Introduction to Habit Formation

"How to Form Good Habits" To help secure our goals, we can call on our built-in cognitive capacity to create habits to automate our actions. This starts with implementation intentions, a strategy of simple plans to get strong effects.

Instead of vague self-promises to "do our best," implementation intentions are specific "if-then" plans to perform a particular behavior in a specific context.

They take the form of "when Situation X arises, I will perform Response Y." For example, "If I get hungry after dinner, I will eat an apple.

Implementation Intentions and If-Then Plans

" If the triggering circumstance is a regular, daily occurrence, implementation intentions can be the beginning of a beautiful habit. Note that to break a bad habit or create a new one, you have to select a new action like "eat an apple," rather than just giving up an existing behavior like "don't eat potato chips." To activate the habit-forming mechanism, you likely need a new alternative response rather than a non-response.

Evidently, you can't form a habit of not doing something. Then, to lock it in, you have to purposefully repeat it day after day, week after week, and maybe even month after month before it takes on a mind of its own, becoming second nature.

Once it's ingrained in your brain, the need for willpower is replaced by a curious compulsion to just keep doing your healthy habit. Given their simplicity, implementation intentions appear to be surprisingly effective.

Imagine you're a dentist who wants their patients to floss their teeth every day.

Building Habits Through Repetition

You give them a pack of dental floss and a handout telling them how important it is and encouraging them to floss. You recall hearing about the supposed power of implementation intentions.

You're skeptical, so you randomize half your patients to get the same free floss and identical handout except for containing one additional message that says: "You are more likely to carry out your intention to perform dental flossing every day if you make a decision about when and where.

Write down where and when you intend to floss your teeth every day for the next four weeks." That exact experiment was carried out, and that one additional tweak doubled flossing frequency, from eight days of flossing out of the following month to 19 days.

That's the power of implementation intentions.

Flossing Experiment and Behavior Change

Does what works for floss work for food? When researchers interviewed people who had maintained significant weight loss, action planning to develop healthy habits was a consistent theme.

The successful users often decided in advance what they were going to be eating, when, and where. Many consciously planned their meals for the day or week, often getting into the habit of eating similar meals for breakfast and lunch every day.

They prepped and kept healthy snacks, like carrots and fruits, in plain sight. Some made double portions of

wholesome meals to fridge or freeze, in case they got busy.

Others mentioned always stocking up on healthy ingredients. As one person put it, "I buy huge, huge amounts of vegetables, and I always make sure to stock almonds, lentils, and beans in my cupboards." Those all sound like good ideas, but how do we know it was the implementation intentions versus some unknown factor.

To prove cause-and-effect, we need a randomized interventional trial, which is what exactly what researchers did.

Planning Healthy Eating Habits

Hundreds of women were randomized into one of two groups. Both groups were told about the health benefits of fruits and vegetables and encouraged to boost their intake, but one group got additional instructions to form implementation intentions.

They were told to think of all the barriers to healthy eating they encounter on a daily basis and come up with three implementation intentions to overcome them.

Typical examples included, "If I have no fruits at work, then I'll buy an apple in the canteen at lunch," or, "If I'm eating out for lunch, I'll order a salad." In the first couple months, both groups succeeded in eating more fruits and vegetables, but by month four, the implementation intention group pulled ahead.

Two years later, the fruit and veg consumption in the information-only group had fallen back toward baseline, but the implementation intention group was still going strong.

Long-Term Fruit and Vegetable Study

After just that single meeting with the researchers years before, they were still eating significantly more fruits and vegetables, presumably because it had become so routine as to become habit.

The business world knows all about how to make things easy. It's the reason Amazon has a 1-Click Buy button. This is why the term "habit forming" can be a good thing, it removes the friction, helping to turn healthy decisions into an impulse buy.