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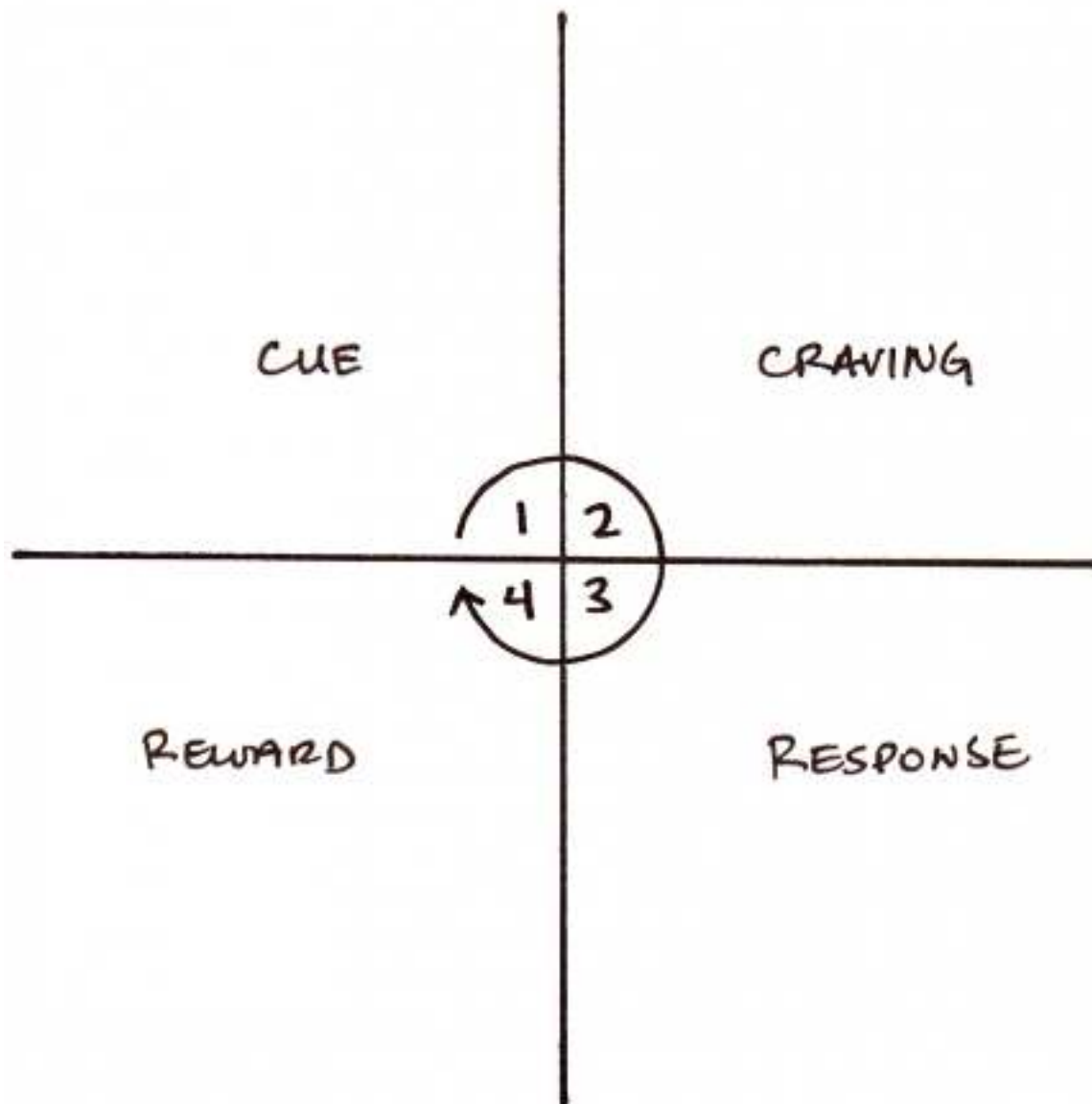
The 5 Triggers That Make New Habits Stick

In my book New York Times bestselling book Atomic Habits (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>), I explain that the process of building a habit can be divided into four simple steps: cue, craving, response, and reward.

The Habit Loop

The image below shows the habit loop and how these four factors work together to build new habits.

THE HABIT LOOP



Charles Duhigg and Nir Eyal deserve special recognition for their influence on this image. This representation of the habit loop is a combination of language that was popularized by Duhigg's book, *The Power of Habit*, and a design that was popularized by Eyal's book, *Hooked*.

Each phase of the habit loop is important for building new habits, but today I'd like to discuss the first factor: **habit cues** (or triggers).

There are five primary ways that a new habit can be triggered. If you understand each of them, then you can select the right one for the particular habit that you are working on.

Here's what you need to know about each habit cue...

Cue 1: Time

Time is perhaps the most common way to trigger a new habit. Common morning habits are just one example. Waking up in the morning usually triggers a cascade of habits: go to the bathroom, take a shower, brush your teeth, get dressed, make a cup of coffee, etc.

There are also less commonly recognized ways that time triggers our behavior. For example, if you pay attention you may notice that you repeat certain tasks mindlessly at different points during the day: heading off to get a snack at the same time each afternoon, taking a smoking break at the same time each morning, and so on.

If these patterns are bad habits, then you may want to take stock of how you feel at this time of day. In many cases, your habits are a signal of how you feel. Bored? Maybe your afternoon snacking habit is a way of breaking up the monotony of the day. Feeling lonely? Maybe your smoking break is a way to connect with fellow co-workers. The point is, if you understand the reason why these habits pop up at the same time each day, then it can become easier to find a new habit to fill the void. Bad habits are replaced, not eliminated (<https://jamesclear.com/how-to-break-a-bad-habit>).

How I use it: Time-based cues can also be used to stick with routines over and over again. This is my preferred method. For example, every Monday and Thursday I write a new article and post it on JamesClear.com. The time and date

drive this pattern. It doesn't matter how good or how bad I feel about the article. It doesn't matter how long or how short the article is. All that matters is that I stick to the schedule (<https://jamesclear.com/schedule-goals>). The time triggers the habit loop.

Cue 2: Location

If you have ever walked into your kitchen, seen a plate of cookies on the counter, and eaten them just because they are there in front of you, then you understand the power of location on our behavior.

In my opinion, location (i.e. environment) is the most powerful driver of mindless habits and also the least recognized. In many cases, our habits and behaviors are simply a response to the environment that surrounds us. The famous study on water versus soft drink consumption (<https://jamesclear.com/choice-architecture>) is one example of how our environment can either promote good habits or lead us toward bad ones.

However, location-based cues are not simply things we respond to, they can also be things we create. Multiple research studies by David Neal and Wendy Wood from Duke University have discovered that new habits are actually easier to perform in new locations.

One theory is that we mentally assign habits to a particular location. This means that all of the current places that you're familiar with (your home, your office, etc.) already have behaviors, habits, and routines assigned to them. If you want to build

new habits in these familiar locations, then you need to overcome the cues that your brain has already assigned to that area. Meanwhile, building a new habit in a new location is like having a blank slate. You don't have to overcome any pre-existing triggers.

How I use it: When I arrive at the gym, I head to the same spot each time to get ready, change into my lifting gear, and start my warm up. This location in the gym is a simple habit cue that helps prompt my pre-workout routine (more on the power of a pre-game routine (<https://jamesclear.com/how-to-get-motivated>)). There are bound to be some days when I don't feel like exercising, but the location-based trigger helps me overcome that and get into my workout ritual as painlessly as possible.

Cue 3: Preceding Event

Many habits are a response to something else that happens in your life. Your phone buzzes, so you pick it up to check your latest text message. The little notification bar lights up on Facebook, so you click it to see what it signals. These are examples of habits that are triggered by a preceding event.

When it comes to cues that are useful for building new habits, I find preceding events to be one of the most useful. Once you understand habit stacking (<https://jamesclear.com/habit-stacking>) you can develop all sorts of ways to tie new habits into preceding events. (Example: "When I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for one minute.")

How I use it: For over two years, I have used a preceding event to stick with a daily gratitude habit (<https://jamesclear.com/gratitude-habit>). Each night, when I sit down to eat dinner, I say one thing that I was grateful for that day. (It's worth

noting, one reason I believe I have been able to stick with this habit so consistently is because it is so small. The smaller the habit (<https://jamesclear.com/small-habits>), the easier it is to build into your life.)

Cue 4: Emotional State

In my experience, emotional state is a common cue for bad habits. For example, you may have a habit of eating when you feel depressed. Or, you may default to online shopping when you feel bored. The emotional states of depression or boredom are triggers for these negative habits.

Unfortunately, although emotions are very common cues for our behavior, I find that they are harder to control and utilize for building good habits. Mostly, I think this is because if you want an emotion to trigger a positive habit, then you often need to be consciously aware of the emotion as you are experiencing it. In other words, you have to be emotional and aware at the same time ... and that can be hard to do. Paying attention (<https://jamesclear.com/awareness-start-better-habits>) is a powerful, but difficult, way to build better habits.

How I use it: I'm trying to get better about noticing when I am holding tension in my body and experiencing stress. When I do notice that I'm feeling particularly stressed, I'll use this emotional state to cue a deep breathing habit.

I like to follow a 3-1-5 breathing pattern: three seconds in, pause for one second, five seconds out. I'll usually repeat this sequence three to five times. I find this little breathing exercise to be a great instant stress reliever. It's particularly useful

because you can literally do it anywhere.

Cue 5: Other People

It is probably no surprise to you that the people you surround yourself with can play a role in your habits and behaviors. What may be a surprise is just how big of an impact these people can make. One study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17652652>) found that if your friend becomes obese, then your risk of obesity increases by 57 percent — even if your friend lives hundreds of miles away.

As far as I can tell, the best way to make use of this information is to surround yourself with people who have the habits you want to have yourself. As Jim Rohn says, “You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with.”

How I use it: I'm not a heavy drinker, but nearly every time I go out with friends, I get a drink. Why is that? If I'm not yearning for a beer, why get one? It's simply a response to the environment that I am in and the people I am around.

Before You Choose Your Habit Cue

No matter what cue you choose for your new habit, there is one important thing to understand. **The key to choosing a successful cue is to pick a trigger that is very specific and immediately actionable.**

For example, let's say you want to build a new habit of doing 10 pushups each day at lunch time. You might start by choosing a time-based cue and saying something like, “During my lunch break each day, I'll do 10 pushups.” This might work, but

it's not very specific. Do you do your pushups at the beginning of your lunch break? At the end? Any time?

Alternatively, you could create a cue around a very specific preceding event that happens right around your lunch break. For example, “When I close my laptop to leave for lunch, I’ll do 10 pushups.” In this case, the very specific action of “closing the laptop” is a perfect trigger for what to do next (your 10 pushups). There is no mistaking when you should do the new habit and kick off the habit loop.

As always, self-experimentation is the only real answer. Play around with these five habit cues and see what works for you.

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 3 of my New York Times bestselling book Atomic Habits. Read more here (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>).

FOOTNOTES

1. By the way, you could define this as a positive or negative habit. Drinking alcohol often has a negative connotation, and it certainly can be when done in excess. That said, socializing with friends and building companionship is one of the healthiest things we can do as humans.
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