How Long Does It Take to Form Healthy Habits? Transcript

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Mindless Eating and Habit Autopilot

We think we're in control of what we eat most of the time, but we're actually not. Habits quietly steer our forks without us noticing. And the good news is, though, we can hack that autopilot.

By understanding how habits form, we can turn mindless eating into a powerful tool for lasting change. Check it out. "How Long Does It Take to Form Healthy Habits?" We may make hundreds of food decisions every day, yet the vast majority pass under our conscious radar.

They happen more automatically, without conscious reflection, deliberation, or even awareness.

How Habits Form Through Cues and Repetition

We may be able to take advantage of this mindless eating, though, by harnessing the power of habit formation. It's been said that "Most of the time, what we do is what we do most of the time." Many of our eating habits are indeed just that, habitual.

And the busier and more distracted we are, the more likely we are to fall back on habits. That's what they're there for. They're like reflexive subroutines your body uses to free up mental resources.

They can work against us, in the case of bad habits, or for us, in the case of good. Imagine if you had to add "buckle seatbelt" to your to-do list every day.

If you're in the habit of buckling up, your hand will start reaching for it without you even knowing. Once you do something long enough, it worms its way into your brain.

Your brain commits the actions to memory and can whip them out when needed to automate away some of your cognitive workload– essentially becoming second nature.

The repetition of a simple action in a consistent context leads to the action being triggered when exposed to that same situation.

The 66-Day Habit Formation Myth and Study

So, do it enough times, and the contextual clue, for example, getting in a car, can automatically lead to the action, reaching for the seatbelt. Habits are defined as "learned behavioral responses to situational cues." So, it has two parts, the cue and the action.

The cue can be any context. It can be an event or a time, a location, or even a mood, as long as it's something frequently and consistently encountered in daily life.

Do something over and over again in the same context– intentionally or unintentionally– and a habit can form. How long does it take? You may have heard that habits take 21 days to form.

That's apparently a myth that originated from anecdotal evidence of how long it takes plastic surgery patients to psychologically adapt to their new appearance.

If instead habit formation is actually put to the test, the average time for that habit to become automatic is 66 days. Study volunteers were asked to choose an eating, drinking, or activity behavior to carry out daily in the same context.

Examples chosen include "eating a piece of fruit with lunch," "drinking a bottle of water with lunch," and "running for 15 minutes before dinner." There was considerable variation in the time it took these actions to become automatic, from 18 to 254 days, with an average of 66.

Why Habits Stick and What Comes Next

About two months seems to be what it takes across all sorts of habits. The researchers found that sporadically missing a day resulted in a tiny dip in how automatic it was the next day but had no longer-term consequences.

So, if you stumble or forget on one day, just pick it back up the next. Sixty-six days might seem like a long time, but be reassured that it does get progressively easier with time, and you only have to maintain your motivation until the habit forms.

The magic of habits lies in their persistence even after we lose conscious motivation or interest. Of course, the reverse can happen too. Habits are great if the contextual cue of using the toilet can mindlessly lead you to the action of washing your hands, but not so great if your brain forever connects a daily happenstance with a not-so-healthful act.

If you do pick up a bad habit, how can you go about breaking it? I'll cover that next.