Ep #24: 3 Steps to Changing Habits when Under Stress

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With Your Host

Nicole Symcox

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So, when we make changes, the brain wants to see an immediate outcome so it can decide if it wants to keep doing the thing, if it's safe to do the thing, and if it's beneficial. But as we all know, change doesn't happen overnight, and many times, changing habits requires perseverance and commitment to the process before we start seeing rewards.

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Here's your host, educator, coach and licensed psychotherapist, Nicole Symcox...

Hey, hey, everyone. Welcome to episode 24. Today, we are talking about how to train your brain for new habits. So, let's get real right off the bat. Habits are hard to break. We all know this. We're all frustrated by this.

We want habits that support our goals and our emotional wellbeing. But creating those habits can be really tough. We end up going up against all of this mental and emotional resistance to creating new habits. And this largely has to do with how hard the brain has to work at creating new systems that will implement a new habit.

But it also has to do with how we are wired with a need for reward, okay. So, when we make changes, the brain wants to see an immediate outcome so it can decide if it wants to keep doing the thing, if it's safe to do the thing, and if it's beneficial. But as we all know, change doesn't happen overnight. And many times, changing habits requires perseverance and commitment to the process before we start seeing rewards.

So, today, we are going to be diving into what this reward-based learning system is ad how to make it work for you so you so you can change your

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habits even when you're stressed out. Because here's the reality; when we are stressed out, it is incredibly challenging to change habits. Stress triggers all of our survival mechanisms, and it's going to be hard to be focused on a future-based reward or a future-based goal, like a lot of times we're working towards something because we have a perceived reward that will happen if we stick to our goal.

But when our bodies and our minds are overwhelmed with concerns having to do with today, adding something future-based when your present is currently overwhelming and stressful is going to present its own set of challenges. The brain is going to be like, "Why do I care about something that is six weeks in the future when right now in my present I have a problem?" right, like if we were going to narrate the brain.

So, when you're stressed, you are always going to reach for that easy, simple solution. Whatever's going to make you feel better in the now is likely what you're to reach for rather than postponing it until later. And, unfortunately, most of us want things that aren't necessarily healthy or supportive to our future selves, right?

Like, in the moment we just want what we want because it ends whatever problem or stress response we are having. We tend to reach for the sugar that gets us off our healthy eating regimens or we call the ex-boyfriend that we know is going to, you know, treat us like shit, but at least we don't feel lonely when we're with him.

We start to make impulsive decisions under stress and so we want to take a step back so we don't fall victim to these patterns, right? Because what ends up happening is, every time we give in, a conflict starts. Like, we start to get really frustrated and then we have a frustration cycle that starts to take root. And then, once we start to feel like a failure, then we lose perspective.

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It's kind of like, "Why do I even want to work towards this future goal or this future thing or change this habit? It's too freaking hard. And why do I even care? I feel like a failure when I do it, so I'm just going to give up." So we end up blaming and shaming and blaming ourselves for not having enough self-control or care for ourselves in that moment.

And then it just makes the cycle worse because now we're adding more stress to our already stressed-out nervous system because we've made meaning out of our perceived failure, that we are not good enough, or we don't have enough self-control, which makes us… fill in the blank with another negative story you want to put in there, because I'm sure it's some kind of ugly meaning about yourself.

So, let's do this another way. Let's stop all this shit and make some changes, okay. Let's change the story on how we do habits so that we can feel successful in the moment and persevere onto our future-self goals. So, let's break down how this works.

So, simply put a reward-based learning, this idea around reward-based learning involves a trigger. So, for example, hunger, which is followed by a behavior, eating food, and then a reward which would be feeling full. So, very, very simple.

It's three components; trigger, behavior, and reward. It shows up every time we eat a brownie, every time we check social media, every time we engage in a relationship where this is showing up for us. And so, each time we reach out for something to soothe ourselves, we are reinforcing this learning to the point it becomes automatic. This is partially how habits can get formed.

So, why is changing them so hard when you're stressed out? When we're stressed out, self-control is like out the window. It's one of the first things to go offline for the brain, largely because the networks associated with self-

control are in the prefrontal cortex and it is the first thing to go offline when the brain is triggered by stress.

So we've all experienced this to some degree, like yelling at somebody we didn't mean to or losing our temper or eating the thing we shouldn't have been eating or whatever it is. We kind of start diving into these impulsive behaviors because we're s stressed out and overwhelmed that we're losing touch with some of our ability to have self-control.

So, I hope that helps to kind of normalize for you that there is a whole survival-based wiring that is going on that also links to habits, right? It's not about just shaming or blaming ourselves to the point of having more self-control. It's just not that simple.

I mean, it's a nice idea that it could be fixed that easily, but it takes quite a bit more strategy than that because when you're stressed out, and if you have PTSD or anxiety, your system is already completely stressed out just by the nature of what those disorders create in your nervous system. So, if you want to change habits, we need to go about it another way.

We can't get stuck in the self-defeating shaming and blaming cycle because it will only perpetuate feeling bad about ourselves, which will lead to more stress, which will lead to less self-control, and it will lead us to more impulsive behaviors, and thus continuing bad habits. Do you see how this makes a nice little fucked up circle?

Okay, so let's bring on the good news; how do we change this? So, let's talk about three ways that you can start changing your habits. Okay, number one, you want to map out your habit loops. So, B.F. Skinner is one of psychology's OGs in behavior. He's one of the originators. And he was observing that reward-based learning is based on rewards, not necessarily behaviors.

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So, in other words, if we are rewarded for a behavior, we are more likely to do the thing again and put it on repeat. At its primal level, the brain chases rewards, okay. So, this is why anything that produces a dopamine hit – that is your reward center in your brain – it has the potential to create an addiction because the brain likes being rewarded for actions.

And so, if we can flip the script, if we can flip this on its head and make it work for us, how much easier do you think habits are going to be to change? If we use this reward-based learning system, flip it on its head, use it to our advantage, like if our brains are already doing this, the hope in that is that you can implement and change habits in a much easier way.

So, for example, we used the example of loneliness earlier. So, for example, we may feel lonely. So, then we call the ex-boyfriend who we know isn't good for us. The result of that is we don't feel lonely anymore, right, when we're with him.

And so, when we're using this kind of reward-based learning system theory, the result of that is we're like, "Cool, problem solved. Loneliness, call guy, not lonely anymore, simple, fixed." And then that pattern repeats because the reward in that is, "Problem… Solved."

But it's not taking into account that you feel like shit afterwards. And now you have a new problem to deal with after that, which are all your emotions that are going to be tied to making a bad decision. So, we want to map out the lonely as the trigger and we want to get ahead of it.

Give the brain a new solution to act on. Instead of impulsively calling your ex, what else can you do that will alleviate the feeling of lonely in that moment that is also going to be healthy for you? Pick a reward that is going to support your goals.

And to be honest, sometimes, if you have a trauma history in this, you may need some supportive therapy work first before you can fully implement

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changing habits. So, I just want to put some realities around that. Trauma can complicate this.

So, if you're running into trouble with changing habits and some of that feels like it might be linked to your past or a trauma story, definitely seek out mental health support and kind of work through what's coming up for you. But my hope is that this kind of breaks down, like, how this system works and how you can interject a new habit loop.

So, number two is you want to link up your actions to outcomes. So, everything we do produces an outcome. So, take a moment to be mindful and in the moment when you take an action and notice the results of that action. It gives the brain a chance to actually see what's going on rather than jumping into autopilot and falling victim to old habits.

To disrupt habits, you have to first observe and see what's happening and notice the results you're getting from it and create something else to put in its place so you can get a new result. You can't fix something if you don't know it's broke. Like, sometimes we have to take a second to look at our actions and look at how we may be accidentally enforcing a negative habit.

Okay, so, the last one is find a better way to reward yourself, okay. So, again, a lot of times we're rewarding ourselves, we don't even know we're doing it. So, you need to slow down. Sometimes rewards aren't always, as I said earlier, they're not always – the brownie, the cookie – they're not always obvious.

Sometimes, a reward is perceived as, "Oh I fixed this problem." Or there's some other emotional benefit. There's also this thing called secondary gains. Like, sometimes we do something because we get something out of it.

So, you need to be open and curious, what am I getting out of this? What is the reward? And again, the reward may not be healthy. So, you want to

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take it from an observation level; healthy, unhealthy. But what is the reward that is driving this habit to stay in place?

And so, start keeping a journal, start keeping track of it, start writing this stuff down because once you can sort of start to strategize, "Can I come up with a new reward? What can I do instead of calling my ex that will also fix my loneliness?"

So, once you're figuring out, like going back to that example, what can I put in its place? Because calling my ex makes me feel like shit for weeks, so that's not a good solution. But when I feel lonely, I need a plan. What can I do? Who can I call? What action can I take? What do I need to do for myself in that moment?

And that's the key to it. Rewards have to be moment-focused. Rewards cannot be 10 weeks down the road because when you're overwhelmed, stressed out, and anxious and your brain is perceiving a problem, it's going to want a solution as quickly as possible. And so, when we arm ourselves with new opportunities for a different reward, we're not so caught off-guard. We're more empowered to make a different decision.

Alright, my friends, this was a little bit of a dense episode. I hope this was helpful to you in kind of introducing this idea of reward-based learning when it comes to habits and how you can really use this to your advantage if you do it right.

So, at any rate, that's a wrap. I hope this was helpful. And as always, if strong emotions came up for you, take it as information that something in your internal world needs support. There is never shame and blame in getting mental health support from a therapist, doctor, whoever in your local state of residence. It's probably the best thing you can do for yourself.

And, if you enjoyed today's episode and you never want to miss when a new one drops, make sure you're on my email list and we will send you the

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details every week. Alright, my friends, I am rooting for you. Have a great week.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Mental Health Remix. If you like what you've heard and want to learn more, go to nicolesymcox.com.