

A CHANGE OF HABIT

OUR LIVES ARE IN MANY WAYS DEFINED BY UNCONSCIOUS HABITS AND INGRAINED BEHAVIORS. HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE STRUCTURES THAT HOLD YOU TOGETHER, AND THOSE THAT HOLD YOU DOWN?

By CAT THOMPSON

I guess you could say that I have a habit of looking up words in the dictionary — particularly when I'm thinking deeply about a particular topic. I often find that learning exactly what a particular word means — rather than assuming I know — gives me greater insight into its broader meaning, implications and applications. But wow — when I looked up *habit* (see above), I was genuinely surprised to find such a rich vein of information.

Not only was I taken aback by a few of the lesser known meanings (the growth pattern of a crystal?!), I also discovered that embedded within the descriptions of these various kinds of “habits” lie many clues that can help us understand the process of evolving and changing our own.

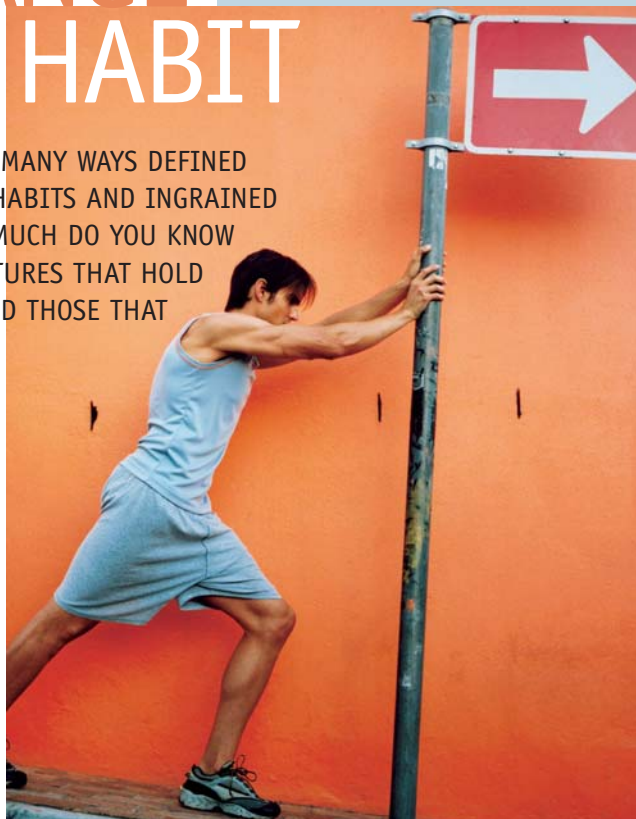
HABIT-FORMING

We are all creatures of habit. As the dictionary points out, a habit is the *characteristic growth pattern* of a plant or animal. That means that living organisms like us depend upon certain habits in order to grow and become who and what we are. Habits are structures — actions that we put into place to hold up the walls of our lives.

Of course, there are “good habits” and “bad habits.” Our good habits serve us and help us grow in the direction of our highest choice. Our bad habits tend to hurt or undermine us, eventually becoming coping mechanisms, avoidance mechanisms or addictions. We understand that we're supposed to cultivate one kind of habit and avoid the other, but unless we understand how habits are formed and how they serve us, the means of doing that — and of discerning between them — remain unclear.

First, let's look at so-called “good habits.” Eating breakfast, brushing your teeth, going to the gym, wearing your seat belt, doing the dishes after dinner — habitual behaviors

Hab•it n **1.** an action or behavior pattern that is regular, repetitive, and often unconscious; **2.** an addiction to a drug (slang); **3.** a long, loose gown traditionally worn by nuns and monks; **4.** the characteristic appearance, behavior, or growth pattern of a plant or animal; **5.** the characteristic growth pattern or shape of a crystal; **6.** somebody's attitude or general disposition. — Webster's 7th New Collegiate Dictionary



like these create a safe structure that helps you know what to expect. Building our life around such structures lets us sink safely into the “being-ness” of our life. Knowing that we are automatically going to do certain things that support our needs frees up more of our focus and energy to concentrate on more complex thoughts and goals.

In order to keep our stress levels in check, we need to feel safe — to trust the rules by which we are living. Knowing we can adhere to a solid structure helps reassure us that we are on track for a happy life and that we will probably achieve what we set out to accomplish. As we grow and mature we typically add more habits into our structure, and they support us as our roles and goals get bigger and more demanding.

Sometimes, though, habits that once provided comfort or support start to limit and imprison us. Most of us have had this experience: What starts out as a structure we've

successfully used to survive a stressful situation (such as smoking when we are feeling anxious) or to achieve a particular goal (such as working out three days a week to lose some weight) can become an addiction that overtakes our life. We start to believe that if we don't have a cigarette, or if we don't get to the gym *every* day and work out for *at least* an hour, we will be unable to function.

When the walls of certain structures get too thick and high, they can begin forcing us into growth patterns we may not like.

PEERING UNDER OUR STRUCTURES

How do structures turn from habits that support us into habits that limit us? When we examine our habits, we have to look at the feelings that underlie them. This is often the key to understanding if a habit is supporting us or if we are supporting it.

A habit that is *supporting us* is one that enables us to experience a rich and satisfying life. It is one that is flexible — one that can be dropped and picked back up with relative ease. It is one that, precisely because we believe it is *typical* of our behavior and character, we know we can draw upon as needed. For example, if we are traveling and can't make it to the gym, we don't fret because we know as soon as we are home we'll pick up that habit again. The habit of working out supports our lifestyle by keeping us strong and healthy, and we are using our healthy body to have fun and live life more fully. The habit reflects and supports a positive feeling that we already have about ourselves without limiting us in other areas.

Conversely, a habit that *we are supporting* is a monkey on our back. It requires constant feeding and it demands our attention even when we are exhausted, depleted or when we know it is hurting us. Usually, there is a big emotional component that keeps us tied to our addictive habits. They may temporarily relieve or distract us from an uncomfortable feeling. Or they may temporarily let us experience a positive feeling, but some part of us does not trust that we can independently re-create the feeling without the habit. This dynamic turns the habit into an addiction — a situation where we can't feel right unless we have access to the habit.

Sometimes, this addictive cycle can occur even with so-called “good habits.” For example, excessive worry about missing our habitual workout might make us avoid overnight travel. It might prevent us from being in relationships with others who don't enjoy going to a gym every day. It may dictate a great many life choices in ways that distort or interfere with our larger “growth pattern.”

TAKING OFF OUR HABITS

Habits are meant to be flexible and change as we grow, but once we've made our habits into defining parts of ourselves and have grown dependent on them for our comfort or identity, altering or adjusting them can prove difficult. There are many reasons for this.

Since so many of us build our personal structures while at the age of reaction (our teenage years) we may find ourselves frustrated or unhappy with those habits by the time we reach our 30s. But when a habit is taken up in defiance (“I'm

Supportive Habit or ADDICTION?

- Do I **enjoy it fully** when I am doing it?
- Is it adding to the **quality of my life**?
- Am I **conscious and present** while I am doing it?
- Does it **satisfy** me?
- Do I like how it **defines** me?



doing this to show you I am different from you and I don't care what you think!”), there may never be any real personal satisfaction that comes from the habit-act itself. When satisfaction is expected but found lacking, there is often a desire by the body to do even more of it, thus creating a vicious cycle in which satisfaction is never reached, but our commitment to the habit is actually strengthened.

Similarly, when a habit becomes unconscious (meaning that our bodies go through the motions without our minds or emotions being present), its ability to satisfy can be greatly diminished. But ironically, the unconsciousness with which certain habits are executed may also be an essential component of their appeal. If you are a compulsive eater, for exam-

ple, you may find that eating in front of the TV is an essential part of how you “do” your habit. Trying to eat the same foods while seated at a table and actually paying attention to the sensations of eating may not deliver the same addictive payload and may actually interfere with the emotional release or anesthetic you usually get from eating. As a result, you may find yourself unable to eat compulsively in that environment.

Ditto with smoking. By staying present for each and every puff of that cigarette, you may find yourself satisfied much earlier (putting it out halfway through). You may also find yourself suddenly bored or annoyed with the habit, making it much easier to give up than you thought it would be. I have a friend who once suggested, “If you're going to smoke, make each puff a prayer.” When I tried to smoke a whole cigarette that way, I was unable to maintain my focus and had to put it out after three puffs.

INSTALLING HABIT UPGRADES

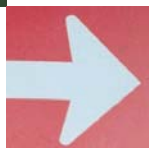
Once we've decided that a habit isn't serving us anymore, our tendency is to want to “get rid of it.” But in many cases it's important to remember that in some way this habit probably helped you get to where you are today. It deserves to be recognized for that help. Rather than “quit” the habit, you may choose to create a small ritual to change it.

To do this, visualize what the habit might look like upgraded or replaced by a healthier structure. Then, acknowledge the old habit and thank it for supporting you in your life. It often helps to make some kind of formal statement like, “Habit, I see how you served me and I appreciate your help over the years. I now choose to invest that energy in _____” (whatever your upgraded habit or new goal is).

Another excellent tool is to stay fully present while you are doing the habit and observe how that feels. You may have to journal your feelings for a while to get to the bottom of what you are feeling and why the habit seems so resistant to change. If you cannot stay present during the habit, this is a good indication that you are disconnected from the real purpose of it. Each time you repeat the habit try to stay a little more present. Look for insights about where the original need came from and why you still feel it.

In all cases, the primary objective in evaluating and working with your habits is making sure that their structures support you in ways that free up additional energy and create “growth patterns” that make you happy. If your structures are stressing you out or sending you in the wrong direction, by all means, redefine them — before they redefine you. ●

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HOW TO UPGRADE a Habit

- Stay fully present when you're doing it, paying attention to how it feels.
- Ask yourself: What other times do you have these same feelings?
- Watch what happens when you deny yourself the habit.
- Journal/express your feelings about the habit.
- Try making the habit sacred, part of a ritual ceremony. See how that changes it.
- Have a clear picture of why you are seeking to change the habit: Who is the person you will become when you have changed this? What aspects of your personality or experience will be left behind? What is your motivation for change? What are your fears about it?