



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HABIT

As the repercussions of COVID-19 continue to impact on our daily lives, the habits that formed our health routines, caring for both the physical and mental side of well-being, are being disrupted. But how do we create new habits? Here we consider the psychology of habit.

Before lockdown, we all had a routine. Or rather, we all had routines. They varied from travelling to work every day to what we ate for breakfast and even where we ate breakfast – at home, on the train, at the office. They also included how we got our exercise – walking to the office, going to the gym, playing sport at the weekend...

Some of them were so engrained in our everyday life that they were habits that we didn't even have to think about, we carried them out automatically. Within psychology, 'habits' are defined as actions that are triggered automatically in response to contextual cues that have been associated with their performance: for example, putting on a seatbelt (action) after getting into the car (contextual cue) or picking up an apple from the bowl (action) before we leave the house to go to the office (contextual clue).

But now many of these routines, these habits, have been broken.

The importance of habits

We need habits in our life – they're necessary to our general success as human beings. And when you take away the healthy habits – those that keep our mind and body working and healthy, the ones that we do almost without thinking about on a daily basis – it can have an impact on our well-being.

They're important, especially those that we do subconsciously, because we only have so much capacity to think about these things.

It's estimated that the processing capacity of the conscious mind is about 120 bits per second which, compared to the amount of information we're taking in on a regular basis through our sensory system, is a really small amount of information and doesn't give us much to play with, so we have to use the capacity we have elsewhere.

When we engage with the world through our conscious mind, we're really looking at it as though we're looking through a small scope, and our mind is filtering out a large amount of information. That sub-conscious filtering system is where we find the extra capacity.

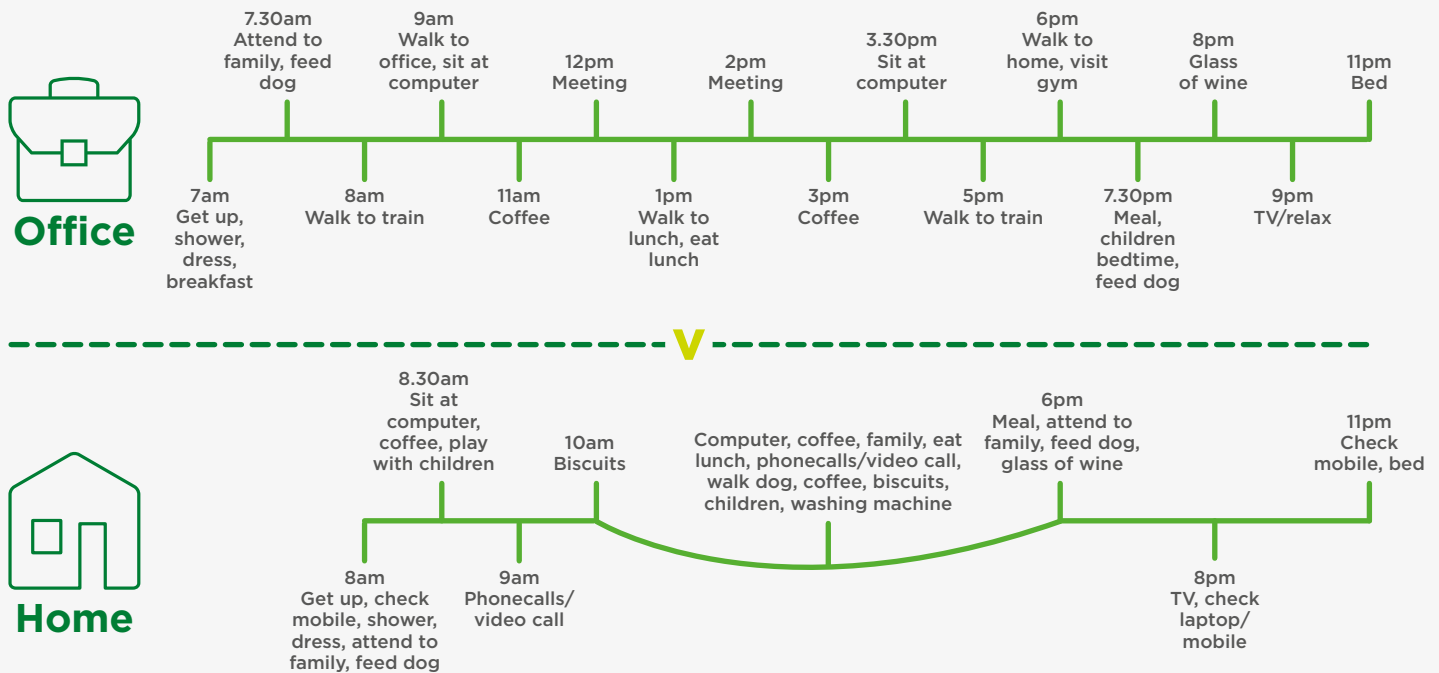
This doesn't mean we spend our lives on autopilot, according to neuroscientist David Eagleman¹ "Brains are in the business of gathering information and steering behavior appropriately. It doesn't matter whether consciousness is involved in the decision making. And most of the time, it's not."

We need to get through our day and react to a lot of the information that comes through, even for something as simple as how we feel in the morning: what is the temperature? How do we get dressed for it?

But if you had to think about every one of those things that impact on your whole health, you'd exhaust those 120 bits per second. Which is where habits come in, they allow us to engage in behaviours that we need in order to survive without engaging our conscious minds, and save that all-important capacity for other tasks.



Office routine Versus Working from home



The growth of bad habits

Typically, we don't break habits so much as create new ones, if we were trying to improve our dietary health, we need to select a new behaviour (for example, eat an apple) rather than give up an existing behaviour (do not eat fried snacks) because it is not possible to form a habit for not doing something².

When habits are formed they're usually because we're in pursuit of a goal. As you engage in a behaviour and get positive feedback in the form of a reward, that is a behaviour that becomes reinforced. This is where the impact of lockdown comes in, as our routines changed, there's the risk that the 'good habits' that we might have, like healthy eating or an exercise routine, aren't necessarily broken but are displaced by new habits that come in to meet our new needs.

One need that a lot of us are experiencing is the alleviation of boredom. Many of us have been sitting in the same room for the past six to nine months, and our mind needs stimulus. This is where food comes in. It seems like a good solution as it's such a powerful, pleasurable stimulate, it's also an excuse to get up and it gives you a jolt of entertainment because you've gone to get something tasty to eat. The need to do this on a more frequent basis than set meal times, means that it's very easy to displace the healthy foods that were once your 'go to' lunch option.

Of course, habits are usually part of a cycle, or habit loop. In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg explains how 'during their extensive studies of the underpinnings of habit in the 1990s, researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology discovered a simple neurological loop at the core of every habit. All habits, it turns out, consist of three parts: a routine, a reward and a cue. The researchers dubbed this the "habit loop."

In recent times, our mobility has been reduced and we've lost a large number of cues that were part of the existing loop.

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For example, you may once have had the habit of walking twenty minutes to the metro station in order to get towards your daily steps.

Well, that's gone now, and it's not replaceable in a world where you don't have so many options for exercise. That loop is broken and we have to find a way of replacing it and creating a new one – we have to try to construct a routine that we will eventually habituate.

To do that, the best bet is to create habits around an environment we can rely upon, one that is much more focussed around the ecosystem of our own person and home. Obviously, this has its pros and cons, and the fact is many people are experiencing a lot of stress due to being in the same place all the time. However, on the other hand, if we do try to create a lot of habits or new routines that involve going out, you could find those disrupted very quickly.

What people are beginning to realise is that the boundary between 'work' and 'life' need not be quite as definite as it was, it can be porous, without our mental health suffering – you could possibly work 9am to 4pm, take an hour off, then plug back in again to finish off.

The stigma that once existed around working from home has changed, people are more accepting about working remotely and there are benefits that can help create new habits – having no commute is the obvious one.





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It does of course depend on the company you work for, Google immediately [at lockdown] told their employees to work from home until 2021, Twitter told employees they could work from home forever while Cigna has always had a very flexible approach to home working – some are more forward-thinking.

Whatever the future holds, we've discovered something about remote working and it's going to shift the way people expect to interact with work.

Forming new habits

On an individual level, when we talk about mental and emotional routine, one thing that's never going to change in terms of location is our mind – the environment in which we perceive our entire world. And some of the pieces of advice at the beginning of the pandemic still hold true now – don't obsessively check the news, we have to resist the temptation to consume information about distressing headlines. Even before COVID-19, this is something we've all done – it's a 24-hour news cycle, and as humans we look for bad news. It's the modern version of a vital warning, 'don't go over there, there's a tiger', but our brain latches onto it anyway. So when it comes to our own mental health, that's the first anchor piece of advice. There's quite a lot we can do by just making a decision about how much information we're going to take in – it's not about sticking your head in the sand,

it's saying 'I am going to keep up to date with what's going on in the world but I'm only going to devote 30 – 60 minutes a day, I'm not going to allow it to become the thing I do to take me away from work'. That's a habit we can make or break and can take anywhere with us. That mental hygiene is very critical.

Cigna's [check-in campaign](#) is based on another vital piece of advice, which is that our social connections remain just as important, if not more so, now. Our family and friends are also an ecosystem that we can control, and form a really important piece of our mental health. Keep those connections vital, whether that's via video conferencing, or in a socially distanced way – that's a good place to put your energy.

We do encourage companies to put resources at their employee's disposal. People are struggling, many families are finding it tough to balance work/life, and feeling emotional strain and exhaustion. We're also facing issues of loneliness, anxiety and depression – we've been deprived of the normal systems that regulate us, one of the reasons is because people aren't seeing you in the office and asking after you.

This can be countered with different forms of remote coaching and it's vital to train those at management level to recognise problems such as burnout and anxiety, how to deal with them and how to support that person.

The importance of achievable goals

There's also Cigna's One Small Change Programme which is about introducing habits during the time of COVID-19. It encourages us to set mini challenges over the course of a week to try and bring about small changes that can make a difference to our whole health well-being – it could be as simple as having one small teaspoon of sugar in your coffee, rather than two.

It's not about large shifts in behaviour and habit because these aren't sustainable – you can buy a »



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high-end indoor exercise bike, lift weights etc, but these are the equivalent of a crash diet and we don't have enough cognitive capacity to focus on that amount of change on a long-term basis. It's not about willpower either, because mental energy is limited, just like our physical energy.

The key is to choose achievable goals, and turn those things into habits that we can, over time, build more habits upon – that's how we can create a positive and successful feedback loop that designs a new lifestyle that works for us.

Behaviour change is achievable but it requires a commitment to make reasonable expectations – if we

don't do that then we're setting ourselves up to fail. Be sensible and practical in what is changed however, and you can form new, healthy habits that will fuel your whole health for the rest of your life.

MAKE A NEW HEALTHY HABIT³

- 1** Decide on a goal that you would like to achieve for your health.
- 2** Choose a simple action that will get you towards your goal which you can do on a daily basis.
- 3** Plan when and where you will do your chosen action. Be consistent: choose a time and place that you encounter every day of the week.
- 4** Every time you encounter that time and place, do the action.
- 5** It will get easier with time, and within 10 weeks you should find you are doing it automatically without even having to think about it.
- 6** Congratulations, you've made a healthy habit!

References:

¹ Incognito: The Secret Lives of The Brain

^{2, 3} Making health habitual: the psychology of 'habit-formation' and general practice, British Journal of General Practice

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