How Habits Form

"How to Break Bad Habits" The first time you have a cookie with your cup of tea or start snacking in front of the TV at night, you may be genuinely hungry.

Over time, though, the two activities can become perpetually linked, such that your afternoon cup of tea is always accompanied by a cookie or your favorite weekly shows trigger snack cravings, even if you're not really in the mood to eat.

It can be something you can't help– in other words, a bad habit. In one often-cited study, people in the habit of eating popcorn in the movie theater were asked why.

Most gave some variation of the answer "it tastes good." Okay. Well then, why did they end up eating the same amount when they were given week-old stale popcorn they "decidedly disliked"?

Breaking Habits by Changing Cues

Put people who aren't habituated in the same scenario and they eat more of the fresh popcorn and less of the stale, but strong habits can continue independently of the intentions or consequences of your behavior.

There are two ways to break a bad habit: change the cue or change the action. The most straightforward approach is to just try to avoid the situational triggers.

Recovering alcoholics and drug addicts know all too well the power of social or environmental cues to prompt cravings and relapses. That may be the reason that some people find it easier to quit smoking when they're traveling or otherwise removed from their typical everyday circumstances.

So, any time we can remove ourselves from triggering situations, like walking a different route to work to avoid the store from which we're always buying candy and potato chips, we can capitalize on context changes to avoid the habitual call-and-response.

In the popcorn study, when the habituated eaters were removed from the movie theater to instead watch videos in a conference room, the spell was broken.

Without the same contextual cues, their actions were released from habitual control, and they too pushed away the stale popcorn. That's the first way to break a habit: block its activation.

The other way is to block its execution. In the popcorn study, this was accomplished by forcing people to eat with their nondominant hand.

Blocking Habitual Actions

Here, they were in the theater with popcorn, and so their reflexive response to mindlessly eat even stale popcorn was triggered, but even just having to eat with their other hand was enough to disrupt the subroutine and regain intentional control.

But do that long enough and that will become a habit, too. A better strategy would be to form new habits of healthy eating. Health-wise, it matters little what we eat on birthdays, holidays, or special occasions (unless for you every day is National Hot Dog Day).

It's the day-to-day stuff that adds up, which is why our eating habits are so important, for good or for ill. Our food choices may start out planned and purposeful, but over time, may morph into well-worn tracks, and we can become

stuck in a rut.

There is a tendency for habits to continue regardless of our intentions. This may be why just knowing the right thing to do often isn't enough.

Building Healthier Eating Habits

By definition, habits are propensities to repeat behaviors given the recurring circumstances. As habits form, deliberate decision-making recedes and is replaced by these reflexive circuits within our brain.

However, the strength of habits is also its weakness. The dependence of habits on contextual triggers renders them vulnerable to modification. We can make our direct environment more conducive to healthy food choices by doing things like placing tempting foods in inconvenient places, or, for that matter, keeping them out of the house altogether.

If you have a cookie every time you see the cookie jar, it might be better to put out a fruit basket instead. Strategies like packing healthy snacks on the go can help shift our immediate surroundings to become more favorable to healthy choices.

To change all our habits at once, though, we can try exploiting major life events, such as a change in living arrangements. Public health campaigners try to take advantage of this by targeting those experiencing natural shifts in their lives, such as changing jobs.

Using Life Changes to Start Fresh

A study of personal accounts of successful versus failed attempts at major life changes found that altering one's immediate environment or moving to an entirely different location appeared to help.

When our existing habits are disrupted, this offers an opportunity to start anew. But you don't have to relocate to start fresh. You can change your existing bad habits to good or establish new good habits from scratch using a technique known as implementation intentions.

That's what I'll cover next.