

Habit Formation

Empowering Participants to Build Sustainable Habits for Lifestyle Change



EMORY
ROLLINS
SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC
HEALTH

Emory Centers
for Public Health
Training and
Technical Assistance

Facilitator



Kris Fanelli, MPH

National Master Trainer

Lifestyle Coach

Diabetes Training & Technical Assistance Center (DTTAC)

Emory Centers for Public Health Training & Technical Assistance

Rollins School of Public Health | Emory University | Atlanta, GA

Top 3 Things to Know About Habit Formation

1. The truth about willpower and self control
2. Habit formation theory
3. Understanding the habit loop

Expectations and Disclaimers

- This is introductory content on habit formation theory. *Not an exhaustive presentation on habit formation practice or research*
 - Primary focus on *forming new habits* and less today on eliminating habits
- We are not addressing other factors that influence behavior change such as readiness, efficacy, environmental factors such as social determinants of health
- Research on habit formation and behavior change is evolving

Societal Approach to Behavior Change

- *Just do it*
- Get motivated
- Use self-control
- Make good choices
- You have to want it
- Focus on your “why”

The Limits of Self Control and Willpower

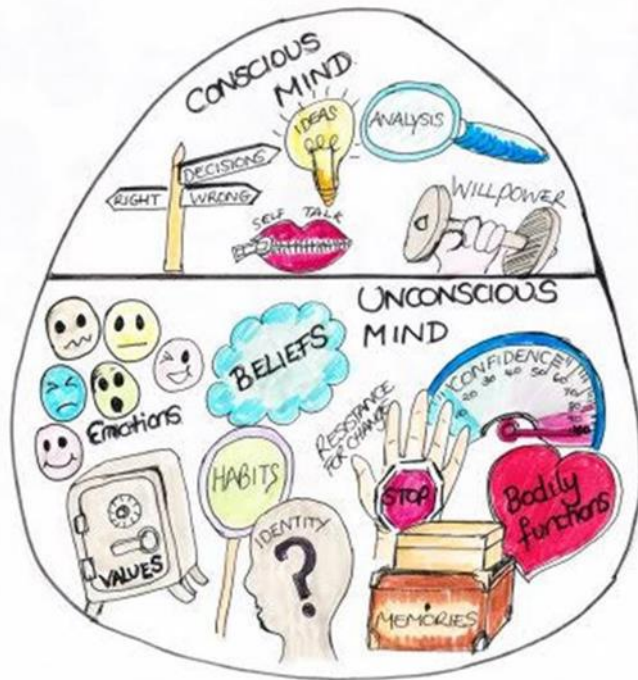
- Self-control & will power work better in certain situations that require decisiveness
- Self-control & will power do NOT work as well for repeated actions such as
 - Spending
 - Sleeping
 - Physical activity
 - Eating

Source: Good Habits, Bad Habits, Wendy Wood



Understanding Habits

- Almost half of our actions aren't conscious choices, we do them by habit
 - Brushing teeth
 - Driving to work
 - How we eat
 - Biting nails



The Problem & Possible Solution

- Changing behaviors is complex and challenging
- Willpower & self-control are a part of the change process, but not enough for sustainable change over time
- Emerging neuro and behavioral science on **habit formation** are shedding light on the role of habits in changing and sustaining behavior

"Because we think self-control and will power is the problem, our cultural solutions focus on choices and self-control"
- Wendy Wood, author and researcher

Habit Over Self Control

- Habits aren't affected by stress, distraction, tiredness or time pressure like our more conscious selves
- Habits make lifestyle changes easier



**CAN'T SOMEONE ELSE
JUST DO IT?**

How Habits Are Formed

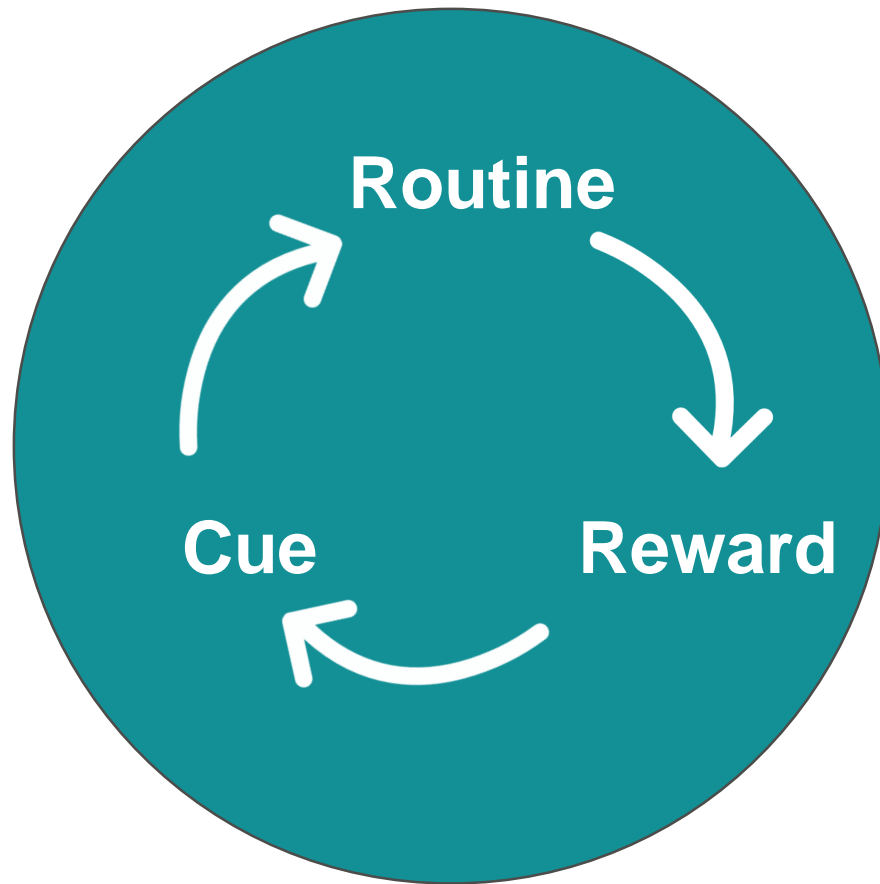
Habit

- **Habit:** a routine of behavior that is repeated regularly and tends to occur subconsciously
- **Habit formation:** the process by which behaviors become automatic
- Habits can form without a person intending to acquire them
- Habits can be deliberately cultivated—or eliminated—to better suit one's personal goals



Source: Psychology Today

What is a Habit Loop?



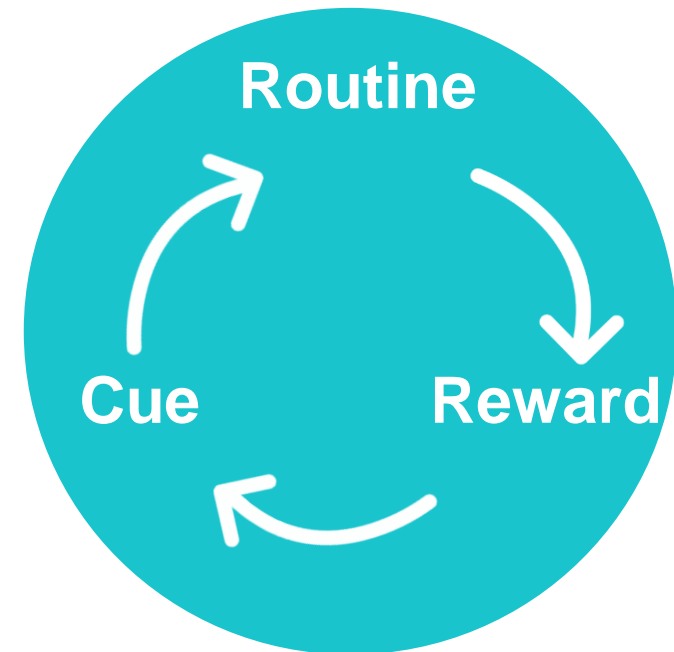
The Cue: What triggers or kick-starts your habitual behavior.

The Routine: The habitual behavior

The Reward: What the behavior does for you

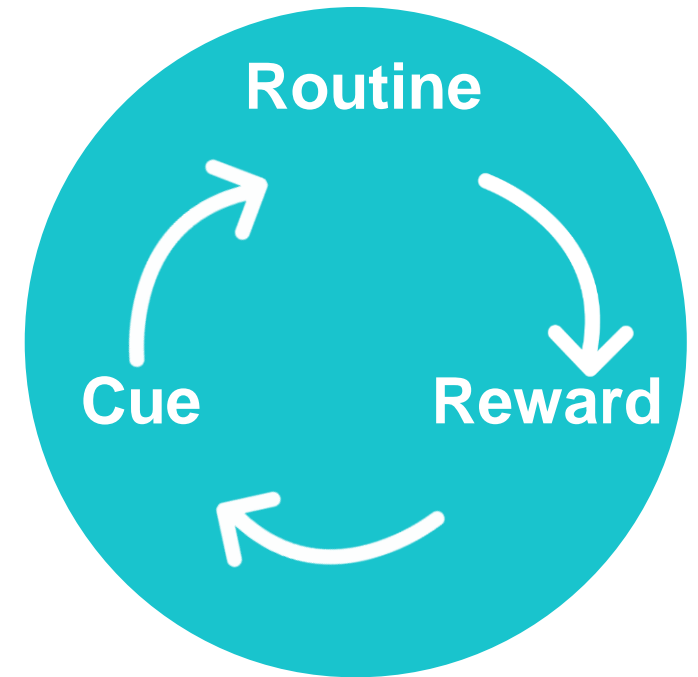
The Routine

- This is the “habit” part of the loop
- Routines in a desired habit loop
 - Brushing teeth
 - Taking the dog for a walk
 - Drinking water
- Routines in an undesired habit loop could be:
 - Eating junk food when stressed
 - Scrolling through phone vs. reading a book
 - Biting nails while watching TV



The Cue

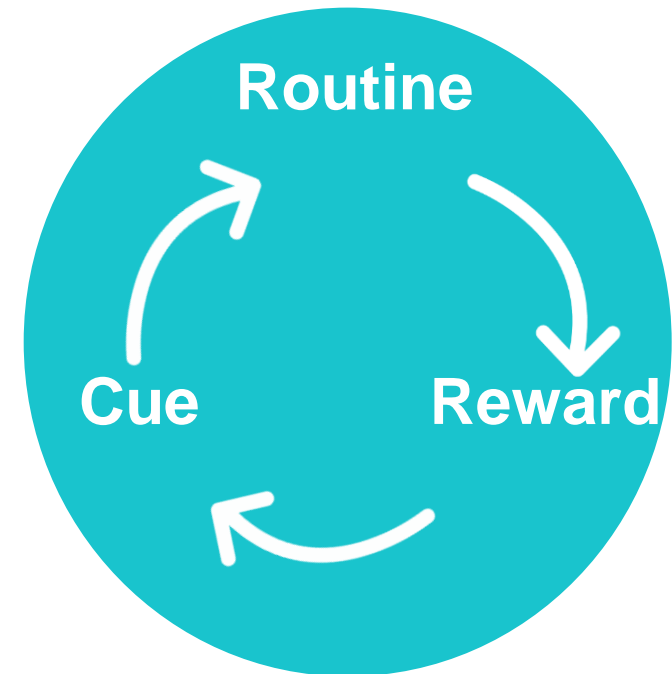
- A cue kicks off a habit behavior
- Most habitual cues fit into one of five categories:
 - Location
 - Time
 - Emotional state
 - Other people
 - Immediately preceding action



The Reward

The reward is the bit that makes your brain go “this is great, I’m going to do this as much as I possibly can.”

- Clean teeth
- Taste of the food
- Taste/feeling from caffeine
- Energy from physical activity
- Socializing with friend when walking



Repetition

- With repetition, the habit starts to form
- One's intentions and goals related to that behavior gradually become less influential



Other Keys to Habit Formation

- Select a *new routine* that you like and that's easy to follow
- *Modify the environment* to make it easy to engage in new routine
- If replacing an old routine, *make the old routine harder to follow*
- *Repetition* is key
- Track what happens



Building a New Routine

"I want to spend more time writing. I waste time looking at social media and online shopping and do not make time to write."

Select a *new routine* that you like and that's easy to follow



Take time to write 3X/week

Modify the environment to make it easy to engage in new routine



Put my journal and computer on coffee table where I sit when I wake up. Do this on Tues, Thurs & Sat.

If replacing an old routine, *make the old routine harder to follow*



Move cell phone out of reach, into another room, to remove the temptation of distraction

Repetition is key



Repeat at least 3x/week (most likely Tues, and Thurs when I *do not* drop off kid, and Sat. Morning)

Track what happens



Put check mark on our refrigerator calendar each time I write

Reward: Intrinsic, feeling more grounded and in touch with self, moving forward on projects, sharing writing with others

Poll

How long does it take to form a new habit?

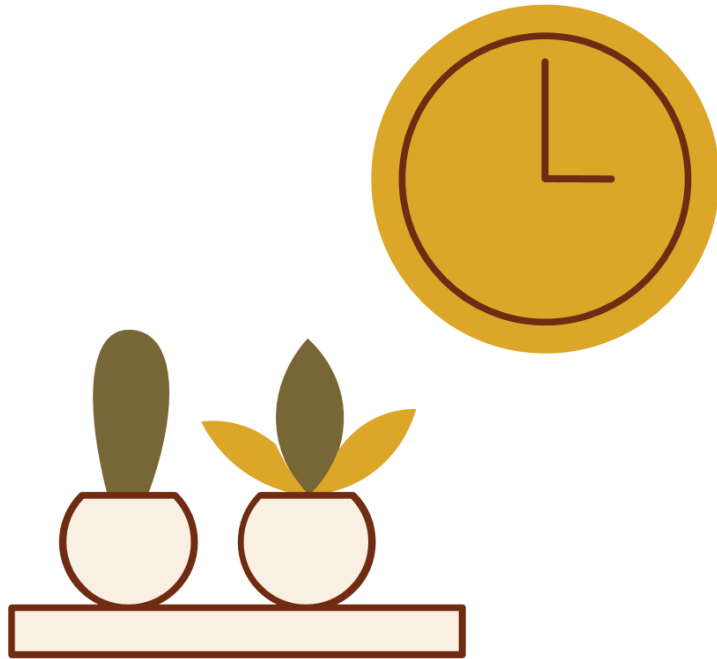
21 days

66 days

It takes as long as it takes

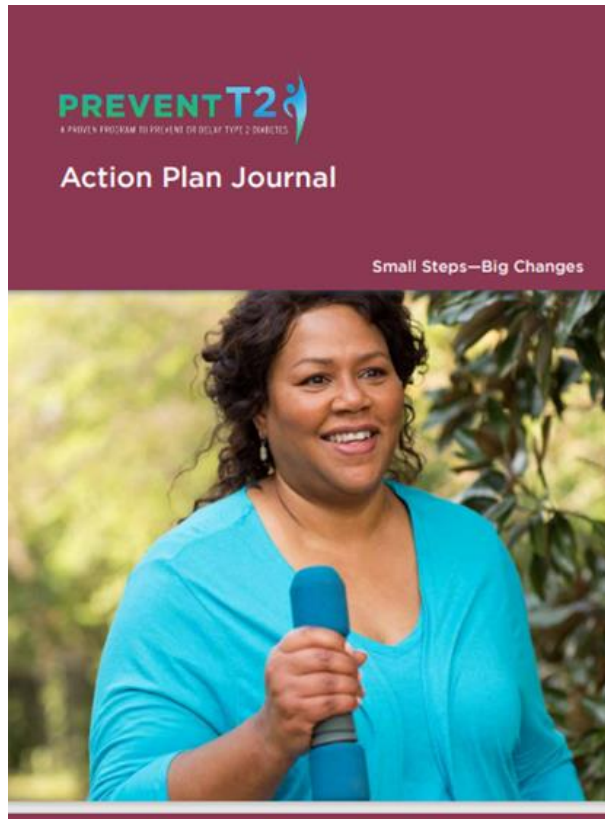
Not sure

How Long Does it Take to Form a New Habit?



- The amount of time needed to build a habit will depend on multiple factors, including the individual and the intended behavior.
- While you might be able to pick up a new habit in a matter of weeks, some research indicates that building healthy habits can also take many months.

How does Habit Formation show up in the Prevent T2 curriculum?



- Shift from a weekly goal focus to a *weekly routine* focus -routines that can turn into habits over time
- More emphasis on a small steps to big changes approach and messaging
 - Simple actions become habits more quickly
- The action plan is about planning *a new routine*

Language that Supports Habit Formation

Say More

- Create healthy routine
- Develop healthy habits
- What is a small step you could take?
- How can you make the routine easier?
- What new routines might help you work on _____?

Say Less

- How can you stay motivated?
- Use self-control/willpower
- What healthy choices can you make?

Summary

- Willpower and self control are not as effective at sustaining repeated actions such as spending, eating & activity
- Habit formation theory offers a promising approach to lifestyle change behaviors
- The habit loop includes the cue, the routine, and the reward
 - Will power and choice should be focus on establishing cues for desirable routines
 - Repetition is key
- Habit formation approach is aligned with the LCP curriculum only requiring subtle shifts in the way LC's talk about action plans and lifestyle behaviors

"Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going."

-Jim Ron

Resources and References

- The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business, Charles Duhigg, 2012
- Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes that Stick, Wendy Wood, 2019
- Making health habitual: the psychology of ‘habit-formation’ and general practice Br J Gen Pract. 2012 Dec; 62(605): 664–666.doi: 10.3399/bjgp12X659466PMCID: PMC3505409PMID : 23211256
- Cannon et al., Diabetes Care, 2020, 43:2042-2049