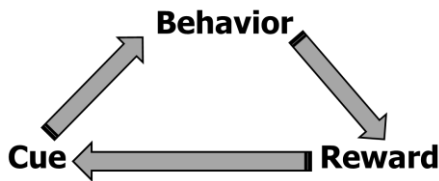


## Habit-Building for Better Decision Making

Change is a skill; you can get better at it. Two good ways to change or build habits are to change your environment and to build change in small steps. *These are things you can control.* You need to understand your habits to decide how best to change them. According to numerous researchers, this is the basic structure of a habit:

**The Habit Loop:** A cue (a place, a time of day, a person, an emotion, an action, etc.) triggers the behavior (the existing routine). The behavior activates a reward. The reward reinforces the cue, making it more likely to trigger the behavior again. (An excellent book about this is *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg, Random House, 2012.)



*To create or change a habit, you need to address one or ideally more of these things. Sometimes the key is figuring out the actual reward(s)—it's not always obvious.*

According to Dr. BJ Fogg (<https://www.bjfogg.com/learn>), a behavior scientist at Stanford University, habits are like plants. To grow one, you should:

1. Start with something tiny (analogous to a seed or a sprout).
2. Find a good spot for it in your garden (a good environment for it).
3. Nourish your tiny plant so the roots get established.

In terms of behavior change, these translate to:

1. Start small: *Focus on a very small behavior that leads into the bigger behavior you want.*
2. Choose the right environment: *Attach your new behavior to a solid existing routine, one in a good place and time for the new behavior also to occur.*
3. Help establish the roots: *Practice your new behavior, and nourish the new behavior (reward it)—attach positive emotion to it.*
4. And an additional step--If there are issues with the new behavior taking root:  
–**Assess a** if it's the right small step to start with, **b** if it's connected to the best possible existing behavior, **c** if you have actually rewarded yourself for doing the new behavior  
–**Adjust one or more of the above.** *Change is a skill and so requires practice.*

Think about two or three behaviors you would like to add to your day. Consider different aspects of your life such as nutrition (e.g., eating more fruits or vegetables, drinking more water or other healthy fluids), exercise (e.g., walking more, working on upper body strength), other health and hygiene (e.g., flossing, less screen time), relationships (e.g., positive contact with a loved one), hobbies (e.g., practicing an instrument or a language, doing crosswords, reading), other rejuvenating practices (e.g., mindfulness, gratitude, connect to nature), etc.

Note: Commit to practicing the behavior(s) you choose for at least five days. For free interactive tools and mini-courses for helping people improve decisions, change habits, and achieve goals (based on research regarding), go to: [https://www.clearerthinking.org/.](https://www.clearerthinking.org/)]

*(continued)*

For each behavior you want to add to your day, carefully consider:

- ◆ **What smaller actions add in to make up the larger desired behavior?** Pull it apart into its smallest steps. There likely will be “high impact” moments in those steps (often ones very early in the behavior)—ones that are key to the behavior even being possible; note these as possible places for change. Choose a very small behavior to focus on first.
- ◆ **What would be the best existing routine to connect the new behavior to?** An ideal routine will be one that is well-established, that occurs with the same frequency as you want for the new behavior, and that is somehow related to the existing routine (perhaps in the place it occurs, time of day, type of activity, or overall goal). You will be trying to connect or “anchor” the new behavior to a strong, appropriate existing one; the existing behavior will become a cue for the new one.
- ◆ **What do you need to do to set up the environment for success before you start the new behavior?** For instance, are there materials that need to be in place?
- ◆ **How will you make sure to associate positive emotions with the new behavior when you do it?** Positive reinforcements don’t have to be big but are **necessary**—rewards, mini-celebrations (“Yay, me!”), or some other acknowledgment you find positive (crossing off an item on a list, reporting to a friend or family member, etc.).

Now, write these as formulas below—“After I (existing behavior), I will (new small behavior).” These are obviously similar to the If \_\_\_ - Then \_\_\_ format that has strong research supporting it.

1) “After I \_\_\_\_\_,  
I will \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Notes:*

2) “After I \_\_\_\_\_,  
I will \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Notes:*

3) “After I \_\_\_\_\_,  
I will \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Notes:*

(See next page for more resources)

## Some Resources for Creating New Habits

1. **ClearerThinking.org**. Free interactive tools and mini-courses, based on research, to help people improve decisions, change habits, and achieve goals. <https://www.clearerthinking.org/>
2. Duhigg, Charles. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. Round House, 2012. Excellent book on how habits form and how to change them.
3. Fogg, BJ. “**Tiny Habits**.” Stanford University behavior scientist’s website and free coaching on structuring for changing habits one little bit at a time. <https://www.bjfogg.com/learn>
4. Thaler, Richard H., et al. “**Choice Architecture**.” 2010. Analyzes some tools available to help nudge people to make better choices. <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~baron/475/choice.architecture.pdf>
5. Thaler, Richard H., and Cass R. Sunstein. *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Penguin Group, 2008. Excellent book about “choice architecture” – making positive change more likely.
6. Wood, Wendy, and David T. Neal. “**Healthy through Habit: Interventions for Initiating and Maintaining Health Behavior Change**.” *Behavioral Science & Policy*, vol. 2, is. 1, 2016, pp. 71–83. [https://behavioralpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/BSP\\_vol1is1\\_Wood.pdf](https://behavioralpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/BSP_vol1is1_Wood.pdf)