

DO IT FOR A DAY

DAY 6 – STACK THE HABIT

“Burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning.” – Exodus 30:7

One hundred years ago, only 7% of Americans brushed their teeth. I know, sucks! When the United States began drafting for World War I, so many soldiers had rotten teeth that poor dental hygiene posed a national security risk. That raises the question: how did brushing teeth become a national habit?

Before I answer, let me go back to the basal ganglia, that part of the brain where recurring patterns are stored and repeated actions are remembered. It's the way we get from the room to the bathroom in the middle of the night. In fact, it's the way we drive two-ton vehicles on a ten foot (three meter) road at seventy miles per hour (112 km/h). Of course it was very different the first time you tried to walk a new path in the dark, wasn't it? Instead of finding the bathroom, you probably found the door with your forehead or the nightstand with your little toe!

You finally got so good at repeated actions that you could do them with your eyes closed. My favorite example? Michael Jordan shot a blindfolded free throw against the Denver Nuggets during the 1991 NBA season. If he did!

What does “What does all this have to do with brushing your teeth?”

In 1929, a toothpaste company called Pepsodent launched a marketing campaign that would transform the habits of the nation. Within a few years, more than half the population of the United States was brushing their teeth daily. But that represents one of the largest statistical changes in daily habits ever seen!

The mastermind behind that campaign was a publicist named Claude Hopkins, and the key was building momentum. While researching dental textbooks, along with the message, Hopkins created the wish. Pepsodent's secret ingredients were citric acid and a drop of peppermint oil. The chemical combination created a tingling sensation on the tongue that people associated with clean teeth. **The tingling sensation was the reward.**

“Remember the habit cycle—the three-step process whereby habits are formed?”

One, a prompt activates an automatic response.

Two, a pattern is put on repeat.

Three, a prize functions as a dangling carrot.

To create or break a habit, you have to identify the impulse, interrupt the pattern, and imagine the reward. Intentionally or not, Claude Hopkins managed to achieve all three steps with Pepsodent.”

“The tingling sensation produced by brushing teeth is only a hundred years old, but empowering the five senses in habit formation is as old as incense. Did you know that in the Bible there is a precise description for the preparation of incense? The devil is not in the details;

God yes. The question, of course, is why?

“Why did God give the priests precise directions for the incense tabernacle? For the same reason that companies spend millions of dollars creating a unique fragrance that will awaken your olfactory nerves. Can you say cinnamon roll? Sense activates salivation, even among the holiest of us! God accumulated habits: he used a unique fragrance to activate the memory of worship. And it was a regular routine as it is for us to brush our teeth.

Every morning, when Aaron prepares the lamps, he will burn aromatic incense on the altar, and also in the late afternoon, when he lights them. Future generations must always burn incense before the Lord.

“Every time people approached the place of worship, the aroma of incense evoked their memories of worship. The incense was the push, the call to worship. And that is the tip of the iceberg. It is the reason why they wore fringes called tzitzit. Those fringes were not what was fashionable. They were physical stimuli to help them remember the commandments. This is why they hung mezuzahs, a ritual reminder, on the front door.

Those are not just ancient rituals or silly superstitions. They are genius! God was helping his people to form habits. I eat? By creating impulses from daily habits. One of the best ways to create new impulses is to take advantage of bedtime. What is the last thing you do every day?

Instead of being on social media, close your eyes and confess your sins. Instead of counting sheep, count your blessings.

“There are many mysteries in the universe, but the biggest of all might be the four pounds of gray matter inside the human skull.

**It is there where memories are stored, where dreams are
conceived and where habits are formed.
It is there also where the Holy Spirit does his work best.**

Just as it hovers over all of creation, it also inhabits the trillions of synapses that intertwine in the cerebral cortex. Sanctify our amygdala with stimuli. It consecrates our basal ganglia with impulses.”

"Delight yourself in the Lord," said the psalmist, "and he will give you the desires of your heart." At the risk of oversimplifying something that is mystical, we could say that God alters our neurochemistry by conceiving new desires within us. Let's try to embody this idea.

HOW DO I MAKE A HABIT?

Stack the habit

If you want to interrupt the pattern, you have to experiment with different impulses. I eat? You can take advantage of your daily routines by accumulating habits. Habit stacking is associating hard-to-form habits with things we do normally and naturally. My office is located right above a coffee shop that we own and run. So I start my day with a small double espresso. Why? Holy Spirit + caffeine = extraordinary! Coffee is my go-to for my daily Bible reading plan. The payoff is caffeine, which, in my experience, makes Bible reading even better!

One key to building up your habits is to reverse engineer your daily routines and find ways to manage them.

Turn your commute into a class by listening to audiobooks. Instead of lying on the couch, exercise while watching TV. You can even take advantage of the time you spend in the bathroom. I eat? Have a book there! Anyone can read a book a month that way, and some of you have more potential than that.

Excerpt From

Do It For A Day: How to Create or Break Any Habit in 30 Days / Do It For A Day: How to Make or Break Any Habit in 3

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