

How to Build Positive, Long-Lasting Habits, According to Psychologists

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For many of us, the past year has disrupted deeply ingrained habits. Some people report [exercising less](#), others are [drinking more](#). As we look forward to life returning to some semblance of normal, it's worth considering what scientists have learned about how to create good habits and break bad ones.

Habits are like shortcuts — they're things we can do quickly and without thinking because we've done them so often they've become automatic, says behavioral scientist Katy Milkman of the University of Pennsylvania.

One important feature of habits is that they're triggered by cues in our surroundings, says Wendy Wood, a social psychologist at the University of Southern California whose research focuses on how we form and change habits. The trigger could be a time of day, a particular place or a different activity. Getting out of bed each morning and shuffling to the kitchen, for example, might trigger you to scoop some beans into a grinder and go through the motions of making coffee. Habitual behaviors generally offer a reward — in this case, a freshly brewed cup.

In an ideal world, good habits such as exercising, healthy eating, and reading would be as easy to acquire as brewing coffee. Unfortunately, that's frequently not the case.

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