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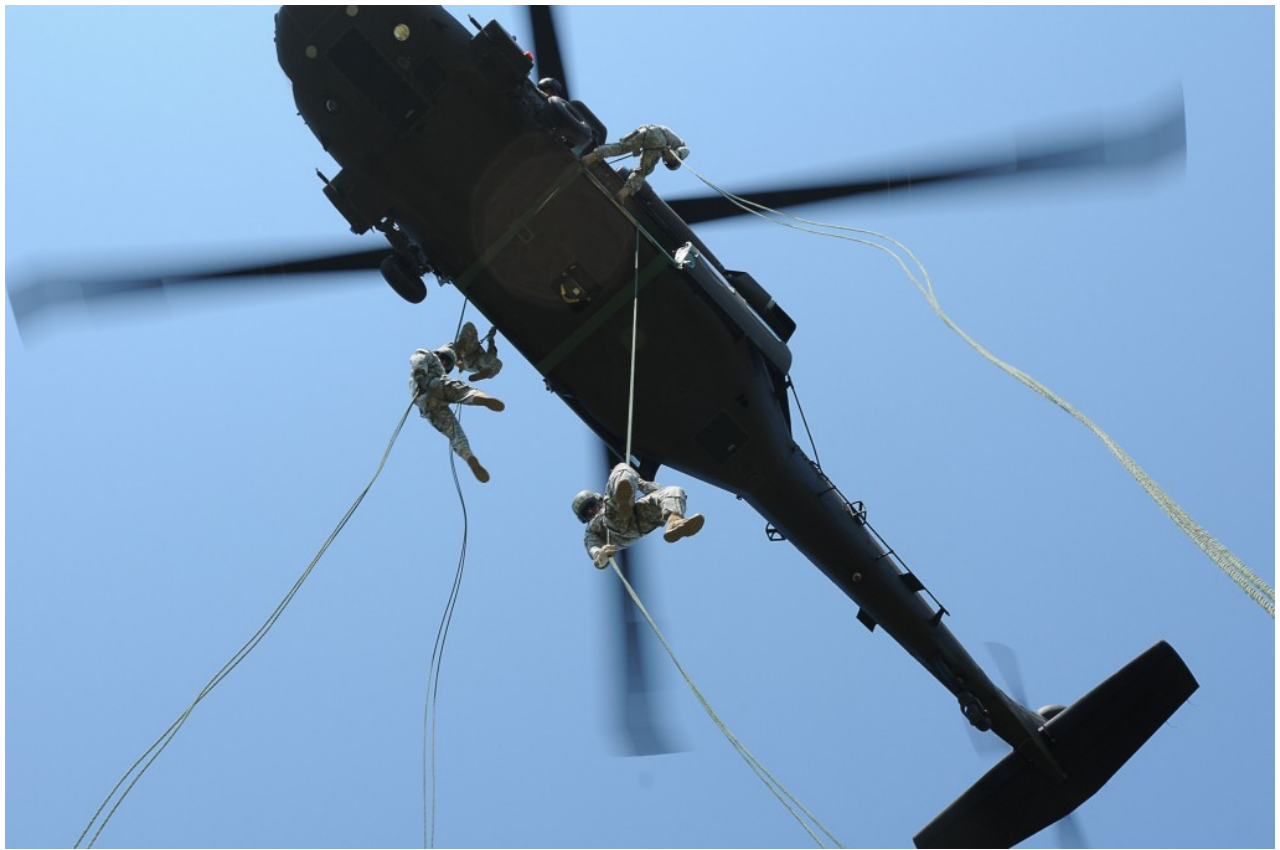
# The Dangers of Habits

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 8 min read

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## A Lesson on “Habits”...

When I was still on Active Duty, I would teach my soldiers that “habits” are the most dangerous addictions of all. For your average, run of the mill human being, it only takes 23 times to develop a full on, set in stone, habit. 23 times is all it takes. 23 times of speeding at a yellow light, 23 times of looking left when you should start by looking right, 23 repetitions of trigger jerk, versus trigger squeeze, getting frustrated and putting that cigarette in your mouth, or skipping over seemingly minor steps in a pre-flight or pre-combat checklist. Aside from the Law of Primacy’s foundation forming from sensory input, your brain also associates actions with thoughts and makes connections in the form of muscle memories called habits. In dangerous occupations, bad habits will get you and/or your team killed in less time than it takes to blink an eye. However, in regular everyday life, bad habits can kill you instantly in a car wreck, slowly through developed health conditions, or even as the result of another persons bad habits.



In an effort to show just how dangerous habits can be, first we will need to summarize just how fast habits can form, and how difficult they are to get rid of. To do this, we can use smoking as an example in our case study because the vast amount of scientific research grants enough evidence to support the claim. Smoking forms two types of addictions, one directly the result of habit formation, and the other indirectly the result of habit formation. These are a mental addiction, and a physical addiction. The latter is secondary to the first and forms as a direct result of the action, so we shall start there.



Now, physical addictions are beyond easy to get rid of. Three to five days after one stops smoking, the parts of the body responsible for the production of chemical messengers such as acetylcholine, norepinephrine, epinephrine, arginine vasopressin, serotonin, dopamine, and beta-endorphin start production again without stimulant. Many chemicals naturally produced by the body are directly responsible for “evening out” our moods and chemical balances. When you smoke, your body becomes flooded with an excess of stimulants that trigger the release of these chemicals. The body reacts by slowing and even ceasing production unless the stimulant is present. Thus begins the physical addiction. After three to five days of withdraw, the body starts normal production again to answer the demand of the natural substances and the physical addiction is gone. All that remains, and the primary reason that people return to smoking, is the habit.



That mental attachment formed from the action of putting a cigarette in your mouth in relation to different moods or as a reaction to something else, is very, very strong. To think about its strength in a more physical aspect, it can be compared to the Strong Force that binds Quarks together to form Protons and Neutrons. Like the exchanges of Gluons (a type of Boson) between Fermions, the average brain creates a rock solid bond after an average of 23 repetitions, thus forming a correlation of attachment to information and action. This is the number one reason why gum has become so vastly popular. People continue their addictions, never getting rid of or breaking them, by simply replacing one action within the same habit for another. The cigarette becomes the gum, the habit remains.



Additionally, it takes (about) over 200 times to break those same habits which took only 23 times to form. And this is not simply 200 times of “not doing it”, but 200 concerned, thought about, conscious attempts. 200 recognized and thought over attempts to break the bonds formed through information reception and correlative action. This means that forming habits is not only far easier, but that it does not require any actual thought process involvement for them to form. Consequently, this also means that often people may not even recognize when a new habit has formed.



Habits can be considered both “Good” and “Bad”. While we have highlighted how smoking is tied directly to habit formation – and as such, it is a bad habit that kills you and everyone else around you (assault) – what

are some examples of good habits that can help you, can improve your quality of life, and can even keep you and others safe? For starters, what about driving?

Putting on your seat belt before starting your car, shoulder checking instead of simply relying on mirrors before turning, never using a mobile phone / eating / doing make-up (or doing anything else other than driving), actually obeying the law and all speed limits, actually stopping completely at stop signs and not trying to run yellow lights, staying right except to pass those going slower than the posted speed limit, allowing people to merge, getting to the back of the line like everyone else (instead of trying to cut in front of everyone else), never encroaching on motorcycles, keeping the music volume down, maintaining a proper buffer zone (even when stopped), and not cutting others off, are ALL examples of good driving habits that can, and will, save your life, and the lives of others. What about good habits with firearms? Maintaining a stable and steady position, using front-site focus, using proper breathing technique, and trigger squeeze are all examples of good marksmanship habits. And finally, examples of good life habits... Eating a regular healthy diet, not over-eating, getting regular exercise that gets your heart-rate up for a prolonged period of time, and brushing after every meal, are all good healthy life habits...

Yet even good habits are situationally dependent, and because situations are different from one moment to the next, even good habits are subject to revision and change, and this is very important to stress and understand...



Professionals in dynamic, inherently dangerous occupations such as aviation, search and rescue, emergency medicine, special operations, infantry, intelligence, etc., know for a fact that all things change. What was “law” today, is subject to review tomorrow as we strive to perfect and improve our knowledge, standards, and skills. Adaptation, Innovation and Flexibility are the names of the game as all “standards” are subject to review and revision. If we discover a safer, better, faster, and/or more efficient way to conduct operations, those *good* habits formed from now outdated methods pose a significant *hazard* to individuals and teams as they attempt to change. This greatly reduces efficiency while increasing risk all because (as we just discussed) habits are so very difficult to break. Often our procedures require immediate action without references. Habits formed while making emergency decisions in an aircraft during flight, or during a long

dive underwater, have just as much risk involved as breaching and clearing a room, or deciding on the best methods to save a life.



**Habits are the most dangerous addictions of all because they form so easily, no thoughts are required in their formation processes, and they are exponentially more difficult to get rid of. Like an addiction, we return to habits by default whenever encountering a situation our brain might recognize as fitting within their parameters. This makes habit formation dangerous in dynamic operations that require critical thinking and adaptability.**



As leaders, we should constantly remain aware of the dangers of habits while striving to make decisions that are the result of conscious thought. While some habits may be good, they can provide a comfort zone that impairs judgement, prevents growth, or makes necessary adaptations nearly impossible. Instead of writing off all habits as dangerous, it would be far wiser for leadership to educate organizations on the dangers of habits while encouraging individuals to constantly remain vigilant over habit formation. An organization may never be free from habits, but knowledge of their formation, and how they affect us, can aid in increased adaptability, implementation of necessary changes, openness to individual growth and education, and even generate improvement in efficiency and safety. All of this equals improved cohesion, a more enjoyable environment, higher morale, and a more successful organization.

## Sound Off!

We ALL have a large number of habits, many known to us, but most are so subtle that we don't even notice their existence... Stop and think about your daily life for a few minutes, then concentrate on the things you do often without even thinking about them... do you do them with regularity? Chances are, those are habits. Now, can you think of any habits you might have that are tied to emotional responses? For example, when you get upset about something, is there a typical reaction or behavior you do as a result?

Consider the BAD habits in your life... whether personal habits, or habits that directly affect your professional career, how do you think you could use this new understanding about the dangers of habits to better yourself and your professional career? As a leader, how could this knowledge help you improve those around you?

Take a few moments to think about these questions, then write **your answers** in the **comments below** so the community can discuss, engage, learn, and grow!

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## About the author



### AJ Powell

AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.