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The Habit Revolution

Simple steps to rewire your brain
for powerful habit change

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Introduction

The power of habits

DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR VERY first driving lesson?

You probably fumbled around trying to find where the key goes, checked every mirror multiple times, made sure your foot was on the brake pedal and not the accelerator, then finally moved your foot and ever so slowly started to roll the car forward, making sure not to go even the tiniest bit above the speed limit.

Fast forward to now and you're probably arriving at places you drove to and thinking, 'How did I even get here? I don't remember the drive.' That's because driving is now an automatic action for you – a habit.

The task of driving, which once upon a time took a lot of mental energy and concentration, has now become subconscious, automatic, habitual. Your brain remembers how to drive a car because it's something you've done many times before. So instead of using up mental energy on a task that you already know how to do, your brain moves the familiar action of driving to the automatic part of your brain, so that driving becomes instinctive and subconscious.

You could also think of the time you were first learning to tie your shoelaces. I remember my parents teaching me a song that included something to do with bunny ears jumping into a hole and popping out the other side, beautiful and bold. I also remember tying my fingers in the shoelaces, which is not supposed to happen, doing some elaborate knot only to have it unravel as soon as I let it go, and making my parents late for our outing because I was so determined to tie my own laces. It took many practices, many failed attempts, and every brain cell I could recruit to successfully learn how to tie my own shoelaces. Now I tie my laces without giving it any thought. I'm usually planning my next move or looking around the room to locate my keys and wallet. Just as with driving a car, my brain has moved the familiar action of tying my shoelaces into the automatic part of my brain so that it's instinctive and subconscious; it's a habit.

Imagine living a life where you eat healthy meals, exercise regularly, get a good night's sleep and have a productive workday – and do it all without having to grind through it, because those things just happen automatically. That's the power of creating a life built around healthy habits. Once you understand the theory of habit change and learn how to implement it, you can apply it to any area of your life, be it health, wellbeing, mindset, finances, relationships or productivity.

If you've ever set a goal to start a new habit or break an old one and you fell off the wagon; if you've been in a cycle of yo-yo dieting, phone scrolling or alarm snoozing; or if you intend to do one thing but end up doing another, then you're in the right place. Changing your habits has the power to help you achieve and maintain your goals in the long term, but you've probably never been guided through the steps of how to successfully change your habits – until now, that is.

Growing up, I watched both my grandparents battle through mealtimes due to having type 2 diabetes. They would be served different meals from the rest of the family and at dessert time they

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would eat sugar-free jelly while the rest of us indulged in sugary pastries and ice cream. In my Egyptian culture, food is a pretty big deal. We celebrate just about everything with a feast. Food is basically its own love language. The attitude in my family is if we're not feasting, we're not really living, and the more the merrier. But my grandparents didn't get to enjoy this experience with us (I mean sugar-free jelly is okaaaay, but it's got nothing on pastries and ice cream). It wasn't so much the feasting or even the food that I wished they could experience; I just wanted them to enjoy a better quality of life.

I wanted to help people like my grandparents, so I completed a bachelor's degree in biomedical science and went on to do a master's degree in nutrition and dietetics. As a dietitian, I had the privilege of helping people achieve their health goals and regain their confidence. I worked across various hospital settings and ran my own private practice. I loved my job, but I started noticing that my patients' results were only short-lived. Within just a few weeks or months they would be back in the clinic wanting to work on the goals we'd already worked so hard to achieve. Initially, I thought I must have been a terrible dietitian, that perhaps my love for food got in the way of my objective advice. Did other dietitians have this same issue? What could I be doing wrong?

I was determined to help my patients achieve long-term results, so I started to hunt for evidence-based strategies. I took a deep dive into the medical literature in search of answers and read something that changed the course of my life: in all types of attempts at goal attainment and behaviour change, there was an overwhelming fail rate. Whether the goal was to lose weight, get fit, drink more water, quit smoking, reduce drinking, get better sleep or spend less time using technology, most of the time, people fell back into their old patterns and old habits and did not successfully achieve their goal.

Everything I read reiterated the fact that we're very good at setting goals but not so great at maintaining those goals in the long

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term. I wasn't a terrible dietitian after all. This yo-yo life of bouncing between moving towards their goals and falling off the wagon wasn't just happening to my patients, it was happening to most people on this planet. In fact, the majority of people who lose weight end up regaining that weight over the following months or years.¹ In the same way, most New Year's resolutions are forgotten by February.

Not long after this discovery, I decided to put my private practice clinic on hold and embark on a research journey. I wanted answers, I wanted sustainable solutions and I wanted to be able to help people achieve long-term success. Over the next four years I completed a doctorate² in habit change and became a habit researcher.

I read every journal article about long-term change that I could get my hands on. I read hundreds of papers on behavioural theories, psychology, sociology, neuroscience, neuropsychology and public health interventions. All the successful strategies pointed in the same direction: habit change. Changing our habits is the only proven method for achieving our goals in the long term. This means that making consistent, achievable, bite-sized changes in our day-to-day life to alter our habits is the only scientifically backed system for achieving sustainable success. Talk about a light-bulb moment!

How to Create New Habits

Imagine you've decided to start a new habit of drinking more water. You've bought a fancy new water bottle and told yourself you're going to drink eight glasses of water a day. Day one goes well – you fill up your bottle and keep it with you all day, taking sips regularly. Day two, you remember to drink water, but not as much as day one. By day three, you forget to bring your water bottle, and by day four, you're back to your old habits of not drinking enough water.

So how do you turn drinking more water into a habit that sticks?

- 1. Start Small:** Begin with a goal that's so easy it's hard to fail. Instead of aiming for eight glasses a day, start with one glass of water each morning.
- 2. Use a Cue:** Link your new habit to an existing habit or a specific time of day. For instance, drink a glass of water right after brushing your teeth in the morning.
- 3. Make It Attractive:** Find ways to make your new habit enjoyable. You could add a slice of lemon or a few cucumber slices to your water for a refreshing taste.
- 4. Make It Easy:** Simplify the process as much as possible. Keep a water bottle filled and within reach at all times.
- 5. Use a Reward:** Give yourself a small reward for completing your new habit. This could be a healthy snack, a short walk, or a few minutes of relaxation.

By starting small, using cues, making your habit attractive and easy, and rewarding yourself, you can create new habits that stick and lead to lasting change.