

UNITED WISDOM

When a habit needs reconsidering

Freedom and Action

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A-11-N04 · EN

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Epigraph

> *habits are (temporarily) disturbed*

Bas Verplanken and Deborah Roy, *Empowering Interventions to Promote Sustainable Lifestyles* (2016), abstract, p. 127. The authors describe a premise of the habit discontinuity hypothesis when conditions change. The fragment is not advice to disrupt the stability of one's life.

What this article is about

An action can remain easy and familiar after its purpose has changed. We keep opening a page, taking the same route, or following a brief sequence even though our present task is different. Repetition tells us that an action occurs. By itself, it does not establish usefulness, endorsement, or a fit with a new goal.

Consider Maxim, a hypothetical person who used to check the city's events listings every morning to choose outings for family weekends. The family's plans have changed: another activity now occupies part of the weekend, and events of interest arrive through a separate subscription. Yet the old page still opens immediately after breakfast. Maxim notices that he often closes it without choosing anything and repeats the same procedure the next morning.

We have not decided in advance that the listings are useless or must be banned. This article examines grounds for reconsideration: a current goal, observable consequences, conditions that initiate action, and other participants' interests. Verplanken and Roy's study helps frame the question of changing context without turning relocation or any disrupted routine into a universal remedy. The small trial proposed at the end concerns only voluntary, safe action and requires checking its own outcome.

I. An easy action is not necessarily a useful one

Maxim does not need to deliberate at length every morning about whether to open the listings. The sequence is familiar: finish breakfast, pick up the phone, open the saved page. That ease can be convenient. If events still help him choose weekend plans, an automatic start saves unnecessary searching and leaves attention for the content. We cannot declare an action unnecessary merely because it recurs without extended thought.

The same ease may remain after the task changes. Maxim browses dozens of events when he is now choosing between two already known options. The number of pages viewed does not

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tell him whether browsing brings him closer to a decision. It helps to assess the operation and its result separately: how browsing begins and what useful outcome it produces today.

This distinction prevents reconsideration from becoming a general prohibition on habits. Prepared tools, stable procedures, and familiar movements help in many activities. A question arises when the old operation no longer fits the present goal. The mismatch needs a concrete description: browsing no longer adds relevant information, takes a certain amount of time, or delays a discussion of the available options.

If there are no such facts yet, doubt can prompt observation rather than an immediate overhaul. Maxim can notice which information from the listings he actually uses for the next weekend. He may also discover a separate purpose: he enjoys learning about city life even when he plans no visit. The familiar activity would then have changed function, and assessing it only as a tool for arranging an outing would be inaccurate.

II. A familiar context may support an old response

Wendy Wood and Dennis Rünger's review discusses psychological habit through learned associations between context and a repeated response. A familiar situation may initiate action without a fresh, complete choice of its outcome. This helps explain how the end of breakfast, the phone, and the saved page might support Maxim's old browsing. The explanation remains a general research framework; the strength of our hypothetical person's habit has not been measured.

A goal and a habitual response can operate together. The wish to organise weekends initially supported repetition, and an accessible page helped him perform the task. A later change of goal need not automatically remove every cue in the old arrangement. The phone remains in the same place, the shortcut opens just as quickly, and the morning feels familiar. A mismatch can develop between the present purpose and a situation that continues to initiate action.

This does not mean a person is powerless or that every easy action is a habit in the narrow research sense. Automaticity can characterise different processes, including well-practised skills. Sometimes Maxim deliberately opens the listings to check a particular event. The same outward movement may have different grounds. Speed or frequency alone cannot establish them.

Practical reconsideration needs only a modest observation: what immediately precedes the action and what result it provides. Such a description does not require diagnosing oneself with a habit. If browsing starts after breakfast while the necessary information has long been available elsewhere, Maxim can try linking that situation to a different response. This is an editorial application of the distinction among goal, cue, and action, rather than a verified measurement of his hidden mechanism.

III. Reconsideration begins with present facts

An action’s earlier purpose matters to its history, but it does not fully answer whether the action remains useful. Maxim may reasonably have chosen the listings when no other source was available. There is now new information and a different limit on time. Acknowledging this change does not mean declaring the original decision mistaken. Present suitability concerns today’s conditions.

It helps to identify a specific function. Is the task to choose one event, compare offers, or simply learn about the city? Different functions call for different results. For choosing a family event, one suitable option discussed together may be an observable outcome. For enjoyment of browsing, voluntarily allocated time and consequences for other activities matter. Neither the number of scrolls nor uninterrupted browsing can replace these questions.

Costs also need precision. There is no need to claim that a habit consumes an entire life. It may be enough to notice that ten morning minutes produce no relevant information, or that discussing plans is repeatedly postponed. The cost may turn out to be small and the enjoyment willingly endorsed. Reconsideration can then end with keeping the action for a clear purpose. Its task is to assess fit, rather than necessarily eliminate everything familiar.

Observation and a proposed cause should remain distinct. Maxim knows how long he spent on the page; he does not necessarily know why he started. He may suspect that a familiar sequence initiated the action while retaining that description as a hypothesis. A limited trial helps assess another arrangement’s suitability. It will not establish the complete cause of his earlier behaviour or have to confirm an explanation that seemed persuasive in advance.

When comparing two arrangements, it helps to keep accompanying changes visible. On a successful weekend there may have been more time, fewer events, or easier agreement. One good result does not establish that moving a link caused the entire improvement. Maxim can consider observed suitability for his own choice without claiming a demonstrated causal effect. Substantially different circumstances honestly limit the comparison; they are no reason to adjust it to fit the original hypothesis. This keeps the alternative open to another check.

IV. Frequency does not establish present endorsement

Repeated action is easily taken as evidence of a continuing wish. If Maxim opens the listings daily, it may seem that he necessarily prefers precisely this way of choosing weekends. Wood and Rünger discuss how people may infer their goals from their own habitual behaviour. That account does not justify regarding every inference about motivation as mistaken or every frequent operation as unwanted.

Maxim may expressly endorse browsing. He may act through a familiar sequence and notice the outcome only later. Mixed reasons are possible too: some information is useful, while other material attracts attention independently of the original task. Assessing current endorsement involves asking what a person chooses when the function and cost are clear. Frequency remains a fact about action rather than a complete answer about endorsement.

In Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, autonomy involves endorsement of an action rather than compulsory independence from others or constant enjoyment. A person can willingly perform a difficult activity for a meaningful goal. Conversely, convenience does not establish acceptance of the goal. These distinctions help Maxim discuss present browsing without demanding immediate pleasure or proof that he is free from every influence.

If other participants use his recommendations, Maxim's own wish is only part of the situation. Their expectations do not automatically establish that he must maintain the old routine, but they require a separate conversation. An accurate message about reconsideration is preferable to assuming that others should understand his changed goal by themselves. Frequent past help creates no endless obligation; an existing agreement needs assessment through its actual terms.

V. What Verplanken and Roy tested

Bas Verplanken and Deborah Roy tested the habit discontinuity hypothesis in a field experiment concerning more sustainable lifestyles. The authors proposed that a change in context temporarily disturbs habitual behaviour and creates an opportunity for intervention. The study compared recent movers with non-movers and participants who received a particular intervention with those who did not.

Initially, 800 people participated; follow-up data were obtained from 521. Changes were assessed through self-reports of 25 behaviours over eight weeks. The intervention was assigned through cluster randomisation. Relocation itself was not randomly imposed by the researchers: mover and non-mover groups were matched for comparison. The study must therefore not be described as an experiment in which people were randomly instructed to change their homes.

The authors found a small interaction between intervention and relocation: the intervention was more effective among recent movers. This result belongs to a specific research design and a particular self-reported measure. It does not establish that every change of context improves every action. Limitations concerning selection, missing follow-up data, and measuring behaviour through participants' reports need to remain visible.

The study gives grounds for considering conditions in which a familiar sequence becomes less stable as a possible moment for reconsideration. Maxim's story does not reproduce the field

experiment. He receives no studied environmental intervention, and his morning events page does not automatically belong to the measured behaviours. Applying the idea here remains editorial reasoning that requires its own modest check, rather than a reference that guarantees the result.

VI. A window of opportunity is not a calendar law

In Verplanken and Roy’s abstract, greater sensitivity to new information is described as an assumption of the hypothesis. The experiment directly assessed self-reported behavioural changes; it did not separately establish an internal measure of sensitivity to information. The proposed mechanism and the observed measure therefore need distinguishing. Readers need not believe that every change in conditions has been proven to make their thinking more receptive.

The authors also discuss a possible window following relocation, approximately associated with the first three months. This analysis is exploratory within the specific context. It establishes no universal deadline for changing a habit and does not mean that reconsideration becomes impossible later. Three months cannot be transferred to changing a morning page, taking another job, or any life transition as an established general rule.

For Maxim, the actual availability of reconsideration today matters more. He has noticed a changed purpose and can try an alternative without a major disruption. If the morning arrangement is convenient, he need not dismantle it for a supposed psychological window. He can keep breakfast and the time for conversation while changing only what directly concerns browsing the page.

Changing context can create difficulties of its own: learning to use new tools, dealing with practical tasks, and restoring access. This article’s sources do not allow us to assess the entire balance of relocation’s consequences in advance. There is therefore no recommendation to choose instability as a tool. The research observation helps raise a question about familiar associations; deciding the scale of a change needs separate grounds appropriate to its actual consequences.

VII. Conditions can change through a small reversible trial

Maxim can try a more modest alternative: remove the listings shortcut from the phone’s first page and keep a link to two genuinely suitable events nearby. After breakfast, he first considers these options and decides whether additional comparison is needed. The old listings remain accessible. The change concerns one operation and can be reversed if it ceases to help. This is an editorial trial, rather than a research-validated technique.

Reversibility does not make every action risk-free. Maxim needs to consider who uses the same tools and what else changes. If the phone is shared or another participant needs the link, he cannot alter their access on their behalf. If a familiar sequence includes a mandatory check, this article does not justify disabling it for an experiment. A change’s scale is assessed by its consequences, rather than just the number of movements on a screen.

It helps to identify a limited object of observation beforehand. Has the weekend choice become clearer? Has relevant information been lost? Is there still time to agree on plans? Such questions reveal a result that concerns the present goal. Simply eliminating the earlier browsing does not establish success. One operation can cease without anything useful taking its place.

If the new form is inconvenient, Maxim can restore the old one or try another available arrangement. Ending a trial need not become a personal defeat. It supplies information about specific conditions. Nor should a habit be declared permanently changed after one day: Lally’s study shows variation in the growth of self-reported automaticity with repetition and establishes no universal timetable for our alternative.

VIII. A new form needs a purpose of its own

Prohibiting an old operation answers only what not to do at present. It does not specify how to achieve a current goal. If Maxim wants to choose events with his family, the alternative response must leave room for their participation. Selecting two events, checking availability, and discussing them is a different sequence from closing the listings and declaring reconsideration finished.

Tools must fit the response too. A link helps if it is current and accessible; a brief conversation is possible if participants can actually talk. A new rule is insufficient when a necessary condition is absent. Maxim may find that a morning discussion is inconvenient and move it to another agreed time. That changes the practical form rather than demonstrating insufficient willpower.

In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes an outwardly correct act from action by someone who knows, chooses, and maintains a certain steadiness. His question concerns character formation and ethical choice. It cannot be equated with a contemporary model of contextual habit initiation. The comparison helps us see why repeating an outward operation does not exhaust assessment of purpose and choice.

For Maxim, a new form also requires endorsement rather than merely a convenient start. If the family task has ended, a new technique need not preserve its appearance. If the task remains, familiar help can be organised differently. Reconsideration allows several outcomes: retain the

old action for a clear purpose, change it, or end an unnecessary procedure. The sources do not choose that outcome on a person’s behalf.

IX. Stability can be a shared value

Changing one’s arrangement affects others when they have relied on it. The family may expect Maxim to provide options by a certain day, or a friend may use a shared selection. Even help that was initially voluntary can include a specific agreement. Its terms need clarification before the old sequence is declared a personal habit that can disappear without explanation.

Discussion does not mean that others acquire the right to assign the old workload indefinitely. Maxim can identify changed conditions and offer different timing or a division of the task. But he cannot assume agreement simply because the new arrangement seems reasonable to him. Other participants may know something about the old form’s usefulness that he has missed. Their response can alter assessment of the alternative.

In some activities, stability itself matters: agreed information handovers, reliable access to materials, and an established procedure for important checks. Habit research provides no grounds for overriding their rules. Sometimes reconsidering a useful habit ends with retaining its outward form while clarifying its purpose. A decision need not look new to make sense under present conditions.

If the old browsing was exclusively personal, the boundaries are simpler. Maxim can choose its amount and timing while considering shared living conditions. Still, the right to change and assessment of consequences are distinct. Being able to close a page does not show that closing it will improve the choice. The right to continue does not show that the old arrangement still serves the task. These questions require different grounds and can be considered together.

X. Reconsideration ends with observing the result

Let us return to Maxim. He keeps morning breakfast and tries looking at two current options first. After a chosen period, he checks what happened: did a discussion take place, was there enough information, and was an important opportunity lost? If choosing became more convenient, he can continue the new form and keep observing. If a loss appears, he should identify it rather than hide it to confirm a successful change.

Usefulness can vary. Two options may suffice for one weekend, while another requires a wider search. Distinguishing situations may work better than a universal prohibition: start with available proposals and consult the listings when information is insufficient. A separate voluntary browse out of interest in the city is possible too. Its purpose should not automatically be presented as completion of a family task.

A new operation need not immediately be as easy as the old one. Learning it and its fit with the present goal are different objects of assessment. A person can deliberately use a more attentive arrangement when its result justifies the effort. Access to tools can be simplified without handing a habit a question that requires fresh information and others' agreement. Research does not promise that every useful arrangement must become automatic.

A concrete mismatch therefore prompts reconsideration, and checking present suitability completes it. Repetition alone does not condemn an action; familiar ease does not establish its value. Maxim retains the right to use stability and the right to change a form. To exercise these rights meaningfully, he clarifies the goal, consequences, initiation conditions, and participants' expectations, then examines the actual result of a manageable change.

What this means in practice

Choose one voluntary, safe action that continues after its task has changed. This editorial trial is not a validated intervention method and does not require rebuilding your life.

First describe the earlier purpose and the current goal. Then identify one observable result of the familiar action and one possible cost. If usefulness remains, include it; reconsideration need not end in rejection. Distinguish information about consequences from a hypothesis about what initiates action.

Notice the situation immediately preceding the action. Choose one available, reversible change and an alternative response that fits the current goal. Check the tools, timing, and effects on other participants. Agreed obligations and safety procedures retain their own rules; the article does not permit overriding them.

Set a limited observation period and a clear question about the outcome. For example, did enough information become available for a shared choice? Separately note what may have been lost. Absence of the old action is not success by itself. If the new form does not help, it can be changed or reversed without a global personal judgement.

The outcome may be keeping the old arrangement, changing part of it, or ending an activity. Do not impose a universal timetable for forming a new habit or regard changed conditions as a guarantee. The trial helps obtain information about one action in your circumstances; its findings do not replace competent assessment of treatment, safety, and substantial obligations.

Key quotation

> *more sensitive to new information*

Bas Verplanken and Deborah Roy, *Empowering Interventions to Promote Sustainable Lifestyles* (2016), abstract, p. 127. The original article is published under CC BY 4.0. In the abstract, this is an assumption of the hypothesis about temporarily changed habitual context. The experiment measured self-reported behaviour rather than a separate internal sensitivity measure. The fragment does not guarantee the effectiveness of our trial.

Connections between traditions

1. **Repetition and choice.** Aristotle considers character formation and acting with knowledge and choice. Wood and Rünger describe contextual response associations. A shared interest in repetition does not make ethical virtue and psychological habit identical.

2. **Conditions and consequences.** Verplanken and Roy study a specific intervention following a contextual change. The events-listing trial uses a question about conditions without reproducing the experiment or inheriting its effect.

3. **Ease and endorsement.** Ryan and Deci relate autonomy to accepting an action. A convenient operation may or may not be endorsed; frequency cannot fully establish its motivation.

4. **Learning and suitability.** Lally and colleagues model self-reported automaticity with repetition. It measures neither usefulness nor a deadline by which a new form must become convenient.

5. **Personal form and shared stability.** The sources help distinguish questions of action and goal; participants' agreement and existing arrangements remain a separate editorial and ethical concern.

Sources

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2. Wood, W.; Rünger, D. *Psychology of Habit*. Annual Review of Psychology 67 (2016), 289–314. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033417. University copy. The preliminary 2015 Review in Advance version was used: introduction, automaticity, and selected material on formation, goal inferences, and changing habits.

3. Lally, P.; van Jaarsveld, C. H. M.; Potts, H. W. W.; Wardle, J. *How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World*. European Journal of Social Psychology 40

(2010), 998–1009. DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.674. Research text. The abstract, introduction, methodological context, and discussion were used; not all results and figures were read in full.

4. Ryan, R. M.; Deci, E. L. *Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being*. American Psychologist 55 (2000), 68–78. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68. Author copy. The abstract, introduction, and selected autonomy and regulation discussions were used; the whole text was not read.

5. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, especially chapters 1, 2, 4, and 6. English translation by W. D. Ross. Internet Classics Archive. The complete Book II page was read, rather than the whole work. Philosophical positions are used through original paraphrase.

Tags

habit, reconsideration, context, goal, action, repetition, automaticity, choice, conditions, usefulness, consequences, costs, information, observation, reversibility, trial, autonomy, voluntary action, self-determination, stability, agreement, consent, responsibility, character, virtue, Aristotle, Bas Verplanken, Deborah Roy, Wendy Wood, United Wisdom

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