

WORKING THROUGH THE TRIGGERS OF ENSLAVING SIN

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"Don't judge what you see by what you see. Judge what you see by what the Bible says about what you see" (Dr. Bob Jones, Sr.).

COMMON VIEW OF ADDICTION (SOMEWHAT HELPFUL, BUT NOT COMPLETE).¹

1. "You can't extinguish a bad habit, you can only change it."²
2. "Keep the cue, provide the same reward, insert a new routine."
3. "When a habit emerges, the brain stops fully participating in decision making. It stops working so hard, or diverts focus to other tasks. So unless you decide to deliberately *fight* a habit—unless you find new routines—the pattern will unfold automatically."³
4. "Habits never really disappear. They are encoded into the structures of our brain, and that's a huge advantage for us. . . . The problem is that your brain can't tell the difference between bad and good habits, and so if you have a bad one, it's always lurking there, waiting for the right cues and rewards."⁴

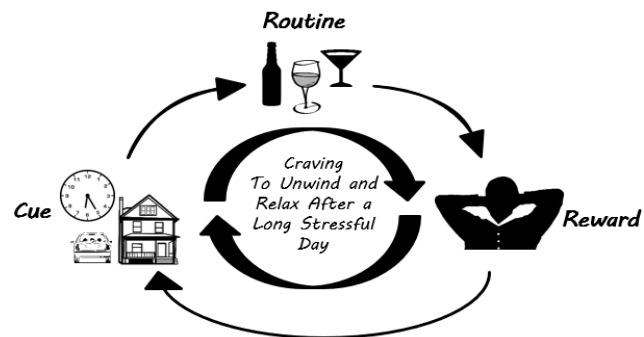


Figure 1-The Habit Loop

WHAT IS A TRIGGER?

1. Triggers (cues) are habituated *associations* that activate habituated *responses* (routines).
2. *Triggers are part of a habit.* A habit is a *learned* behavior that *feels* involuntary because of *repetition*. Habits are formed more quickly and are more stubborn when motivated by strong *desires/emotions*. Triggers tempt us to repeat a habit that gets us the *reward* we want—added pleasure (i.e., a high, altered mood, etc.) or avoidance of pain through self-medication, etc.
3. Triggers are often places, people, or situations that *remind* us of past pain or pleasure and that lead us down habitual response paths that *seem* impossible to resist.

¹ Modified drawing from *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg (Random House, 2012, 2014), 72.

² *Ibid.*, 63.

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*

WHAT IMPRINTS MEMORY IN THE BRAIN FOR HABIT FORMATION?

What aids deep learning?

1. *Repetition* imprints memory—"repetition (of an act or a thought) aids learning."
2. *Concentration* imprints memory—analyzing a traumatic event, anticipating a ritual for an indulgence, meditating upon a truth or a lie, focusing on a goal, deliberating a cause and effect, planning a strategy
3. *Strong emotion* imprints memory—fear, dread, terror, grief, sorrow, joy, satisfaction, sexual or drug-induced ecstasy, peace, etc.

UNDERSTANDING HABITS OF THE HEART

1. Every part of our soul/heart is designed to be habituated so that the pursuit of God and the pursuit of godliness become our manner of life. Study the actions and interactions of the various parts of the soul/heart in the diagram at the right.⁵

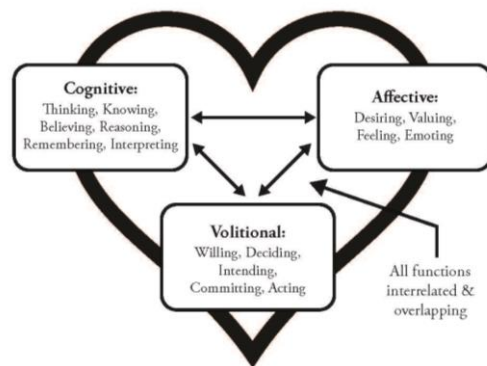
Notice the references to every part of the soul in Romans 6-8; James 1, 4. "How the heart actively responds to God determines how it responds to everything else."⁶

2. We develop either sinful or godly habits of thinking, habits of desiring, and habits of behavior depending upon which master we obey and how faithfully we obey that master (6:19-23).

"Every alcoholic is an individual, with individual beliefs, values, and commitments that are being expressed in the pursuit of alcohol. . . . [He] is looking to alcohol as a means of getting some perceived good without having to deal with God. When this pursuit is repeated, [it] becomes habitual, which means that the body shapes itself in the direction of the pursuit, reinforcing itself in an increasingly impenetrable cycle of addiction. This whole-person pursuit becomes so automated that the motivating beliefs [thoughts], desires [emotions], and commitments [choices] of a person fade into lesser and lesser consciousness. . . . This process of habituation occurs in all sorts of pursuits, whether they would graduate to the level of addiction or not."⁷

3. Overcoming addiction (life-dominating sin) involves change in very part of the heart/soul—not merely a change in behavior. The slave to sin must, as a slave to Christ, cultivate Christlikeness: the mind of Christ (righteous thoughts), the motivations of Christ (righteous desires), and the responses of Christ (righteous behaviors) through the process of sanctification.

The Dynamic Heart: Functions



⁵ Excerpted from *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* ©2016 by Jeremy Pierre. Used by permission of New Growth Press. May not be reproduced without prior written permission.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

Example of anger: “There is no generic anger. There is only a heart believing certain things, wanting certain things, choosing certain things—and anger is just his impassioned method of getting them.”⁸

4. The flesh will always fight against our attempts to replace sinful habits of the heart with godly habits of the heart. Thus, we are engaged in a war of the soul (1 Peter 2:11; 5:5-11).

KEY SANCTIFICATION COMPONENTS AND STRATEGIES (EPHESIANS 4:22-32)

Helping someone overcome life-dominating sins will involve strategies like those that follow. The complexity and entrenchment of the sinful habits will often require much time and may often necessitate the involvement of a team of people within the local church to provide the encouragement, structure, accountability, and fellowship, and to provide assistance in sorting through legal, relational, financial, marital, and parental responsibilities. The operative principle is, “When the normal things don’t seem to work, we don’t abandon the normal things. We intensify the normal things.”

The instructions below assume that you have already determined whether the individual is a true believer. If he is not, that must be your goal. The goal is not “sobriety.” A “recovering addict” can be sober and miserable. He can be sober and a thief. He can be sober and an adulterer. But he cannot be like Jesus and be a thief, an adulterer, or a person enslaved to any sin. The goal is transformation, not mere sobriety, though we rejoice with him and his family whenever someone stays “clean and sober.”

Put off the [ways of] the old man (v. 22). ASK GOD for help to . . .

1. Recognize sinful patterns of thinking, desiring/emoting, and behaving (Psalm 139:23-24).
 - Use a journal to note the times, places, patterns, and frequency of your failings. Identify those elements that facilitate your sinful habit and those that inhibit it.
 - Use the “donut” illustration to identify the scope of self-centeredness that corrupts every part of your life.
 - Be especially alert to God’s conviction of sin.
 - Be receptive to the confrontations of others who are trying to help you (Galatians 6:1).
2. Repent of your sin and sinful habits to restore your fellowship with God and to get His grace (Proverbs 28:13; Isaiah 55:6-7; 59:1-2; 1 Peter 5:5; 1 John 1:9). See the Appendix worksheet on “Repentance for Revival: Siding with God Against Yourself” for details.
 - Confess to God and ask forgiveness for both the sinful responses and the sinful desires that motivated them (James 4:1-6).
 - Confess to others whom you have wronged and ask forgiveness (Matthew 5:23-24; Acts 24:16)
3. “Radically amputate” influences that lead you back into your old ways (Matthew 5:27-30). This may include eliminating ungodly friends, entertainment options, social media outlets, and social gatherings, and filtering your electronic devices, etc.
4. Resist the temptation at its inception/cue/trigger.
 - Do something that breaks the habitual cycle (i.e., “STOP-THINK Cards,” turn off the computer, call your mentor/accountability partner, walk away from the conversation, etc.).

⁸ Pierre, 13.

- Merely resisting the temptation without being reconciled to God and asking His help will end in defeat. Sheer willpower will not work for the long haul. Without God as the reason and the enabler of your obedience, you will attempt to quit the bad habit (because of its negative consequences) for the same reason you started it in the first place—to please yourself.

Be renewed in the spirit of your mind (v. 23). ASK GOD for help to . . .

1. Recommit yourself immediately to Christ, submitting to His will and His ways (Isaiah 55) and asking for His grace and instruction from His Word.
2. Renew your mind in God's Word (Isaiah 55:8-11; Psalm 19:7-14; 119:9-11; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 4:16-18; 1 Timothy 4:15-16). *Especially ground yourself in the truths of the freedom Christ has already given you from the penalty and power of sin because you are "in Christ" (Romans 6) also understand the process of temptation outlined in James 1:14 (identify the lies and lusts behind your sin).*
 - Earnestly hear and do God's Word (Matthew 7:24-27; James 1:21-25).
 - Read, memorize, and study God's Word by yourself and with other believers. Listen to God's Word preached, and talk to others about what God is teaching you.
 - Spend time daily in earnest prayer for yourself and others.
 - Devote time to strategic reading of helpful Christian literature on discipleship and wise problem-solving.

Put on the [ways of] the new man (v. 24). ASK GOD for help to . . .

1. Restructure your life to develop new habits/patterns of thinking, desiring, and behaving.
 - You must develop new habits/patterns that will facilitate your spiritual growth and usefulness to Christ—church attendance, service to others, fellowship with godly believers.
2. Repeat your new patterns of life. You must practice and practice without giving up (Galatians 6:7-9).

All of this by God's grace for God's glory!

CONCLUSION

Mature believers are tempted to sin. Mature believers do sin. But mature believers are not dominated and enslaved by sin. The opposite of addiction and life-dominating sin is sanctification!

APPENDIX—REPENTANCE: SIDING WITH GOD AGAINST MYSELF

This worksheet will help you look at your sin and its effects through God’s eyes and through the eyes of those you have wronged. Key passages: Matthew 22:38-40; Revelation 3:19-20; Matthew 5:23-24

This exercise is especially crucial for leaders. If leaders want followers to be humble (i.e., admit their sins and take instruction), leaders must lead in humility by repenting of sin and taking instruction from God and from their spiritual leadership. Humility isn’t optional for the believer. Working through this exercise is also especially helpful for those who have seriously damaged relationships and trust through addiction with all of its deception and destruction.

- 1. Make a thorough list of your sins against God and against others (spouse, children, boss, etc.).** Pay special attention to *accusations* that they have made against you. These often reveal areas where they believe you have wronged them. List also sins God is convicting you about as you sincerely ask him to do a thorough “housecleaning” in your heart (Psalm 139:23-24).

Maintain a running list, and categorize the offenses under broader headings (i.e., sins of the tongue, sins of “lording it over others,” sins of dishonesty, sins of slander and gossip, sins of anger, sins of discontent and complaining, sins of neglect of God and His Word, etc.). Continue to add to the list as God convicts you further or as others bring up additional wrongs you have committed against them.

Make these lists detailed and explicit. You sinned against God and others with specific details. In 1 John 1:9, “confess” means “to state your offense in terms the wronged party would agree with”.

- 2. Find Scripture passages that show that your sin against others was more importantly a sin against God because you violated His Word** (Psalm 51). List references for each category of offense. Pray that God will expose your sin (Psalm 139:23-24) and compare yourself with the virtue lists and sermons of Jesus for God’s standards: Psalm 15; Matthew 5-7; 1 Corinthians 13:1-8; James 3:1-18; 2 Peter 1:1-15).
- 3. Consider and be able to describe the hurt that you caused God and others by your offenses.** Hurt is what others remember more than anything else about your offenses. Even if you don’t know the exact nature of the hurt, you must show that you have thought about the possibilities of what they must have felt and must have thought when you sinned against them (Romans 13:10; 2 Corinthians 5:13-15). Otherwise, they will have a hard time believing your sincerity when you ask forgiveness.
- 4. List the possible spiritual battles you made others face because you were not walking with God yourself.** Were your actions stumbling blocks in their lives? Were they tempted to sin in some way because you sinned against them (i.e., anger, bitterness, hatred, despair/hopelessness, acting out, isolation, self-medication, violence, etc.)? Matthew 18:6-10; Romans 14:7-8; 13b
- 5. Express godly sorrow to God over your sin and its effects upon Him (Isaiah 53). Be prepared to describe your grief at the hurt you have caused others (2 Corinthians 7:9-11) and grief at the spiritual battles you caused others to face when you sinned.** This is not a time to bring up the sins of the other person (i.e., “I was angry with you when you were disrespectful to me,” etc.). Rather, put the focus on your own sin (i.e., “God has convicted me that in that conversation we had yesterday, I was sinfully angry with you. Please forgive me,” etc.).
- 6. Repent of these matters before God.** Repentance means that you have changed your mind about how you acted (you no longer think it is ok, nor do you justify it) and have turned away from these sins with the intention never to repeat them again (Psalm 38, 51; Proverbs 28:13; Luke 15:11-21).

7. **Worship God and praise Him for His lovingkindness and tender mercies.** (Psalm 30, 32-34).
Growing in realization of the extent of God's forgiveness increases your love for and joy in God (Luke 7:36-50).
8. **Write out exactly what you are going to say to the one you offended and check it with your counselor before you seek forgiveness.** Wrongly handled, these confessions can bring more offence into the relationship. When writing out your confession, state the offence (i.e., "I was wrong when I..."), the passages you violated (i.e., "God has shown me that..."), your understanding of the hurt you caused (i.e., I'm quite sure that my sin made you feel..."), and your understanding of the possible spiritual battles you triggered for the other person (i.e., It's very likely that when I sinned against you, you were tempted to...), your grief over what you did to the person, and then ask forgiveness for the offense (i.e., "Will you forgive me for...?").
9. **Get help about how to make thorough, biblical change** (Romans 6:12-23; 2 Corinthians 7:8-11).

EXAMPLES

A. Sins of the tongue (gossip, cutting words, slander, boasting/arrogance, profanity, deception, etc.)

1. **I sinned against** John when I sarcastically cut him down by saying . . . (list actual words you used).
 - a. Scriptures violated:
 - b. Hurts caused:
 - c. Spiritual stumbling blocks created for others:
 - d. What grieves you about your sin:
 - e. Confession statement:

B. Sins of immorality (pornography, illicit sex, sexting, sexually suggestive touching and talk, etc.)

1. **I sinned against** my wife/my parents, when I indulged in pornography.
 - a. Scriptures violated:
 - b. Hurts caused:
 - c. Spiritual stumbling blocks created for others:
 - d. What grieves you about your sin:
 - e. Confession statement:

B. Sins of "lording it over" others (bullying, harshness, mistreatment/abusive, harassment, etc.)

1. **I sinned against** my children by treating them harshly and impatiently.
 - a. Scriptures violated:
 - b. Hurts caused:
 - c. Spiritual stumbling blocks created for others:
 - d. What grieves you about your sin:
 - e. Confession statement:

C. Sins of . . . (theft, anger/violence, laziness, greed, ambition, gluttony, excuse-making, blame-shifting, drunkenness, partiality, injustice, neglecting God's Word, lack of faithfulness in church attendance and service, etc.)