



# Oh, Those Habits

## (Or . . . The Definition of Insanity)

### The Power of Habits

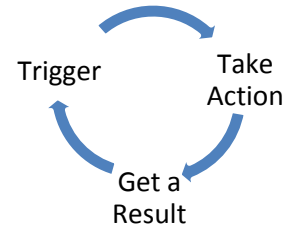
Consider the classic definition of insanity in the famous quote by Albert Einstein.  
“Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

We are all creatures of habit. The vast majority of what we do each day is based on habits we have developed over many years. Some habits help us maintain equilibrium – from breathing and walking to talking to physical acts like brushing our teeth or stepping on the car brakes. Other habits are very helpful and keep us motivated and on track. Still others get in our way and hold us back, causing us to continuously repeat bad results over and over, often without recognizing what is happening.

Habits are important in both our professional and personal lives. Understanding and leveraging them can make a huge difference in our happiness and success. They contribute to productivity by helping us make fast decision. They also impact our resistance to change and the bad habits that hold us back.

Habit formation works like this:

1. There is a trigger
2. We take action
3. We get a result



We follow this cycle throughout our lives. If the result is a positive outcome (a reward), we learn that we can get the reward again by taking the same action the next time the trigger occurs. This often happens below our level of consciousness. Successful repetition becomes instinctual over time.

Bad habits are ingrained the same way, but the ultimate result is not positive. So, why would we choose to repeat a bad result? This can happen when we settle for “good enough” or when the immediate result is positive or feels good (eating sweets, for example), but the ultimate outcome is bad for us (weight gain and compromised health).

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All habits, good or bad, can hold us back from time to time. Once a habit is engrained, we no longer think about that action. Once we no longer think about an action, we are in a rut and may sub-consciously reject new ideas, approaches and methods. We do what we do because that is what we’ve always done. Ouch. Research has now proven that we cannot eliminate a habit. We can however, replace





it with a new habit. Then the new habit must be reinforced repeatedly.

Some of the research on this is illustrated by the following excerpt from an excellent book on habits, [\*The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business\*](#), by Charles Duhigg, an investigative reporter for *The New York Times*:

“We’ve done experiments where we trained rats to run down a maze until it was a habit, and then we extinguished the habit by changing the placement of the reward,” Ann Graybiel, a scientist at MIT who oversaw many of the basal ganglia experiments, told me. “Then one day, we’ll put the reward in the old place, and put in the rat, and, by golly, the old habit will reemerge right away. Habits never really disappear. They’re encoded into the structures of our brain, and that’s a huge advantage for us, because it would be awful if we had to relearn how to drive after every vacation. The problem is that your brain can’t tell the difference between bad and good habits, and so if you have a bad one, it’s always lurking there, waiting for the right cues and rewards.”

We have *physical* habits like breathing, walking and talking. We also have *habits of thought*, which are very powerful. We can

think of the neurons firing in our brains like paths in a field. Before anyone walks in a field, there are no pathways, similar to our brains when they are first formed. Over time, walking repeatedly through a field creates a path. The same is true in our brains. Our neurons begin to fire via established pathways. These become literally the paths of least resistance, and so we begin to think in a consistent way.

Why do so many attempts to change a habit fail? It’s because we do not understand the structure and strength of habits. They are truly hardwired. Conventional wisdom says that it takes 21 days of consistent change to alter a habit. To make the new habit stick, it is important to identify the habit’s trigger, take a different action and notice the new result. This awareness and deliberate approach is important and a very effective way to replace a habit.

We are capable of deliberate choice. We can break the cycle of insanity by choosing a new path.

*For more information about recognizing and replacing your habits, contact Janet Treer at 717-653-6118 or [janet@thetreergroup.com](mailto:janet@thetreergroup.com).*

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