

GET Hooked ON Good Habits

Science shows us that you can actually get addicted to breaking targets — but that's not a good thing.

BY JOHN D. SHIMA

I've expressed the importance of developing and maintaining good shooting habits in my books and several previous articles. Readers might recall that the pathway involved in the programming of shooting habits resides within certain primitive pathways in the brain.

I've referred to this process as programming the adaptive unconscious to make preplanned moves. Each preplanned move is a habitual response to a specific visual cue — the emergence of a clay target into your peripheral visual field. Hence, a consistent reaction and response to the emergence of a target is a consequence of creating a good habit.

In his book *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg explained why habits are important to everyday life. Habits allow us to conduct the repetitive behaviors of daily living without conscious thought, so we can focus our conscious mind on more important tasks. I've used the analogy of driving a car to explain how the unconscious



and conscious minds function. Since we are “victims of our habits,” Duhigg stressed the need for us to understand the psychological and biological aspects of a habit so we can convert bad ones to good ones. The central

a manner that elicits the reward. It is easy to understand how the habit loop relates to ice cream, chocolate desserts, alcohol or mood-altering drugs. Surprisingly, the same habit loop phenomenon relates to shooting clay targets.

shooting.” Murrell went on to explain the important distinction between hitting and shooting that captures the theme of this article.

Murrell realized that hitting the next target created an overriding desire to break

the next target. This intention to control the outcome of the next shot activated his conscious mind to be completely involved in the shot sequence. He went on to explain that shooting is an experience that occurs in response to movement of the target and the firing of the shotgun. It is more about watching and feeling the movement of the target than trying to break it. Whatever happens to the target after the shotgun fires does not diminish or enhance the experience of shooting. When Murrell steps onto a station in a mindset that craves shooting, he feels a pleasant sense of calmness and his mind is free to just watch the next target until it breaks.

▼ Focus on the movement of the target, not trying to break it.



▲ Whether you're a developing shooter or a more experienced one, you've got habits. The question is, are they good ones or bad ones?

theme in Duhigg's entertaining book is the habit loop, which consists of the cue, the routine and the reward. His compelling argument is that every habit loop is preceded by a desire or craving that yearns to be satisfied.

If we are all victims of habit as Duhigg suggests, then according to Dr. Nora Volkow, head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, it is reasonable to assume that we are all drug addicts. The drug we are addicted to is dopamine, which is a natural biochemical that activates the pleasure center of the brain. Basically our desire for a pleasurable reward is linked to a craving. When we become aware of the cure, it triggers us to respond in

WHAT DO YOU CRAVE?

Duhigg stated the first step in the process of breaking a bad habit is to analyze the underlying craving that arises when it is activated by a specific cue. When I asked my longtime friend Murrell Smith to describe what he craves before calling for a target, he responded with his usual insightfulness. Murrell said, “When I was a careful shooter for more than 30 years, I craved hitting the next target, shooting 100 straight, and winning a medal. Since I recovered from a few physical problems, I've become a mindful shooter, and I just crave



▲ When you get your movement and rotation right, the target seems to slow down and the shot sequence feels effortless.



▲ Psychologically, there's a big difference between shooting and hitting. Which one are you trying to do?

WHAT SHOULD YOU CRAVE?

Clay target shooters who crave hitting the next target condition their brain to release dopamine only when they execute a solid hit. Anything less than a solid hit leaves the shooter in a greater need for the next dopamine fix. The desire to break the next target activates the shooter's ego to make a conscious effort to break the next target. When a shooter craves hitting the

next target, that misguided intention increases the probability of visual deceptions, which cause more missed targets.

On the contrary, when a shooter simply craves the experience of shooting, the release of dopamine is linked to the sensual process of shooting. This mindset reinforces the desire to merely watch the next target so the shooter can experience the pleasure of shooting during every shot.

I've often stated that

shooting is a visual and a visceral experience. Shooters not only see the movement of each target, they also feel the speed of the target as the rotation of the body synchronizes with the movement. When the shooter experiences synchronization, the target seems to slow down and the entire shot sequence feels effortless and graceful. This feeling is what the mindful shooter craves.

I repeat my shooting mantra during every teaching session: The desire to watch the target break must override the shooter's need to break the target. Since trying to hit the target seems like a logical goal for new shooters, the bad habits associated with that intention are easily reinforced. Recurring missed targets soon lead to frustration, which is often followed by self-doubt and anger.

Dr. Elisha Goldstein reported that self-compassion is necessary to restore a

measure of self-control when confronted by failure. Empathy toward oneself minimizes the harmful effects of self-defeating (bad) habits. According to Goldstein and Eckhart Tolle, mindfulness enables a person to experience moments of clarity, introspection and emotional detachment from outcomes.

HOW TO KICK A BAD HABIT

Before you attempt to kick a bad shooting habit, you must recognize that the bad habit is connected to a craving to hit targets. Whatever experience you crave prior to calling for the target and during the shot sequence ultimately determines when the dopamine is released into the pleasure center of your brain. Therefore, you must develop an awareness of what you crave as you step onto each station.

Relapses in every addic-



THADDIUS BEDFORD

▲ A flawlessly executed process is the goal. If your goal is anything else — like breaking the target — you're more apt to fall prey to bad habits. Keep your focus on following your routine.

▼ Forgive and forget your mistakes — focusing on a miss makes you desperate not to miss the next one, and bad habits are likely to arise.



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tion program commonly occur when the addict experiences a sense of failure and shame. These negative emotions are closely tied to the urge or craving that precipitates self-defeating bad habits. In the clay target sports, the intention to break the next target activates the ego's craving for the next dopamine fix. The ego will use deceptive self-talk and try to control the outcome of the next shot in an effort to get that next dopamine fix.

According to Goldstein, many successful addiction centers are integrating mindfulness into their rehabilitation programs. Experts have demonstrated with brain scans that self-compassion (empathy) is necessary to manage the addict's fear of failure and the mistaken sense of shame associated with it.

Mindfulness enables addicts to develop moments of clarity during which they realize it is possible to manage their cravings instead of allowing their cravings to control them.

GET HOOKED ON GOOD HABITS

I've used the term "emotional freedom" in my books and in previous articles to stress that clay target shooters must develop the capacity to become emotionally detached from the outcome of each shot, the score of each round, or their place in a competition. I remind competitive shooters that

they must be able to forgive and forget mistakes during competition so they don't activate the misguided craving to hit the next target, which precipitates self-defeating bad habits.

Getting hooked on good habits is a four-step process. It is a simple routine, but it requires vigilance every time you step onto a station. Often the insidious urge to hit the target will arise during the moment of truth — just before you fire the gun.

- ▶ Respect the power of your cravings.
- ▶ Recognize the relationship between the craving and the cue.
- ▶ Release your emotional attachment to the outcome.
- ▶ Redirect your craving to embrace the sensual experience of shooting in the moment.

It requires rational thinking and introspection to become aware of your cravings, and you must exercise self-discipline to manage them with the proper mindset. I suggest the best way to get hooked on good habits is to care less about hitting, and care more about shooting. **CTN**

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