



## It's not about the Cookie.

# The Power of Habit – Why We Do What We Do in Life & Business by Charles Duhigg

*'All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits.'* William James, 1892.

Willie knew what he was talking about. More than 40% of our actions are not decisions but habits. This has its pros & cons says Charles Duhigg, investigative reporter for the New York Times & author of The Power Of Habit.

On the yeah side (of 40% of our actions being on autopilot) it means that our brains can relax & focus on higher order thinking (how do they get the caramel in the Caramilk bar?) rather than having to frenetically pay attention to every minor thing (how do I steer my car, tie my shoe, brush my teeth & write my name).

On the nay side it means we can be held prisoner to our habits. Because habits are '*neurological cravings*' we cling to habits against all reason. '*Habits can be so powerful that they overwhelm our capacity to make decisions.*' Don't feel too bad foisting that chocolate chip cookie to your lips yet again as lab rats have knowingly walked across electrified flooring to fulfill a habit loop.

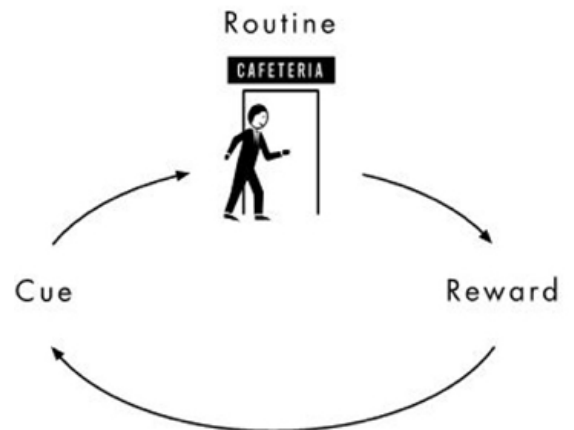
Duhigg lays out the habit loop that has lassoed our brains: cue → routine → reward. Cues come in 5 categories: the immediate preceding action, location, time, emotional state & other people. Understand the cue, replace the old routine with a new one et voila, you can conquer a habit.

The habit loop is powered by a craving, namely the anticipation of a reward. If you understand the craving, you'll understand the behaviour.

### The Habit Loop

Duhigg uses himself as an example. Having gained a few pounds by daily snacking on a chocolate chip cookie, he went to work to uncover his own habit loop.

1. Identify the routine: Duhigg realized he was getting up from his desk to buy a chocolate chip cookie pretty much every day.



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2. Experiment with rewards: '*rewards are powerful because they satisfy cravings.*' Most are hiding in plain view, obvious in retrospect but they can be challenging to tease out. Duhigg experimented until he figured out it wasn't the cookie he wanted, '*rather, it was a moment of distraction & the opportunity to socialize.*'
3. Isolate the cue: his cue was timing. Around 3:30 he'd find himself automatically getting up & heading to the cafeteria.
4. Have a plan: he set his alarm for 3:30 & when it went off he'd get up & go to a friend's desk to chat for 10 minutes. Voila! Craving satisfied with a new routine.

### **Keystone Habits**

Some habits matter more than others. They're called keystone habits. Exercise is an example. The act of exercising appears to trigger all sorts of other habits. People who exercise have been found to be more productive at work, they smoke less, they're more patient, they use credit cards less & are less stressed (running for your runners yet?).

### **Habits and Organizations**

Duhigg goes on to take the research to organizational levels. '*Individuals have habits, groups have routines.*' From Alcoa's turnaround habit of excellence, to Febreze's initial dismal launch to sales of more than 1 billion (yes billion), and from AA to chocolate chip cookies, Duhigg has an example everyone can relate to.

### **Click your heels and believe**

Research has shown one of the key elements is you have to believe that change is feasible (he uses AA's giving it over to a higher power as an interesting example).

### **Habits of the Tongue**

During World War 1 poor dental hygiene was a national security risk in the States as so many men got turned away from enlisting due to poor teeth. At that time brushing your teeth wasn't all that common. Enter Hopkins, who turned teeth brushing into a national cult while vaulting Pepsodent to the top of sales. How'd he do it? By habit.

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Turns out citric acid was an ingredient in Pepsodent. Citric acid is actually an irritant- it makes our tongues feel cool & tingly. People began to crave that irritation when they associated the feeling with cleanliness. (In the same vein, the amount of foam in shampoo has nothing to do with how clean it gets our hair, we've just learned to associate foam with cleanliness.)

Duhigg lays out fascinating examples, wrapped in rigorous research, with practical advice on how to apply the learning – whether it be on a personal, professional or organizational level. So next time you reach for a chocolate chip cookie, know that it's likely not about the cookie.

Lee-Anne Ragan, MEd, BSW, ITC, is President of Rock.Paper.Scissors Inc. (RPS), an internationally renowned, award winning corporate training & entertainment company.

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