'The Power of Habit' review: Neurological loops, cues and cravings: Understanding the habits that shape our lives

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By

THE POWER OF HABIT
Charles Duhigg
Random House
$28, 371 pages

"All of us are simply a bundle of habits," pastor Rick Warren teaches his congregants. He asks them to sign a "maturity covenant card" pledging to practice three good habits: a quiet time for reflection and prayer, tithing, and membership in a small group. When these habits become "a new self-identity," Warren promises that the church will provide support "and get out of your way."

People succeed, Charles Duhigg, an investigative reporter for The New York Times agrees, when they identify patterns that shape their lives -- and learn how to change them. In "The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business," Duhigg draws on the latest research in academic and applied psychology to examine the neurological loops that cause habits, the use of cues, cravings and rewards by manufacturers, retailers, football coaches, and addiction therapists to exploit or modify behavior, and the role of social habits in movements for political change.

"The Power of Habit" is, at times, rather facile. The term "habit" is a moving target in this book and Duhigg's treatment of individual habit formation and behavioral norms in the workplace and in society as analogous is questionable. Most importantly, he makes exchanging bad habits for good habits seem easy.
Once you understand the nature and function of habits, he writes, "you have the freedom -- and the responsibility -- to remake them." The "most addicted alcoholics can become sober. The most dysfunctional companies can transform themselves. A high school dropout can become a successful manager." In a footnote Duhigg acknowledges that "though the process of habit change is easily described, it does not necessarily follow that it is easily accomplished."

Nonetheless, "The Power of Habit" is chock-full of interesting and arresting information. Pepsodent, Duhigg reveals, contains citric acid and mint oil to generate a cool, tingling sensation that customers come to associate with cleanliness -- and to crave.

Based on buying habits, Target can tell who is pregnant and what trimester they're in. When people enter grocery stores, researchers have discovered, they invariably turn right. So that's where the most profitable products are displayed. And retailers put fruits and vegetables at the front of stores because shoppers with healthy produce in their carts are much more likely to load up on junk food before they check out.

Duhigg includes practical advice as well. It's easier to change a habit while you're on vacation, he suggests, because your routine is different. And he tells the story of a nail-biter who learned to put her hands in her pockets when she felt tension in her fingertips -- and to rap her knuckles on a desk to get the quick physical stimulation she craved.

The cues and rewards remain the same, Duhigg concludes. Only the routine has changed.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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