

EAO Supervisor Newsletter- January Issue
Plain Text version

Subject line: This month, we discuss the science of habits and evidence-based strategies to bring your habits in line with your goals.

Introduction: In January, everyone's talking about their resolutions, intentions, and habits for the new year. But what **are** habits? In this two-part newsletter series, the EAO dives into this topic. This month, we'll discuss the ways that habits are formed and begin sharing tips and strategies to take control of your habits. Next month, we will share additional strategies and address how they show up in the workplace. We hope that you'll make professional development and productive management practices a habit this year!

What are habits, and how can they be helpful?

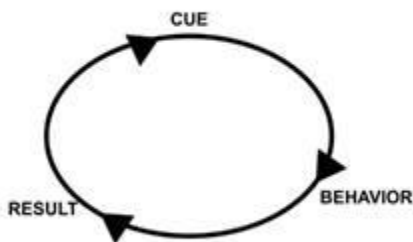
Simply put, habits are unconscious or instinctive routines that we repeat over time. Habits are very efficient ways for humans to act without wasting time and energy deciding what to do. Researchers estimate that over 40% of our actions each day are based on habit, rather than conscious decisions. When you automatically buckle your seatbelt when you get into a car or make your bed right after waking up, you're experiencing a habit in action.

Habits can be both harmful and helpful. When habits are not aligned with our values and goals, we become accustomed to unhealthy, unproductive, or dangerous behaviors. There are proven ways that you can harness the power of habits to help you meet your goals.

How do habits form?

Habits are built through learning and repetition. People develop habits in pursuit of a goal by beginning to associate certain cues and behaviors that help meet their goals. Over time, these cues will trigger the behavior itself.

Habits follow a simple pattern: Cue --> Behavior --> Result.



- Cues are the feelings, stimuli, and triggers that begin a habit. These cues can come from our environment (a phone notification, for example) or from our internal feelings (hunger, stress, anxiety, and more).
- Behaviors are what we do once we experience or notice a cue. Do you pick up your phone, eat the cookie, snap at your coworker? Often, we don't even realize we're in a habit until we're already taking an action.
- Results are what happens after you engage in the behavior. Rewards and outcomes of habit-driven behavior matter.

Over time, these cues, behaviors, and results turn into an unconscious habit that repeats over and over. While changing our ways can be difficult, research in neuroscience gives us the information we need to support the growth of new habits.

How can I form new habits or break old ones?

There are several different ways that you can approach the creation of a new habit.

- **Create a when-then action plan.**
 - A conscious action plan interrupts a habit loop and allows you to plan how you'll react in different circumstances. One helpful way to frame this action plan is in the form of a "when-then" statement. For example, imagine that you want to create a habit that leads to drinking more water during the work day. This when-then statement creates concrete steps that you can begin to internalize:

When I walk to a different part of the building for meeting, then I will bring my water bottle and fill it up.

Think about conscious actions that you can realistically take, and don't be afraid to start small. When-then statements provide an alternative to your habitual reaction to a cue. By reframing your reaction to the cue that leads to a behavioral habit with an when-then statement, and following through on the "then" action enough, you can support the growth of a new habit loop. Over time, this desired action will become an unconscious habit.

- **Increase the "activation energy" of unwanted behaviors, and decrease the activation energy of wanted behaviors.**
 - Sometimes, undesirable behavior is enabled by our environment. As you work to build a more intentional and desirable habit, you may consider changing the "activation energy" of behaviors you don't want to undertake. This means creating hurdles and extra steps that make it harder to unconsciously act. You can also decrease the activation energy of wanted behaviors by taking away extra steps and getting rid of obstacles. This makes your new habit easier to achieve, and can decrease the amount of time it takes to create a subconscious habit loop.
- For example, I might have a goal to read more and watch less TV. I can increase the activation energy of watching TV by moving the remote to a safe spot in another room. If I want to watch TV, I need to consciously think about where the remote is located and pause to consider whether I really want to take that action. I can also decrease the activation energy of reading by putting my book in a visible, comfortable spot. It becomes easier to think of the book as an

option for post-work relaxation, and over time, I'm more likely to pick it up without a second thought.

- **Be specific and stay accountable.**

Broad goals, like "get more fresh air", are overwhelming and make it hard to measure success. A more specific goal, like "I will go on a walk most days", is a bit better. Add in an when-then statement to create a specific and actionable plan:

"When I log off for lunch during the week, I will put on comfortable walking shoes and go outside."

This statement achieves the goal of getting more fresh air, but is very small, specific, and easy to achieve. Being specific also makes it easier to be accountable to new habits. Research shows that those who write down their intentions are more likely to follow through. Just planning out your intended habit can help you to remember your intentions and stick to a new habit. You may also find that it's helpful to keep track of your habit in a journal or checklist to keep it at the front of your mind.

These tips are some of many evidence-based ways to change your habits. Next month, the EAO Supervisor newsletter will dive deeper into this topic, share additional strategies for habit formation, and delve into the ways that habits can help you succeed in the workplace.

"Addressing Burnout" Webinar

LifeMatters and the Employee Assistance Office are offering a virtual webinar addressing burnout on **Wednesday, Tuesday 22, 10:00 a.m. -11:00 a.m. via Zoom.**

Burnout is a real thing that leaves us exhausted, detached from our jobs and inefficient in all areas of our lives. Creating a healthy mindset that is flexible and able to adapt to the stress everyday life is a remedy for burnout. Content includes:

- Mindful living and mindful habits
- Building resilience through focusing on managing energy in four areas: Physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual
- Increasing emotional intelligence through self-awareness, self- management, and empathy

This training is offered at no cost to all UW–Madison employees. [Register online](#) to receive the Zoom link.

Upcoming LifeMatters Webinar Opportunities

The CALS Wellness Committee has partnered with [LifeMatters](#) to bring you self-care seminars in the first months of the year. Please register for one or both sessions. We look forward to seeing you there – and feel free to invite your peers across campus to sign up.

Once you register, you will receive a Zoom link for the session. Later, closer to the date of the session, the link will be sent again and the CALS Wellness Committee may share some LifeMatters handouts. Registration links for all three sessions can be found [here](#).

LifeMatters Monthly Promotions and Resources

Our affiliate partner, LifeMatters, offers promotions, newsletters, webinars and more! Go to mylifematters.com and sign in with Bucky2. Webinars are located under “Quick Links.”

This month's promotional content includes:

Calendars:

- 2023 LifeMatters Promotional Calendar
- 2023 LifeMatters Webinars

Flyers:

- Communication Tips for Parents
- Concrete Goals
- “Soft Skills” for Management Success (for Managers)

Posters:

- Lifelong Conversation
- Write it Down
- Think it Through