free trips to the casino which Bachman couldn't resist. These free stays at the hotel only exacerbated her gambling addiction which made her feel good inside, so Bachman was simply acting upon a habit in which she used to argue her defense in court.

So how did each trial end? Well, Thomas was acquitted of his charges, and many people including the judge expressed their sympathy for the grieving man. However, Bachman lost her case and became a victim of immense

public scorn. While both argued their habits were the cause of their actions, why did only one end in a guilty verdict? Simply put, Bachman recognized her bad habit and she had the free will to change her behavior. Thomas did not, and his actions were a result of a tragic accident that occurred in his sleep. Bachman recognized that she had a gambling problem, she had already declared bankruptcy and blew through a million-dollar inheritance, she could have simply opted out of Harrah's program that sends their customers upcoming deals. She could have taken the necessary steps to avoid seeing the enticing offers that Harrah's was giving her, whereas Thomas had no control over his actions. In the end, it's only up to you to change your habits.

Final Summary

We all adopt habits throughout our lives, both good and bad. Our routines become an unconscious habit that all follow the same three-step loop: cue, routine, reward. As we continue to crave the desired reward, it becomes harder and harder to break a bad habit. However, the key to changing your habits is to change your routine, but keep the cue and reward the same. Of course, it's not as easy as adopting a routine, so developing keystone habits becomes critical for success. Keystone habits like willpower can be practiced as you continue to withhold the desire to practice your bad habits. As you strengthen your willpower, you become more successful at adopting habits that lead to a successful, positive lifestyle.



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