Do you have any bad habits you want to break? Or do you want to start a new habit, like healthier eating, exercise, or reading more?

You're not alone. **People try and fail to change their habits all the time.** But they often fail because they believe it's simply about willpower - stopping the habit brute force - without understanding the nature of the habit and how to most effectively change it.

The *Power of Habit* gives you an incredibly useful framework for understanding your habits and for changing them. In short, **you must set up a routine that gives you fast positive feedback, and keep doing it until it becomes a fully-formed habit.** I've found it personally useful for adopting new behaviors I've struggled with for years. This *Power of Habit* summary will walk you through the main points and the most important examples so you can finally kick your bad habits.
Prologue
You think you’re making decisions all day, but more than 40% of the actions you take each day are actually habits.

Habits are choices that you continue doing repeatedly without actually thinking about them. At one point, they started with a decision, but they eventually became automatic.

They’re very powerful, and sometimes destructive. You can probably think about things you do everyday that you wish you did less of (binging Netflix shows; habitually opening Facebook; snacking when you’re not hungry).

But if you can understand how habits are triggered, you can overcome them. This Power of Habit summary will teach you the main strategies to recognize and overcome your habits.

Part One – The Habits of Individuals
The Power of Habit starts with the most important section: what habits are, and how habits exist in individuals like you and me. This is the core of the book and really worth paying attention to.

Chapter 1: The Habit Loop – How Habits Work

A habit has 3 steps:

1. A cue, a trigger that tells your brain which habit to use and puts it into automatic mode.
2. A routine, which acts out the habit. This can be physical, mental, or emotional.
3. A reward, which is the result of the routine and reinforces the habit.

Experiments with rats in mazes show this in a simple form. Let’s say you place a rat in a maze, with a chocolate reward at the end of it. When you release the rat in the maze, you play a click sound. The first time, the rat
explores randomly and eventually finds the chocolate. You repeat this multiple times, with the same click at the same time, and the chocolate in the same place.

Over time, the rat will build a habit and ace the maze, every single time. The click is the cue that activates the routine, or the specific route through the maze that gets to the chocolate reward.

You can even train the rat to activate different routines based on different cues. You can put the chocolate in a different place and associate it with a bang sound. Then, depending on whether you play a click or a bang, the rat will take the corresponding route.

**Interestingly, when the rat’s running its routine, its brain goes into autopilot.** The rat's brain activity is a lot less active than it is when normally exploring the world. If you’ve ever zoned out while doing something pretty complex – like brushing your teeth or backing out of the driveway – you know the feeling.

This graph shows brain behavior in trained rats. Notice how the brain behavior ramps down quickly when the mouse hears the click - essentially, the mouse goes into autopilot as it executes its routine. [Source](#)

That’s because habits are evolutionarily advantageous. The brain is always looking for ways to save effort. In our caveman past, having a brain that could go into auto-pilot to execute ordinary routines, like walking and eating, was helpful - the brain could then spend its extra energy thinking about how to find new mammoth herds and build new shelters.

**Without habit loops, you’d have to make decisions on every action in your life** – whether to brush your teeth before or after showering, which shoe to tie first, how to pull out of your driveway. This would be incredibly taxing and sap your energy from more important decisions to worry about.
You might think habits are the same as memory, but they’re actually distinct processes in the brain. Researchers believe habits are formed and stored in the basal ganglia, part of the more “primitive” low-level part of the brain. Even people who are incapable of forming new memories can learn new habits:

In the 2000’s, a patient named Eugene had a disease that destroyed a major part of his brain dealing with memory. He had anterograde amnesia – he was incapable of forming new memories (like in the movie Memento). He’d introduce himself to people dozens of times in a day, and every day seemed entirely new to him.

But surprisingly, Eugene was able to form new habits. He could take walks by himself around the block and get back home, even though he wasn’t able to draw a map of the houses on his block. He could find his way to the bathroom, even though he couldn’t consciously point out which door led to the bathroom.

He could even “learn” simple memory games. A researcher would give him two different colored objects, one of them marked with “correct” on the bottom. He was asked to choose one object and turn it over to see if it was the “correct object.” A person with intact memory would only need one try to learn what the correct object was. Eugene didn’t have a memory, so he was slower – but eventually over dozens of trials he was able to habitually get it right anyway, to a 95% degree of accuracy. He never consciously remembered ever doing the experiment, and he couldn’t explain why he was choosing the correct object.

How could Eugene do all this without memory? They were habits, formed in a different part of the brain. For the memory game, being presented with the objects was his cue. He then executed the routine of flipping over the correct object. He then got the reward of pleasure of picking the right object. Subconsciously, this had been baked into his brain, without his ever articulating why he was doing what he was doing.

But habits are also delicate and can be changed. For Eugene above, if the cues were taken away, his habits would fail. On his daily walks, if a storm had blown leaves all over the sidewalk or a house was undergoing construction – Eugene would get lost.

Habit loops are made of cue, routine, and reward. They start as a conscious decision, but ultimately the loop can reinforce itself. Over time, you may end up losing full control over your behavior – with a cue, your brain goes into autopilot and executes the routine.

The good news is that by consciously recognizing your cues and rewards, you can combat your habits. That’s what we're achieving with this Power of Habit summary.
Chapter 2: The Craving Brain – How to Create New Habits

From the last chapter of *The Power of Habit*, you now know that the habit consists of a cue, a routine, and a reward. But this is only part of the story. **By themselves, the cue and reward would just be considered learning.** For example, consider fixing a flat tire on your car. You hear the cue of the flat tire sound, and you feel the cue of the bumpiness of the ride. You have a routine to fix the tire. Then you have the reward of being able to continue on your ride, and the self-satisfaction of handiwork.

**But you don’t have a habit of fixing your tire.** It’s not something you look do on auto-pilot, daily or weekly.

The final essential component of a habit is craving. **A craving is the anticipation of the reward when you get the cue, even before you actually get the reward.** This craving pushes you through the routine so that you get the reward at the end of the habit. And if you don’t push through the routine, you don’t get the reward, and the craving is unsatisfied – making you unhappy.

Imagine the habit of ordering fast food from McDonald’s. You get the cue of delicious French fry smell. Before actually going through the routine, you crave the reward – the Big Mac with Diet Coke at the end. This craving pushes you through the completion of the habit’s routine. And if you don’t satisfy this craving by completing the habit, you end up pretty dejected as you instead eat your baby carrots.

**This craving makes the cue-routine-reward loop a true habit, rather than just simple learning.**

The seminal work in understanding cravings was done in monkeys. The monkey was set in front of a blank computer screen. Periodically, a colored shape would appear on the screen. The monkey’s job was to press a lever when this shape appeared, and it’d get a drop of grape juice (which the monkey loved).

![Image of a monkey pressing a lever](image)

When measuring activity in the monkey’s dopamine neurons, a predictable pattern appeared – when the monkey got a reward (R), its brain activity spiked, indicating pleasure:

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After many iterations of this loop, the monkey got really good at pulling the lever and getting the grape juice. It was good at recognizing the cue, doing the routine of pulling the lever, and getting the reward of juice.

But interestingly, over time, the monkey began anticipating the reward. **The brain activity spiked when the cue appeared, well in advance of actually getting the reward:**

Notice that the peak area of brain activity happens when the cue is sensed (CS). **This is the craving that happens when you sense a cue.** The activity no longer appears when getting the reward – in some senses, the brain is no longer pleasantly surprised at getting the reward, it just gets what is expected.

Finally, the scientist tried a different experiment – give the monkey the cue, activate the routine, but give it no reward. Below, you’ll see a spike of activity when the cue is sensed – anticipating the reward, but **when no reward actually comes, the brain activity flatlines, indicating disappointment:**
This is what happens when you get a cue (like smelling French fries), develop a craving, but end up not satisfying the craving. (Biologically, this serves the purpose of giving negative feedback to the behavioral circuit – if you sense a cue and execute a behavior and don’t get the reward, then maybe in the future you shouldn’t execute the behavior again.)

The spike in activity when you sense a cue is the craving. This craving, this eager anticipation of the reward, kicks your habit into gear – you execute the routine, without even thinking hard about it, so you can get that sweet reward at the end.

Let’s make this concrete with a few more real-life examples.

Smoking:
- Cue: see a cigarette carton or smell smoke
- Craving: you want a hit of nicotine
- Routine: get a cigarette and light it
- Reward: get that sweet nicotine

Checking your phone:
- Cue: hear your phone buzz
- Craving: who’s contacting me? What’s going on in the world? I HAVE TO FIND OUT
- Routine: stop everything you’re doing and check your phone
- Reward: get pleasure from the momentary distraction from a text, email, Tweet, etc.
Cravings are the centers of real habits, and they’re very powerful at driving you through your habit loop. **If you keep ignoring your craving, it can keep building and building until you lose control over your own behavior.** Just try to will yourself to hear your phone buzz 20 times before picking it up, or go to your favorite restaurant when you’re on a diet. It’s really hard.

The good news is, by becoming conscious of your habits and cravings, you can overpower them. **Recognize which cues and cravings are driving your habit.** You can avoid the craving by removing the cue. If you silence your phone, you won’t get the cue to pick up your phone, and you won’t get the craving to find out what Becky’s saying to you. Instead, you can focus on reading this summary of *The Power of Habit* summary.

**And if you want to start a new habit, set up a clear cue and reward.** Then, when you encounter the cue, **actively mentally crave the reward that follows.**

For example, if you want to start exercising, set up a simple cue (like putting on your running shoes after you get back from work). Set up a reward (like a snack at the end of your run, a feeling of pride at extending your run time, the endorphins you get after running, or a picture of yourself in your summer swimsuit). Finally, when you encounter the cue, **actively think about the reward and anticipate it.** This will make you more likely to drive through the routine to get the reward.

Finally, if you’re trying to sell a product or drive behavior in other people, **think about how to attach a craving to that behavior.** For instance, healthy behaviors like putting on sunscreen isn’t nearly as universal a habit as taking a shower. So manufacturers are now trying to attach a sensation to putting on sunscreen, like a cool tingling sensation, to inspire a craving for that feeling.

In the early 1900s, American rarely brushed their teeth. It just wasn’t ingrained as a daily habit. Combined with processed foods, the lack of dental hygiene led to an epidemic of rotten teeth. Enter Claude Hopkins, a master advertiser who had made Palmolive and Quaker Oats into household names. Taking up the case of new toothpaste Pepsodent, he focused on building a new habit:

- **Cue:** run your tongue over your teeth. You’ll feel a film that discolors and decays your teeth.
- **Routine:** brush your teeth with Pepsodent
- **Reward:** end up with a beautiful smile

Pepsodent rocketed in demand. Before Pepsodent, only 7% of Americans owned toothpaste; 10 years after the ad campaign, the number jumped to 65%.

But it turns out this wasn’t the first time the cue had been used in advertising. Other brands had tried and failed with similar marketing.
The secret, it turns out, was the aftertaste of Pepsodent. With mint oil and citric acid, Pepsodent left a cool, tingling feeling after brushing teeth.

Customers of Pepsodent revealed that if they forgot to brush their teeth, they missed the tingling sensation. They craved this feeling. This drove the growth of Pepsodent over other toothpastes; and when other companies introduced mint to their toothpaste, Pepsodent’s market share dropped.

When invented in the 1990s, Febreze was a magical product – it could remove bad smells from fabric, not just cover it up like other products. It seemed like a sure-fire win, an alternative to dry cleaning and laundry. The team designed ads with cues and rewards, focusing on the cue of bad smells. The reward was clothing that no longer smelled like cigarettes, or sofas that no longer smelled like dog.

But the ads failed. Sales didn’t bump at all, and they coasted along at low levels.

They discovered that the cue failed – people perpetually around bad smells couldn’t actually detect the cue any longer. If you’re a long time smoker, your nose just becomes less sensitive to smoke smells. This meant the habit couldn’t fully form.

So the Febreze team tried a different strategy. Instead of attacking the smell problem, they repositioned the product as the proper reward to a cleaning routine. They added more perfume to Febreze, and they encouraged customers to spray Febreze after freshly making a bed or vacuuming. Over time, customers associated cleanliness with the smell of Febreze.

Then the smell became a craving. If it didn’t smell nice like Febreze, it didn’t really seem clean.

This habit change catapulted the use of Febreze – it wasn’t just used when bad smells happened, it was used habitually after every cleaning.

In malls, Cinnabon locates its stores away from other restaurants. They want the smell alone wafting through the hallways to act as a cue, then trigger a craving for the cinnamon roll. Once the customer finally sees the Cinnabon store, the routine to buy a cinnamon roll activates and they get their sweet reward.

Up until now, this The Power of Habit summary has focused on building new habits – Pepsodent causing a new tingle, Febreze adding a new smell. But you likely want to stop your bad habits too – eating without control, procrastinating, or getting distracted at work.

Over time, habits become deeply ingrained. **Over many iterations of the habit loop, the transition between cue, craving, routine, and reward become automatic.** Think about any personal habits that you want to break, and how hard they seem to change. Once you get a cue and craving, it can seem almost as though you lose control and act on auto-pilot.

Luckily, research into successful methods of behavior change have revealed the best practices of changing your habits.

First and foremost is **understanding your own habits.** First, **identify the cues or triggers that kick off your habit.** Every time you feel tempted with a craving, make a note to yourself on paper. Then think about what happened recently, or what you felt recently, that kicked off the craving.

Next, **understand the reward you get after the routine.** This could be a physical one, like food, or an emotional one, like relief of boredom or feeling socially connected. Think deep, and ask yourself “why?” five times. Often, **the real root cues and rewards are not the superficial ones that first come to mind.**

For example, say you want to stop snacking at work. Periodically, you feel the urge to get up from your desk, go to the kitchen, and find something to eat. Superficially, you think that you snack to satisfy your hunger. But you might find that you do this even when you’re not hungry. Instead, after introspection, you find that your real cue is that you get up when you feel lonely. Getting a snack gives you an excuse to go to the kitchen, where someone’s usually hanging out. You then strike up a conversation, while coincidentally eating chips. The real reward is the social connection with another person.

Once you identify your cues and rewards, you want to work on actually changing the habit.

It turns out that it’s **incredibly hard to completely eliminate old habits.** For some reason, even after a long time, experiencing a cue can trigger old habits despite your best intentions. This is why alcoholics and smokers can fall off the wagon after just smelling cigarette smoke or having one taste of alcohol.

Luckily, there is one Golden Rule: **to change a habit, keep the same cue and the same reward, but change the routine.**
Because your brain’s already wired in the habit, it’s hard to totally resist the temptation of the cue and the craving, for the rest of your life. Instead, a more successful strategy is to replace the routine with something more productive, so that you get the same reward at the end.

And this works because often it’s the routine that you want to eliminate – whether that’s eating junk food, drinking, or binging Netflix.

One of the most successful examples of habit change is Alcoholics Anonymous. Its famous 12-step program forces the recovering alcoholic to go through a few important steps. For example, step 4 asks to make “a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves,” and step 5 asks to admit “to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” In these steps, it’s hard not to make a list of all the reasons you drink, and the urges that started the behavior.

Often, alcoholics drink not because of the physical feeling of intoxication, but because of the accompanying emotional relief – an escape from your everyday problems, a distraction, catharsis.

To change the habit, AA forces its members to replace the routine of drinking with engaging socially at meetings. Their goal is to attend 90 meetings in 90 days, and new members get a dedicated sponsor as a personal companion. The recovering alcoholic can keep the same cues (like anxiety about a life problem) and rewards (distraction from the problem or relaxation). But the routine is entirely different, and much healthier.

In 1996, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers were one of the worst football teams in the NFL. Tony Dungy arrived as head coach with a new strategy – force the players to develop deeply ingrained habits so they don’t ever have to think during a game.

For instance, on each play a defensive lineman, would focus on only a few cues – the positioning of his opponent’s back foot, the distance between him and the next player. Depending on what the cues are, the player then has an automatic habit of reacting. If it’s a pass play, he’ll immediately circle around the offensive line and sack the quarterback. He doesn’t need to think about it – he can just explode.

If these could truly become habits, then the behavior would be automatic. And Coach Dungy believed that their team didn’t need to have a more complicated playbook – they just needed to be faster. Football plays happen in fractions of a second, and thinking gets you in trouble.
This strategy, and countless sessions of drilling habits until they became automatic, ultimately led the Buccaneers to the Super Bowl. Coach Dungy then took his techniques to the Colts, who won a Super Bowl themselves.

There’s a last component of habit change that’s important – belief. (This is a less rigorous section of the book, but I’ll take it at face value).

In the deepest and darkest days, when your cravings feel unbearable, it is critical to believe that you DO have the power to make your new habit a permanent behavior. You must believe that you can cope with the stress of the craving without falling back to your old behavior. You must believe that things will get better.

Faith is a big component of AA – belief in a higher power is a big part of the 12 step program. Researchers currently believe that the belief in God itself isn’t the critical piece – rather, just believing in something spills over into powering belief in the alcoholic herself.

Being in a community is helpful for this – a community can make the big goal of change believable. Hearing the stories of other people who have successfully changed their habits gives you belief that you can do it too.

Thus, if you want to change a habit, try to find other people who have successfully done it themselves. Try to find a subreddit or local meetup with other people who are on the same journey as you. And believe in your ability to change, one step at a time.
Part Two: The Habits of Successful Organizations

Next, Duhigg takes *The Power of Habit* into covering habits adopted by multiple people - companies, organizations, teams. This section of the book seems less rigorous and research-backed than the first part, but has some interesting ideas.

Chapter 4: Keystone Habits – Which Habits Matter Most

Certain habits can have a domino effect – get one habit right, and many other good habits fall into place naturally. These **keystone habits** act as massive levers.

A 2009 study on weight loss tried to get obese people to follow a simple habit – write down everything they ate, at least one day a week. While difficult at first, it became a habit for many. **Unexpectedly, this small habit rippled throughout their diet.** When forced to study what they ate, the study participants couldn’t help noticing when they snacked absentmindedly, or when they had unhealthy dinners. They then proactively started to plan future meals so that when they wanted a snack, they reached for an apple instead of a candy bar.

The keystone habit of keeping a food journal created an environment for more healthy habits to thrive. Eventually, participants who kept a journal lost twice as much weight as the control group.

**How do you find a keystone habit?** Find an area where you can have small wins. By achieving small wins, you create forces that favor another small win, and that in turn encourages the next small win, and so on, creating a virtuous cycle. These wins create a culture of change, and create new structures that help new habits grow and thrive.

[This chapter of *The Power of Habit* doesn’t contain as much scientific rigor as in the first 3 chapters, so the keystone habit concept feels anecdotal. It can make sense intuitively, though. When you’re stuck in a rut, it’s often easy to resign yourself to thinking you’re incapable of change, that you’re a lazy good-for-nothing. By achieving small wins, you can reverse this resignation – you can convince yourself that you ARE capable of change. This courage can empower you to take bigger and bigger steps.]

In 1987, the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) was struggling to grow in the face of competition. Its product quality was poor, and its workers went on strike when ordered to improve their productivity.

The company’s shareholders hired a new CEO from government, Paul O’Neill. On his first investor meeting, he shocked the room by talking not about synergy or profits or competitive advantages, but about a simple focus: worker safety. **He wanted to make Alcoa the safest company in the...**

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country. His stance was that if the company worked together to lower injury rate, they would have developed habits across the entire organization that prized excellence of work.

The investors were shocked – surely this was an insane, unprofitable area to focus on. But O’Neill was right – over his 13 year tenure, Alcoa grew its market value by 5 times and became more profitable than ever. **Improving worker safety was a keystone habit that caused ripples of improvements through every major practice in the company.**

The first step was making it known across the entire company that worker safety was the number one priority. People would be promoted and fired on achieving worker safety, so the reward was established.

**Next, he put into place a simple habit:**

- **Cue:** employee injury
- **Routine:** the unit president must report it to O’Neill within 24 hours and present a plan to make sure it never happens again
- **Reward:** all those involved would be given positive marks

Even just meeting the 24-hour requirement was a challenge in communication. The president would have to keep their ears open to presidents, who would need to be in touch with floor managers, who would need to be constantly on alert with the workers on the ground for injuries. Furthermore, floor managers would need to have plans prepared to prevent the injury from happening again. **All of this opened up communication like never before,** which had major benefits outside of just guaranteeing safety.

Other examples of new habits:

- **Measuring productivity** was now embraced because it helped indicate problem areas in the pipeline that could lead to injury. Unions had opposed it for years. This change then allowed managers to hold workers accountable for productivity.

- **Equipment** was regularly repaired and processes were redesigned. If a molten aluminum pourer was splashing, for example, it was replaced before causing injury. This also led to increased efficiency, less waste, and higher quality products.

- **Paul O’Neill** encouraged front-line workers to call him personally if they felt their managers weren’t taking safety seriously. They started calling him not just to talk about safety, but about other great ideas they had that no one was listening to.

**Worker safety was essentially synonymous with product quality, efficiency, communication, and collaboration. When achieving worker safety, the company also had to improve many of its core functions, which in turn led to a superior position in the market.**
Questions:

- what are some small wins of a habit you can pick up today?
- what downstream ripples do you think this habit might lead to?

Chapter 5: Starbucks and the Habit of Success – When Willpower Becomes Automatic

Willpower can be defined in a number of ways: as self-discipline, determination, self-control. More technically, it has also been defined as the ability to delay short-term gratification to reach long-term goals, the ability to override an unwanted impulse, and regulation of the self.

Willpower is critical to personal success. A famous study in the 1960s, nicknamed the “Marshmallow Test,” studied the willpower of 4-year-olds. Kids were put into a room and presented with a marshmallow on a plate. They were presented with a deal: you can eat this marshmallow right away, or you can wait a few minutes and we’ll give you two marshmallows. The researcher left the room and watched the kids. Most kids (70%) twisted and squirmed before snatching the marshmallow and eating it joyfully. About 30% ignored their urges and got the longer-term reward of 2 marshmallows.

Decades later, they tracked the kids’ performance in high school. The minority of kids who delayed gratification ended up with the best grades and SAT scores that were 210 points higher on average. They were less likely to do drugs and were more socially popular. It seemed that being able to resist short-term temptations had rippling effects for academics and resisting peer pressure. This ideas has since been replicated across dozens of experiments. Willpower even predicts academic performance more robustly than IQ.

Willpower is trainable. The same 4-year-old kids can be taught techniques to resist the marshmallow, like distracting themselves by doodling, or picturing a frame around a marshmallow so it looks like a picture.

Willpower is less a skill (like a tennis serve) and more like a resource, like muscle power. This means willpower is depletable. In a study, college students were presented with a bowl of cookies and a bowl of radishes. They were split into two groups – one was instructed to eat only the cookies and leave the radishes, and the other to eat only the radishes and leave the cookies. The radish group should be using more willpower trying to resist the cookies. Students in both groups were then given an impossible puzzle to solve, and the time before they gave up was measured. The radish group gave up in 8 minutes, 60% less time than the cookie eaters who spent nearly 19 minutes. By resisting the cookies, the radish group had depleted their willpower, and had less of it to use on the maze.

Building willpower in one aspect of life spills over into other areas of life. In different studies, participants were trained to build willpower in physical exercise, or money management, or study habits. Not only did they achieve results in what they were training directly (like exercising or saving money), they also improved other aspects of their lives – they smoked less, drank less, watched TV less, and ate better, even though the
The key to developing willpower is to predict the most painful points, and build a specific plan beforehand for how you’ll work through them. For example, if you want to start running, the most painful point is probably when you get off the couch, put on your shoes, and take the first 20 steps. After that, you can get into the zone.

This insight came from a research study of orthopedic patients in Scotland. After going through a hip replacement, exercising is important to avoid blood clots and developing scar tissue. However, it’s extremely painful, so many patients skip the practice. In an experiment, a researcher gave each patient a book with blank pages and instructions: “My goals for this week are _______. Write down exactly what you are going to do. For example, if you are going to go for a walk this week, write down where and when you are going to walk.”

Three months later, the patients who had filled in the books were walking twice as fast as the control group, and getting out of their chairs three times as fast. Within all the plans written on the pages, the key was filling in specific plans about how to deal with predicted pain points. For example, one patient trying to walk to the bus stop each day wrote down every obstacle and what pills he would take if the pain was too much. The patients who didn’t write this down ahead of time never thought specifically about how to deal with the major pain points, and they didn’t have the willpower to push through in the moment.

To develop willpower, choose a pain point getting in the way of a habit you want to adopt. Construct a routine ahead of time to push through the pain, and keep practicing it until it becomes a habit. You don’t necessarily need to have a greater bank of willpower – you just need to make self-control automatic so you don’t even think about it, and this conserves willpower for later.

For many retail chains like Starbucks, the front-line baristas join the company as their first job. They’re often not accustomed to the stress that angry customers and complicated orders bring. They may have come from environments that didn’t actively promote self-discipline and willpower. This can lead employees with lower willpower to snap at customers, lowering customer experience.

The key, as many companies like Starbucks have found, is to define routines for employees to use in rough patches. Say a customer is irate that you’ve messed up his venti double shot no
foam soy extra hot latte with light whip and splenda. You want to scream at his face, but instead Starbucks has trained you to follow the LATTE method:

- Listen to the customer
- Acknowledge the complaint
- Take action by solving the problem
- Thank the customer
- Explain why the problem occurred

In training, **managers drill new baristas to picture realistic stressful scenarios and to follow the LATTE method.** When the real stressor comes, the baristas know how to push through it using a classic cue-routine-reward habit loop.

[Allen comment: Willpower is defined as a muscle you can strengthen and grow, so that you can push through higher activation barriers. But when you adopt a habit (like LATTE) – are you strengthening your willpower muscle, or are you actually short-circuiting the pain point by automatically executing a routine? In other words, when you have a routine to auto-execute without thinking about it, it seems as though you need even less willpower than before to not snap at the customer.

As an analogy, let’s say you have to travel two miles in the cold. Slogging there on foot is the normal painful way that requires a lot of willpower. But you learn to ride a bike, which conserves your muscle strength while accomplishing the same goal. In this analogy, having a routine like LATTE is like a bike that makes getting through the pain point easier.

It might be a bit of both. By refusing to yell at the customer, you build willpower that you didn’t previously have. And by having a reliable habit you can call in, you use less willpower to make the customer happier, as opposed to dealing with it live.]

Questions:

- what is a habit you feel you lack willpower for?
- what is the major pain point you can predict?
- what is a *specific* routine you can use to get through this pain point?
Chapter 6: The Power of a Crisis – How Leaders Create Habits Through Accident and Design

[Allen note: This is a weaker conceptual chapter in this Power of Habit summary, without much supporting research]

One would think that a company’s behavior, and their employees’ behavior, is defined by rational, deliberate choices at each step.

In reality, much of employee behavior comes from habits grandfathered in from the past. Employees rely on routines to guide their behavior – for instance, many companies have a standard bonus and promotion track. In the typical environment, employees know that if they keep their head down, work hard, and don’t cause trouble, they’ll be rewarded with bonuses and promotions at a predetermined schedule.

The utility of habits here is the same as personal individual habits - it saves energy when you don’t have to question why you behave every day. Routines help stuff get done without falling into paralysis. They allow employees to make progress without having to reinvent things all the time or ask for permission at each step.

Organizational habits can be constructive or destructive. Often destructive habits are created without deliberate planning, instead growing organically from rivalries, fear, or ego.

The book argues that the natural state of a company is of conflict. Executives compete for influence and credit from achievements. Different teams compete for resources and attention. Employees compete against each other to gain favor with managers and snag a promotion.

Habits are actually useful in brokering peace. Conflicting parties come together and agree on a set of behaviors that everyone will follow, so that the company overall benefits and everyone gets paid.

For example, salespeople are often tempted to give big discounts to clients to land a sale. But if everyone did this, the company would go bankrupt. So the sales team decides internally to limit the discounts each person can give so that the entire team can succeed.

Similarly, departments want to maintain control over their jurisdiction and prevent power grabs by other departments. So different departments agree on habits to avoid turf battles – don’t intrude on our space, and we won’t intrude on yours. This leads to the natural pushing away of responsibilities: “this isn’t a sales problem, it’s an engineering problem.”

Habits broker peace between warring factions. Break these habits, and you’ll be alienated as a disruptor.

Of course, the problem with these habits is that at times they can be destructive. Sometimes problems appear that perfuse the entire organization. If departments maintain clearly defined boundaries, no one claims responsibility for these problems. The anecdotes below will illustrate the example.

And over time, these habits become calcified – they become a part of the organization’s DNA, new employees quickly adopt the habits to fit in, and the cycle perpetuates.
To resolve this, companies need to deliberately cultivate habits that allow one priority to overshadow everything else, even though it might temporarily disrupt the balance of power. The Alcoa anecdote above illustrates this well—worker safety was elevated to be the primary responsibility of all departments. If another department pointed out a safety problem in another department, they would be rewarded, not punished. This keystone habit eventually led to systemwide improvements in communication, collaboration, and morale.

Because these habits can become deeply ingrained in a company culture, they can be hard to change at will. The best opportunity to change them are in times of crisis, when people feel something must change for the organization to survive. This is when habits are most malleable. In these moments, you can promote and articulate a sense of emergency.

In 2000, Rhode Island Hospital, the teaching hospital of Brown University, was a wreck. Some doctors habitually bullied nurses, chastising them for correcting the doctors. So to avoid punishment, nurses had secret habits—they communicated through marker color who the bad doctors were (green for good, black for bad). Around bad doctors, you needed to keep quiet when they got pushy. Nurses also quietly covered for doctors, fixing incorrect medication doses and fixing doctors’ unintelligible handwriting.

Ultimately, this led to several high profile reports on mistakes. In multiple cases, surgeons operated on the wrong side of the head, with one case leading to death.

A crisis had occurred. The entire surgical ward was shut down for a day for training. New habits were instituted, like checklists for every operation and video cameras recording every surgery. At this time of crisis, no matter how vehemently the doctors opposed these practices, the elevation of patient safety to supersede the organization led to radical change.

These new practices dramatically improved patient safety and reduced medical error, and likely led to better morale across the team.

In 1987, a fire occurred at King’s Cross Station, a major interchange in the London subway system. 31 people died, and 100 people were injured. A review showed that destructive habits had set in that prevented departments from taking ownership over the event of a fire:

- A ticketing clerk noticed the first sign of a burning tissue. He put it out, but didn’t think to report the issue—it wasn’t part of his department’s responsibility.
- The station employees weren’t trained to use the sprinkler system, and another department controlled the fire extinguishers.
When they arrived, the fire brigade used their department’s street-level hydrants rather than the subway-level hydrants, because they were instructed not to use the equipment of other agencies.

Well before the event, the risk of a fire had already been reported, but they were ignored.

The insidious problem is that all of these habits were adopted for good reason. At one point, ticketing clerks went outside their formal duty by helping tourists and picking up trash, and this caused delays in issuing tickets to riders. So a new policy forced ticketing clerks to keep within their jurisdiction in the interest of efficiency.

Ultimately, no one had final responsibility for passenger safety. Insufficient training meant departments didn’t know how to collaborate in emergencies.

Just as with the Rhode Island Hospital, the crisis spurred major overhauls to the organization.

Chapter 7: How Target Knows What You Want Before You Do – When Companies Predict (and Manipulate) Habits

When you consume commercial products like groceries and music, you have habits, and those habits are predictable. (What a surprise.) People have favorite types of food and genres of music and regularly consume them. Again, the value of habits is conservation of mental energy – you don’t have to think hard about what groceries to buy every trip or which radio station to listen to everyday.

Supermarkets are well designed to play psychological tricks based on your habits:

- Healthy, fresh food is put near the entrance of the store. The theory is that if you buy healthy food at the beginning of your shopping trip, you'll be able to justify buying Oreos placed at the end (additionally, you’ve likely already depleted your willpower by this point after passing by loads of delicious looking food). This makes you spend more overall, and over time you develop a habit of loading up your cart with a full range of goods.

- Most people turn to the right after entering a store, so higher margin items are placed to the right.

People’s habits do suddenly change, and most often after major life events. Even though your personal habits have changed, they change in a predictable way. For example, if you’re expecting a baby, you’re likely to suddenly start buying vitamins and unscented lotion.
Retailers track all your buying behavior through your credit cards and rewards cards. They can then detect your buying patterns and send you customized newsletters with deals unique to you, to get you back into the store. For instance, if Target thinks you’re likely to be in your third trimester of pregnancy, it’ll send you discounts on diapers and baby clothes. This will get you into the store and you’re likely to buy food and housewares along the way.

However, this can’t be done too obviously. Because buying pregnancy items is new to you, it contradicts your previous habits, and pointing it out is especially salient. It’d be creepy to get a coupon book full of baby formula coupons when you haven’t even announced that you’re pregnant.

So retailers have figured out that these new customized deals need to be sandwiched in between familiar items, like dish soap and detergent. Then it doesn’t look like you’re being explicitly targeted, but you notice the customized deals anyway.

This relates to the lesson from Chapter 3 – to adopt new habits, keep the same cue and the same reward, but change the routine. By sandwiching a new routine (baby formula) in between familiar cues (normal coupons), you can inspire new habits.

In popular music, there’s a running joke that the top songs all sound the same. For example, many songs follow a familiar 4 chord progression.

People crave familiarity, even if they consciously deny liking these songs. We subconsciously enjoy patterns so they ease the load on our cognition. For audio, patterns help us distinguish signal from the noise. In a busy intersection with hundreds of different noises happening at once, we can still pay attention to a conversation. Patterns in music work similarly.

In 2003, hip-hop group Outkast created a song called “Hey Ya!”. The studio executives felt it was catchy, fresh, and had the potential to be a big hit. But they noticed that listeners actively switched to a different station when it came on the radio. The theory – it sounded too dissimilar from other top 40 songs. People’s listening habits couldn’t immediately make sense of Hey Ya.

To ease the transition, DJs sandwiched the song in between popular form-fitting songs by people like Maroon 5 and Justin Timberlake. This made Hey Ya sound relatively more familiar than if it were sandwiched between unfamiliar songs. As people listened to the song over and over again, their habits shifted, and they began to crave Hey Ya as a new, adjusted habit.

Allen note: The idea of personal consumption habits has profound implications in today’s hyper-customization of tech products. You produce more data than ever about what you enjoy, and companies use that to increase your engagement. Netflix tees up your next show based on what you’ve watched in the past. Facebook customizes your News Feed to what you’ve Liked and shared in the past.
This customization makes you use the service more, with each unit of content giving you a dopamine hit and turning consumption into a regular habit. (Just think about how automatically you open a new browser tab, type the first letter of your favorite site, and load it without thinking. Or how you absent-mindedly click on your most-used app on your phone.)

However, the hyper-customization can potentially whittle your worldview into a predictable, narrow echo chamber. If you like liberal-leaning content on Facebook, for example, its algorithms will repeatedly serve you more liberal-leaning content and actively suppress things you dislike. Over time, this can lead to further polarization of groups and groupthink without our consciously noticing it (as is typical of habits).

As an analogy, consider a snowy hill you’re practicing ski jumps on. At first, the hill has fresh powder, and you’re free to choose any route. But as you continuously ski down the hill, your skis carve into the snow, leaving progressively deeper tracks. Eventually, the only route you can take is down the one you’ve carved deeply into the hill.

As customization becomes increasingly powerful, it will become progressively more difficult to break outside of your comfortable habits. From the company’s standpoint, the short-term boost in engagement by feeding you things that you expect is too profitable to stop doing. This might be adjusted if algorithms find that introducing some novelty and disagreeable things that expand your worldview ultimately leads to higher long-term engagement (like if Netflix breaks you into a new genre, which opens up a whole new library of content to watch).]
Part Three: The Habits of Societies

Finally, this *The Power of Habit* summary concludes with habits in society. I felt this was the least practical section of the book for your everyday life, and a bit of a stretch into fuzzy sociological theory, though I summarize the major interesting points below.

Chapter 8: Saddleback Church and the Montgomery Bus Boycott — How Movements Happen

Successful social movements are said to have three parts:

1) **the movement begins with the social habits of close friendship** – someone is afflicted, and the people close to them immediately help

2) **the movement grows from the habits of a community** and the weak ties that combine loosely affiliated people. There is increasing social pressure to join to maintain your social status

3) **the movement endures because the leaders give participants new habits**, a new identity, and a feeling of ownership over the movement

We’ll unpack each of these parts and use the example of Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement in 1950’s America.

1) **Social movements often begin with a victim who suffered an injustice, like being injured or discriminated against.** Immediately, the victim’s close friends band together to help, as the habits of friendship would dictate. (Cue: friend is in trouble; Routine: help the friend; Reward: happiness from helping friend). To have a broad social movement, it helps if the victim is well connected in the community.

   In 1955, Rosa Parks was ordered to give up her bus seat in the colored section for a white passenger. She refused. She was arrested. Actually, Rosa Parks wasn’t the first one to get arrested for sitting on a bus, even in the same city (Montgomery, Alabama) in the same year. But she became a symbol of the civil rights movement.

   Part of the reason was timing — *Brown v Board* had just ruled that segregation was illegal in public schools. Part of the reason was Rosa’s pleasant demeanor and relative middle-aged normality – earlier in the year, a teenager Claudette Colvin was arrested for resisting bus segregation, but civil rights leaders were afraid of championing her given that she was a teenager pregnant by a married man.
The book argues that Rosa Parks was the catalyst for the movement because of her exceptionally well-connected placement in the local community. She actively participated in the NAACP, church, youth organizations, botanical club, and volunteer groups. So her arrest set off a series of powerful events:

- the head of the local NAACP (where she was secretary) was bailed her out and saw her example as the perfect opportunity to challenge segregation laws
- her friend, the president of a schoolteacher group, called for a boycott on Parks’s court appearance date. She spread flyers to all teachers in the organization, who then passed them on to parents
- people who knew Parks intimately from her many community involvements rallied to her cause

The social habits of close friendship kicked in to rally around Parks and the larger issue. When someone you care about is in trouble, you just act.

2) For the movement to grow, it now must expand beyond the immediate clique and involve a whole community, many of whom have only weak ties to the victim. Now, the habits of social pressure kick in.

A 1960s study found that weak ties (or friends of friends) were more instrumental in getting people jobs than close friends. The reason is that you likely belong to the same clique as your close friends, and thus access the same pool or opportunities. In contrast, the weak tie friends access social networks that you don’t belong to and find opportunities you would otherwise never hear of. But the tie is strong enough that the friend of a friend will still help you much more than she would a stranger.

This weak tie behavior seems like an automatic habit – if you get a request to help a friend of a friend, you likely don’t think explicitly, “well Mary is a friend of Jason’s, so if I help Mary, I’ll look better to Jason.” You just feel a compunction to help. (This behavior might have evolved biologically when close knit communities were more fit for survival.)

If you don’t help the friend of a friend, you risk losing your social status from the community. Jason will know he can no longer rely on you for help, and he’ll tell your mutual friends, and so forth. So peer pressure also forces us to action, when everyone else expects us to perform a certain way.

Parks’s advocates now mobilized their own local groups. Black ministers told their congregations that every black church in town was joining a one-day protest. Thousands of flyers were
circulated that explained how it was expected that every black citizen would participate in the boycott.

By this point, every black person heard the message clearly – if you skip the boycott and ride a bus on Monday, you’re an embarrassment to the black community. Even people who didn’t know Parks personally, and possibly people who didn’t care much about the civil rights movement, felt a social obligation to participate in the boycott.

3) It’s common at this point for the movement to flag in energy. For the movement to endure, it now must train new habits and forge a new identity for its participants. If done successfully, people continue participating automatically as a habit – they have new identities as members of this movement, and they now define themselves as part of this movement. To act otherwise would be to counter the habit.

[Allen note: this is the weakest part of the chapter and not as convincing, without specific examples of habits.]

When Martin Luther King’s house was bombed, he strongly insisted to the riotous crowd to stay nonviolent. “We must make them know that we love them,” he cried. The crowd settled. This was a large departure from the more militant and combative rhetoric the movement had been using prior to his appearance. When future bombings happened, the same pattern repeated – the black community showed up in solidarity and disbanded without violence.

This behavior, along with other components of King’s philosophy, turned followers into self-directing leaders. The movement spread nationwide, and local nonviolent demonstrations against segregation happened frequently.

Chapter 9: The Neurology of Free Will – Are We Responsible for Our Habits?

In the final chapter of this The Power of Habit summary, we confront an interesting moral question – if habits are so strongly wired within us, and we act automatically when confronted with a cue, are we legally and morally responsible for our actions?

We’ll examine two relevant cases – a murder, and gambling debt.
In 2008, Brian Thomas woke up to find a man on top of his wife. He choked the man until he felt the man stop moving – only to realize he had actually killed his wife. From an early age, Thomas had started sleepwalking. When doing so, the part of his brain that usually consciously processes behavior is asleep, but the parts governing routine habits are still awake. When he killed his wife, Thomas had experienced a sleep terror, unconsciously imagining a situation that led to profound anxiety and a primitive defense reaction.

There has been thorough studying of people suffering sleep terrors, and the consensus is that the behavior is automatic – that the person does not consciously process the situation and has no control over behavior. This has led some night terror sufferers to jump off roofs when believing they were being chased, or killing their babies when believing they were fighting wild animals.

After examining Thomas’s healthy marriage and hearing expert testimony that Thomas was asleep when he killed his wife, the jury acquitted him. They believed Thomas had not consciously committed a crime, and thus was not responsible for it.

So here we’ve had a sympathetic case – someone unknowingly committed a terrible act, had no control over his behavior, and was acquitted.

Now let’s examine gambling.

Angie Bachmann didn’t plan to get addicted to gambling. A housewife, she started visiting a local casino once a week after getting bored when her family was out of the house. Over time, she started visiting more frequently and playing with bigger stakes. While she started with just $50 for an entire day, eventually she was going up and down by $5,000 within hours.

Before she could recognize what was happening, she was uncontrollably addicted. She used gambling as stress relief, and being a capable card player was now part of her identity. Within a few years, she was $20,000 in debt to the casino, and they went bankrupt. She realized her life had to change, and she kicked the habit for a few years.

Then her parents died, and she inherited nearly $1 million. She was getting along fine, but one day while driving she started panicking about her parents’ deaths. She wanted to take her mind off the pain – and she craved gambling again (recall cravings and habits above). She visited a casino and instantly felt her stress melt away.

As she made repeated trips back to the casino, her old habits returned, and she was now gambling with even bigger stakes. She played $400 on each hand, two hands at a time, and on a single trip, she lost $250,000. She couldn’t control her cravings. Within 2 years, Bachmann had
lost all the money she inherited, and in further debt with the casino, who had lent her money to gamble with.

Bachmann sued. **She argued that she had no control over her habits**, just like Brian Thomas when he killed his wife. Once the casino contacted her and gave her sweet offers to return, it was impossible for her to control her behavior.

There is some justification for this. fMRI research shows that people with gambling problems interpret gambling situations differently. Slot machines have “near win” outcomes – say, the first reel shows 7, the second reel shows 7, and the third reel shows a cherry, just one tick away from the 777 jackpot. In normal brains, this is treated the same as a loss. **But in addicts’ brains, this is treated as a win** – a near win is as rewarding as an actual win. Thus, addict brains get rewarded far more frequently than they should, which perpetuates the habits.

In the end, though, **the state Supreme Court justices were unconvinced. Bachmann was ultimately responsible for her behavior**, and she hadn’t taken adequate measure to change her habits, such as joining a voluntary exclusion program to be barred from casinos.

If both Thomas’s and Bachmann’s reactions were both virtually automatic habits, **why do we sympathize with the killer but disdain the gambler?**

Charles Duhigg argues that **if we can consciously recognize our habits, we can change them.** (That’s what this book is about.) People have provably changed their most difficult habits – smoking, alcoholism, gambling – so few habits are entirely set in stone.

**Thomas was not consciously aware of his habit.** He couldn’t predict that he would have his night terror, nor could he control his behavior once he had one. Bachmann, on the other hand, was strongly conscious of her habit, as shown by her temporary quitting and guilt around her behavior. Thus, she was responsible.

All this is to end on an uplifting note – that **if you can recognize your habit, if you have a framework to change your habit, and you put in concerted effort to change it, you will succeed.**

[Allen note: There are larger concerns about the influence of genetics and environment on our willpower and ability to change habits. Someone who had grown up in a worse environment without positive role models and constant stress could be less equipped to deal with addictive triggers through no apparent fault of her own. They also aren’t as likely to seek out frameworks and help like this book. **The Power of Habit** doesn’t touch upon this issue as it wants to be an empowering self-improvement book.

However, even if these environmental influences were taken into account, the ramifications on law would be staggering: people on trial for murder would argue they couldn't help themselves, given how they were raised. So as a society we tend to draw clearer lines - if you're generally conscious of your behavior, you have responsibility over it.]
Appendix: A Reader’s Guide to Using These Ideas

You probably want to change your bad habits, or adopt good new ones. This last section of my The Power of Habit summary is a condensed guide on how to achieve this, with a realistic habit example.

A habit consists of Cue -> Routine -> Reward. The insight here is that the superficial routine (e.g. shopping for dessert and eating it) may not be the actual underlying craving (e.g. wanting a break away from the office).

Step 1: Identify the Routine

The routine is the automatic behavior you want to change. **Unpack the entire routine into every single step from beginning to finish, even the steps you think aren’t important.**

Example: Let’s say I have a habit of going downstairs during work, visiting a nearby supermarket, and buying a dessert. I want to change this because I’ve gained 5 pounds. My entire routine: I get up from my desk, walk to the elevator, take the elevator down, walk outside for 3 minutes to the supermarket, browse the dessert selection, pick one, go to the checkout line, chat briefly with the checkout clerk, walk back to work, go up the elevator, and go back to my desk and eat the dessert.

Step 2: Experiment with Rewards

Next, we need to figure out which part of the routine is most important to your craving. This will be a science experiment – **change your routine to focus on a specific portion, and see if that fulfills your craving.**

After you finish, write down the first three words that come to mind. They can be emotions or random thoughts.

Then, set an alarm for 15 minutes. When it rings, ask yourself – do you still feel that craving?

On four different days, I try modifications to the routines depending on my hypothesis for what the craving actually is:

- **Hypothesis: I actually want a sweet dessert.**
  - New routine: Instead of going to Whole Foods, I eat a candy bar in the office.
Three notes: saccharine, tired, guilty
Craving still exist? not hungry, but still feel something’s missing

- Hypothesis: I actually want some fresh air and walk outside.
  - New routine: I walk for 10 minutes outside instead of going to the supermarket.
  - Three notes: relaxed, cold, hungry
  - Craving still exist? no

- Hypothesis: I actually like the feeling of the elevator.
  - New routine: I ride down and up the elevator three times.
  - Three notes: bored, nauseous, silly
  - Craving still exist? yes

- Hypothesis: I actually want some human contact (the dessert is just an excuse to talk to the checkout clerk).
  - New routine: I talk to a co-worker.
  - Three notes: interested, cool, productivity
  - Craving still exist? yes

This is an artificially simplistic example, but we can see that the only time the craving actually went away was when I walked outside. This is already a strong hint that the dessert is not what I actually want.

Figuring this out can take many tries over weeks. Be patient and keep collecting data until you see patterns.

Step 3: Isolate the Cue

The last diagnostic step is to figure out what cue sets you off. Because you’re receiving so much information at any given time, it might be hard to narrow this down. But all cues fit into one of five categories:

- Location
- Time
- Emotional state
- Other people
- Immediately preceding action
When you next feel the craving, answer these questions to find patterns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Where are you? At my desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What time is it? 4:05PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What’s your emotional state? Tired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Who else is around? Coworkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What action preceded the urge? Answered 10 long emails</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Where are you? In a meeting room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What time is it? 2:37PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What’s your emotional state? Frustrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Who else is around? Senior manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What action preceded the urge? Argument about hiring decision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and so on...

It seems that I feel the craving in the afternoon, and often my emotional state is fatigue or frustration, often from work matters. Note that hunger isn’t often the major emotional state that prompts a dessert run.

**Step 4: Have a Plan**

After a lot of experimentation, you’ve now defined the Cue -> Routine -> Reward loop for yourself.

**Now you need to set a plan to specify what you are going to do when the craving comes**, just like the recovering hip replacement patients. Also, visualize the reward beforehand so that you can develop a craving for it.
Plan: At 3:00PM, I will visualize the reward of a relaxing walk and breathing in fresh air. I will crave the feeling of calm after a hard day of work. I will go downstairs, walk to the nearby park a block away, walk a lap around, and walk back to the office.

Over many repeated iterations of the new routine, you should start feeling like you’re adopting a new habit. You may slip off the wagon a few times, but keep at it – it’ll soon be automatic.

This is how you gain power over your habit. I hope you took a lot away from my The Power of Habit summary. Good luck!