

This Insight About Habits Helps People Change Their Behaviour (M)



Many people believe that a lack of willpower is the reason they cannot change, but this study finds otherwise.

People radically underestimate the effect of habits on their behaviour, research finds.

Coffee drinkers, for example, believe that the feeling of being tired has twice the influence that habits have over whether they have a cup.

In contrast, a study reveals that habit is just as important at prompting coffee drinking as feeling tired.

The findings have considerable implications for behaviour change.

Despite many people believing that a lack of willpower is the reason they cannot change, it is frequently down to underestimating the impact of habits.

This study focused on coffee drinking since it is a familiar habit for many people.

Coffee drinking is strongly controlled by habits, explained Mr Asaf Mazar, the study's first author:

"People may consume coffee out of habit—for example, you may automatically follow a coffee drinking routine when you wake up or go on your morning commute, regardless of how tired you are."

Habits are typically triggered by cues from our environment.

Professor Wendy Wood, study co-author, said:

"Much of what we do every day is habitual, but we are reluctant to acknowledge our habits and instead chalk our behaviors up to our mood and our intentions."

For the study, over 100 students were asked to estimate the effects of a habit on their coffee drinking.

This was compared to their actual behaviour over a week.

The results showed that contrary to what people believed, habit was just as strong an influence on coffee consumption as feeling tired.

Mr Mazar said:

"We found that the participants strongly overestimated the effect of tiredness on their coffee consumption and underestimated the effect of habit."

Merely habit

A subsequent experiment revealed just how strong habits are in controlling our behaviour.

It had over 800 people doing what appeared to be an online memory experiment.

In fact, they were being trained in the habit of pressing a key either with their right or left hand.

At the end of the memory experiment they were asked whether they would like to help the researchers with additional trials.

They had to press a key either with the right or left hand to say 'yes' or 'no'.

The results showed that people who had habitually been trained to press the 'yes' key were more likely to respond 'yes'.

Those who had habitually been pressing the 'no' key were more likely to respond 'no'.

People in the study, though, naturally thought they had made a decision based on their mood or some other internal thought or sensation.

In fact, for many people, it was merely habit.

Professor Wood said:

"The experiment provided causal evidence that people's explanations for their behavior favor inner states over habits, even when that behavior is driven by habit."

Automatic behaviour

Behaviour change should start with acknowledging that much of what we do is automatic, said Mr Mazar:

"To effectively change behavior, Americans must acknowledge that much of our behavior is habitual and automatic.

Habits can keep us repeating unwanted behaviors, but they can also keep us on track in maintaining desirable ones, like working out or recycling."

A survey the researchers conducted on recycling behaviours also bore out the importance of habit.

Professor Wood explained:

“Successful recyclers had figured out how to create habits—without having to stress or think much—that made recycling easy and rewarding.

They put their recycling bins in the kitchen, not in the garage.

They displayed signs indicating where to put the trash and how to sort it.

They had these hacks.”

The study was published in the journal *Psychological Science* ([Mazar & Wood, 2022](#)).