



(PFC), the part of our brain where we do what we call thinking and decision-making. Instead, habits rely on the basal ganglia, an oval shaped mass of cells deep in our brains. When researchers at MIT began exploring the notion of habit in the early 1990s, they found that repeating an action makes it automatic and increases our skill — even as mental activity decreases.

“[They found] the basal ganglia was central to recalling patterns and acting on them,” notes Charles Duhigg in his 2012 book, *The Power of Habit*. “The basal ganglia ... stored habits even while the rest of the brain went to sleep.” In other words, create the right habits, and you could do what it takes to be successful in your sleep, so to speak.

WHY AND HOW

Our brains aren't keen on expending energy. It's the underlying reason we so often fail at resolutions no matter what time of year we make them. When something takes effort, eventually our motivation wanes and we stop doing it. But our brains excel at turning routines, no matter how complex and effortful (driving a car, for instance), into habits that are effortless.

Developing a habit involves three distinct elements: a cue, a routine and a reward. The cue tells your brain to shift to autopilot. See a stop sign and you automatically step on the brake. No thinking required. The routine is the set of actions or patterns of thinking that are set in motion by the cue. When you see a stop sign, you take your right foot off the gas pedal, shift it to the left and gently depress the brake pedal.

The reward is any immediate response that tells your brain you just did a good thing that's worth repeating. For some of us, that might be a quick exclamation: “Awesome” or “Yessss!” For others, it might be a pat on the back or a gold star on the calendar. Anything that triggers the reward circuit upstairs reinforces to the brain that you want to repeat the action. We need the reward only while the habit is forming. In driver's ed, you probably got praised for making a smooth stop. Once a smooth stop became habitual, you no longer needed the reinforcement.

How long it takes to create a habit is a subject of some debate. There is no magic number. It depends on how motivated you are, how complex the series of actions or thoughts and many other factors. In the beginning, creating a habit will feel like work — perhaps a lot of work. But once ingrained, the habit will require virtually no effort for the rest of your life.

BREAKING BAD HABITS

Unwanted and outdated habits don't ever really go away. They're still there, encoded deep in your basal ganglia. But they do go dormant when unused, just as a footpath grows over when it's unused. You can wire new habits over the old ones. Habits are made up of a

THE NO. 1 GAME CHANGER

HABITS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF SUCCESS AND HAPPINESS

BY MOLLY ROSE TEUKE

***M**en's natures are alike; it is their habits that separate them. – Confucius*

How are you doing on your New Year's resolutions? Chances are, you can barely remember what they were, much less claim to have kept them. You're not alone. Though some 45 percent of Americans make New Year's resolutions, a mere 2 percent of us keep them. Yet, keeping the promises we make to ourselves is a key indicator of our capacity to achieve the success we desire.

What if we could make it easy to keep our resolutions and make them stick?

We can, with a simple tool. It's called habit. A habit is something we do without thinking. Anyone who's learned to drive a car gets the impact of habit. You don't have to stop and think about putting the car in gear after you put the key in the ignition. It's a mindless action.

“Habits are the invisible architecture of everyday life, and a significant element of happiness,” says Gretchen Rubin, founder of The Happiness Project and author of a brand-new book called *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of our Everyday Lives*. “If we have habits that work for us, we're much more likely to be happy, healthy, productive and creative.”

IT'S A BRAIN THING

A Duke researcher suggested in 2006 that more than 40 percent of our daily actions are performed by habit. In other words, they don't involve the prefrontal cortex

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sequence of events in your brain — thoughts that follow a familiar pathway. Wiring over an old habit is like putting up a detour sign at the point where the cue occurs. You get in the elevator at work and automatically press 3. When you get promoted and move to the sixth floor, you still press 3. So you put up a mental detour sign and send your brain on a different route — you have to think about it a few times before you automatically begin pressing 6. But use a new mental pathway often enough and fairly quickly, it becomes your brain's default. That's the beauty of habit. It lets us stop thinking about it.

Pressing 6 instead of 3 is easy. What about more complicated things — actions that might take real effort — like flossing your teeth? One of the tricks to successful habit formation is to make it simple — very simple, according to B.J. Fogg, director of the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford University, and an expert on habits. Instead of saying you'll floss nightly, commit to flossing just one tooth each night. Flossing the rest will be easy, once the habit has taken root.

"If you pick the right small behavior and sequence it right, then you won't have to motivate yourself to have it grow," he says. "It will just happen naturally, like a good seed planted in a good spot."

What habits would you like to plant in your life? You never know which one might be the game changer. [WM](#)

Resources

- *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of our Everyday Lives*, ©2015, Gretchen Rubin;
- *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do In Life and Business*, ©2012, Charles Duhigg;
- gretchenrubin.com/habits/habits-downloads;
- tinyhabits.com; youtube.com/watch?v=AdKUJxjn-R8

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Molly Rose Teuke isn't a neuroscientist, but she plays one in her dreams. She speaks frequently on *How to Get Your Brain on Your Side®*. She also coaches clients globally,

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