

How Long Does it Take to Form Good Habits?

There is a worldview emerging that suggests human destiny is preordained.

Free will is dead, [declared](#) The Atlantic last summer, since “...all human behavior can be explained through the clockwork laws of cause and effect.”

Humans are mere amoebae. In this Neo-Predestination philosophy, we're bound not by Providence or Fate, but our brain chemistry and macro socio-economic forces beyond our control.

I've always found this worldview troubling and flawed: troubling because it denies us freedom and control over our fate; flawed because it ignores the thousands of conscious decisions we make every single day.

Give me Aristotle, who posited that “the good of man is a working of the soul in the way of excellence in a complete life...”

His is a view that suggests man is primarily defined not by his environment, but his rituals.

“We are what we repeatedly do,” said Will Durant, paraphrasing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book II, 4; Book I, 7). “Excellence...is not an act, but a habit.”

Still, forming habits is hard. How hard?

Jeremy Dean, an author and psychologist, asked this very question. Or, rather, he asked just how long it takes to form a new habit. He found a University College of London study involving 96 participants who were asked to choose a daily behavior to turn into a habit. Over 84 days, each participant

logged in and reported whether or not they performed their habit, rating how automatic it felt. ('Automaticity' is a key component of any habit, Dean writes.)

So what did the study ultimately find? Per Dean's book [Making Habits, Breaking Habits](#):

The simple answer is that, on average, across the participants who provided enough data, it took 66 days until a habit was formed. As you might imagine, there was considerable variation in how long habits took to form depending on what people tried to do. People who resolved to drink a glass of water after breakfast were up to maximum automaticity after about 20 days, while those trying to eat a piece of fruit with lunch took at least twice as long to turn it into a habit. The exercise habit proved most tricky with '50 sit-ups after morning coffee,' still not a habit after 84 days for one participant. 'Walking for 10 minutes after breakfast,' though, was turned into a habit after 50 days for another participant. ...

Indeed, overall, the researchers were surprised by how slowly habits seemed to form. Although the study only covered 84 days, by extrapolating the curves, it turned out that some of the habits could have taken around 254 days to form – the better part of a year! What this research suggests is that 21 days to form a habit is probably right, as long as all you want to do is drink a glass of water after breakfast. Anything harder is likely to take longer to become a really strong habit, and, in the case of some activities, much longer."

Clearly, good habits don't come easily. In the beginning, they take conscious effort and discipline. But it can be done.

Admittedly, some environments are more conducive to habit forming than others; some might even argue that some individuals are more or less predisposed to forming habits

than others because of their brain chemistry. But neither of these premises would alter the fact that people can profoundly change themselves through the cultivation of good habits.

This Aristotelian idea is one I believe to be not just true, but good. Think about it for a moment: Few of us can fundamentally change the world in which we live. But man always has the power to change himself.

It's an incredibly empowering idea, far more empowering than the sad notion that free will is an illusion.

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