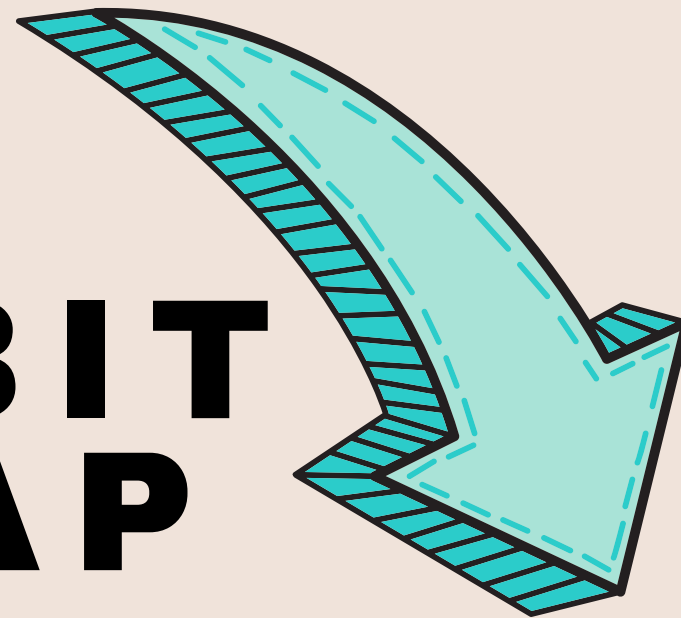


Identify an  
unhealthy habit

**HABIT  
SWAP**



swap it to a healthy one

SWAP  
SWAP  
SWAP  
SWAP

**Habits - we all have those things in our lives that we do almost automatically in order to give our brains a break from all of the complex decisions and thought processes they go through each day. Research has found that while we think we are making “decisions”, every day up to 40% of these “decisions” are actually habits. Habits can be unhealthy, unproductive and unhelpful, often keeping us in a cycle of negative repeated behaviour. However, we can change them to healthier ones. In order to do this, understanding the habit cycle could be helpful.**

**It is said there are 4 stages to each habit - cue, craving, response, reward.**

**Cues - these are triggers that result in us behaving in a particular way, for example smelling chocolate or another food causes us to feel hungry or our mouth to water. Cues are different for each of us. It's a good idea to identify cues as we can then change the rest of the habit cycle to healthier options. Is your cue emotional (stress, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, happiness)? Is it environmental (like walking past the coffee shop or bakery, office snacks in clear sight)? Is it physical (feeling hungry or thirsty, tired, unwell)?**

**Cravings - these are linked to your desire to change your current state (such as a negative emotion, hunger etc), they are the motivating factor in the habit. For example, your cue is smelling chocolate, the craving is to eat chocolate.**

**Response** - This is the actual habit, which can be an action or a thought. Whether you carry out the action will depend on your motivation levels, and the situation you're in at the time (are you able to get hold of what you're craving or not). If you are highly motivated to resist carrying out the response then you can begin to break the habit cycle. Performing the response action or thought gives you the reward.

**Reward** - The reward is to satisfy the craving you had, and experience the change in your state that you wanted. Rewards can also programme us to want to repeat the action again if it resulted in something positive such as enjoyment or relief, forming a habit.

So how do we break our unhealthy or negative habits? We need to make it as difficult and unsatisfying as possible, even if that's just in our minds. We need to try to avoid cues as much as possible or become oblivious to them, this may be not having certain items in your house or not going down certain aisles in the supermarket. Focusing on the negative aspects of the craving can help us to reduce the desire for it. For example, if the craving is chocolate, then thinking about the unhealthy aspects of consuming some may make it less appealing. Making it as hard as possible to carry out the response can help us break the habit cycle. Not having the craving to hand, means additional effort to get it like a trip to the shop, which may be too much effort or not possible at that time. This extra effort can also give us time to challenge our craving and respond in a healthier way. We also need to view the reward as unsatisfying. For example, remember that chocolate we had and how it made us feel sick, or how buying that thing we had to have made us worry about money, feel anxious and regret buying it. Viewing the reward negatively means we are less likely to repeat it, as we don't want to feel this way again.

**To create a good habit, we do the opposite. We make the cue really clear and easy to understand and the craving really appealing. The response should be as easy as possible to do and the reward should feel satisfying. Let's take drinking water as an example, we know we should drink it for a range of benefits but many of us forget or don't drink enough. Perhaps the old habit was to drink a soda.**

**Cue - we're thirsty**

**Craving - A nice, cool drink of water, which will stop us feeling thirsty, reduce our temperature and help us feel good**

**Response - Reach for our water bottle, which we have with us all the time (because we've made it easy to react to our craving)**

**Reward - Focus on how refreshing it is and how nice it is to feel hydrated. We no longer feel thirsty.**

**It may help to write your new habit plan down, for example:**

**When I feel stressed (cue), I will do 2 minutes of breathing exercises (response) because it provides me with feelings of calm and relaxation (reward).**

# Tips for healthy habits

Small is the key – start small and keep them small. Small positive changes build into big positive results, and they are easier to start and sustain. If the habit is something that could be (and is likely to be) increased like reading more pages, exercising more, drinking more water, ensure you keep the amount you're going to do within a sensible, healthy and realistic limit.

If you have a bad day and don't make healthy choices, dust it off and make a commitment to follow your healthy habits the next day. If you're aiming to perform the habit for a set number of days then add another day on to the finish date.

Keep a log of your habits. It can be rewarding when we see a visual representation that we've succeeded and it can also keep us on track for continuing. Ticking that box or logging that achievement keeps us motivated.

Be clear on the habit you want to do, and where possible assign an amount to it. Exercise for 30 minutes a day, drink 1.5 litres of water daily, read 1 chapter of a book every day, do 3 minutes of breathing exercises every day...you get the idea.

**Understand that changes may take time and commitment. Every day you follow your healthy habits is getting you closer to achieving your goals or changes you desire.**

**Focus on the process and steps, not the overall goal. Decide what it is you want to achieve and identify the steps/processes that will get you there. "I want to have more energy and feel alert" - the steps to get there may include: developing good sleep habits with consistent bed and waking times, no screens before bedtime, drinking more water, getting more exercise. Decide which will work for you and make them as detailed as possible - "I will go to bed at 10pm every night and wake up at 6am every day".**

**Get a support network. Find people with the same objectives and support and motivate each other.**

**Remember the 21/90 rule - it takes approximately 21 days to develop a new habit and 90 days for it to become a permanent part of your life.**

**Ready to swap a habit for a healthier one? Then see our Habit Swap Challenge and give it a go for 30 days (or longer).**