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New Habits for the New Year

By Michele Gregoire Gill
UCF Forum columnist
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(Photo by Saulo Mohana / unsplash)

Happy 2019! At this time of year, many of us are thinking about resolutions for the new year, and these often involve some kind of change. Yet behavioral change is hard, and it's rarely a "one and done" kind of action.

In *The Power of Habit*, author and Pulitzer-prize winning reporter Charles Duhigg harnesses operant conditioning theory to explain how to create new habits (and change old ones). According to his model, a habit loop is created by a cue that triggers a behavior and a reward that follows the behavior. You can break bad habits by

interrupting the cycle at the cue stage or reward stage, and you can program new and better habits by pairing a cue with a behavior and ensuring some kind of reward follows the behavior.

This is all well and good in theory, but if you have ever tried to teach a pet a new trick, consistency is key. I don't know about you, but I'm so bombarded by information and life obligations at this stage in my life that trying to add a new habit or change an old one is almost impossible without some kind of help.

This may sound silly, but adding this date to my smartphone calendar has greatly increased how often we communicate, and it has led to a lot of happiness and help in my life.

For instance, when my youngest sister and I found ourselves not talking for long periods of time due to our busy schedules, we decided to make a date for a weekly phone call. This may sound silly, but adding this date to my smartphone calendar has greatly increased how often we communicate, and it has led to a lot of happiness and help in my life. The cue is the calendar reminder and the reward is the great conversation we have.

So, I thought I'd share a few of my favorite things that have helped me with cueing and rewarding new behaviors (and stopping unhelpful or outdated habits). Most of this help has come through apps as I find they are convenient and accessible via my smartphone and smartwatch.

First, my personal favorite is the [Due app](#). I have been using this app for years to remind me of important habits and events that I don't want cluttering my calendar. You can customize how often and when the task repeats, how often you want it to bug you till you mark it done, and whether you want sounds to accompany the reminder.

I've used it to remind me of my crazy gym schedule which varies each week, to remember to spend time playing board games with my kids, to remind me to start cooking dinner at a certain time. I think it's a fantastic tool for teenagers too, as it is so easy to add tasks, and it discretely reminds them to turn in assignments or speak with their guidance counselor without disturbing the class or requiring one's phone to be unlocked.

The cues are the reminders that are given and which keep popping up until you mark them complete. And to me, marking them complete is a reward in and of itself.

My next favorite habit app is [Beeminder](#), a habit-building app that explicitly uses operant conditioning to encourage consistent behaviors. It rewards with a graph showing your achievements and punishes with a fine when you don't meet your goals.

[Calm](#) is something I've just started using to help relax and literally calm down. It helps with mindfulness and even sleep. The cue is the backdrop of nature sounds, and the reward has been how incredibly good I feel after a session.

Other apps that I use now or have benefited from in the past are:

- [Evernote](#): All of my notes, both work and personal, are synced across my devices through this app. In addition, it clips webpages, adds business cards, scans, audio files, handwritten notes, and PDF files. This is a powerhouse for keeping one's life organized.
- [Peace with Food](#): Used for tracking hunger and fullness, with a nice dial that serves as a cue.
- [Focus@Will](#): An instrumental soundtrack for writing. You set a timer for a planned writing session, and the app cues with a bell sound, using a playlist set for your particular personality.
- [Seconds Pro](#): For interval training. It cues with color and sounds.

And as for unhelpful behaviors, [Hindsight](#) has been useful in allowing me to monitor my actions, and I can envision it being used to track how often one engages in a negative behavior one is trying to eliminate (e.g., nail biting). Right now, I mostly use it to track when I need to take medications to make sure they are taken at the appropriate intervals.

Finally, for those really difficult to start (or unlearn) habits, I have found success with online coaching services. Since this can get pricey, I am not able to do this regularly. Even a few sessions can help, though, just like hiring a personal trainer at the gym can be useful to get a routine started.

There's a ton of wonderful apps out there to help with new behaviors, so I encourage you to take a chance on trying to change one thing in your life using the habit cycle and perhaps a technological aid to start a new — or break an old — habit.

Wishing you a wonderful and productive 2019!

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