

How to change a habit, from *'The Power of Habit'*

- (extract) Charles Duhigg, (2012)

“For permanent change we need to identify the habit triggers or cues, and learn new routines (habits) that still provide the familiar reward / relief.”

“AA, in essence, is a giant machine for **changing habit loops**. And though the habits associated with alcoholism are extreme, the lessons AA provides demonstrate how almost any habit - even the most obstinate - can be changed.

Because of the programme's lack of rigour, academics and researchers have often criticised it. AA's emphasis on spirituality, some claimed, made it more like a cult than a treatment. In the past 15 years, however, a re-evaluation has begun. Researchers now say the programme's methods offer valuable lessons. Faculty at Harvard, Yale, the University of Chicago, the University of New Mexico, and dozens of other research centres have found a kind of science within AA... their findings endorse **the golden rule of habit change**: AA succeeds because it helps Alcoholics **use the same cues, and get the same rewards, but it shifts the routines**.

Researchers say that AA works because the programme forces people to identify the cues and rewards that encourage their alcoholic habits, and then helps them find new behaviours.

Take steps four (to make “a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves”) and five (to admit “to God, to ourselves, into another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”).

“It's not obvious from the way they are written, but to complete those steps, someone has to create a list of all the **triggers** for their alcoholic urges,” said J. Scott Tonigan, a researcher at the University of New Mexico who has studied AA for more than a decade. “When you make a self-inventory, you're figuring out all the things that make you drink. And admitting to someone else all the bad things you've done is a pretty good way of figuring out the moments where everything spiralled out of control.”

Then, AA asks Alcoholics to search for the rewards they get from alcohol. What cravings, the programme asks, are driving your habit loop?

“For permanent change we need to learn new routines that draw on the old triggers and provide familiar relief.”

The truth is, the brain can be reprogrammed. You just have to be deliberate about it.

However, just changing the neurological cravings and patterns is not enough. We need something else if we're not going to relapse under stress...” (see the importance of belief.)