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How to Find and Fix the Causes of Your Bad Habits

IN LATE 2012, I was sitting in an old apartment just a few blocks from Istanbul's most famous street, Istiklal Caddesi. I was in the middle of a four-day trip to Turkey and my guide, Mike, was relaxing in a worn-out armchair a few feet away.

Mike wasn't really a guide. He was just a guy from Maine who had been living in Turkey for five years, but he offered to show me around while I was visiting the country and I took him up on it. On this particular night, I had been invited to dinner with him and a handful of his Turkish friends.

There were seven of us, and I was the only one who hadn't, at some point, smoked at least one pack of cigarettes per day. I asked one of the Turks how he got started. "Friends," he said. "It always starts with your friends. One friend smokes, then you try it."

What was truly fascinating was that half of the people in the room had managed to *quit* smoking. Mike had been smoke-free for a few years at that point, and he swore up and down that he broke the habit because of a book called *Allen Carr's Easy Way to Stop Smoking*.

"It frees you from the mental burden of smoking," he said. "It tells you: 'Stop lying to yourself. You know you

don't actually want to smoke. You know you don't really enjoy this.' It helps you feel like you're not the victim anymore. You start to realize that you don't *need* to smoke."

I had never tried a cigarette, but I took a look at the book afterward out of curiosity. The author employs an interesting strategy to help smokers eliminate their cravings. He systematically reframes each cue associated with smoking and gives it a new meaning.

He says things like:

- You think you are quitting something, but you're not quitting anything because cigarettes do nothing for you.
- You think smoking is something you need to do to be social, but it's not. You can be social without smoking at all.
- You think smoking is about relieving stress, but it's not. Smoking does not relieve your nerves, it destroys them.

Over and over, he repeats these phrases and others like them. "Get it clearly into your mind," he says. "You are losing nothing and you are making marvelous positive gains not only in health, energy and money but also in confidence, self-respect, freedom and, most important of all, in the length and quality of your future life."

By the time you get to the end of the book, smoking seems like the most ridiculous thing in the world to do. And if you no longer expect smoking to bring you any benefits, you have no reason to smoke. It is an inversion of the 2nd Law of Behavior Change: *make it unattractive*.

Now, I know this idea might sound overly simplistic. Just change your mind and you can quit smoking. But stick with me for a minute.

WHERE CRAVINGS COME FROM

Every behavior has a surface level craving and a deeper, underlying motive. I often have a craving that goes something like this: “I want to eat tacos.” If you were to ask me why I want to eat tacos, I wouldn’t say, “Because I need food to survive.” But the truth is, somewhere deep down, I am motivated to eat tacos because I have to eat to survive. The underlying motive is to obtain food and water even if my specific craving is for a taco.

Some of our underlying motives include:*

- Conserve energy
- Obtain food and water
- Find love and reproduce
- Connect and bond with others
- Win social acceptance and approval
- Reduce uncertainty
- Achieve status and prestige

A craving is just a specific manifestation of a deeper underlying motive. Your brain did not evolve with a desire to smoke cigarettes or to check Instagram or to play video games. At a deep level, you simply want to reduce uncertainty and relieve anxiety, to win social acceptance and approval, or to achieve status.

Look at nearly any product that is habit-forming and you’ll see that it does not create a new motivation, but rather latches onto the underlying motives of human nature.

- Find love and reproduce = using Tinder
- Connect and bond with others = browsing Facebook
- Win social acceptance and approval = posting on Instagram

- Reduce uncertainty = searching on Google
- Achieve status and prestige = playing video games

Your habits are modern-day solutions to ancient desires. New versions of old vices. The underlying motives behind human behavior remain the same. The specific habits we perform differ based on the period of history.

Here's the powerful part: there are many different ways to address the same underlying motive. One person might learn to reduce stress by smoking a cigarette. Another person learns to ease their anxiety by going for a run. Your current habits are not necessarily the best way to solve the problems you face; they are just the methods you learned to use. Once you associate a solution with the problem you need to solve, you keep coming back to it.

Habits are all about associations. These associations determine whether we predict a habit to be worth repeating or not. As we covered in our discussion of the 1st Law, your brain is continually absorbing information and noticing cues in the environment. Every time you perceive a cue, your brain runs a simulation and makes a prediction about what to do in the next moment.

Cue: You notice that the stove is hot.

Prediction: *If I touch it I'll get burned, so I should avoid touching it.*

Cue: You see that the traffic light turned green.

Prediction: *If I step on the gas, I'll make it safely through the intersection and get closer to my destination, so I should step on the gas.*

You see a cue, categorize it based on past experience, and determine the appropriate response.

This all happens in an instant, but it plays a crucial role in your habits because every action is preceded by a

prediction. Life feels reactive, but it is actually predictive. All day long, you are making your best guess of how to act given what you've just seen and what has worked for you in the past. You are endlessly predicting what will happen in the next moment.

Our behavior is heavily dependent on these predictions. Put another way, our behavior is heavily dependent on how we interpret the events that happen to us, not necessarily the objective reality of the events themselves. Two people can look at the same cigarette, and one feels the urge to smoke while the other is repulsed by the smell. The same cue can spark a good habit or a bad habit depending on your prediction. The cause of your habits is actually the prediction that precedes them.

These predictions lead to feelings, which is how we typically describe a craving—a feeling, a desire, an urge. Feelings and emotions transform the cues we perceive and the predictions we make into a signal that we can apply. They help explain what we are currently sensing. For instance, whether or not you realize it, you are noticing how warm or cold you feel right now. If the temperature drops by one degree, you probably won't do anything. If the temperature drops ten degrees, however, you'll feel cold and put on another layer of clothing. Feeling cold was the signal that prompted you to act. You have been sensing the cues the entire time, but it is only when you predict that you would be better off in a different state that you take action.

A craving is the sense that something is missing. It is the desire to change your internal state. When the temperature falls, there is a gap between what your body is currently sensing and what it *wants* to be sensing. This gap between your current state and your desired state provides a reason to act.

Desire is the difference between where you are now and where you want to be in the future. Even the tiniest action

is tinged with the motivation to feel differently than you do in the moment. When you binge-eat or light up or browse social media, what you really want is *not* a potato chip or a cigarette or a bunch of likes. What you really want is to *feel* different.

Our feelings and emotions tell us whether to hold steady in our current state or to make a change. They help us decide the best course of action. Neurologists have discovered that when emotions and feelings are impaired, we actually lose the ability to make decisions. We have no signal of what to pursue and what to avoid. As the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio explains, “It is emotion that allows you to mark things as good, bad, or indifferent.”

To summarize, the specific cravings you feel and habits you perform are really an attempt to address your fundamental underlying motives. Whenever a habit successfully addresses a motive, you develop a craving to do it again. In time, you learn to predict that checking social media will help you feel loved or that watching YouTube will allow you to forget your fears. Habits are attractive when we associate them with positive feelings, and we can use this insight to our advantage rather than to our detriment.

HOW TO REPROGRAM YOUR BRAIN TO ENJOY HARD HABITS

You can make hard habits more attractive if you can learn to associate them with a positive experience. Sometimes, all you need is a slight mind-set shift. For instance, we often talk about everything we have to do in a given day. You have to wake up early for work. You have to make another sales call for your business. You have to cook dinner for your family.

Now, imagine changing just one word: You don't "have" to. You "get" to.

You *get* to wake up early for work. You *get* to make another sales call for your business. You *get* to cook dinner for your family. By simply changing one word, you shift the way you view each event. You transition from seeing these behaviors as burdens and turn them into opportunities.

The key point is that both versions of reality are true. You *have* to do those things, and you also *get* to do them. We can find evidence for whatever mind-set we choose.

I once heard a story about a man who uses a wheelchair. When asked if it was difficult being confined, he responded, "I'm not confined to my wheelchair—I am liberated by it. If it wasn't for my wheelchair, I would be bed-bound and never able to leave my house." This shift in perspective completely transformed how he lived each day.

Reframing your habits to highlight their *benefits* rather than their drawbacks is a fast and lightweight way to reprogram your mind and make a habit seem more attractive.

Exercise. Many people associate exercise with being a challenging task that drains energy and wears you down. You can just as easily view it as a way to develop skills and build you up. Instead of telling yourself "I need to go run in the morning," say "It's time to build endurance and get fast."

Finance. Saving money is often associated with sacrifice. However, you can associate it with freedom rather than limitation if you realize one simple truth: living below your current means *increases* your future means. The money you save this month increases your purchasing power next month.

Meditation. Anyone who has tried meditation for more than three seconds knows how frustrating it can be when the next distraction inevitably pops into your mind. You can transform frustration into delight when you realize that

each interruption gives you a chance to practice returning to your breath. Distraction is a good thing because you need distractions to practice meditation.

Pregame jitters. Many people feel anxious before delivering a big presentation or competing in an important event. They experience quicker breathing, a faster heart rate, heightened arousal. If we interpret these feelings negatively, then we feel threatened and tense up. If we interpret these feelings positively, then we can respond with fluidity and grace. You can reframe “I am nervous” to “I am excited and I’m getting an adrenaline rush to help me concentrate.”

These little mind-set shifts aren’t magic, but they can help change the feelings you associate with a particular habit or situation.

If you want to take it a step further, you can create a *motivation ritual*. You simply practice associating your habits with something you enjoy, then you can use that cue whenever you need a bit of motivation. For instance, if you always play the same song before having sex, then you’ll begin to link the music with the act. Whenever you want to get in the mood, just press play.

Ed Latimore, a boxer and writer from Pittsburgh, benefited from a similar strategy without knowing it. “Odd realization,” he wrote. “My focus and concentration goes up just by putting my headphones [on] while writing. I don’t even have to play any music.” Without realizing it, he was conditioning himself. In the beginning, he put his headphones on, played some music he enjoyed, and did focused work. After doing it five, ten, twenty times, putting his headphones on became a cue that he automatically associated with increased focus. The craving followed naturally.

Athletes use similar strategies to get themselves in the mind-set to perform. During my baseball career, I developed a specific ritual of stretching and throwing

before each game. The whole sequence took about ten minutes, and I did it the same way every single time. While it physically warmed me up to play, more importantly, it put me in the right mental state. I began to associate my pregame ritual with feeling competitive and focused. Even if I wasn't motivated beforehand, by the time I was done with my ritual, I was in "game mode."

You can adapt this strategy for nearly any purpose. Say you want to feel happier in general. Find something that makes you truly happy—like petting your dog or taking a bubble bath—and then create a short routine that you perform every time *before* you do the thing you love. Maybe you take three deep breaths and smile.

Three deep breaths. Smile. Pet the dog. Repeat.

Eventually, you'll begin to associate this breathe-and-smile routine with being in a good mood. It becomes a cue that *means* feeling happy. Once established, you can break it out anytime you need to change your emotional state. Stressed at work? Take three deep breaths and smile. Sad about life? Three deep breaths and smile. Once a habit has been built, the cue can prompt a craving, even if it has little to do with the original situation.

The key to finding and fixing the causes of your bad habits is to reframe the associations you have about them. It's not easy, but if you can reprogram your predictions, you can transform a hard habit into an attractive one.

Chapter Summary

- The inversion of the 2nd Law of Behavior Change is *make it unattractive*.
- Every behavior has a surface level craving and a deeper underlying motive.

- Your habits are modern-day solutions to ancient desires.
- The cause of your habits is actually the prediction that precedes them. The prediction leads to a feeling.
- Highlight the benefits of avoiding a bad habit to make it seem unattractive.
- Habits are attractive when we associate them with positive feelings and unattractive when we associate them with negative feelings. Create a motivation ritual by doing something you enjoy immediately before a difficult habit.

HOW TO CREATE A GOOD HABIT

The 1st Law: Make It Obvious
<p>1.1: Fill out the Habits Scorecard. Write down your current habits to become aware of them.</p> <p>1.2: Use implementation intentions: “I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION].”</p> <p>1.3: Use habit stacking: “After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].”</p> <p>1.4: Design your environment. Make the cues of good habits obvious and visible.</p>
The 2nd Law: Make It Attractive
<p>2.1: Use temptation bundling. Pair an action you <i>want</i> to do with an action you <i>need</i> to do.</p> <p>2.2: Join a culture where your desired behavior is the normal behavior.</p> <p>2.3: Create a motivation ritual. Do something you enjoy immediately before a difficult habit.</p>
The 3rd Law: Make It Easy
The 4th Law: Make It Satisfying

HOW TO BREAK A BAD HABIT

Inversion of the 1st Law: Make It Invisible
<p>1.5: Reduce exposure. Remove the cues of your bad habits from your environment.</p>

Inversion of the 2nd Law: Make It Unattractive
2.4: Reframe your mind-set. Highlight the benefits of avoiding your bad habits.
Inversion of the 3rd Law: Make It Difficult
Inversion of the 4th Law: Make It Unsatisfying

You can download a printable version of this habits cheat sheet at:
atomichabits.com/cheatsheet