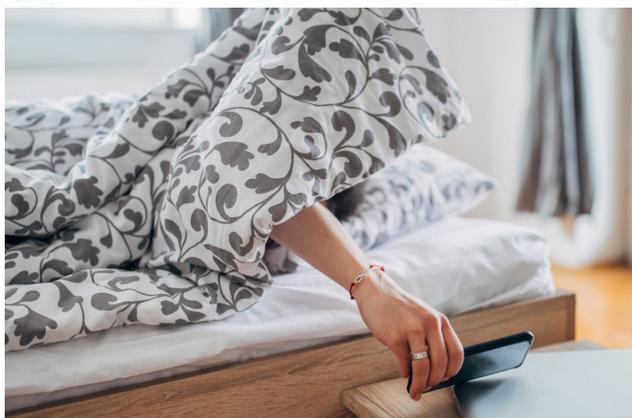


IDENTIFYING HABIT LOOPS



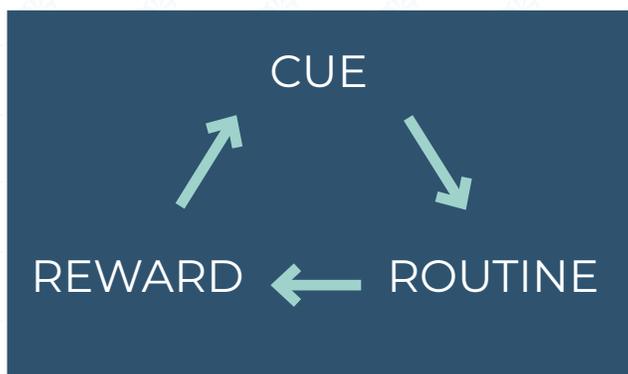
In this worksheet we will discuss habits, habit loops, and plans for changing the habits that we want to break.



It is not uncommon for many of us to talk about our habits. We might share our unhealthy habits, such as smoking, vaping, binge drinking, overeating, biting our nails, and so on. We may discuss healthy habits, such as nutritional eating, exercising, and self-care. **The reality is that habits are a crucial part of our health, both physically and mentally.** Habits are a foundation for our ability to achieve goals, maintain health, and create a lifestyle where we perform at our best. **So, what can we do if we feel like changing or forming better habits is simply impossible?**

THE HABIT LOOP

Let's first look at how habits develop. This will help us to better understand how our existing habits came to be and how we can form new habits. The structure of habits has been summarized as something called a habit loop. These loops begin with triggers, also called cues, leading to behaviors and rewards, as illustrated to the right. **So, how do these three components create the habitual routines that we experience each day?**



The Cues

Cues, or triggers, are the things that initiate our habit. These can be a certain time of day, a location, our emotions, preceding actions or our surroundings. For example, **emotions like stress, anxiousness, or loneliness might trigger us to eat, bite our nails, or text our ex.** Similarly, you might wake up in the morning and go straight for the coffee pot, indicating that a time of day/environment has triggered you. Online shopping is another example of the habit loop. In some cases, we browse because we are bored, but other times it's marketing. Maybe you get an email or text about a deal that's happening at your favorite store, and it prompts you to go online and browse around. In summary, **our cues are unique to us. The first step is to identify them.**

The Routine

Following each cue there is a routine, or the habit itself. Some habits we are very aware of, such as leaving your house at a certain time in the morning, or doing a nightly routine. Others tend to happen subconsciously. For instance, you might not realize at first that you are biting your nails when you are nervous or scrolling through social media when you are bored. **The routine is the part of the loop that we will work on changing** in this worksheet.

The Reward

Finally, we have the reward. **The reward is the reason that habits form, as they reinforce routines by doing something for us.** Many rewards are genuinely beneficial for us, such as health and hygiene rewards. Others only provide temporary satisfaction. Let's look at some examples of habit loops to better demonstrate each piece.

Example 1:

Cue: You feel lonely and bored (emotional)

Routine: You send a message to your ex

Reward: You receive temporary satisfaction from receiving attention and engaging in conversation or physical intimacy.

Example 2:

Cue: You pass a McDonalds each day on your way to work (surroundings)

Routine: Each day you swing by and grab a breakfast sandwich.

Reward: Instant satisfaction of eating and satisfying hunger.

IDENTIFYING OUR HABIT LOOPS

Typically our routine, or habit, is obvious to us. **It is the thing that we either want to stop or start doing.** The reward is what we get out of it, which also tends to be easily identifiable. The difficult part for most of us is identifying the cues. This is because habits are just that - habits. After awhile we do these things automatically which can make it difficult to identify the exact cue or trigger that is causing the routine to happen.

Do Research

In order to identify the cue, **we need to do a little bit of research on ourselves.** The important thing to note about this research is that we are not actively trying to change our habit - yet. In this stage, **we need to act like curious observers that are simply taking notes.** The easiest way to do this is to focus on one specific habit. Remember, cues can be a time of day, a location, surroundings, emotions, or a preceding action. The table on the next page demonstrates one way you can set up a tracking chart to take each of these into account.

Observation

In this example, the habit being tracked is **drinking soda.** At this point in time, our loop might look like this:

Cue: *unknown*

Routine: *drinking soda*

Reward: *instant satisfaction, caffeine, and quenching thirst*

We need to identify our cue. This is where the observational research comes in.

	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3
WHERE ARE YOU?	At work	At work	At home
→ TIME OF DAY	Lunchtime	Lunchtime	Lunchtime
WHO IS AROUND?	Coworkers	Coworkers	Nobody
EMOTIONS	Bored	Tired	Content
→ PRECEDING ACTION	Heating up food for lunch	Heating up food for lunch	Opening the fridge

Analyze Data

Once you have completed some of your observational research, **try to identify some patterns**. Keep in mind that it is possible to have patterns that don't necessarily act as a cue. For instance, in this example the person has two areas that show a pattern: time of day and preceding actions. It appears they may have two cues that are closely related. Lunchtime and the act of getting their lunch ready to eat. In this case, we could safely assume that lunchtime is the cue for preparing lunch. Therefore, preparing lunch is the cue for wanting soda.

Experiment with Rewards

For some, it may be the reward that is more difficult to identify. Maybe you feel a routine is giving you multiple rewards at once. For instance, many of us want to stop sleeping in. This reward could be extra sleep, the warmth and comfort of your bed, or not having to face the day ahead of you quite yet. If this is the case, **try to rule some of the rewards out**. Test each reward with a different routine. For instance, go to bed earlier to see if that helps you wake up earlier. If not, then **you know that is not the true reward**. This helps to isolate the reward that you get from your routine so that you can experiment with new routines.

CHANGING OUR HABIT LOOPS

Now that you know how to identify each component of your habit loop, let's discuss how you can change these loops. When making these adjustments, **we need to look at the cue and the reward**. For instance, in the above example the cue was preparing your lunch at lunchtime. The reward is the instant satisfaction of quenching thirst with a tasty drink. These things don't necessarily need to change, because **it is the habit itself that we want to change**. A healthier alternative could be drinking water at lunch instead of soda. Perhaps this will reveal to you that it is the taste of the soda that is the reward, not the thirst being quenched. **You can continue to make adjustments until you find something that works.**

WORKSHEET EXAMPLE: IDENTIFYING HABIT LOOPS



Below is an example of identifying a habit loop, changing a habit loop, and identifying cues.

HABIT YOU WANT TO CHANGE OR CREATE: *Spending a lot of time on my phone before bed*

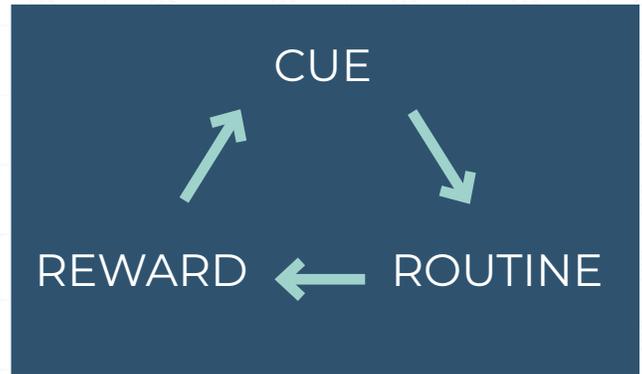
CUE: *Boredom*

ROUTINE: *Grabbing phone*

REWARD: *Entertainment, no longer bored*

ALTERNATIVE ROUTINES TO TRY:

- *Reading a book before bed*
- *Stretching before bed*
- *Journaling before bed*
- *Coloring before bed*
- *Meditating before bed*



Now, let's say you are having difficulty identifying your cue. Use the "identifying cues" worksheet to help pinpoint your triggers.

IDENTIFYING CUES:

	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3
WHERE ARE YOU?	<i>At home on the couch</i>	<i>At home on the couch</i>	<i>At home laying in bed</i>
TIME OF DAY	<i>8 pm</i>	<i>9:45 pm</i>	<i>10 pm</i>
WHO IS AROUND?	<i>Spouse</i>	<i>Nobody</i>	<i>Spouse</i>
→ EMOTIONS	<i>Boredom</i>	<i>Boredom</i>	<i>Boredom</i>
PRECEDING ACTION	<i>Skincare routine</i>	<i>Meal prepping</i>	<i>Showering</i>

Now you can identify your patterns. Remember, sometimes there are patterns, but they aren't always cues. In this case, being bored seems to be the primary cue that leads to grabbing the phone.

EXAMPLE

WORKSHEET: CHANGING ROUTINES



HABIT YOU WANT TO CHANGE OR CREATE:

CUE:

ROUTINE:

REWARD:

ALTERNATIVE ROUTINES TO TRY:

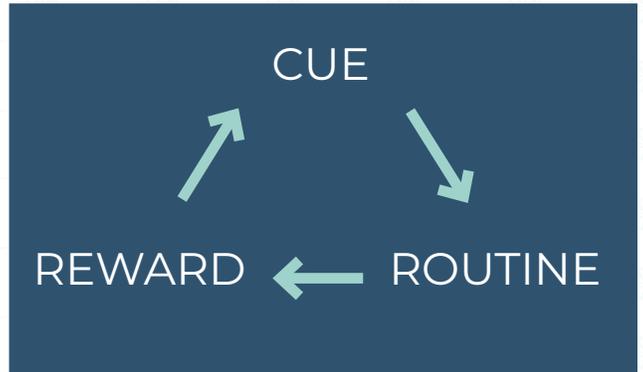
HABIT YOU WANT TO CHANGE OR CREATE:

CUE:

ROUTINE:

REWARD:

ALTERNATIVE ROUTINES TO TRY:



WORKSHEET: IDENTIFYING CUES



HABIT/ROUTINE:

	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3
WHERE ARE YOU?			
TIME OF DAY			
WHO IS AROUND?			
EMOTIONS			
PRECEDING ACTION			

PATTERNS:

HABIT/ROUTINE:

	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3
WHERE ARE YOU?			
TIME OF DAY			
WHO IS AROUND?			
EMOTIONS			
PRECEDING ACTION			

PATTERNS:

WORKSHEET: TESTING REWARDS



Note: Refer to page 3

HABIT/ROUTINE:

REWARD	TEST	RESULT

HABIT/ROUTINE:

REWARD	TEST	RESULT