

Habits and addictions

The good, the bad, and the opportunity to change

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Earlier in the year, when I met with clients and asked with genuine intent “how are you?” they would usually reply “fine thank you”. Now, however, when I ask the same question, 9 times out of 10 the reply is “I’m really busy!” This is usually accompanied by a heart-felt outpouring on the demands of living in a Covid-19 world - juggling a responsible work role, a hectic home life, and a vague attempt at some form of self-care. I’ve become increasingly aware that we are not only in the middle of a global pandemic, but also in the middle of an epidemic of “busyness” – driven by the need to justify our importance, value or self-worth in response to our increasingly complex and uncertain world.

To manage this burgeoning sense of “busyness” we develop habits. At some point, habits can turn into addictions. Our inability to switch from acting habitually to acting in a deliberate way can often underlie addiction. Determining the difference between a habit and addiction can be difficult, because both grow out of behaviours that are consistently repeated. To confuse matters, we often use the words interchangeably.

According to research, there is a fine line between habit and addiction based on factors such as time spent engaging in the behaviour, chemical reactions in the brain, and whether or not withdrawal symptoms are experienced. However, there is one significant factor that differentiates the two. Habits can serve us well or work against us, while addiction is definitely not our friend – addiction implies **dependency**. The trick to identifying whether you (or your client) has developed a habit or addiction often lies in the amount of time and effort it takes to **break**.

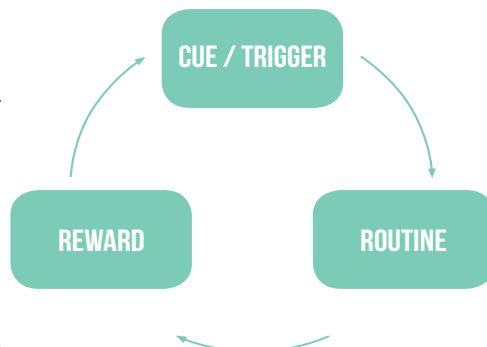
How habits form

Habits are regular practices or tendencies that are often unconscious (Brann, 2015). In essence, they are mental short cuts we have learned from experience. In other

words, a memory of the steps we took to solve a problem in the past. Habits begin with a “loop” based on a reward system (Duhigg, 2012). A cue (or trigger) tells the brain to go on to autopilot while performing a routine. If the brain benefits from the routine, it will continue to do the action. For example, in the morning your alarm goes off (cue/trigger) you drink a cup of coffee or tea (routine) because it gives you a boost and wakes you up (reward). After a stressful day (cue/trigger) you reach for a glass of wine (routine) because it helps you to relax (reward). The loop is a self-reinforcing mechanism that over time becomes automatic.

This process results in the creation of increasingly strong neuronal circuits. The part of our brain often associated with habits is the basal ganglia – this is where our neural pathways that encode habits are found.

Dopamine is the “feel-good” neurotransmitter and hormone that is responsible for our reward and pleasure networks. In essence, habits are a dopamine-driven feedback loop. For years, scientists assumed that dopamine was all about pleasure. However, we now know it plays a key role in many neurological processes including motivation, learning and memory (and much more). Dopamine is not only released when we experience pleasure, but also when we anticipate it. When we predict that something will be rewarding, our levels of dopamine spike in anticipation. And whenever dopamine increases, so does our motivation to act.

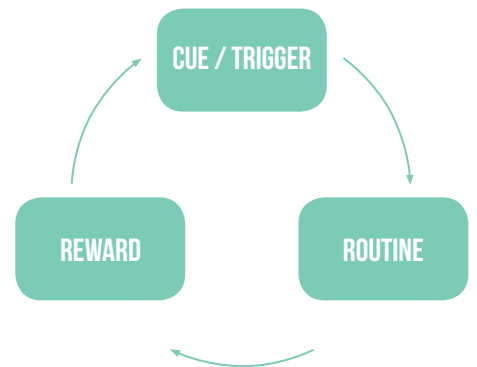


What neuroscience tells us

**NEURONS THAT
FIRE TOGETHER,
WIRE TOGETHER**

Hebb (2002)

As we have repetitive thoughts or take actions repeatedly, the neurons in our brain fire again and again (Hebb’s Law).



It is the **anticipation** of a reward (not the fulfilment of it) that gets us to take action.

When habits serve us well and when they don't

Habits are good for us (and our clients) because they free our minds to focus on new things, making us more efficient and productive. Habits that serve us well enable us to manage a large amount of

information, choices, decisions, emotions, targets and goals that we experience every day. In fact, we have habits for a large part of our daily lives – some 43% of our behaviours are performed out of habit and are unconscious (Wood et al, 2002). This means our brain has more capacity to focus on other tasks.

Our brain can't tell the difference between good and bad habits – we have to do that. We have to intentionally fight a bad habit and replace it with new routines otherwise the pattern will unfold over and over again every time the habit is activated by the cue or trigger.

What this means for us as coaches

The upside of habits is we can do things without thinking. The downside is we get used to doing things in a certain way and stop paying attention. As coaches we can become 'addicted' to many things in our practice:

- Models and frameworks in our toolkit that we roll out repeatedly so that we find ourselves on auto pilot. We are led by our toolkit rather than responding to our clients in the moment. We become rigid around structure and control rather than maintaining a flexible approach (including adapting to remote forms of coaching such as Zoom or Teams).
- Our role as enabler can shift (consciously or otherwise) to one of rescuer as we are drawn into the world of our client.
- We can become addicted to the dopamine rush of "Ah ha" moments or big ticket coaching outcomes.
- Similarly, our Ego takes over and we become directive, sharing our knowledge and experience as we anticipate the buzz of demonstrating how smart we are.
- We prioritise our client's wellbeing over our own - where being in service to our clients in times of crisis pulls rank on our own health and self-care.

Through regular reflective practice, feedback and supervision we have the

ability to raise our self-awareness and check habitual behaviours. By noticing our cue or trigger we can stay alert to a bad habit developing before it becomes a coaching 'addiction'.

What this means for our clients

With the advent of Covid-19, boundaries have become eroded and it's now seems acceptable to send emails, texts, and a whole variety of instant messaging any time of day or night. More worrying still, we expect an immediate response (and get irritated when it doesn't come). We receive an instant high from dopamine every time we hear the buzz of our smartphone or the ping of our email as the screen lights up with a new notification or mail arrives at our inbox. The dopamine hit reinforces (and motivates) our behaviour that makes us feel good and, in turn, can create an unhelpful habit.

Clinically speaking, we can't become addicted to a device, however, we can develop behavioural addictions to smartphone functions (e.g. instant messaging, social media, etc.) and its evident compulsive smartphone, email and social media use is on the rise. According to a recent study by Ofcom, on average we check our smart phone every 12 minutes during waking hours. Two in five adults look at their phone within five minutes of waking, while a third check their phones just before falling asleep. Alarmingly, 71% say they never turn off their phones, and 78% say they couldn't live without it. As we have all experienced with the shift to working from home, technology can, and does, serve us well. However, we have to be careful with when and how we use it so that it doesn't work against us.

Time management, productivity, communication, effective working relationships, and work/life balance are recurring topics my clients bring to coaching. Our leaders have developed unhelpful habits that diminish their ability to think clearly, creatively and strategically. Coaching has a role to play in helping our leaders raise their self-aware about the things they do habitually, providing challenge in identifying the cues and

triggers, and support to create new routines (behaviours) that generate satisfying rewards.

Clear (2018) suggests the reason we don't stick to habits is because our self-image gets in the way. He goes on to say that becoming the best version of ourselves requires us to continuously edit our beliefs, and improve and expand our identity. The process of building habits is the process of becoming ourselves. Creating small, helpful habits can make a meaningful difference by providing evidence of a new identity - something for us all to think about in a post-Covid world.

A final word

Habits never really disappear. Our brain doesn't have a mechanism to stop a habit, rather through practice we can create new, useful habits to replace the old unhelpful ones. If we want to master a helpful habit (for ourselves or our clients), the key is to start with repetition, not perfection. The amount of time we have been performing a habit is not as important as the number of times we do it.

Time now for that glass of wine, or perhaps I'll put my running shoes on and go for a jog instead. Or better still, engage in some precious socially distanced contact with family and friends

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