

**Session 8: Habits**

The number of decisions you must make every day is overwhelming. Do I wear socks or not? Which foot do I put the sock on first? What do I eat for breakfast? Do I make the toast first, or do I start the eggs first? On and on and on. Fortunately, you aren’t consciously making all these decisions because your habits kick in and they do much of the heavy lifting for you.

When your body signals that you need to use the restroom, you don’t need to think about what you are going to do, you just do it. Unless, of course, access to a restroom is not immediately obvious. That’s when you kick out of habit-thinking and engage your pre-frontal cortex for problem-solving. How many times did you use the restroom yesterday? Chances are, you can’t answer that questions because that part of your brain, the part that engages habits, was in control, making your behavior on automatic. When you engage in automatic behavior, it doesn’t register in your conscious brain, making it difficult to even recall that it occurred. It takes a deliberate effort to trace your behavior throughout the day to come up with an answer to the question, how often did you use the restroom, and even as you deliver the answer, you have the uneasy suspicion that your answer is not absolutely correct.

Over your lifetime, you have accumulated a host of habits, many of them very helpful. If you are like me, you don’t have to think about how or what you will do with lots of decisions in your life. I automatically brush my teeth before going to bed, I have a particular routine for getting dressed in the morning and I almost always pour yourself a glass of water when I sit down to a meal. Driving to work is easy, I always follow the same route unless my gas gauge indicates a stop is necessary and when that is the case, I automatically look for the easiest, least time-intensive option available. These habits are positive because they contribute to reducing the stress in our lives, allowing us to focus our limited cognitive energy on those stressors that require problem-solving. The more positive habits we establish, the less energy we must devote to the onslaught of minor, simple decisions that are part of our everyday experience.

Habits are an important element that helps us stay out of the distress zone we talked about last week. We all understand that we need to take care of ourselves, and that self-care isn’t just a buzzword, it’s critical to refilling, maintaining, and protecting our energy. Establishing healthy habits allows us to restore the energy we use every day, for everything that we do. Focusing on issues associated with well-being, things like eating a balanced diet, getting the right exercise, resting and decompressing, and getting enough sleep allows us to rebuild our energy quickly so we can function as our most effective self. When we build a habit, we put the behavior on automatic. We don’t think about it, we just do it. Since self-care is so important to our ability to recover from stressful events, it makes sense to build as many self-care habits as possible.

The question becomes, what is the best way to create a habit? Habits are built through repetition. The more we repeat the same sequence of behavior the tighter the association between them becomes. Hebb’s Law tells us that when neurons fire together, they wire together. What that means is the more often we repeat the same sequence, the tighter the wiring becomes and, eventually, it feels almost impossible not to engage in the sequence. It might even be stressful not to engage the habit. I know that I find it hard to rest if I haven’t brushed my teeth before going to bed. There are lots of strategies that help you to create the repetition necessary to put self-care on automatic. First, you need to identify what habit you want to build and then, make it easy to engage in the behavior. By pairing the new habit with an already established habit, you make the probability of the new behavior occurring very high. For example, I put my once-a-day medications beside the coffee pot. When I get my morning coffee, which happens every morning, I see the medications and I am reminded that I need to take them. This is called habit stacking.

Another strategy is to start small. If you want to make a major change, you might get overwhelmed and give up. By breaking it into smaller chunks, you are more likely to stay the course and you can gradually build up to the big change. If you want to start exercising the recommended thirty minutes a day, start by adding five or 10 minutes of exercise to your day and then slowly adding time. It’s easier to say yes to a five-minute routine than a 30 minute routine so, in the early stages, be kind to yourself.

Provide yourself with little rewards for engaging in a desired behavior. If you want to eat healthy and you fill half your plate with vegetables, reward yourself with a small serving of a sweet you enjoy. I like dark chocolate and knowing that I can follow my meal of healthy food with a small treat of an ounce of dark chocolate helps me to choose smaller portions and to make room for more vegetables. When I was working on my Ph.D., I used folding laundry as my reward for studying for an hour. Now I understand that folding laundry might not seem like a reward to you, but I love to fold laundry so it worked for me. By using little rewards, I can create the necessary repetitions of a behavior to build it into a habit.

Creating a chart and placing it where others will see it can also help to motivate you to repeat behaviors. The public posting of your successes and your misses becomes an accountability system. Just knowing that you will break a streak can be incentive enough to keep going!

It doesn’t matter what strategy you use to create enough repetitions to build a habit. The end goal is that the self-care behavior becomes a habit because, when it does, it’s on automatic. It’s one less thing you need on your to-do list because you don’t have to think about it, you will just do it. And, double bonus, these self-care habits are going to help you restore your energy and bounce back from setbacks! Your self-care habits will serve to reduce your stress levels by creating the very energy you need to tackle your challenges and to perform at your peak.