

PAY ATTENTION TO AWARENESS

Mateusz Banaszekiewicz, from the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, talks about the effects of thinking and acting automatically, and how to fight destructive habits.

ACADEMIA: *Consuetudo altera natura est*, or habit is man's second nature, as the proverb says. How does psychology define a "habit"?

MATEUSZ BANASZEKIEWICZ: As a behavior that is triggered by various situations, surroundings, or specific stimuli. Of course humans have some imprinted reactions that are triggered by the autonomic nervous system, such as stress. But when it comes to habits, these we create ourselves, and for the most part we do it unconsciously.





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Why do we do so?

It helps our brains use as little energy and cognitive resources as possible. For example, in situations where quick decisions are needed, the brain can work quickly and automatically.

Does it make many decisions during the course of the day?

A study by Wood, Quinn and Kasha (2002), in which respondents recorded in dairies what they did, thought and felt every hour over a specific number of days, showed that about 45% of their actions were habitual responses.

What is the difference between a habit and an addiction?

Habits and addictions are formed by the same brain structures, including the basal nuclei. A habit is a pattern formed through regular repetition until our brain begins to perform the activity automatically. Addic-

tion involves a compulsive need, which when unfulfilled leads to strong negative psychological and/or physiological reactions. Habits, in contrast to addiction, can be beneficial.

Another example is someone who develops a habit of drinking a sweet beverage every time they feel sad as it “comforts” them, while in fact it is only temporarily distracting them from feeling bad. Only after spending the money and having that sweet drink will they probably realize they are feeling lousy because they have drunk too much sugar and their behavior does not support their long-term goal of staying healthy.

Is this type of human behavior taken advantage of in marketing, for example?

Of course. Manufacturers use various methods to get us to behave a certain way. Shopping malls are filled with all kinds of pleasant fragrances, such as fresh rolls, precisely because they stimulate habitual behavior: if we smell something sweet, we believe that eating this product will result in a very pleasant sensation that occurs when the body receives sugar.

The desire for this sensation triggers a more or less automatic response to buy. In addition, even if we do realize this is a trap, we can rationalize it by thinking that, after all, we deserve a special treat after a difficult day.

Sugar is unhealthy. How do we fight such a harmful habit?

Perhaps by trying to change it into a good habit. At first, instead of a sugary beverage, have a glass of fruit juice, and eventually replace it with water. Conscious healthy behaviors can also become habitual, as long as you repeat them. When a person who does not brush or floss his teeth finally decides to do so, after a certain number of repetitions he or she no longer feels that these activities require much conscious thought or effort – they are simply creating a new habit.

If it were so simple, there would be no obese people.

Aside from people who are struggling with obesity because of illness, it does work for most others. You can create new habits, such as exercising regularly, but life offers so many possibilities that we often have to choose between opposing goals. For example, although losing weight might be an important goal for someone, despite having designated days for exercising after work, sometimes additional factors such

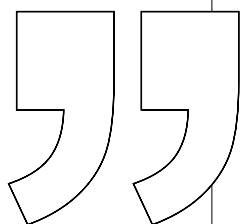
Habits help the human brain to use as little energy as possible in order to react automatically to situations requiring quick decisions.

tion involves a compulsive need, which when unfulfilled leads to strong negative psychological and/or physiological reactions. Habits, in contrast to addiction, can be beneficial.

In a sense, addiction can be thought of as the extreme form of a habitual reaction, which at some stage involves loss of control.

Should we then consider habits friends or enemies?

In many cases they are our friends. Thanks to them, if we see our child running into the street we can react by quickly grabbing the child by the hand and preventing a potential accident, even before our brain’s conscious control mechanism kicks in. But at the same time habits, once they are established, can kick in even when their effect is not beneficial and inconsistent with our long-term goals. Since habits develop when a particular behavior is rewarded, the brain creates a connection between stimuli, specific behavior and reward, causing an automatic reaction. For example, someone drinks



HABITUAL BEHAVIOR

as fatigue or bad mood will make that person tend to choose a different reaction, such as going to the movies where they will buy a sugary drink and salted popcorn. Here, however, the ability to monitor your own needs and emotions and to tolerate internal discomfort is very useful, as they make it easier to make a conscious decision that will have beneficial consequences in the long run, instead of an automatic decision that only serves to reduce tension, like lighting up a cigarette, for example.

So, first you need to recognize the conflict, and then, despite it making you feel uncomfortable at the moment, choose an action that will in the long run help you achieve your goals.

But how do we build such self-discipline?

One way is to take an eight-week mindfulness course, where you can learn how to pay attention to what you are doing and what is happening to you. It helps train your awareness of situations in which you feel like doing something that goes against your values and goals, such as smoking a cigarette. Mindfulness teaches us to really accept the fact that discomfort is part of life, and that despite it we can still consciously make better choices.

We are talking about individual cases, but what about habitual behaviors in social situations or stereotypes?

They also involve automatic responses. For example, in some people the thought of people of different skin color or nationality triggers a whole avalanche of negative associations. In the best case scenario it leads to avoidance, in the worst to violence. One way to help change this reaction is gradual contact with the object of prejudice. It gives you the opportunity to change the pattern. Unfortunately, stereotypes are quite resistant to change. Another way of dealing with them is to look for common ground. When we organize various types of integration events at the SWPS, we create situations in which people of different cultural backgrounds take part in intellectual or physical activities that bring them closer together. Last month, students asked me to help them get mats for group yoga sessions.

When we leave the house we turn off the lights, check that we have turned off the coffee maker and iron. But later many people have nagging thoughts that make them wonder if they did in fact take care of everything. Why does that happen?

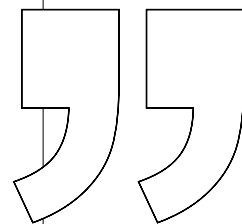
Because in this case these habits have become so automated that we do not register these actions at all, or we think about something else while doing them, which is why later we can't remember if we did in fact do them or not.

To avoid such situations we need to find a balance between doing some things automatically, while paying attention to certain aspects of these actions.

When I observe people gaping at their phones on the street, I have a feeling that not only are they not paying attention to what they're doing, but they're not even aware of the reality around them.

The brain has a certain protective system, so even if we are automatically checking our phone while walking down the street, certain factors will trigger different reactions, such as squealing tires or approaching the road. Unfortunately, it may happen that a person will be so focused on another activity that the one happening automatically will have negative consequences. There is nothing wrong with occasionally looking at the phone to check if anything important has happened, but the problem starts when we do it all the time. And this is not dif-

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icult. If we don't learn how to deal with such automatic response, after a while every time the phone lights up for any reason it will cause us to react in an overly excited manner. And this is another problem as people often confuse this state of arousal with pleasure. Usually, however, it is a decreasing level of stress resulting from FOMO, the fear of missing out on something. Again, one way to deal with this is to monitor your mood at every stage. Do I feel pleasure when I check Facebook because I am doing something for myself? Or am I doing it automatically despite being tired and without a reason to do so? This can help you can gain more control over your behavior. It's a bit like at the metro station when you feel bumps under your feet near the edge of the platform that are there for blind or vision impaired people. This is a sign to look up from the phone. We need such stimuli in our own heads to turn on our awareness, to pay attention and be careful.

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