



Behavior change:  
Changing Our  
Habits

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We Thrive Together

# How we form Habits

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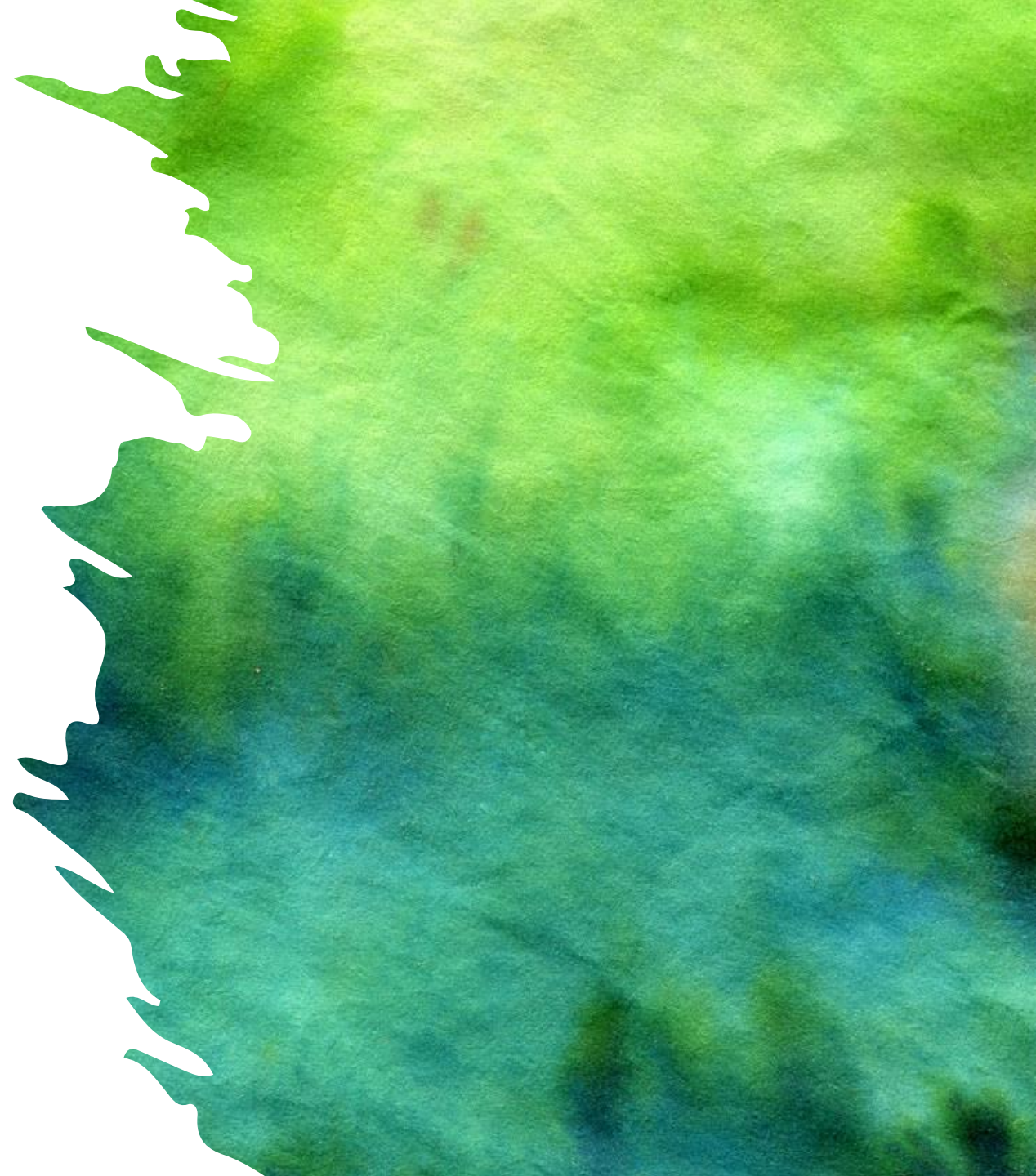
Habits can arise through repetition. They are a normal part of life, and are often helpful. We wake up every morning, shower, comb our hair or brush our teeth without thinking about it. We can drive along familiar routes on mental auto-pilot without paying much attention to the directions. When behaviors become automatic, it gives us an advantage, because the brain does not have to use conscious thought to perform the activity. This frees up our brains to focus on different things.



# Habits

Habits can also develop when good or enjoyable events trigger the brain's "reward" centers. This can set up potentially harmful routines, such as overeating, smoking, drug or alcohol abuse, gambling and even compulsive use of computers and social media.

The general machinery by which we build both kinds of habits are the same, whether it's a habit for overeating or a habit for getting to work without really thinking about the details. Both types of habits are based on the same types of brain mechanisms.



# The difference between bad and good habits

There's one important difference, and this difference makes the pleasure-based habits so much harder to break. Enjoyable behaviors can prompt your brain to release a chemical called **dopamine**. If you do something over and over, and dopamine is there when you're doing it, that strengthens the habit even more. When you're not doing those things, dopamine creates the craving to do it again. This explains why some people crave things, even if the thing no longer makes them feel particularly good once they take it.

In a sense, then, parts of our brains are working against us when we try to overcome bad habits. These routines can become hardwired in our brains. And the brain's reward centers keep us craving the things we're trying so hard to resist.

The good news is, humans are not simply creatures of habit. We have many more brain regions to help us do what's best for our health.





# The making of a habit

There are a few theories around how habits develop. The idea of the 3 Rs is one of the main ones:

- **Reminder.** This is a trigger, or cue, that could be a conscious behavior, such as flushing the toilet, or a feeling, such as nervousness.
- **Routine.** This is the behavior associated with the trigger. Flushing the toilet cues you to wash your hands, while feeling nervous triggers biting your nails. Doing something over and over can make the behavior routine.
- **Reward.** The reward associated with a behavior also helps make a habit stick. If you do something that causes enjoyment or relieves distress, the pleasurable release of [dopamine](#) in your brain can make you want to do it again.



# Self-Control

Humans are much better than any other animal at changing and orienting our behavior toward long-term goals, or long-term benefits.

Studies on self-control and willpower indicate that self-control is like a muscle. Once you've exerted some self-control, like a muscle it gets tired.

You can improve your self-control by doing exercises over time. Any regular act of self-control will gradually exercise your 'muscle' and make you stronger.

# Identify your triggers

- Remember, triggers are the first step in developing a habit. Identifying the triggers behind your habitual behaviors is the first step in moving past them.
- Spend a few days tracking your habit to see whether it follows any patterns.
- Note things like:
  - Where does the habitual behavior happen?
  - What time of day?
  - How do you feel when it happens?
  - Are other people involved?
  - Does it happen right after something else?

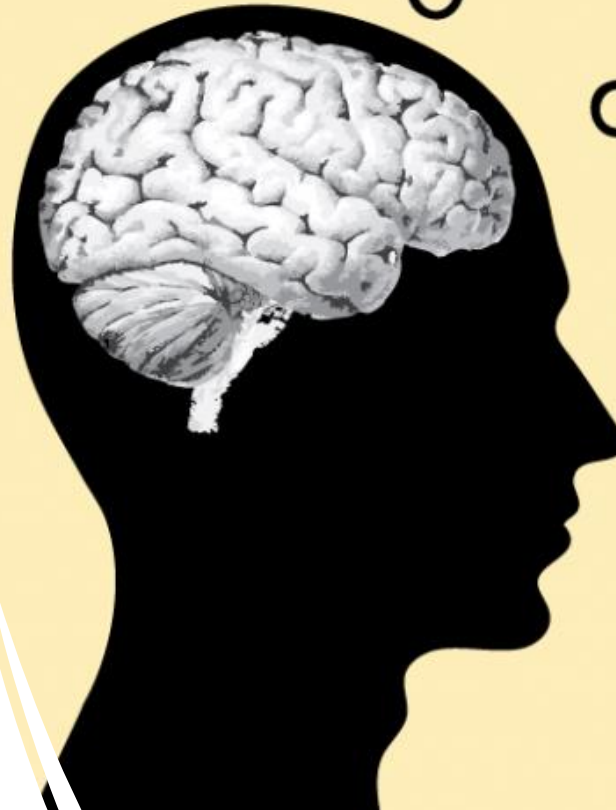
### **Avoid tempting situations**

If you always stop for a donut on your way to work, try a different route. Keep fatty foods, cigarettes, alcohol and other tempting items out of your home.

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**Replace unhealthy behaviors with healthy ones.**

Try exercise, a favorite hobby or spending time with family.



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## Prepare mentally

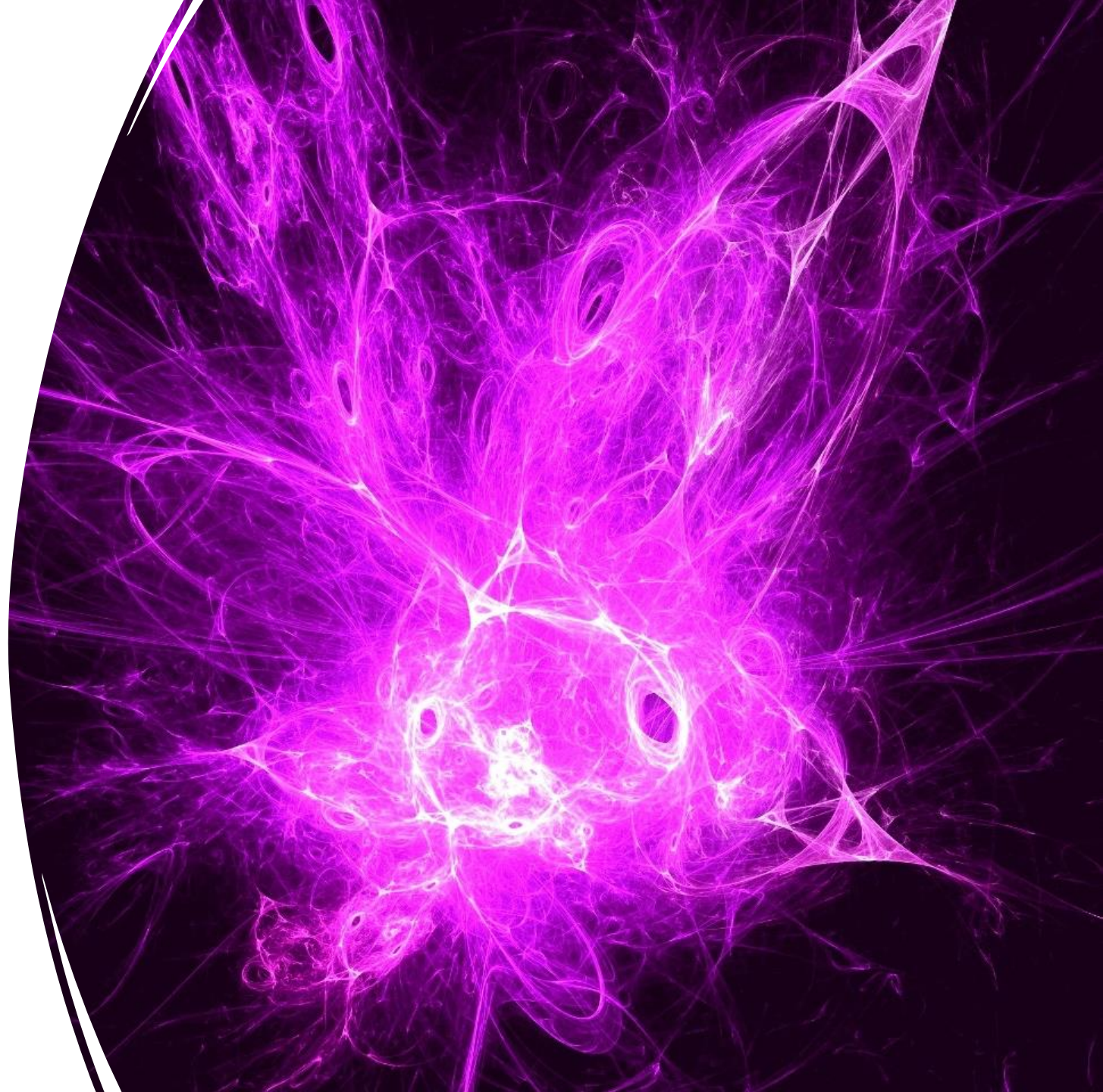
If you can't avoid a tempting situation, prepare yourself in advance. Think about how you want to handle it and mentally practice what you plan.



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## **Enlist support**

Ask friends, family and co-workers to support your efforts to change.



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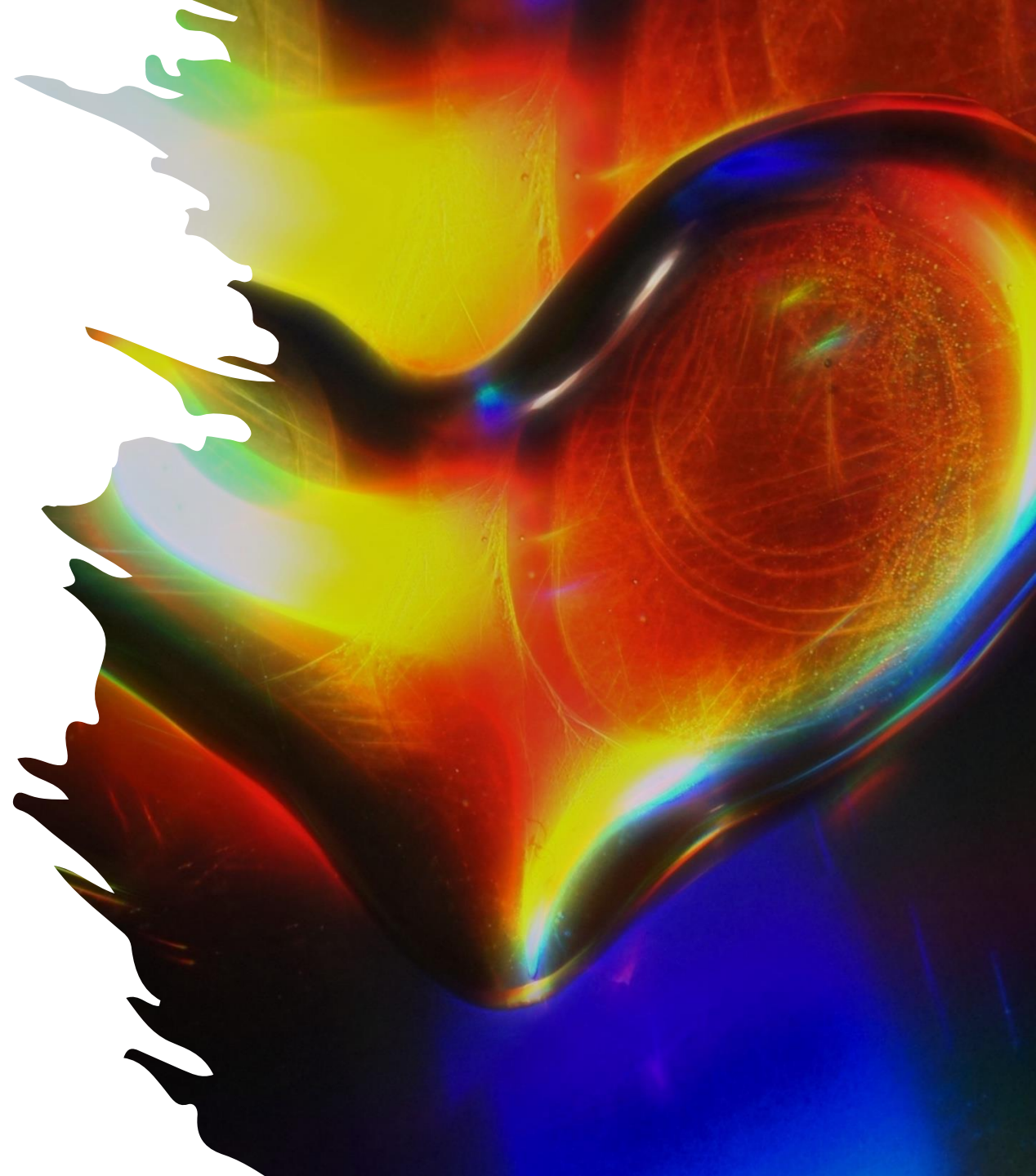
**Reward yourself for small steps**  
Give yourself a healthy treat when you've achieved a small goal or milestone.



# How to Create Healthy Habits

Any resolution to change needs to include small goals that are definable and accompanied by a solid plan on how you'll get to that goal.

- For instance, a resolution to lose 30 pounds may seem overwhelming. Instead, try setting smaller goals of losing 5 pounds a month for 6 months. Think baby steps rather than giant leaps.
- Next, develop an action plan. You might decide to walk a half hour each day to burn calories. You might stop buying vending machine snacks. Or you might limit and keep track of your daily calories. These are specific behaviors that could help you meet your larger goal of losing 30 pounds.



# Positive Benefits

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Think of exactly how the change will enhance your life. For instance, when you stop smoking, your risk plummets for cancer, heart disease, stroke and early death. Reducing stress might cut your risk for heart disease and help you fight off germs. Even small improvements in your physical activity, weight or nutrition may help reduce your risk for disease and lengthen your life. In one study, overweight or obese people who lost just 7% of their body weight slashed their risk for diabetes by nearly 60%. Keeping facts like this in mind can help you maintain your focus over the long haul.





## Social Support

Social support is also key. Research shows that people's health behaviors—like smoking or weight gain—tend to mirror those of their friends, family and spouses. You can enlist friends and family to help you eat better, to go on walks with you, to remind you to stay on track. Find things that are fun to do together, and you'll be more likely to stick with it.



## Self- Monitoring

- Self-monitoring or tracking seems to be critical for almost every sort of behavior change. That includes jotting down the foods you eat, keeping an exercise diary or making a record of your sleeping patterns.
- Monitoring yourself might feel like a burden, but it's one of the best predictors of successful change. Think about how you can make tracking more convenient, so it fits naturally into your life. For some people, that might be a pad of paper in a purse or pocket; for others, a mobile app or a computer program.



## Motivation

Make sure to have a plan to get back on track if you start to slip. If you feel that your motivation is waning, think back and remind yourself why the change was important to you in the first place. Maybe you wanted to have more stamina, feel better, to be able to play. Recalling these personal reasons can encourage you to get back on track.

The background of the slide is a complex, abstract pattern of thin, glowing purple and pink lines that resemble tangled fibers or a neural network. These lines are set against a dark, almost black background, creating a vibrant, textured effect. The lines vary in thickness and brightness, with some appearing as bright, almost white highlights where they intersect or are more densely packed.

# Habit Trivia

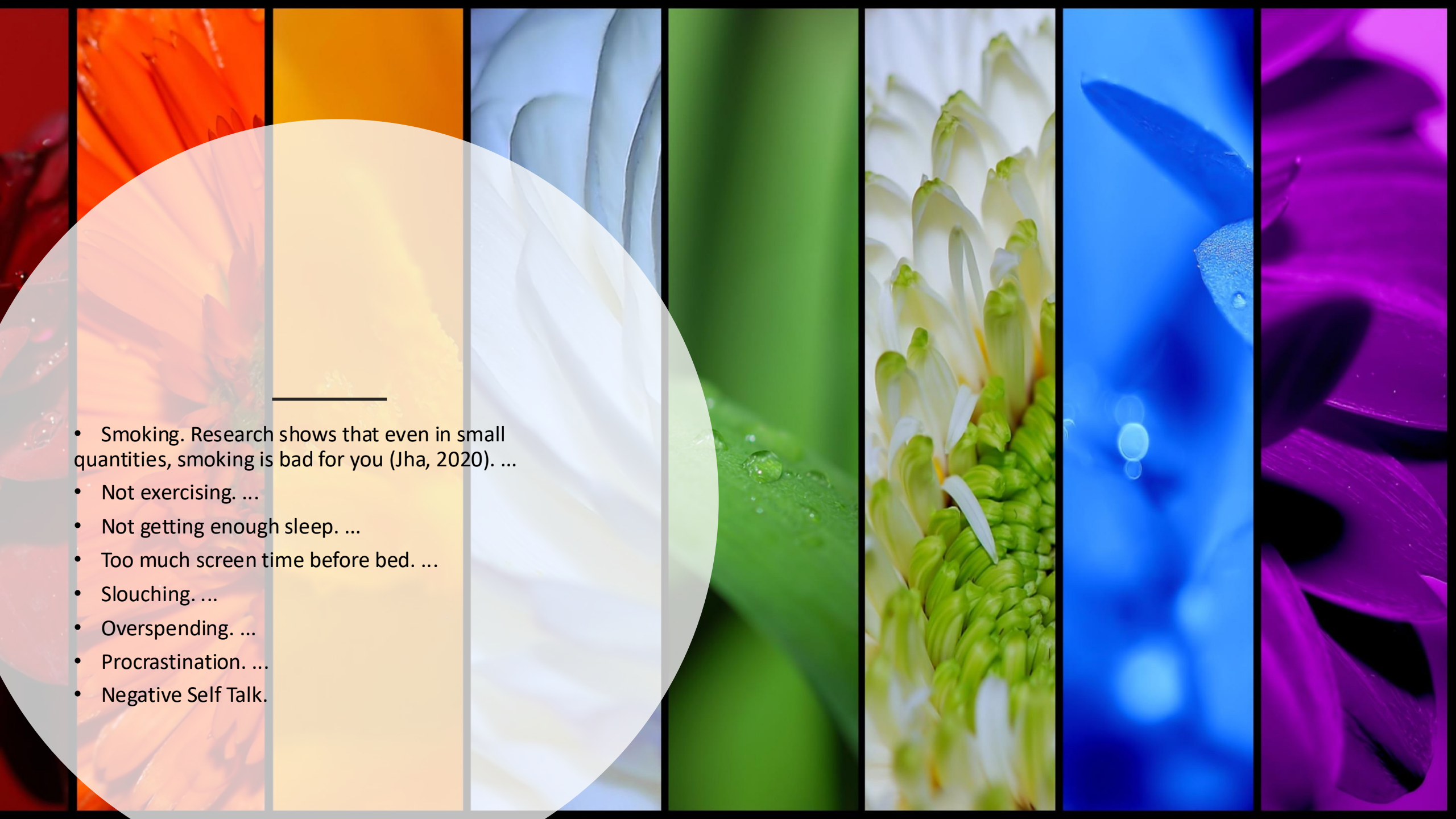
What percent of behavior is habit?



- Habits are involuntary behaviors controlled by the subconscious mind. How much of what we do is habitual? Studies by neurobiologists, cognitive psychologists, and others indicate that from **40 to 95 percent** of human behavior—how we think, what we say, and our overall actions—falls into the habit category

What are the most common bad habits?



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- Smoking. Research shows that even in small quantities, smoking is bad for you (Jha, 2020). ...
  - Not exercising. ...
  - Not getting enough sleep. ...
  - Too much screen time before bed. ...
  - Slouching. ...
  - Overspending. ...
  - Procrastination. ...
  - Negative Self Talk.

How Long does it take to form a habit?





On average, it takes more than 2 months before a new behavior becomes automatic — 66 days to be exact. And how long it takes a new habit to form can vary widely depending on the behavior, the person, and the circumstances. In Lally's study, it took anywhere from **18 days to 254 days** for people to form a new habit.