

DEVELOPING THE WRITING HABIT

By Lin Stepp

Often in the beginning of a New Year, people decide that this is the season in which they're going to change a bad habit and start a new path. They plan to quit smoking, lose weight, exercise regularly, make more sales in their business ... or write more. Some people form these goals enthusiastically in January but fizzle out on them by the end of February. Why? Because creating and developing new habits is HARD!!!

Human beings are strong creatures of habit. All habits in human beings are learned versus inherent. Partly because of this, new habits are hard to create, and old habits are difficult to leave behind. Habits are the routines of behavior that people have repeated - and repeated - on a regular basis for so long that they have now become natural tendencies. People do them instinctively without conscious thought. Habits develop as people complete an action enough times until neurons in the brain actually create a pathway that enables neural messages to move quickly to the brain, and mind, when a trigger point is initiated. For example, if a person consistently eats while watching television - then, over time, the turning on of the television will actually begin to trigger the desire to eat.

Habits can be good or bad. Good habits keep our lives in order – and these positive habits are never the types of behavior people worry about changing. It's the bad ones that are a concern or the unconscious actions that keep us from developing more effective habits in some area. Ellen Langer has written extensively on the contrast between Habit and Mindfulness. She defines habit as the mindless, unconscious, automatic behavior that directs and controls individual actions. In contrast, she suggests that Mindfulness is a positive, conscious state in which individuals look for negative, unproductive patterns in their daily actions and then mindfully work to change them into more positive ones.

All habits form little-by-little, becoming strengthened over time within the lifestyle – both good habits and bad habits. Habits don't happen overnight, and they don't become entrenched and instinctual overnight. Alcoholism develops slowly and insidiously – as do many negative and destructive habits. Whenever individuals want to make a major change in the set, established patterns of their daily habits – they can expect a “flesh war” and a “mental battle.” Usually, existing negative behavioral habits will have to yield to new more positive ones. And they never want to leave.

Change is seldom easy – and changing habits is particularly hard. Research studies maintain different points of view on how long it takes to create a new habit. One study suggested that it takes 21 days for an “every day change habit” to start creating new neural pathways. Another study said it takes three to six weeks to develop a new habit – depending on the individual's commitment to change. Still a third study reported that it takes three months for a new habit to become fully established in the lifestyle. Ouch. That means anyone trying to create a new habit is in for a l-o-n-g struggle before a new behavioral pattern feels like the “norm.” Dr. Stephanie Burns wrote that it takes serious, conscious energy (or work) to remember and motivate a new action. Creating a habit relies on time, patience, reflection, and repetitive actions.

Writing is a learned and cultivated habit. Individuals have either developed the habit of writing or they have not. Productive writers “write” in a habitual, regular pattern. If several chapters of writing are not produced each week – or if an equivalent number of hours are not being given to the research, plotting, or editing that are a part of the writing process - then good writing habits are not in place. There could be some legitimate reasons why the writing falls off for a short season – due to life stressors like a serious illness, family calamity, or death – but then the writing habit should be quickly reestablished. The longer an individual waits to resume an ordered schedule of writing, the harder will be the battle to return to good, regular habits. Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, the famous author of the book *Flow*, stressed that positive, habitual habits in a creative area are essential to experiencing the state of flow that creative people so hope to have in their work life. Without regular writing habits, the joy of flow will seldom occur.

Most all writers yearn to create better and more disciplined writing habits. Lara Shulman wrote: “when we say we can’t change a habit, what we are really saying is that we don’t have a big enough reason why we should.” So, what to do? Well, fortunately, many experts have come up with steps and tips to help people as they try to develop new habit patterns. Here is a list of those that may help to initiate better writing habits:

1. Identify the specific habit desired. Write it down to give focus.
2. Define the positive goals and outcomes that might be attained in being successful with this new habit. This is important and motivational.
3. Create a schedule and plan for developing the new habit. Write the time-plan for the new habit on a wall calendar or daily planner. Check it daily to track progress.
4. Discover willpower. Keep on task. Write down motivational ideas to strengthen the desire to succeed. Try affirmations or reminders and read encouraging literature.
5. Realize it takes appx 3-6 weeks to begin establishing a positive, new habit. Recognize that work and effort will be needed to combat alternate negative habits that conflict.
6. Honestly examine the consequences to the future if new habits are not formed – and if old negative habits are not changed.
7. Plan personal rewards at the end of each week when incremental goals are successfully met and when progress is made in establishing new habit patterns.
8. Know that no one can change personal habits from positive to negative except the individual. Ultimately, initiating and developing new habits begins from within – and is accomplished one step at a time – with only minimal encouragement from others. The only real way to be certain to fail is to fail to initiate the first action.

In closing, here are some great quotes about Habit:

“Successful people are simply those with successful habits.” – Brian Tracy

“Ninety-one percent of failures come from people who have the habit of making excuses.” – George Washington Carver

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” – Aristotle

“Habit is more powerful than will.” – Irwin Greenburg

“Make good habits and they will make you.” - unknown