



HABITS AND ROUTINES FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

COMPASS RECOVERY COLLEGE
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What are routines and habits ?

A **routine** can be defined as “an established sequences of tasks” (Creek, 2014). Routines can be daily, weekly, or over some longer time period. They are a sequence of tasks we do on a regular basis, such as getting up and getting dressed, or getting ready and coming to coffee and chat on Tuesdays.

A **habit** can be defined as something that you do in daily life that is “acquired by frequent repetition, that does not require attention and allows for efficient function” (Creek, 2014). An example would be brushing your teeth in the morning, or always having a cup of tea when you get up



Habits are also something we do automatically in **certain situations** – for instance, we brush our teeth in the morning when we are in the bathroom getting ready. You might put your keys in a special place every time you come in the front door.

Habits are tied to a particular context and the context acts as a prompt to perform the habit.

This means a habits and routines are something **we do without really thinking about it**, such as when we do something on autopilot. You don’t really have to think about *how* you brush your teeth or get dressed, you just do it. It’s automatic.

So habits and routines are closely linked. Some people think of routines as a sequence of habits.

How do routines and habits support our wellbeing ?

Habits and routines support our wellbeing because they are **automatic** actions we are **prompted** to do, so we are using a different part of our brain than when we do other tasks. This frees up our more creative brain for doing other things and tackling other problems !

They are also great **stressbusters**. They make life more predictable. Unpredictability is a great source of stress. They make it easier for us to do the things we need and want to do and make us feel more in control of our lives.

Their automatic nature means that they can be very **strong and “sticky”**, in that we will be more likely to do them, even when we are not feeling particularly motivated, or when we are not feeling great.

In this way, forming new habits and routines can really help us move towards our goals

“Forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you’re inspired or not.”

Octavia Butler, sci-fi writer

‘Bad’ Habits

We probably notice our ‘bad’ habits rather than our ‘good’ ones. It is very easy to beat ourselves up over them and feel as if we can’t change. Here are a few things that might help

- Remember no-one is perfect – everyone will have at least one ‘bad’ habit
- it might be more useful to reframe them as ‘helpful’ or ‘not helpful’ rather than “bad” or “good”
- Habits can be resistant to change because they are rooted in our environment and easy to do.

So to change an unhelpful habit, its useful to make doing it as **difficult** as possible.

If you want to stop hitting the snooze button, move your alarm clock to the opposite side of the room !

Try this ! Think about some useful habits and routines that you already have

Self - Care	Household
Leisure	Anything else ?

The three parts of building a habit

There are three essential parts to a new habit :

Cue – this is something about your environment, such as a time, an object or an activity, which will prompt the habit. For instance, *I put my keys on the table when I come in the front door*



Cues need to **stay the same** for the habit to work. In the example above, the table needs to always be there in the same place for the cue to prompt you to put your keys there.

Repetition - for it to become a habit, the behaviour needs to be frequently repeated in the context until it becomes automatic. In this case, putting my keys on the table **every time** I come in the front door.

Reward - A habit needs a payoff for doing it to strengthen the motivation.

Very often the reward will be something we feel – such as, *not being stressed because I know where my keys are* – and this will be enough to keep us going.

But sometimes we might need to reward ourselves with something to keep us going – *like treating yourself to a coffee after going for a walk.*

How long is it going to take ?

You might see lots of different figures out there for this

- Ultimately, it's **not overnight**
- And realistically at least a month
- It will depend on how important it is to you, how often you repeat it, how easy it is to do and how motivated you are
- Remember it's a gradual process, so it should get easier with time
- You might find it helpful to ask yourself regularly whether it is feeling easier than a week ago. But keep going !

What sort of cues are there ?

In general there are **three types of cue** for habits

Time-based - we are prompted to do the habit at a particular time/day, for instance

I go to coffee and chat on a Tuesday

I will take my antibiotics at midday

Environment - The habit is prompted by something in our environment, such as an action or activity, a place, an object or a person

I put my remote in the box when I have finished using it

When I go in the kitchen, I check if there is any washing up to do and do it

When I see my shoes by the front door, it reminds me to go for a walk in the morning



Existing habits - It can be very effective to tie a new habit onto an existing one. Habits can then be linked in a chain to form a routine

I brush my teeth after my shower

I do the washing up after finishing lunch

Or you can combine them

You don't have to use just one cue, although one cue will work on its own.

Combining them can reinforce the prompt

I write my to-do list in the morning after my coffee when I see my pad and pen.

I will go for a walk after my morning coffee, when I see my shoes and coat out by the door

Try this ! What are my existing cues ?

Look back to your list of existing habits and routines. Can you work out what the cues are ?

My Habit	Cue

The 4 rules of building a habit

(taken from James Clear's Atomic Habits)

Remembering these four rules can help you build sustainable habits

- 1. Make it Meaningful**
- 2. Make it Obvious**
- 3. Make it Easy**
- 4. Make it Satisfying**

Make it Meaningful

A successful habit needs to meet some need that you have.



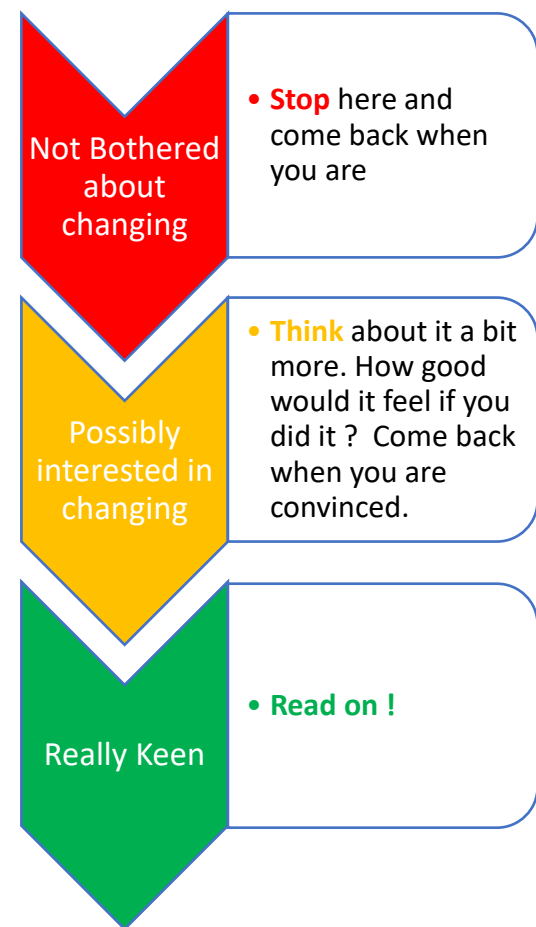
- A habit needs a payback – so the benefit you get from doing it needs to be **important** to you
- It needs to be important enough for you to **truly want to do something about it**. If you don't really care, it won't happen

Example : I really get stressed when I can't find my keys so I'm going to put them on the table when I come in

- It needs to be something that you **realistically** think you can do
- It's best if it is something **you** have thought of. Someone else's idea might sound great in practice, but you are more likely to care about something you have thought of yourself. You know best what is important to you

My Motivation Check

Before you start, figure out where you are on the scale



Make it Obvious

When you are thinking about your new habit, it helps to think of it as a set of very clear instructions for **When** and **What** you are going to do.

When I.....

Then I will

We want to make it as easy as possible, so clear, precise instructions focus our minds and give us less wiggle room for getting out of it !

Top tips for making it obvious

- Be **really specific** about your instruction and say exactly what you are going to do



Which do you think is more helpful ?

When I have finished using the remote

Then I will put it away

or

When I have finished using the remote

Then I will put it in the box by my chair.

- Sometimes it helps to put a **time frame** on it

When I have finished my coffee

Then I will go for a walk for 20 minutes

Make it Easy

The less effort we have to use for our habit, the more chance we have of doing it. Making it easy increases our chances of success.

It might mean we have to put a little more effort into the preparation when we start, but it will be worth it !

We can make it easier by

- Being **really specific** about what we will do, so we don't have to think about it at the time
- Putting everything we need **within reach** and leaving them in the same place
- Putting everything we need in sight
- **Starting small.** Making small changes is easier than big ones
- Keeping it **simple** by breaking down more complex habits into smaller ones
- Reach out to a trusted friend or family member for **support**. They might have ideas that can help

Breaking down a more complex habit or routine

Sometimes the things we want to do by routine are not simple actions, but big changes that involve a series of steps

For instance, you want to develop a habit of washing the dishes after dinner and putting them away.

Going from nothing to doing the dishes in one go is a big change, so it is easier to break it down into a series of smaller habits that are stacked on top on the previous one

- **When I've** finished dinner, **then I will** take the dirty plates to the kitchen
- **When I've** taken the plates out, **then I will** wash them up
- **When I've** washed them up, **then I will** dry them
- **When I've** dried them, **then I will** put them away

You can break them down even smaller if this helps !

The success of the doing the first step can motivate you to do the next one

You may find that some days you don't manage to do all of them, but even then you will be further forward than before.

Make it Satisfying

Habits need a payback to motivate you enough to keep going. If you have chosen a habit to fix something important, then sometimes the result of the habit is enough reward in itself

I put my keys on the table whenever I come in – so now I am not stressed about finding my keys



Rewards work best when they are **immediate**.

Sometimes, the payback from the habit grows the longer we do it and isn't very strong at first, so it helps to reward yourself with something at the beginning to keep you motivated.

Feeling better from going for a daily walk might take time, so I take a flask and end my walk somewhere I can sit and enjoy it

Some tips for making it satisfying

- The reward has to be enjoyable – whether it's a sense of satisfaction, less stress or a cup of coffee, it needs to be something that you like
- Some people find it helps to track their progress in a way they can see.

There is a chart you can use in this workbook, or you can do something like putting a penny in a jar each time you do your new habit

- It can really help to remind ourselves why we are doing it. You can put something like an important object, a picture or a quote out to help you keep this in mind

Keep Repeating

Repetition strengthens the link between your habit and the cue. The more you do it, the more automatic it will become

Habits do not form overnight, so we have to be prepared to keep doing them.

Research shows that forgetting once or twice doesn't matter that much – you don't go back to the beginning

So if you do forget, you haven't ruined all your hard work and it is worth continuing

You might want to check in with yourself once a week to see whether it is getting easier

You can also reach out to a trusted, supportive friend – a bit of encouragement goes a long way !

Keep



Going

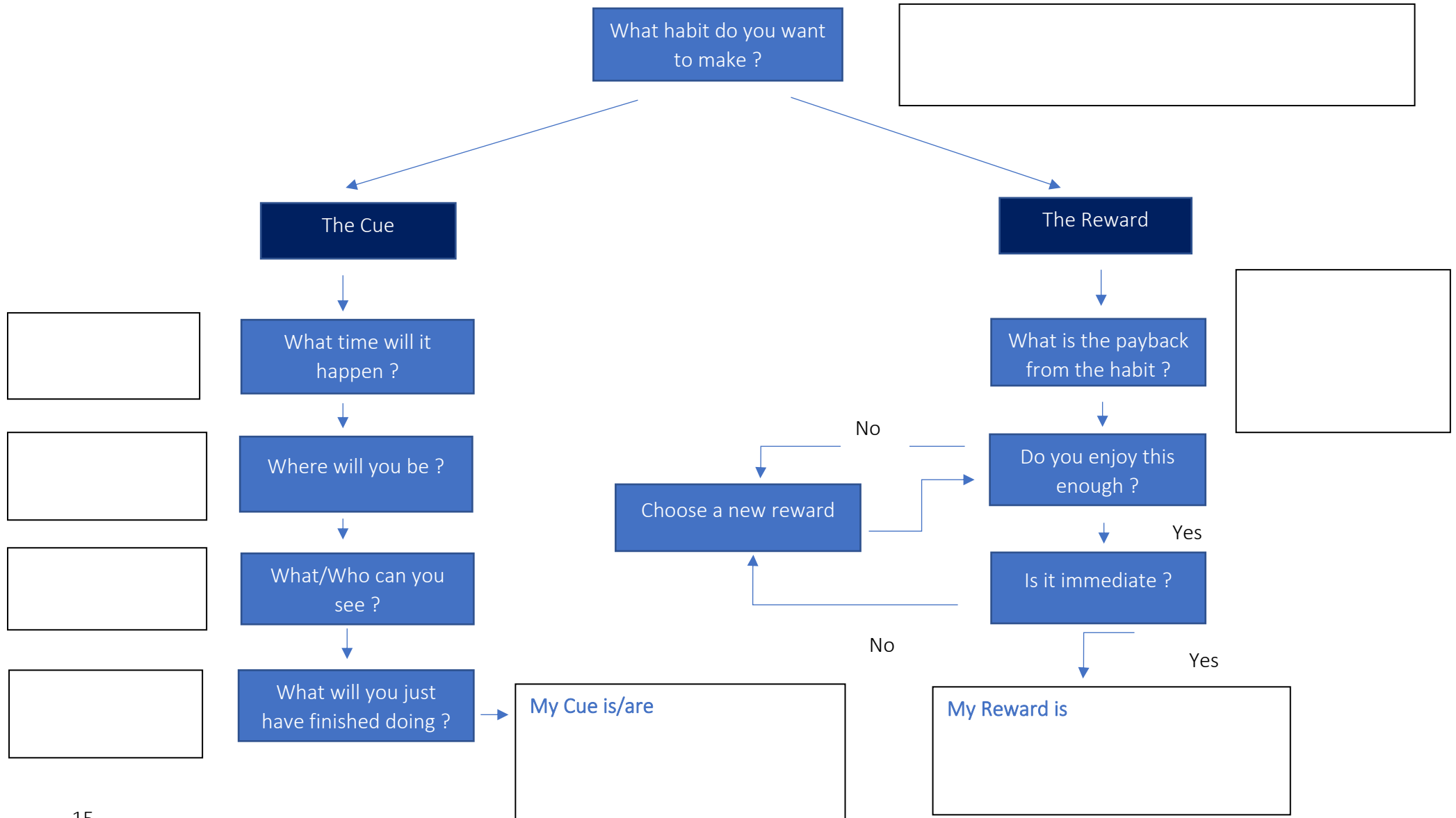
Try this ! Habit Tracker

When I

Then I will.....

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

Build A Habit Flowchart



What about when it's not working ?

When we are practicing a new habit, the chances are that there will be times when it doesn't work.

It can be very easy to lose heart and give up. We can often think that if something goes wrong it is because we can't do it, or that it will always go wrong.

Here's another way to look at it.



We know a habit needs a cue and a reward. Probably these were not quite right, so we can think about why it's working, change things and try again.

You can keep tweaking the cue and the reward until you find what works best for you

Each time it doesn't work is an opportunity to learn.

Strangely enough, research shows that **failure is positively correlated to eventual success**. So if it keeps going wrong, but you keep tweaking it and changing it, the higher the chance it will work out in the end.

Top tips for when it's not working

- Expect it not to go smoothly
- Reach out for support from a trusted friend or family member. You don't have to do this on your own !
- Remember you are learning a new skill. Think back to other skills you have, and how you felt when you were learning those.
- Remember, things go wrong for everyone and building new habits is hard.
- Think about what you would say to your best friend if they were in the same situation, then try and say the same thing to yourself.

Further Reading

James Clear *Atomic Habits*. Random House, 2018.

References

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