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Mary Sims

Second-Place Winner

Short Essay Category

2018 Emerging Writers Contest

Habit Formation and Deconstruction: A Study in Behavioral Psychology

In Charles Duhigg's book *How Habits Work*, Duhigg brings attention to the formations of habits, the four-step process to identify habits, and the three-step process to change them. Duhigg refers to the habit formation process as a "habit loop" where he attempts to find the root of his own habit through a four-step process. The first step of the process begins with identifying the routine in which the three steps of changing a habit come into play: cue, routine, and reward. The cue is the root of your habit which then leads to the routine of conducting it, and finally the reward felt when the habit is completed. The second step is experimenting with rewards, in which the person trying to change their habit – Duhigg in this instance – tries different reward methods while trying to identify the root of the habit. Duhigg lists his bad habit – of getting up from his desk every day to grab a cookie in the cafeteria and chat with friends – and writes about the different rewards he tried, trying to establish his cue: he tested his motivations for hunger (where he supplemented a cookie for an apple), for a burst of energy (a cup of coffee in place of the cookie), and walked to someone's desk to socialize (inspecting if the cookie was a social excuse for socialization). The third step is isolating the cue in which Duhigg records that he found his cue to be the socialization rather than the cookie itself. The final step of the habit formation and changing process is to have a plan, and Duhigg writes it best by saying "A habit is a formula our brain automatically follows: When I see CUE, I will do ROUTINE in order to get

a REWARD” (Duhigg). To fix this, Duhigg says decisions need to be actively made again, and re-implement where the bad habits used to resign: forming a new good habit, over a bad one. I agree with Duhigg’s theory of habit formation because of my personal experiences when experimenting with this theory; I was successful in breaking one of my bad habits – nail biting – due to it, and by following Duhigg’s four-step process I was able to form a new good habit in place of my previous bad habit.

Up until this year, I had the very bad habit of biting my nails. I would bite them at school during class, at home watching television, and even in my bed before I fell asleep. Throughout the thirteen years I spent biting them, my parents tried everything to get me to stop. When I was seven they dipped my finger nails in lemon juice, which backfired because I love lemon juice, and when I was eight they painted my nails which only made me hesitate before I resumed biting. As I entered middle school and passed through high school my parents tried punishment, reward, even bribery! But none of it worked; I continued to bite my nails. When I first read Duhigg’s *How Habits Work*, I was fascinated by his theory and decided to apply it to my own life, utilizing “implementation intentions”, a self-regulated strategy aimed to help with better goal attainment (Duhigg). I followed Duhigg’s process and elected to try the first step myself: identifying my routine. I soon realized that the cue of this habit – which then would trigger my routine of biting my nails during class or television – was misplaced anxiety and boredom. My reward for biting my nails was momentary stress relief, and something mindless to occupy my brain while also fulfilling my subconscious oral fixation. At first, I tried to stop biting my nails completely by willpower alone, without substituting a new behavior or habit, but within the same week I found myself resuming the habit I so desperately wanted to break. The author of *Habit-Based Coaching: Finding the Right Cues to Reap Rewards*, Derrick Price, writes, “Saying no

every day, multiple times a day, is energy-expensive. Willpower will eventually be drained, and you'll succumb to pleasure" (Price 4). By denying myself the pleasure I gained from conducting my habit without a replacement I was dooming and depriving myself of a necessary step. After I realized I needed a transition into a different habit, I reassessed Duhigg's theory, and began experimenting with different routines to achieve the same reward of stress relief.

When experimenting with different routines I kept my cue – of misplaced anxiety and boredom as well as my oral fixation – in mind as well as I continued to apply Duhigg's theory. I learned from my previous mistake that I needed a new habit to replace the old one if I was serious about quitting, and that the process of creating a new habit was going to differ from the process of ending one: "creating a habit requires encoding a new set of automatic behaviors, while breaking a habit requires a different set of processes" (Eyal). In the first new routine I tried, instead of biting my nails I would bite my lip. This worked for a while, but eventually the stress would continue to build, and I bit my lip so hard it bled, so I moved onto the next routine. Next, every time I felt the urge to bite my nails or felt myself getting stressed or anxious I would try to drink a glass of water. The routine worked in one way as it did give me something to occupy my brain with, but it wasn't constant as water wasn't always readily available where ever I went. Then, I had an idea. I knew that my reward was a mixture of stress and anxiety relief as well as an appeasement to my oral fixation, so I created a routine that would placate all my rewards: I began to chew gum to a religious extent.

Referring to Duhigg's process of breaking and forming new habits, Psychological researchers and authors of the article *A New Measure of Reading Habit: Going Beyond Behavioral Frequency* - Fabian T. C. Schmidt and Jan Retelsdorf - who conducted further research on habit formation and frequency write, "It is important to note that habits develop by

successful and satisfying repetition in stable contexts, whereby not only repetition but also automatization of the behavior is essential for the definition of habit” (Fabian & Retelsdorf). Within the article Schmidt and Retelsdorf convey that the process of forming a habit must remain constant— a steady repetition within stable context. Otherwise, without a steady pattern, a behavior cannot become automatic or, therefore, a habit. Schmidt and Retelsdorf also discuss a similar stepped process to Duhigg’s when discussing the construction of habits, crediting the first step of constructing one to repetition: “repetition is important because a certain behavior has to have been executed successfully and repeatedly in the past to form a habit” (Fabian & Retelsdorf). Applying this research of habit construction to Duhigg’s, Duhigg’s emphasis on repetition coincides well with fellow researchers of habit formation, creating a pathway for further exploration on the topic.

While implementing my new routine, trying to replace my bad habit with a better one, I kept my routine – as well as every other alterable component in the case – constant. Repetition became my best friend. Every time I felt bored I would chew a piece of gum. Every time I noticed my stress I would pull out a piece of gum. While watching television, before I could bring my nails to my lips, I would pull out a stick of gum. I was so determined that I kept a packet in my pockets at all times to ensure the formation of this new habit. It may sound extreme now, but I was able to instill the new routine by remaining constant and fulfilling each of my rewards. And it worked, I stopped biting my nails. Every time I had the urge to bite them, I would grab a stick of gum. By replacing the habit of biting my nails with chewing gum, I not only helped to eliminate the possibility of catching a disease or illness that way, but now my breath constantly smells minty fresh. It was once my nails got long and I began to admire them that realized that I no longer had the desire to bite them.

Throughout my experimentation with Duhigg's theory, I was able to prove his process correct. By establishing and realizing my cue – anxiety, stress, and an oral fixation – I was able to discover my rewards – stress and anxiety relief as well as an appeasement for my fixation – and then shape my new routine, by following the path of the old one and creating new patterns through repetition and a constant environment, accordingly. By utilizing Duhigg's steps, experimenting with rewards cues, adhering to repetition and routines, I was able to not only break my bad habit, but replace it with a better one. By chewing gum in the place of biting my nails, I was able to decrease my likelihood of catching an illness, while promoting constant fresh breath. Through my experiment with Duhigg's theory, I was able to prove it was not only a functional theory on paper in the case of the author, but also applicable to readers if they so desired to try to destroy a bad habit, and create a better one in its place.

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