



The Sivv Guide to:

Managing Habits

A compendium of the world's best thinking on realising sustainable behaviour change



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INTRODUCTION

'Depending on what they are, our habits will either make us or break us. We become what we repeatedly do.'

- Sean Covey, author and executive

A habit is a mental or physical behaviour that is conducted with little or no conscious thought. By allowing us to bypass assessment of what to do in familiar situations, habits serve an important role in reducing our cognitive load and account for around 40% of our daily behaviour¹. As a result, they can have profound implications for our health, productivity and happiness.

For example, one recent study² of more than 110,000 people considered the impact on life expectancy at middle age of:

- Not smoking.
- Maintaining a healthy body mass index (of 18 to 25).
- Exercising (30 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity a day).
- Moderate alcohol intake (5g to 15g of pure alcohol per day).
- Following a healthy diet.

The researchers found that, on average, following four or five of these habits significantly increases life expectancy (free of diabetes, cancer and heart disease) at 50 years of age for both women (from 73.7 to 84.4 years) and men (from 73.5 to 81.1 years).

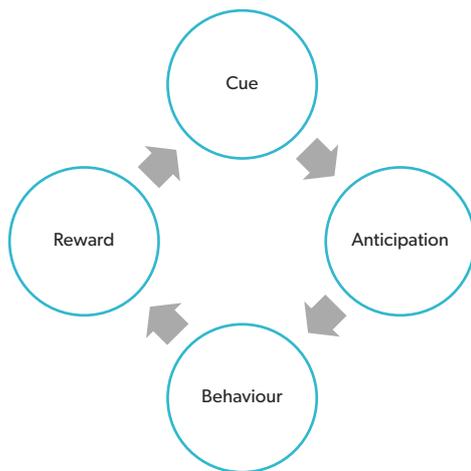
Given that our habits are largely automatic, however, a desire to change them based on knowledge of their long-term impacts is insufficient in itself to drive us to embrace or avoid them. Doing so effectively requires an understanding of how habits form and a strategic approach to leveraging this.

THE HABIT LOOP

'Chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.'

- Warren Buffett, investor and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway

Research³ suggests that habits involve a neurological feedback loop comprising a **cue** (typically a specific location, time, person, emotional state or sequence of thoughts or actions) that, when encountered, triggers a **behaviour** (ranging from a simple action to a relatively complicated sequence



of actions) that is undertaken in anticipation of a **reward** (a pleasant physical or emotional sensation).

This loop forms when we repeatedly engage in a reward-inducing behaviour within a similar context. Over time, we build an association between the context and the reward. Eventually, we begin to anticipate or crave the reward whenever we encounter a similar situation. This

anticipation in turn drives the behaviour (we feel noticeably uncomfortable unless we act), which becomes increasingly automatic as each loop reinforces the cue /reward association.

Many of us experience the habit loop when the ping of a smartphone notification or feeling of boredom (a cue) leads us, almost without thinking, to check our emails, messages and other notifications (a behaviour) in anticipation of the pleasant sensations of mental stimulation and social connection (a reward). In fact, many products are designed to take advantage of the way that habits form^a, while companies often design their marketing efforts to influence us at major life transitions (such as becoming a parent), when we tend to establish new habits.

The cue or reward driving the habit loop are not, however, always obvious^b. For example, habits involving substance abuse often arise for reasons other than the physical sensation of intoxication, such as boredom or a desire for social connection.

^a See the appendix for further details.

^b The same cue can also trigger different behaviours in different people. For instance, arriving home from work triggers some people to have a beer and others to go for a run.

FORMING GOOD HABITS

While positive habits can form naturally, we can encourage them to develop by strengthening the habit loop. Doing so primarily involves:

- **Establishing a cue.** To be effective, a cue must be prominent and encountered frequently within the same context and at a time when we are able to undertake the desired behaviour.

One way to establish a cue for a new habit is to plan exactly where and when we will do it. Creating such a plan (which psychologists refer to as an 'implementation intention') is generally more effective than waiting to feel motivated to act, while scheduling time for a new habit (ideally adding it to a calendar and setting-up a reminder) reduces the risk that something else will get in the way.

We can also make use of 'habit stacking', which involves practicing a new habit immediately after completing an existing one. This establishes an obvious cue (finishing the old habit) that we encounter regularly. For instance, we could immediately follow regular meditation sessions with 30 minutes of reading or integrate healthy eating into an established exercise routine. In 'Tiny Habits'⁴, Stanford University professor BJ Fogg notes that, for this approach to work, the two habits should be aligned in terms purpose (e.g., focused on improving our wellbeing), while we must be able to perform them in the same location and with the same frequency.

- **Making the behaviour as easy as possible.** According to the Fogg Behaviour Model⁵, any individual or group behaviour occurs when motivation, ability and a prompt converge at the same moment. In other words, we do what we do because we are prompted to perform a behaviour when we are sufficiently motivated and able to do it. The more challenging the behaviour, the greater our motivation needs to be for us to perform it when prompted.

As BJ Fogg (the creator of the model) notes, many of the behaviours we want to embrace are difficult. While we often feel highly motivated to adopt these, we struggle to stick with them over the long term because our motivation fluctuates⁶. In order to successfully create new habits, he argues, we should therefore reduce our reliance on our motivation by making the desired behaviour as easy as possible to perform. We can do this in two ways:

1. **Change the behaviour itself.** Anything that we can do to reduce the money, time or effort (mental or physical) that it takes to perform a behaviour, align it with the rules of our social groups or integrate it within our current routines will make it easier to do.

⁶ According to Fogg, our motivation stems from the pleasure derived from or pain avoided by the behaviour itself, our hope of achieving our goals or avoiding our fears and our desire to gain social acceptance or avoid social rejection.

2. **Improve our ability to perform the behaviour.** We can make behaviours that we are trying to follow easier to do by looking for ways to improve our approach and develop any relevant skills. For instance, we could seek advice from people that have successfully developed a similar habit or take a class. We should also make sure that we have the necessary equipment or tools to perform the behaviour (e.g., good running shoes or a reading lamp).

→ **Establishing and / or maximising the associated reward.** To make the activity rewarding, we should attempt to make it as enjoyable as possible (e.g., by selecting a form of exercise that we find fun), focus on its benefits or positive aspects and actively celebrate each time that we do it (even if this simply involves telling ourselves 'well done').

As psychologist Wendy Wood notes⁶, rewards do not need to be intrinsic to the behaviour (although this helps) but do need to be immediate in order to connect the dopamine release they provide with the cue and routine behaviour. As a result, 'temptation bundling', in which positive but difficult-to-stick-with behaviours such as exercising are associated or bundled with additional rewards, can be used to encourage habits to form. For example, watching a television programme that you enjoy while in the gym or catching-up with friends immediately afterwards may help to boost the reward you associate with exercising. This approach works best when there is a level of alignment between the additional reward and the desired habit, so would not, for example, involve bundling a gym session with a visit to a fast-food restaurant^d.

Research⁷ also suggests that rewards become more potent when they are variable, in part because variability introduces an additional element of excitement. So, we may find, for instance, that rewarding ourselves with a different snack after each gym session motivates us more than sticking with the same option each time.

As an example, if you wanted to develop an exercise habit you could:

- Leave your gym bag by the front door so that you encounter it as you leave your house each morning (creating a prominent cue that you will encounter regularly and in the same context).
- Pack your equipment the night before and join a gym that is on your route to work (reducing the friction involved in exercising).
- Engage in activities that you enjoy and listen to interesting podcasts while doing so (increasing the immediate rewards that exercising delivers).

^d See below on the importance of identity in changing habits.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Sivv guides are designed to convey useful, generally-applicable and actionable ideas in a concise, easy-to-digest format. This requires us to streamline explanations and use examples sparingly, so a moderate level of general business / professional acumen is assumed of the reader. Our guides are not intended to be prescriptive and we fully acknowledge that the ideas and suggestions covered are unlikely to be applicable for everyone in all situations.

We have attempted to fully reference all sources relied upon in the development of this guide, with direct links provided to these where possible (see the 'references' section below). If we have failed to acknowledge any sources we apologise and will happily rectify any omission if informed about it.

We update Sivv guides periodically to incorporate new insights, so please do contact us at info@sivv.io if you know of something that we should include, have any feedback or need us to clarify anything that we have written.

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