



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HABITUAL BEHAVIORS

As of COVID-19 continues to impact our daily lives, the habits that formed our health routines, including both the physical and mental side of well-being, are being disrupted. But how do we create new habits? Here we consider the psychology of habitual behaviors.

Before the current pandemic-related restrictions, we all had a routine. Or rather, we all had routines. They varied from traveling to work every day to what we ate for breakfast and even where we ate breakfast – at home, on the train, at the office. They also included how we got our exercise – walking to the office, going to the gym, playing sports on the weekend.

Some of them were so ingrained in our everyday lives that they were habits that we didn't even have to think about, we carried them out automatically. Within psychology, 'habits' are defined as actions that are triggered automatically in response to contextual cues that have been associated with their performance. For example, putting on a seatbelt (action) after getting into the car (contextual cue) or picking up an apple from the bowl (action) before we leave the house to go to the office (contextual cue).

But now many of these routines, these habits, have been disrupted.

The importance of habits

We need habits in our life – they're necessary to our general success as human beings. When you take away the healthy habits – those that we do almost without thinking on a daily basis to keep our minds and bodies healthy – it can have an impact on our well-being.

Habits - especially those we do unconsciously - are important because our brains have a limited capacity to process information.

It's estimated that the processing capacity of the conscious mind is about 120 bits per second. Compared to the amount of information we're taking in on a regular basis through our sensory system, it is a small amount.

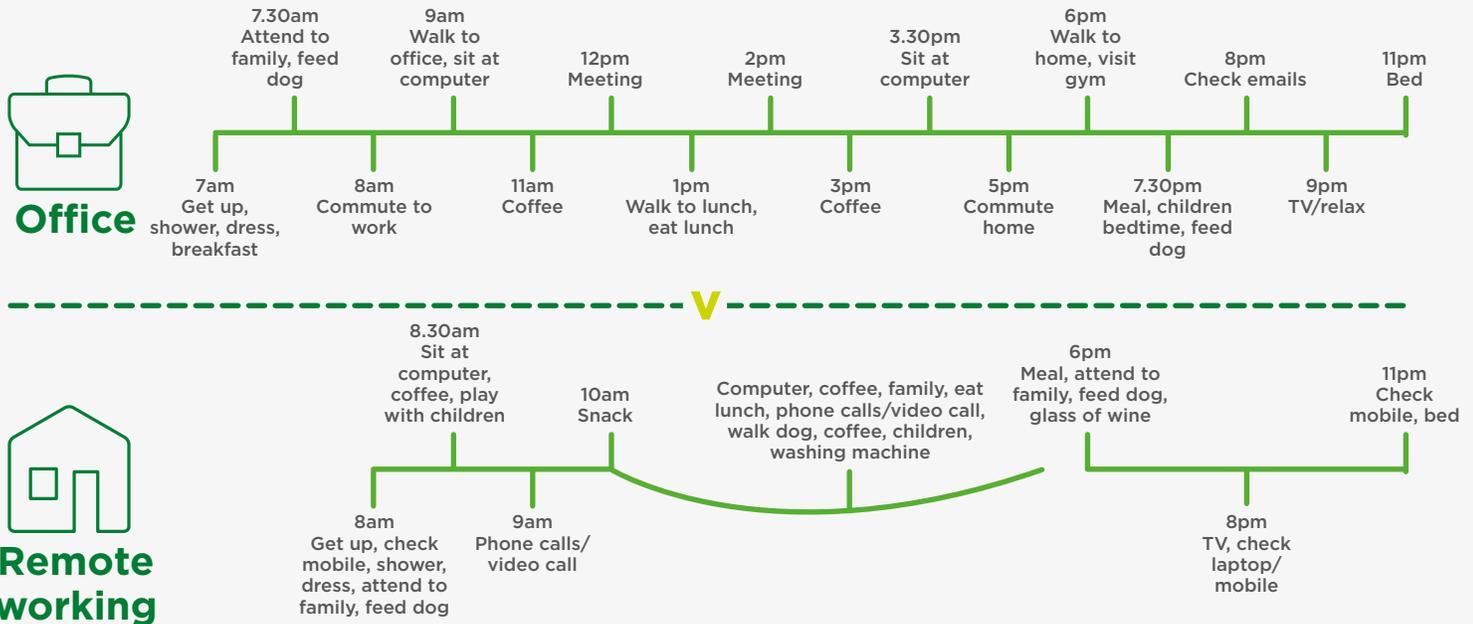
When we engage with the world through our conscious mind, we're really looking at it as though we're looking through a small scope, and our mind is filtering out a large amount of information. That subconscious filtering system is where we find the extra capacity.

This doesn't mean we spend our lives on autopilot, according to neuroscientist David Eagleman¹ "Brains are in the business of gathering information and steering behavior appropriately. It doesn't matter whether consciousness is involved in the decision making. And most of the time, it's not."

We need to get through our day and react to a lot of information that comes through, including something as simple as how we feel in the morning: what is the temperature? How do we get dressed for it?

If you had to think about each item that impact on your whole health, you'd exhaust those 120 bits per second quickly. This is where habits come in. They allow us to engage in behaviors that we need in order to survive without engaging our conscious minds. Thereby saving the capacity for other tasks. »

Office routine Versus Working from home



The growth of unhealthy habits

Typically, we don't break habits so much as create new ones. If we were trying to improve our dietary health, we would need to select a new behavior (for example, eat an apple) rather than just giving up an existing behavior (do not eat fried snacks) because it is not possible to create a habit for not doing something.²

When habits are formed it is usually because we're in pursuit of a goal. When you engage in a behavior that receives positive feedback in the form of a reward, that behavior is reinforced. This is where the impact of lockdown comes in. Since our routines were changed, there is a risk that the 'good habits' that we might have, like healthy eating or an exercise routine, will be replaced by new habits that come in to meet our new needs.

One need that a lot of us are experiencing is the alleviation of boredom. Many of us have been sitting in the same room for the duration of the pandemic, depriving our minds of the usual stimulus it was used to receiving on a daily basis. This is where food comes in. It may seem like a good solution in the moment. Food can be a powerful stimulant in that it gives you an excuse to get up and you enjoy what you're eating. The need to do this on a more frequent basis than set meal times, means that it's very easy to displace the healthy foods that were once your 'go to' lunch option with items that might be less healthy.

Habits are usually part of a cycle, or habit loop. In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg explains that in the 1990s, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology discovered a simple neurological loop at the core of every habit. All habits consist of three parts: a routine, a reward and a cue. The researchers dubbed this the "habit loop."

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In recent times, our mobility has been reduced and we've lost a large number of cues that were part of our existing habit loops.

For example, you may previously have had the habit of walking twenty minutes to the metro station in order to get towards your daily steps.

Now you are unable to accomplish this and it's not replaceable in a world where you don't have many options for exercise. That loop is now broken and we have to find a way of replacing it by creating a new one. We have to try to create a new routine that will eventually become a habit.

The best way to create new habits is to focus them around parts of your life that you currently have control over. This can have pros and cons, and the fact is many people are experiencing a lot of stress due to being in the same place all the time. However, on the other hand, if we do try to create a lot of new habits or routines that involve going out, you could find those disrupted very quickly.

People are beginning to realize that the boundary between 'work' and 'life' doesn't need to be quite as definite as it was. It can be porous, without our mental health suffering. You could possibly work 8 AM to 3 PM, take some time away, then plug back in again to finish the day.





Our family and friends are also an ecosystem that we can control.

Today, the global workforce is more accepting of working remotely and there are benefits to it that can help create new habits – having no commute is the obvious one.

It does of course depend who you work for. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, Google told their employees to work from home until 2021, Twitter told their employees they could work from home indefinitely, and Cigna has always had a very flexible approach to working from home.

Whatever the future holds, we've discovered the importance of remote working and it's going to shift the way people expect to interact with their work.

Forming new habits

On an individual level, when we talk about mental and emotional routine, one thing that's never going to change in terms of location is our mind – the environment in which we perceive our entire world. Some pieces of advice from the beginning of the pandemic still hold true now. For example, don't obsessively check the news. We have to resist the temptation to consume information about distressing headlines. Even before COVID-19, this is something we've all done. We live in a world with a 24-hour news cycle, and we tend to look for bad news. It's the modern version of a vital warning, 'don't go over there, there's a tiger', but our brain latches onto it anyway.

So when it comes to our own mental health, that's the first anchor piece of advice. There's quite a lot we can do by just making a decision about how much information

we're going to take in. It's not about sticking your head in the sand. It's saying 'I am going to keep up-to-date with what's going on in the world but I'm only going to devote 30 - 60 minutes a day to it. I'm not going to allow it to take me away from work'. This is a habit we can make or break and can take anywhere with us – that mental hygiene is very critical.

Cigna's [Check-In Campaign](#) is based on another vital piece of advice, which is the importance of our social connections. Our family and friends are also an ecosystem that we can control. They form a really important piece of our mental health. Keeping those connections vital, whether that's via video conferencing, or in a socially distanced way is a good place to focus your energy.

We encourage companies to make resources available to their employees. People are struggling. Many families are finding it tough to balance work and life. They are feeling emotionally strained and exhausted. We're also facing issues of loneliness, anxiety and depression. We've been deprived of the normal systems that regulate us. One reason being people aren't seeing each other in the office on a regular basis to engage in conversations.

This can be countered with different forms of remote coaching. It is vital to train those at management level to recognize problems such as burnout and anxiety, how to deal with them and how to support someone dealing with these issues.

The importance of achievable goals

Cigna's One Small Change Program introduces new habits during the COVID-19 pandemic. It encourages us to set mini challenges over the course of a week to bring about small changes that can make a difference to our whole health well-being. It could be as simple as having one small teaspoon of sugar in your coffee, rather than two.





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It's not about large shifts in behavior and habit because these aren't sustainable. You can buy a high-end indoor exercise bike, lift weights, etc., but these are the equivalent of a crash diet. We don't have enough cognitive capacity to focus on that amount of change on a long-term basis. It's not about willpower either, because mental energy is limited, just like our physical energy.

The key is to choose achievable goals, and turn those into habits that we can, over time, build more habits upon. That's how we can create a positive and successful feedback loop that designs a new lifestyle that works for us.

References:

1. Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain, David Eagleman, 2011.
2. Making health habitual: the psychology of 'habit-formation' and general practice, British Journal of General Practice, 2012

Behavior change is achievable but it requires a commitment to make reasonable expectations. If we don't then we're setting ourselves up to fail. Be sensible and practical in what is changed however, and you can form new, healthy habits that will fuel your whole health for the rest of your life.

MAKE A NEW HEALTHY HABIT²

- 1** Decide on a goal that you would like to achieve for your health.
- 2** Choose a simple action that will move you towards your goal and you can do on a daily basis.
- 3** Plan when and where you will do your chosen action. Be consistent. Choose a set time and place every day of the week.
- 4** Every time you encounter that time and place, take the action.
- 5** It will get easier with time, and within 10 weeks you should find you are undertaking the action automatically without even having to think about it.
- 6** Congratulations, you've created a healthy habit!

Together, all the way.[®]



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