

# SUMMARY

## MAKING HABITS, BREAKING HABITS

JEREMY DEAN



# **Summary of “Making Habits, Breaking Habits” by Jeremy Dean**

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If you've ever wondered why you do the things you do or wished you knew the secret to quickly and effectively revamping your habits, this is the book for you!

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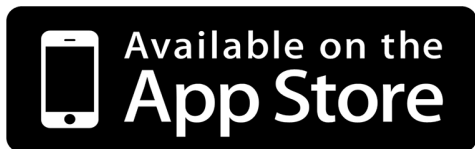


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# Introduction

No matter how much we think we are impervious to subconscious stimuli, the truth is that we all have a few habits which control our daily lives. They could be good-- like pre-programming our coffee maker and laying out our clothes the night before a busy day-- or negative, like hitting snooze on our alarm five times in the morning so we can lay in bed and scroll through Facebook. And although we're probably conscious of these habits, there are many others which may escape our awareness, ranging from habits as innocent as putting on your makeup in a certain order to more toxic traits, like deliberately picking fights with our partners. And because these habits form both our daily routines and a part of our sense of self, we may often be unaware of the extent of their impact on our lives or the fact that we can break free of them any time we choose.

So, through the course of this summary, we're going to go back to basics and take a look at what habits really are, how they're formed, and how you can use your new knowledge of habits to take control of your life. We'll also take a look at a few other fun facts like:

- Why your family always has “assigned seating” at dinner
- How to form happy habits, and:
- The impact of trying to quit smoking

# Habits Are Behaviors we Repeat With Little Conscious Thought

When someone tosses you something, what's your first instinct? For most of us, it's simply to reach up and catch it, right? And you probably don't even think about it as you're doing so; your arms simply reach out without conscious thought. That's because what you're doing is a habit, a learned behavior that's been ingrained in you through years of catching things. Because that's exactly how habits are formed: they occur when an action is repeated so many times that you can instinctively do it without consciously thinking through the motions. Habits are therefore characterized by two factors-- automaticity, which, put simply, means you do it automatically-- and emotionlessness, because repetition decreases your enthusiasm for an action.

This makes a lot of sense if you think about your morning routine, because it probably doesn't conjure up a lot of strong feelings for you. If you're especially fond of structure and routine, you might feel agitated or out of place if your routine is interrupted, but you're probably not super excited about it every day. Likewise, your habits are also defined by context because of the associations you form between your habits and your behavior. For example, if, as a student, you enjoyed the freedom of having few obligations and the ability to drink heavily every time you went out with your friends, as an adult, you might associate drinking with socialization and thus, crave a beer (or five) every time you get together with friends.

But how are habits actually formed? Let's take a closer look. For starters, habits are formed by intentions. If, for example, you'd like to have whiter teeth, you might make a conscious decision to start regularly brushing your teeth. But habits are also formed by explaining random past behavior through adding an intention later on. For example, if you always sit on the same bar stool in your friend's kitchen when you visit her because it's the only free spot, with the passage of time, you might forget this and think that you always sit there because it's a nice and comfy spot. And lastly, habits

can also be formed when you combine the intention and explanation behind your choices. Maybe you first started biking to work because you were on a diet and wanted to start exercising more, but you continue to do it-- forming a long-term habit-- because you later came to enjoy the invigoration and fresh air.

## When Habits are Bad, They're Very, Very Bad

So, now that we've taken a look at how habits are formed, let's take a moment to consider the habits in your life. Bigger habits, both positive and negative-- like dieting or smoking-- might come to mind, but our lives are actually made up of a variety of large and small habits. In fact, studies show that at least one-third of our lives are powered by our unconscious. During these moments, we're kind of operating on auto-pilot, making choices without consciously thinking, "I'm going to go do this thing now." That's how we form a lot of social habits that make us comfortable, like sitting in the same seat during every class or business meeting or consistently sitting in the same order around the family dinner. Maybe we didn't intentionally choose that seat at first, but for one reason or another, we kept sitting in it and now it's a habit that we unconsciously engage in. The same is true for other social habits, like practicing active listening by saying, "Mm-hm," and "Right" during business meetings or other conversations. And we have extra habits for every other part of our lives, like having a "usual" food every time we go to a certain restaurant. We might not realize it at the time, but by operating on auto-pilot in this manner, we're sifting through the detritus of daily decision-making by auto-simplifying our choices.

But we can also indulge in habits even when they're not constructive. For example, do you ever catch yourself refreshing your email inbox for the thousandth time that day? You know you'll get a notification if an email has actually arrived and there's no notification, so you must not have an email. Yet you don't think through that while you're absently punching the "refresh" button yet again. In this case, you're experiencing what psychologists call "the partial reinforcement extinction effect," which occurs when you repeat the same action over and over without actually getting a reward. Why do you keep doing it? Simply because you're grown used to engaging in this action, even though you know it doesn't reward you.



But even though robotically checking your email is pretty innocent, these habits of thought can be insidious. And if the thoughts you repeatedly indulge are negative in nature, then they can often be linked to mental illnesses like depression. Whether our thoughts are positive or negative depends on how we feel about the things that happen to us. Getting a free ice cream, for example, might make one person feel awesome, but if you're lactose-intolerant and you're offered an ice cream, you might be annoyed or a bit sad. Similarly, when a large-scale event occurs-- like losing your job-- negative feelings will naturally occur for anyone. But if your thought habits encourage you to think of yourself as being powerless, incapable, or unlucky, it's more likely that you'll succumb to some severely detrimental feelings.

Another type of toxic habit is rumination. This occurs when you think about something over and over again, usually because of anxiety or because you're trying to figure out a solution to some negative circumstance. But although learning from the past can be healthy in helping us to learn from past mistakes, there's a difference in using our previous choices as learning opportunities and wallowing in the cringey-ness of our mistakes.

# Create Happy Habits

But even though our habits are often thoughtless, that doesn't mean we're doomed to stay enslaved as mindless zombies of our habits. We can manipulate our subconscious into helping us form healthy life patterns. You can start by taking these three steps. First, determine your motivation. It's not enough to casually say, "I wish I had better habits"; you need an overarching goal that will motivate you to overcome any obstacles you might face. You can determine your motivation by employing the WOOP exercise, which stands for Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan.

So, start by writing down your wish, the outcome you hope to have, and the obstacles you expect to encounter along the way. For example, if your wish is to form a daily running habit, your desired outcome might be that you will get in shape and ultimately be capable of competing in a 10k marathon. Your expected obstacles, therefore, might be physical discomfort if you're unused to running and motivating yourself to stick with it even when you don't want to run today. But that's a pretty tall order to accomplish all in one day, so start by adjusting your expectations until they're realistic. For example, you can form an easily achievable daily habit by saying, "I'm going to take the stairs every day."

Making your plans through acting on the right implementation intention is crucial, as is the way you structure your self-talk. That's because positive statements like, "I'll take the stairs" are more affirming than negative talk which begins with self-denial, as in the case of, "I won't take the elevator." This can be especially harmful because denial increases the attraction of an object-- especially when you're out of breath and your legs are weak and the elevator starts to sound pretty great. The next step is to repeat your action because, as we've already discussed, repetition not only builds habits, it removes conscious thought and emotion. And when you're trying to form a healthy habit that may not feel very fun, it's best if you can quickly get yourself into the swing of doing it automatically, especially because it will cut out your internal monologue of, "I don't want to do this right now!"

You can also talk yourself out of giving in to excuses by anticipating challenging situations that may arise as you form your new habit. For example, if you haven't planned ahead, an unexpected rain shower might tempt you to say, "Oh, too bad! It's raining. I can't go running today!" But if you've planned ahead, you can counter that scenario with, "That's okay-- I'll just wear my waterproof running gear!" Doing this consistently is a great way to keep you on track. And last but not least, it's also important that you keep your habits happy. You can do this by adding a little spice to your habits, just to keep yourself engaged in a healthy routine that doesn't become boring. Because although you want to get into the habit of doing something, you don't want it to become so monotonous that it's draining. So, whether that means jogging on a different path every now and then or switching it up by running with a partner or even stopping to smell the roses, any attempt to add new stimulation and give yourself time to intentionally savor an experience will help.

# Breaking Up is Hard To Do

Now that we've looked at the positive aspects of kicking toxic habits and forming healthy ones, it's time to acknowledge the genuine struggle of breaking up with your negative habits. Because, let's be honest, once we get in a rut, it's really, really hard to climb out. In fact, a 1980s study conducted at the University of Scranton found that out of 213 people, 60% weren't able to stick to their New Years' Resolutions. So, why can't some people stick with it? And what can we do to be different? Well, the truth is that every single one of us has the power to change our lives for the better; it's not that you can't, but rather that you might not have employed the right tools to ensure you stay the course.

So, first you can start by identifying the habit you want to kick. When it comes to many bad habits, it's often easier to recognize their consequences than the habits that created them, so a bit of retrospection is important. For example, if you're a smoker, you might be unable to avoid noticing your breathing problems, or if you're overweight, you might notice that you've put on quite a few pounds. But mindfulness can help you trace these side-effects back to their roots. Mindfulness is the act of consciously recognizing where you are and what thoughts and feelings you're experiencing in the present moment and it's great for achieving both peace of mind and self-awareness. However, it does take a little practice before you can get the hang of it, so you might want to start with this exercise.

Begin by relaxing your body and sitting in a comfortable position on your favorite chair, your bed, or the floor. The idea is to hold your body so that you're not rigid, but not floppy either; just comfortable and relaxed. Once you've found that ideal position, you can start focusing on your breathing. So, while you sit, concentrate on the sensation of breathing in and out and allow your thoughts to flow freely without judgment. This is the first step to acknowledging-- and making peace with-- your bad habits. Because as you allow yourself to recognize them without passing judgment or engaging in critical self-talk, you can reach a plane of objective awareness where you

can freely and comfortably recognize what you're doing and why you do it. So, if practicing a few moments of mindfulness brings you some new insight, you can take advantage of this self-awareness and write your reflections on your habits and their origins.

Another great step is working on your self-control. Many of our toxic habits originate because we simply want what we want when we want it and we give in to these pursuits regardless of whether or not they're healthy for us. But because self-control is like a muscle, you can attempt to break free from toxic habits by exercising it. And as you do so, it's important to remember that, like any muscle, even the simple act of training your self-control will bring improvements. You don't have to conquer all your bad habits in one night, but even resisting your impulses will strengthen your ability to say no next time and encourage your formulation of better habits.

So if, for example, you want to quit smoking, just trying to quit will boost your willpower. Even saying no one time when you want a cigarette will prove to your brain that you do have the power to resist. Because once you know you can go one week without indulging your nicotine cravings, you can surge ahead and try one more week. And you can press on by continuing to repeat these small acts of resistance day by day and week by week. You can also get your habits under control in other small ways like monitoring your behavior. For example, if you're struggling with thought patterns that lead you to engage in actions you'd rather avoid, you can try monitoring your thoughts through recording them in a diary. Similarly, if you struggle with your relationship with food, a food diary might help you track how many times per day you think about unhealthy foods or are otherwise tempted to stray from your newly formed healthy habits. Likewise, chewing gum when you're craving a cigarette or removing yourself from a toxic environment can also help.

## Final Summary

Our habits play a tremendous role in our lives. And given that most of them are formed subconsciously, that can be pretty scary because it means we're giving up control over most of our daily lives. But fortunately, we don't have to live as slaves to our automatic tendencies. By practicing just a little bit of self-awareness and learning the secrets of a habit's formation, we can break the cycle and manipulate our subconscious into making healthier choices. If, for example, we start by acknowledging our habits through a few minutes of intentional mindfulness and begin brainstorming healthier solutions to them, then all it takes is a little behavior modification to get us on the track. By acknowledging that our self-control is like a muscle, we can exercise it a little bit at a time until it's strong enough to help us resist our cravings on a long-term basis.



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