



The Anatomy of a Habit

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Habits are conditioned patterns of behavior. We can think of them as our default responses to life's complexities. We learned them well, presumably, because they worked for us earlier in life. And, given who we are now and our current life circumstances, we may begin to discover that these habits limit our creativity, render us ineffective, or cause us to suffer.

This work is not about trying to figure out the origin of a habit. Rather, we are learning to observe the habit as it arises, in all its nuances and subtleties. With this self-awareness (really, an expanded sense of our own truth in a given moment) we find ourselves with a choice about whether to act out the conditioned habit, or, choose a new response that may be more useful.

Habits have five elements. These include a trigger, a constellation of conditioned responses that arise rapidly and sequentially through three levels of experience, and a resulting behavior.

- Trigger: something happens around us that we sense, and that evokes a response.
- Somatic response: how our body automatically responds to this sensory input. This is the biological organism responding, and is observable as sensation (energy, tension, tightness, warmth, numbness, etc.) Generally, this is the first element of a constellation of linked responses.
- Emotional response: the feelings that arise, based on our deep history. Observable as emotions (anger, anxiety, joy, excitement, etc.) This follows the somatic response.
- Mental response: the "mental formations" that provide meaning for our experience, and rationale for our response. Observable as language (stories, interpretation, justification, etc.) Because this is the highest order of response, it generally follows the first two, although the entire constellation can arise in less than a second.
- Resulting behavior: the behavior that flows out of the constellation of phenomena that arises. Observable as acts (movement, speech acts, etc.)

A helpful view is to be curious about your habits, and to "make friends" with them. Habits are there because the organism that is you has learned well how to get along in the world. Your habits have served their purpose. Now, you are becoming curious about their subtleties, and bringing the light of awareness to the entire constellation of what arises with this habit. This is different from working at changing the behavior. Rather, you're expanding and deepening your awareness of something that is in fact quite complex and miraculous.

The secondary effect of this awareness is that, down the road, you'll become able to sense the first arising of the pattern, and choose whether to go the rest of the way with it or replace it with something new. The journey starts with your self-observation.



About Self-Observations

Traditional approaches to changing behavior often rely on good intentions. However, real change requires first being able to observe ourselves doing what isn't working, and knowing what an alternative might be. Then, we must interrupt our automatic tendencies and, in the heat of the moment, remember to replace a habitual behavior with an unfamiliar one.

Self-observations are key to this intricate process. Self-observations help us:

- Develop the capacity to observe our behavior objectively, almost as an outsider might see us,
- Replace the inner critic that makes it more difficult to change with a neutral acceptance, and
- Eventually, to be able to stay present during an event, and choose a more effective response.

Self-observations are simply a structure designed to observe a specific behavior consistently. A self-observation usually defines:

- the behavior to be observed (e.g., interrupting others in meetings),
- the timing of the observation (e.g., at the end of the workday, or after a staff meeting),
- the length of time to do the self-observation (e.g., for the next two weeks,) and
- specific questions to be considered about what happened, what your inner experience was, and what the results were.

The questions are designed to shed light on the nuances of the behavior as it arises. Often questions address the somatic, emotional, and mental levels of the experience, as well as observing what impact the behavior had on yourself or others.

Using self-observations over time leads to change generally as follows:

- We use 20/20 hindsight to reflect at the end of our day. We remember that we actually did engage in some heinous behavior (for example interrupting others) earlier in the day. We jot down notes about our experience, and become curious ("Hey! Maybe I really do interrupt!")
- After several days, we become increasingly attuned to the behavior. We begin to notice it sooner. ("Oops! I just interrupted Joe!") Still hindsight, but closer in time.
- Soon, the internal observer, which we've been cultivating, begins to notice what we're doing as we do it. ("I'm interrupting Beth right now!") Because the bulk of our awareness is wrapped up in the critically important thing we're interrupting Beth to say, we finish saying it anyway, but awareness is dawning.
- We begin to notice our impulse before the behavior. ("I feel my energy increasing and my back straightening. I feel impatient. I know what we should do. I'm about to interrupt Joe. No, this time, I'm going to hear him out instead. Slow down, relax, breathe, listen.") Now, we are changing our behavior. But it happened simply, easily, almost by itself.

Self-observations are of tremendous value, and can be designed for nearly any behavior, including both behaviors that you would like to use, or that you use excessively or inappropriately.