



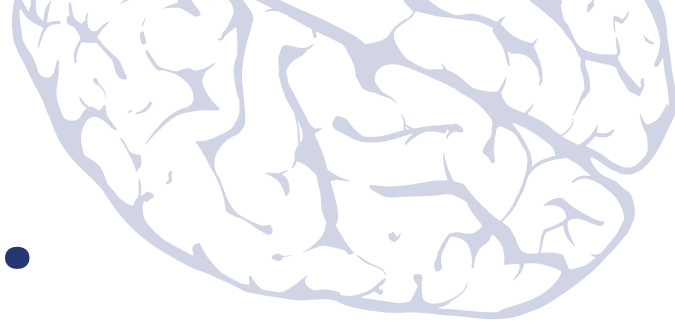
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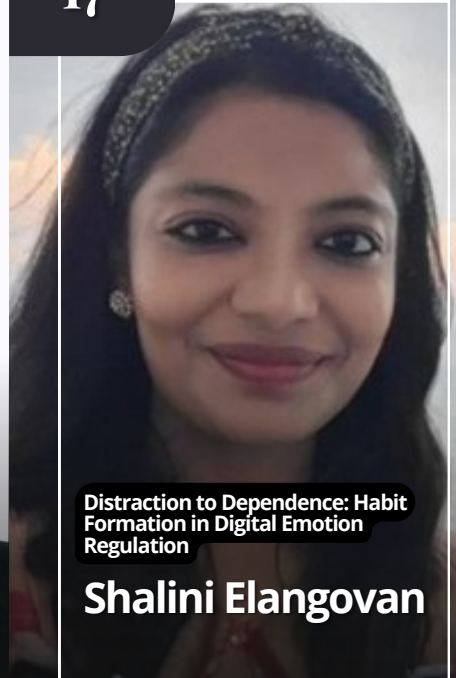
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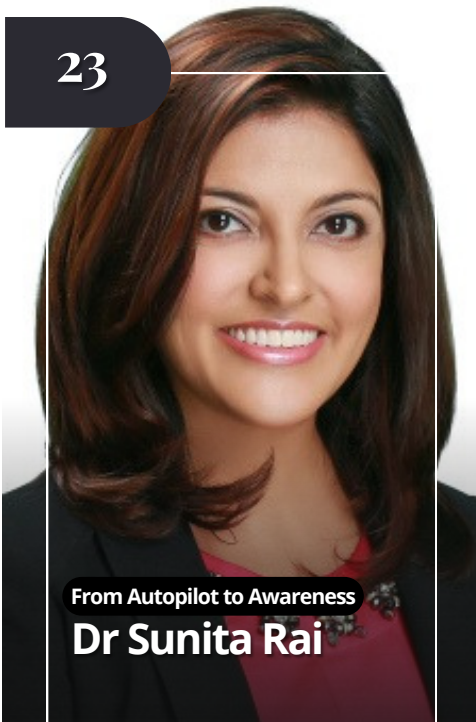
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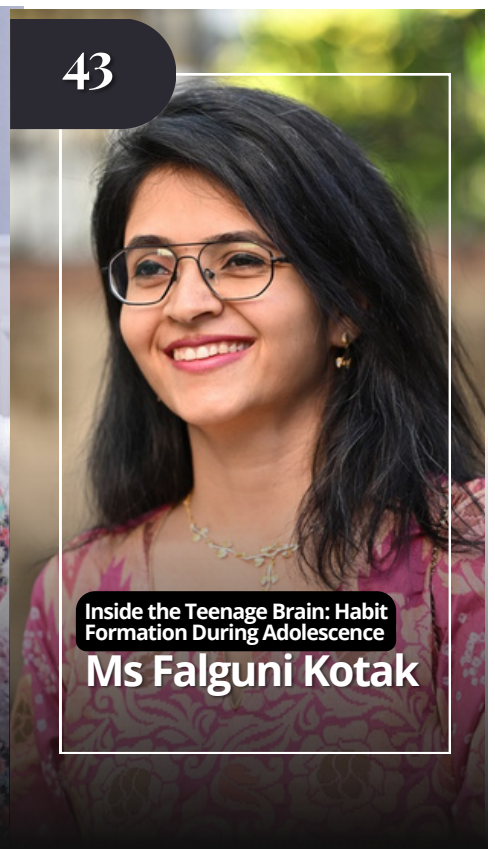
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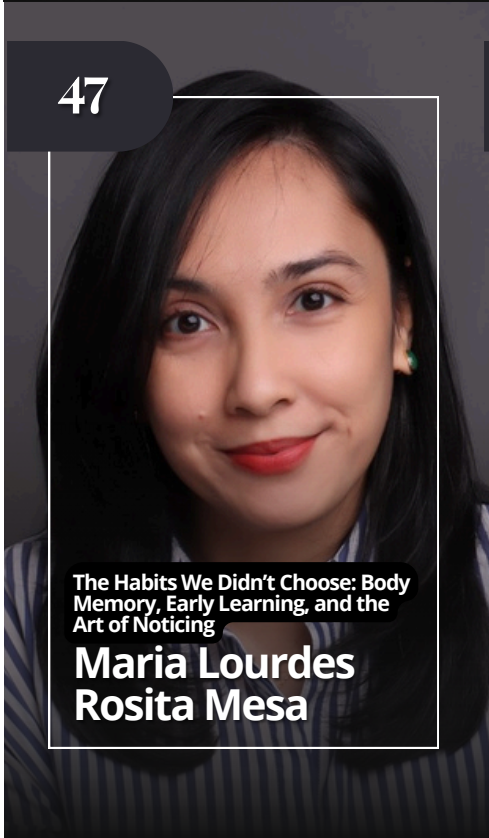
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VICE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Much of what shapes our lives happens not through major decisions, but through small actions repeated over time. The way we begin our mornings, respond to stress, engage with others, approach our work, or care for our health can gradually become part of how we function, often with little conscious thought.

This makes habit formation an especially important area for psychology. Meaningful change is rarely just about knowing what we should do. Most of us already know that we should exercise more, sleep better, spend less time on our devices, or develop healthier ways of managing stress. The greater challenge is understanding what helps intentions translate into behaviours that can be sustained.

Psychology offers an important lens here. Habits are shaped not only by motivation and willpower, but also by our environments, cues, relationships, emotions, and the systems within which we live. This is particularly relevant as our everyday environments become increasingly complex. Digital technologies, social media and artificial intelligence now influence many of the cues, choices and routines that structure our daily lives. Understanding how habits form, therefore, also requires us to consider how the environments around us are designed.

There is also an encouraging message within this - patterns that have become deeply established are not necessarily permanent. Change may begin through something as simple as greater awareness, a different cue, a supportive environment, or a small behaviour practised consistently. In clinical practice, education, health promotion, workplaces and communities, these insights can help us design interventions that make positive behaviours easier to begin and, importantly, easier to sustain.

The contributions in this issue reflect the breadth of these possibilities, from learning and exercise to recovery, mindfulness, technology and healthy ageing. Together, they invite us to look more closely at the behaviours we often take for granted and the conditions that allow meaningful change to take root.

I hope this issue encourages us not only to think about the habits we wish to change, but also about the environments and systems we can create to make healthier and more adaptive behaviours possible, for ourselves and for the people and communities we serve.

Dr Pearlene Ng
Vice President (Outreach)



EDITOR'S NOTE

In this issue, our contributors explore the psychology of habit formation across diverse domains of life and practice, through works that translate psychological theory into insight—whether through research, practice, or lived experience. They variously reflect on how habits are formed, sustained, disrupted, or reshaped over time.

In this issue, our contributors explore the psychology of habit formation across diverse domains of life and practice, through works that translate psychological theory into insight—whether through research, practice, or lived experience. They variously reflect on how habits are formed, sustained, disrupted, or reshaped over time.

Together, these articles remind us that habits extend well beyond simple routines. They influence the ways we move, think, learn, regulate our emotions, engage with technology, recover from illness, and navigate the changing demands of everyday life. Readers will encounter perspectives on the cognitive processes that underlie habitual behaviour, the development of exercise and healthy ageing practices, the role of mindfulness in interrupting automatic patterns, and the increasingly complex relationships between habits, digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic environments.

Several contributions also draw attention to the formative influence of early experience and embodied learning, examining how habits become deeply ingrained through adolescence, education, body memory, and trauma, and how greater awareness can create opportunities for meaningful change. Others consider habit formation in applied settings—from supporting students to take the first step towards learning, to developing recovery routines following stroke, to translating principles from elite sport into educational practice. Across these varied contexts runs a common thread: habits are neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental. Rather, they are adaptive responses shaped by our environments, experiences, and goals, and they remain open to reflection, refinement, and renewal.

I hope this collection offers both fresh perspectives and practical insights into one of psychology's most enduring and consequential topics.

Read on to explore.

Habits, Familiarity, and the Future Self: Why We Keep Repeating Patterns We Want to Change

*By Dr Aloysius Tay, DSc(Psychology), The
Psychology Clinic (Singapore)*

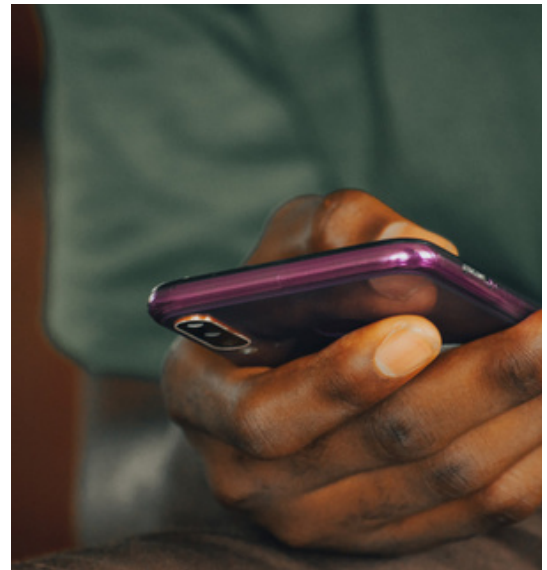
James wants to change.

Like many people, he wants to exercise more regularly, spend less time scrolling on his phone, and stop putting off important tasks until the last minute. He understands the benefits of these changes and genuinely intends to follow through. Yet, despite his best efforts, he often finds himself returning to the very behaviours he wants to leave behind.

Most of us can relate to James. We know we should exercise more, sleep earlier, spend less time online, eat more healthily, or be more patient with the people we care about. Yet knowing what to do and actually doing it are often very different things.

Understanding why this happens has long interested psychologists.

One of the most common assumptions about behaviour is that people continue doing things because those behaviours are rewarding or comfortable. While there is certainly some truth in that, it does not fully explain many of the struggles people bring into therapy rooms, coaching sessions, or everyday conversations.



Take procrastination, for example. Most people do not enjoy leaving important tasks until the last minute, and people struggling with self-doubt rarely enjoy criticising themselves. Yet these patterns often persist.

Over the years, I have found myself wondering whether we sometimes ask the wrong question. Instead of asking why people keep doing things they enjoy, perhaps we should ask why people keep doing things they do not enjoy.

~ ”

*Perhaps people repeat patterns
not because they are comfortable,
but because they are familiar.*

” ~

This distinction may appear subtle, but it changes how we think about behaviour. Familiarity provides a sense of predictability. The mind knows what to expect. Even when a pattern is frustrating, limiting, or unhelpful, it remains known territory.

The same principle can be observed in procrastination. Faced with uncertainty, the mind often returns to a well-rehearsed response. The behaviour may not be enjoyable, but it is known. In many ways, familiarity acts like a well-worn path through a forest. It may not be the best path, but it is the one we know how to follow.

Psychologists have long recognised that repeated behaviours gradually become automatic (Wood & Rünger, 2016). Over time, familiar responses require less conscious effort, which is one reason habits can be so powerful.

Familiarity alone, however, does not explain everything. Timing may also play an important role.

Psychological science has long distinguished between automatic and reflective forms of thinking (Kahneman, 2011). Automatic responses tend to be rapid and effortless, whereas reflective thinking is slower and more deliberate.

Imagine James sitting down to begin an important report. Almost immediately, familiar thoughts begin to appear: “I’ll do it later”, “I’m not in the right frame of mind”, or “I work better under pressure.” These responses are often less a deliberate choice and more a familiar pathway that has been travelled many times before. By the time James begins reflecting on what he should do, the familiar response may already be underway.



Viewed through this lens, some habits may persist not because people lack motivation or self-discipline, but because familiar responses gain momentum before reflection has an opportunity to participate (Tay, 2025).

As the urge to delay the task emerges, James pauses for a few seconds. During that brief moment, reflection has an opportunity to catch up and the conversation within his mind begins to change.

Instead of asking, "What do I feel like doing right now?", James begins asking, "What kind of person do I want to become?"

The pause itself does not guarantee change. However, it creates the possibility of change.

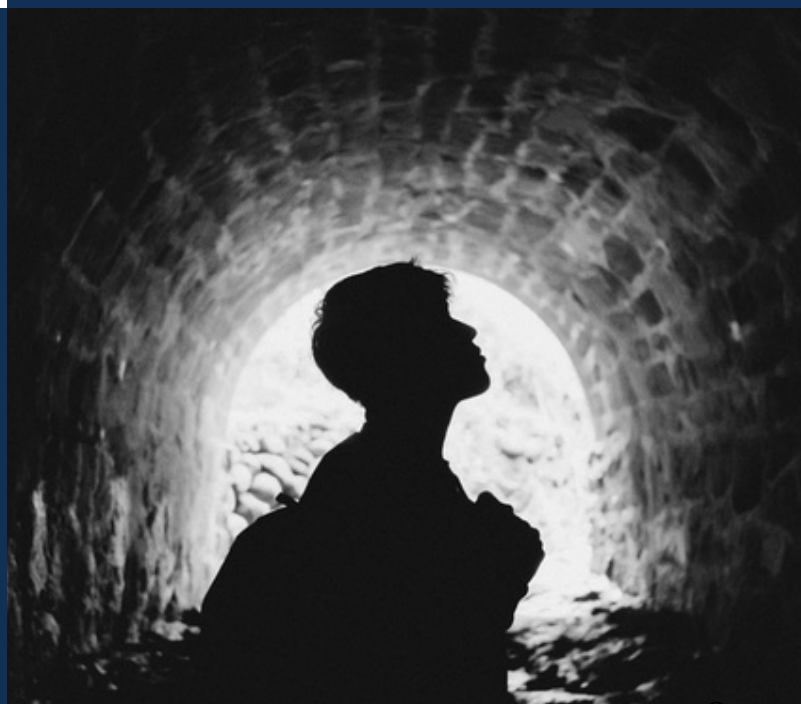
Many psychological approaches, including mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy, seek to create enough space for reflection to become involved before automatic responses take over.

Importantly, successful behaviour change is not simply about eliminating old habits. It is also about creating new familiarities.

The first time James starts a task immediately instead of delaying it, the behaviour feels unfamiliar and may still feel uncomfortable even after several attempts. Yet, with repetition, a new pathway begins to emerge, and what was once unfamiliar gradually becomes familiar.

Perhaps this is the real challenge of change.

Most people do not remain stuck because they enjoy their difficulties. More often, they remain connected to patterns they know. The familiar past exerts a powerful pull, even when a different future is desired.



Yet human beings are not guided only by familiar memories. They can also be guided by familiar futures.

In my work, lasting change rarely begins when people become experts at fighting old habits. More often, it begins when they become increasingly connected to the person they want to become. The future self becomes clearer, more believable, and eventually more familiar.

James does not become healthier by focusing on what he should stop doing. He changes when healthier actions become part of his identity and daily life.

Understanding habits through the lens of familiarity and timing offers a different perspective on behavioural change. The challenge is not always overcoming comfort. Sometimes the challenge is moving beyond familiarity. We often assume that change requires letting go of the past. Perhaps it also requires becoming acquainted with a different future.

"And perhaps lasting change begins when the future becomes more familiar than the past."



FROM INTENTION TO INSTINCT:

Why Your Exercise Plan Keeps Failing — And the Brain Hack That Can Fix It

Edgar Tham¹, Alida Toh¹, Michelle Kong¹, & Andrea Ferrer²
SportPsych Consulting Singapore¹
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Be honest — how's that fitness resolution really going?

If your gym shoes have been gathering dust since the New Year, you're not alone. Around four in ten Singaporeans don't get enough weekly physical activity (Chew et al., 2021). But the problem isn't laziness. More often, people try to adopt a long-term routine fuelled by motivation, which rises and falls with our mood and workload. Habits, on the other hand, don't need a daily pep talk or reward to get you going. They just happen

How Your Brain Builds a Habit

When an action is done in the same setting often enough, your brain learns to link the setting with the behaviour. Seeing a pair of walking shoes beside the door begins nudging you towards a walk — no internal debate needed (Phipps et al., 2024). Over time, this cue-based routine can make movement feel less like a mental tug-of-war and more like part of the day (Monge-Rojas et al., 2021): almost like autopilot.

These four ingredients can help turn good intentions to durable routines (Rhodes & Sui, 2021):

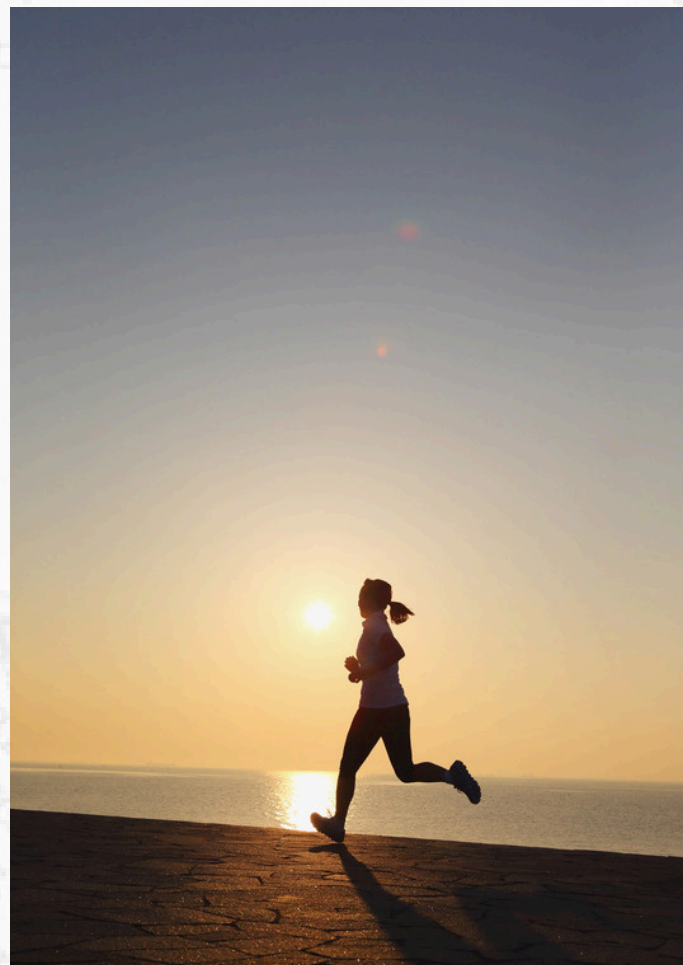
- A plan — knowing your when, where, and how.
- Confidence — believing you can actually do it.
- Enjoyment — finding it genuinely fun (or at least satisfying).
- Identity — seeing yourself as "someone who moves."

Get these working together, and exercise stops being something you try to do — it becomes part of how you see yourself and your daily routines.

Teens & Young Adults: Make It Fun, Make It Yours

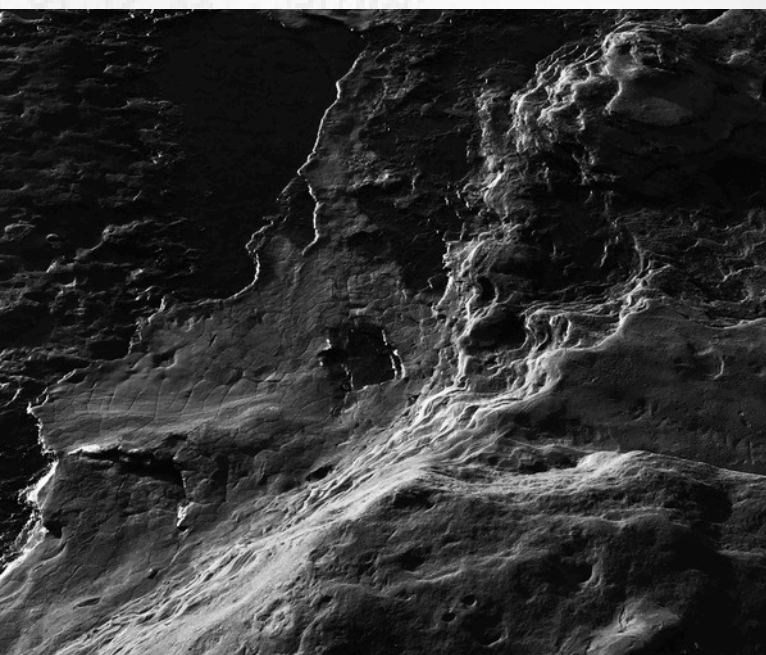
For young Singaporeans, staying active is not just about staying healthy and fit. Active teens tend to report better life satisfaction, more positive emotions, and lower stress, anxiety and depression (Gan et al., 2026). Yet adolescence is when many young people — especially girls — drift away from exercise, due to school pressures, body image concerns and fear of being judged (Derhemi & Kovaci, 2025).

The fix? Give young people more ownership and reasons to enjoy moving. Teens who have a choice in how they want to be active are far more likely to keep going (Derhemi & Kovaci, 2025), and the belief that “I can do this” can fuel motivation and sustained action (Yang et al., 2025).



Try this:

- Pick something you'd do even without being told — dance, martial arts, climbing, team sports.
- Bring a friend. Accountability plus laughter equals consistency.
- Chase small wins. Three 15-minute sessions beat one demoralising 90-minute session.



NEWS ALERT

Older Adults: It's Genuinely Never Too Late



Even seniors who haven't exercised for many years can develop new routines and enjoy meaningful gains in mood, mobility, memory and independence. For many older Singaporeans, the most powerful reason is staying independent: to keep climbing stairs, enjoy their grandchildren, or continue caring for their loved ones (Liew et al., 2025). For them, early successes, however small, can build confidence and make the next session easier, even when fear of injury or low confidence gets in the way (Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2023). Starting safely, with proper guidance, makes all the difference.

Try this:

- Join a senior-friendly group programme that offers structure, safety and social connection (Royse et al., 2023).
- Get guidance from a physiotherapist or certified trainer early on.
- Focus on functional movements — balance for fall prevention, leg strength for stairs.
- Celebrate every win. Confidence compounds (McMullan et al., 2021).





REFLECT & TAKE ACTION (5 MINUTES):



Build Your Exercise Habit

An exercise habit is not developed by forcing yourself into action, but by planning your next steps that are clear, small and repeatable. Fill this in before you close the page.

1. Consistency beats intensity.
My smallest repeatable action this week is:

_____.

2. Same time, same place (anchor your cue).

My if-then plan: If it is (time/trigger) _____, then I will (activity) _____.

_____, at (place) _____.
(Wee & Dillon, 2022)

3. Start smaller than feels necessary (make it easy to begin).

On my busiest day, my "micro-version" is: (e.g., 5-10 minutes) _____.

4. Grow into your identity (behaviour follows belief).

I'm becoming someone who:

_____.

5. Be kind to yourself when life interrupts (plan the comeback).

If I miss a session, I will restart by:

_____.

**Tonight, try this small cue:
put your walking shoes by
the door.**

**That's how intention
becomes instinct.**

Distraction to Dependence: Habit Formation in Digital Emotion Regulation

*By Shalini Elangovan, Senior Clinical
Psychologist, AWWA LTD*

Digital technologies have become deeply embedded in daily life transforming how people experience and regulate emotions. Smartphones, television and social media applications provide immediate access to distraction, comfort, and stimulation. While these technologies offer convenience and functions in managing stress, their increasing role in emotional coping raises questions about how habitual patterns of digital engagement develop and influence psychological well-being.



Emotion regulation refers to the processes through which individuals manage, modify, and respond to emotional experiences. Healthy emotion regulation involves recognising emotions, tolerating discomfort, and employing adaptive coping strategies (Bettis et al., 2022). However, in an increasingly digital world, individuals may turn to technology as a means of escaping or avoiding distressing emotions.

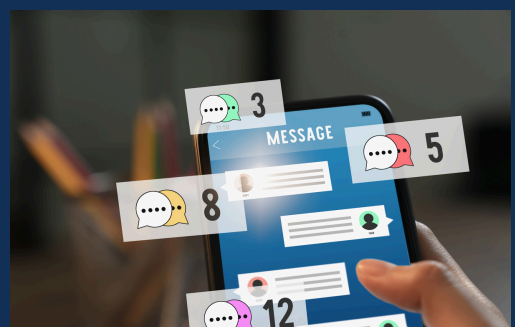
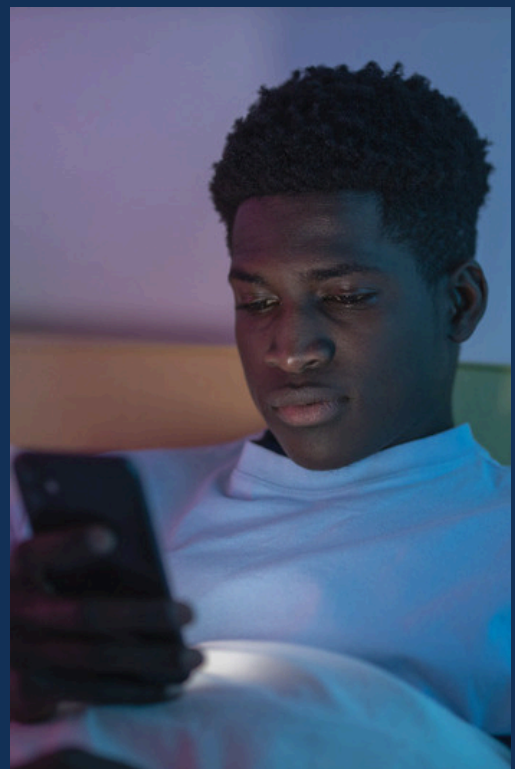
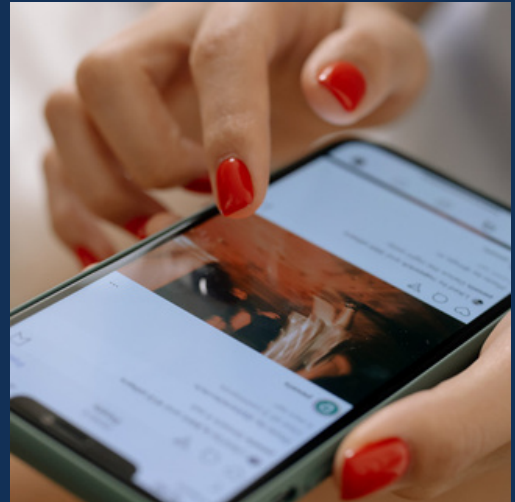
The appeal of digital technologies is their immediate psychological relief. A person experiencing sadness may spend hours browsing digital content for temporary distraction. However, when digital engagement becomes the primary coping strategy, it can reinforce emotional avoidance.

The Role of Habit Formation

Habits are automatic behavioural patterns that develop through repeated associations between cues, actions, and outcomes. Habit formation occurs when behaviours are consistently repeated in response to specific triggers and are reinforced by rewarding consequences (Hoffner & Lee, 2015).

Within digital environments, habit formation may be amplified by continuous access, personalised content, and immediate feedback. Through autoplay, notifications, "likes," and endless scrolling, users receive frequent rewards of pleasure, novelty, or relief. These rewards strengthen behavioural patterns and increase repeated engagement.

Over time, emotional states can become cues that trigger digital behaviours. Feelings of boredom, stress, loneliness, anxiety, or sadness may automatically prompt a person to





reach for a device. What begins as an intentional coping strategy gradually becomes an ingrained habit.

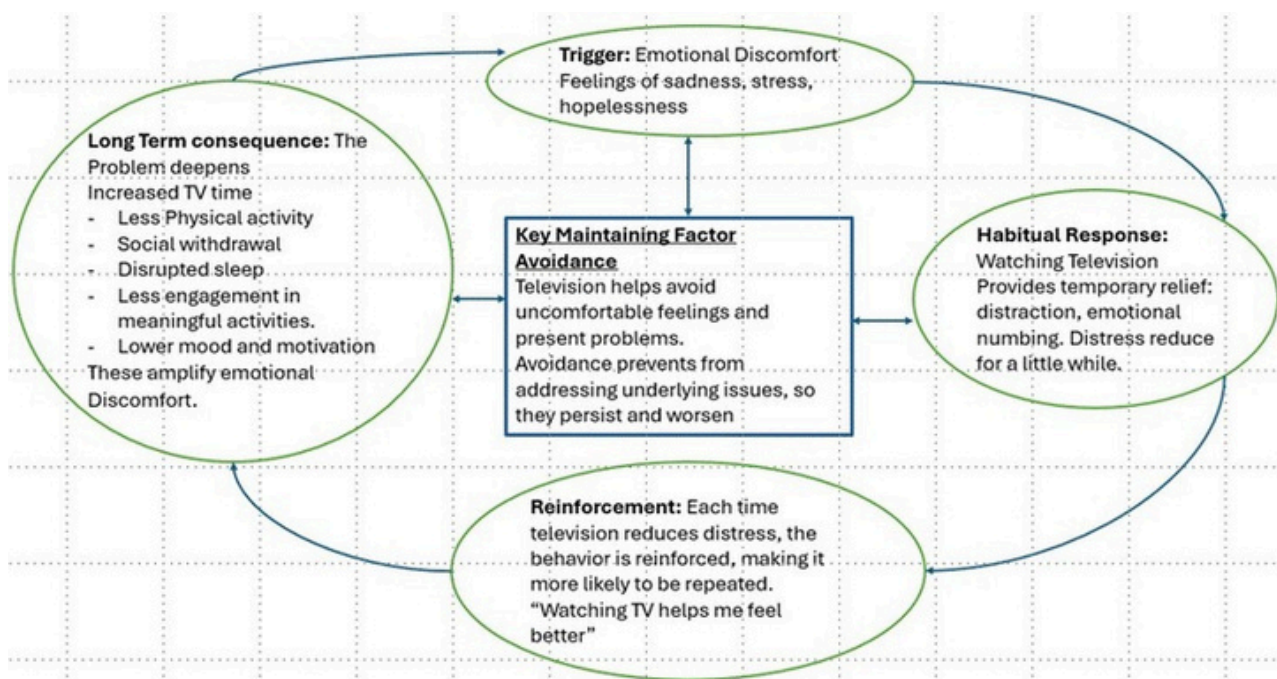
While these behaviours may reduce emotional discomfort in the short term, they do not address the underlying causes of distress. Consequently, individuals may become increasingly dependent on digital distractions while having fewer opportunities to develop adaptive coping skills and emotional resilience (Gorday & Bardeen, 2022).

The Role of Habit Formation

The relationship between digital engagement and emotional regulation can be seen in the case of a client with symptoms of depression. She

reported sadness, fatigue, low motivation, and difficulty managing daily responsibilities. These difficulties arose from multiple stressors, including caring for a child with special needs, co-parenting challenges, and relationship difficulties. Over time, these demands left her feeling emotionally overwhelmed.

In an effort to manage these difficult emotions, she began spending more time watching television. Initially, television served as a temporary escape from distressing thoughts. When she felt sad, it provided comfort and allowed her to momentarily disengage from her worries and emotional discomfort. While this strategy appeared helpful in the short term, it gradually became the client's primary way of coping. Activities she once enjoyed, such as exercising, socialising, and pursuing personal interests, became less frequent. Instead, she increasingly relied on television whenever she felt sad, stressed, or hopeless.



Over time, this pattern developed into an automatic behavioural cycle (Figure 1). Emotional discomfort became the trigger, television viewing the habitual response, and temporary emotional relief the reinforcing outcome. Each time she turned to television for relief, the behaviour was reinforced because it reduced her distress in the moment.



However, although television viewing provided temporary comfort, it did not address the underlying causes of the client's difficulties. Spending more time watching television led to reduced physical activity, social withdrawal, disrupted sleep, and less engagement in meaningful activities. These changes further reinforced her low mood and reduced motivation.

This case highlights how a coping strategy that initially serves a protective function can become maladaptive when relied upon excessively. Rather than helping the client process emotions or address life challenges, television viewing became a form of avoidance-oriented emotion regulation. While avoidance may offer short-term relief, persistent reliance on distraction can limit the development of adaptive coping strategies and contribute to a cycle of ongoing emotional difficulties.

Mindful Technology Use

Mindful use of digital technology, involving intentional, reflective, and values-driven behaviour, can reduce habitual scrolling and passive consumption (Sandra, 2025).



When individuals pause before engaging, notice their emotions before screen use, and use technology with intention, they create psychological space between emotion and behaviour. This helps reduce the reinforcing cycle that maintains dependence on digital distraction.

Conclusion

Digital technologies have transformed modern approaches to emotion regulation by offering immediate access to distraction and psychological relief. While these tools can serve adaptive functions, repeated reliance on digital engagement during times of emotional distress may contribute to the formation of habitual coping patterns that prioritise avoidance over emotional processing.

For clinicians, exploring clients' digital habits can provide valuable insights into emotional regulation patterns that are often overlooked. By fostering awareness and encouraging adaptive coping strategies, individuals can harness the benefits of digital technology without becoming dependent on it as their primary source of emotional regulation.



From Autopilot to Awareness

The Psychology of Mindfulness, Habits, and Conscious Living

By: Dr Sunita Rai (PsyD, CMT-P, CMSAC, MSPS, MICIP-AS, CMEMIP-1)



It is 11.45 pm. Elaine has just replied to another work email. Her shoulders are tense, her mind is active, and she knows she promised herself she would stop. Tomorrow, she will probably repeat the same pattern.

When she came to therapy, she said, “I know what I should do. I need boundaries, rest and self-care. I just cannot seem to do it.” The problem was not knowledge. It was automaticity. When anxiety appeared, she reached for her phone. When work felt overwhelming, she worked harder. When she felt inadequate, her inner critic took over.

Wood and Neal’s (2007) habit-goal interface model explains this: once established, a habit can be triggered by context—a time, place,



bodily sensation or emotional state—without conscious intention. For Elaine, the late hour, desk and body tension were enough to cue the phone. Her goal to stop had little power over a response that was no longer asking permission.

Habits Are More Than Behaviours

Repeated actions can become automatic, allowing us to function efficiently with less conscious effort (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999).

Behaviours repeated in stable contexts gradually acquire automaticity (Lally et al., 2010; Gardner, 2015). Autopilot is therefore not inherently problematic. It helps us drive familiar routes and move through routines.



The difficulty arises when autopilot enters emotional and relational life. We may react before reflecting, judge before understanding, withdraw before communicating, or over-function before recognising exhaustion. These are not simply “bad habits”. They are habitual relationships with uncertainty, discomfort, approval and self-worth.



A more meaningful question is not only, “How do I change this habit?” but “How am I relating to my experience when this habit appears?” This shifts the focus from behavioural control to conscious awareness.

Mindfulness and the Awareness Pathway

Mindfulness is often described as paying attention to present-moment experience with openness and without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Clinically, it is also a way of waking up to our lives and noticing old patterns before they take over.



Shapiro et al. (2006) call this “reperceiving”: stepping back from a thought, emotion or urge and observing it, rather than being fused with it. This allows mindfulness to interrupt automatic reactions before they run their course.

I often describe this as an Awareness Pathway. Change rarely begins with trying harder. It begins with seeing more clearly.

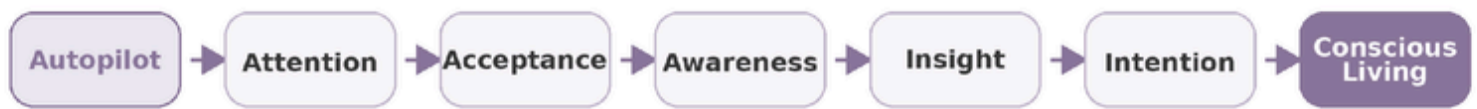
- **Attention** helps us pause instead of being captured by worry, distraction, or the inner critic.
- **Acceptance** creates space to acknowledge what is present without suppressing, fixing, or escaping it.
- **Awareness** allows us to notice our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, urges, and reactions.
- **Insight** then begins to emerge. We understand not only what we repeatedly do, but why. Overworking may protect us from feeling inadequate; people-pleasing from rejection; self-criticism from uncertainty.
- **Intention** supports conscious choice aligned with values, wellbeing and who we want to become.



This pathway is consistent with research linking mindfulness to attentional regulation, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and psychological flexibility (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hayes et al., 2012). It is also reflected in mindfulness-based approaches that emphasise awareness, acceptance, self-understanding, and intentional living (Kathirasan & Rai, 2021, 2023).

The Awareness Pathway

From Autopilot to Conscious Living

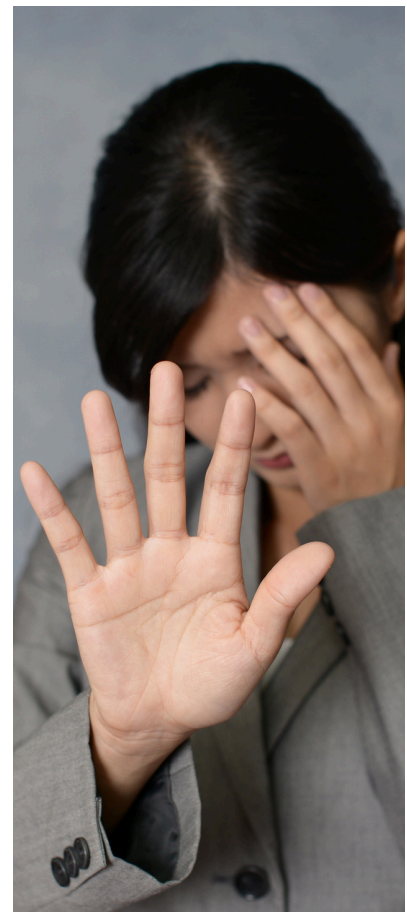


Attention → Acceptance → Awareness → Insight → Intention

Why This Matters in Singapore and Asian Contexts

In Singapore and many Asian societies, achievement, perseverance, responsibility, and family commitment are deeply valued strengths. Yet when internalised without awareness, they can become constant doing. Busyness becomes identity. Rest feels indulgent. Saying “no” feels selfish. Digital connectivity keeps attention outwards, leaving little space for reflection.

Mindfulness does not ask us to withdraw from responsibility or ambition. It invites us to engage with life more consciously. Wellbeing is reflected not only in productivity but also in how we attend, respond, and relate.



Five Ways to Interrupt Autopilot

- 1 Pause and name the pattern.** Ask, "What is happening in me right now?" Naming worry, rushing, or self-criticism creates distance.
- 2 Notice the cue.** Habits often arise in response to tiredness, uncertainty, shame, or the need for approval. Understanding the cue brings compassion.
- 3 Return to the body.** A conscious breath, feet on the floor, or softening the shoulders brings attention to the present.
- 4 Practise acceptance before action.** Ask, "Can I allow this to be here for a moment?" Acceptance reduces struggle so a wiser response becomes possible.
- 5 Choose one intentional response.** It may be pausing before replying, putting the phone away, speaking gently, or asking for what is needed.

Choosing Conscious Living

Perhaps the most important habit we can cultivate is returning to awareness. Sometimes we rehearse anxiety, self-criticism or busyness. We can also rehearse awareness, attention, acceptance and compassion.

The question is not whether we have habits—we all do. The deeper question is whether they are consciously chosen or unconsciously lived. Through intentional moments, we begin to move from autopilot to awareness, purpose and wellbeing.

THE HIDDEN COST OF HELPFUL HABITS

By Dr. Emmanuel Bernet

IT IS EVENING.

The schoolbag is open, the phone beside the worksheet, and homework should have been finished before bedtime. The child knows what would help: put the phone away, start with one page, move, or ask for help. Yet the first step feels unreachable: they scroll, delay, or stare at the screen. From the outside, this can look like laziness.

Psychologically, the habit may have become too costly to begin.



This friction is especially relevant in Singapore's high-expectation educational context. The Youth Epidemiology and Resilience study reported significant internalising symptoms among adolescents, while a 2025 SingHealth Duke-NUS landscape brief noted family concerns that mental-health programmes could detract from academic performance ([Stona et al., 2025](#); [Wong et al., 2024](#)).

Habits are often described as routines built through repetition. Repetition matters, but behaviour becomes easier when stable cues and environments reduce friction ([Fiorella, 2020](#)).

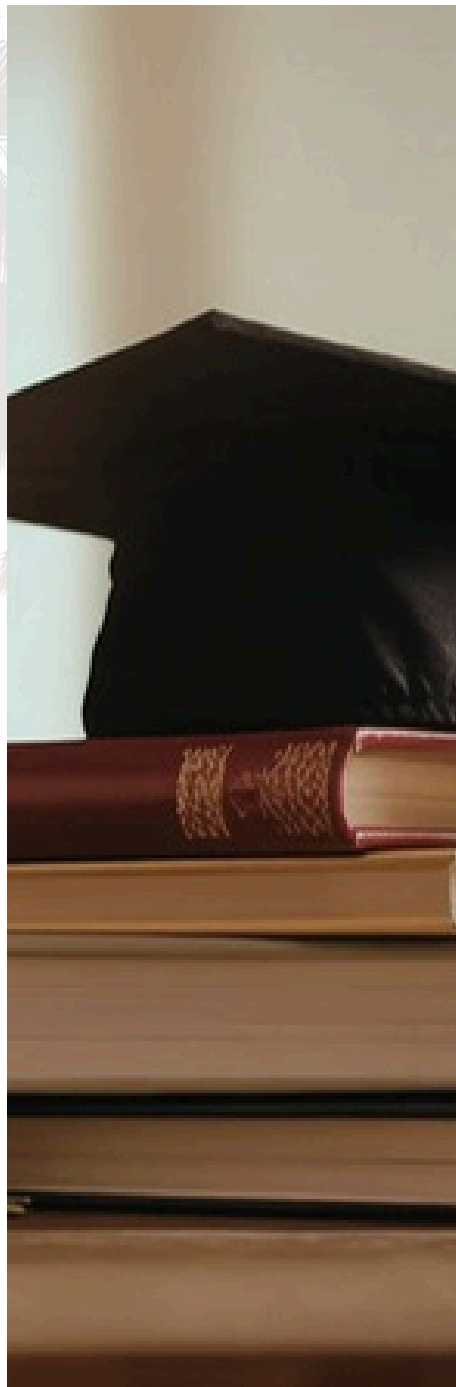




WHEN THE FIRST STEP BECOMES COSTLY

Public conversations around PSLE, including CNA's documentary *Regardless of Grades* (Saad & Peh, 2024), show how routines can become emotionally charged. Wellbeing habits therefore need to be framed as supporting learning, not taking time away from it.

Over time, a habit develops a history. If schoolwork is repeatedly paired with comparison, fear of disappointing others, or loss of rest and play, the worksheet itself can become a cue for worry, shame, bodily tension, or escape.



THIS IS WHERE

EXPECTANCY-VALUE THEORY

of achievement motivation becomes useful. It suggests that motivation is shaped by what young people expect and by the value they attach to the task: *Can I do this? Why would I do this?* Because motivation is situated, these answers can shift across subjects, settings, and moments. A third question is decisive: *What might it cost me?* Cost is the negative side of engaging: effort cost, such as energy and time; opportunity cost, such as lost rest or play; and emotional or ego cost, such as anxiety, shame, or fear that failure says something about who I am (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020).

THIS HELPS EXPLAIN WHY

“I KNOW IT MATTERS”

DOES NOT ALWAYS BECOME

“I CAN START NOW.”

For anxious or low-mood young people who care deeply but doubt their ability, effort can feel dangerous. If failure might mean “I am not good enough,” avoidance offers temporary relief, but removes the chance to experience mastery (*Wigfield & Ponnock, 2020*). The habit never becomes easier because it never gets repeated safely enough.



MAKING THE FIRST STEP POSSIBLE



A helpful response reduces the cost of beginning. Adults can ask: What would make this first step smaller, clearer, and safer? Instead of “study for two hours,” try “open the file and work for ten minutes.” Instead of “fix your sleep,” try “place the phone outside the bedroom after brushing your teeth.”

Small pleasant cues also help: a drink the child likes, a snack, a comfortable place, or a short starter ritual. This is habit design: making the first step less punishing and more repeatable. In class, it might be a predictable settling routine, one visible first step, or a brief pause before a difficult task.



A child's environment is physical and relational. Children can pick up on adult anxiety, pressure, and disappointment. When parents or teachers pause, manage their own stress, and communicate encouragement rather than urgency, the task can feel less like a test of worth.

Adult self-reflection also matters. Without blame, adults can ask: Which expectations are truly this child's, and which come from the wider educational climate, my own worries, or my own experience of achievement and failure? This lens also applies to adults' own tasks, habits, and motivation. The aim is not to remove ambition, but to notice when adult anxiety is passed on as urgency, comparison, or disappointment. The useful question becomes:

"AM I MAKING THE FIRST STEP FEEL SAFER OR MORE COSTLY?"



A cognitive-behavioural approach treats thoughts such as "I will fail" or "I cannot cope" as predictions to test through small actions, not final truths (Beck, 2021). A body-oriented perspective adds that anxiety and low mood can show up through breath, posture, tension, heaviness, agitation, or shutdown. Learning to notice and respond to internal body signals can support emotion regulation (Price & Hooven, 2018). For some children, the first step before homework is not cognitive. It is feeling their feet on the floor, breathing slowly, stretching, or naming tightness in their chest.

Helpful habits are not built by willpower alone.

They become possible when the first step is small enough to begin, meaningful enough to matter, pleasant enough to repeat, emotionally affordable, and safe enough in the body. When the first step feels less costly, the routine has a better chance to take root.



Same Challenge, Better Playbook: What Singapore Classrooms Can Learn from Training Like Athletes

*By Ms. Lynn Tan and
Dr. Yuto Yasuda*

Remember those golden stickers your teacher would award on the classroom notice board? For many Singaporean children, these charts were early encounters with habit formation: complete your homework, remember your spelling list, help a classmate, and another sticker appeared beside your name.

Today, despite the shift to digital classroom platforms, primary schools still rely on familiar habit-building practices: tracking behaviour, recognising effort, rewarding milestones, and reinforcing routines. Classrooms have long trained behavioural habits. The question is whether we are equally intentional about training psychological habits for difficult learning moments.

Singapore's Ministry of Education already recognises these competencies. Policies such as the 21st Century Competencies framework and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) aim to develop resilience, emotional regulation and relationship management (Ministry of Education, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). These map closely onto the psychological habits students need under pressure.



Mental Skills Are Trained, Not Merely Encouraged

Athletes are not simply told to “be resilient.” or are innately resilient. Rather, they practice before performance, regulate themselves during pressure, and recover after mistakes. This reflects a core principle in sport psychology: psychological skills are not fixed traits, but capacities developed through structured practice. Primary school students also face performance moments such as oral presentations, tests, and peer comparison. If classrooms already train responsibility and discipline, they can also train attention, recovery, and adaptive responses to failure.

This does not mean importing elite sport culture into the classroom. Children do not need more pressure disguised as motivation. Rather, classrooms can borrow structured psychological routines that help children prepare, perform, recover, and improve.

Preparing, Performing, Recovering: What Classrooms Can Borrow from Sport Psychology

The first lesson from sport is preparation. Athletes use pre-performance routines to regulate attention, focus on performance and reduce perceived uncertainty. In a classroom, this might look like a simple “ready routine” before a test: pause, take two slow breaths, identify one controllable goal, and begin. A child’s goal might be, “I will read each question carefully and show my working,” rather than “I must get full marks,” directing attention towards controllable actions.

The second lesson is self-regulation during a challenge. When athletes make errors, they are trained to reset quickly and not self-criticize. In classrooms, a child stuck on a difficult question might use a reset routine: breathe, relax their shoulders, and use constructive self-talk. An if-then plan can support this by helping students anticipate challenges and prepare responses. For example, when facing a difficult question, students might think “Try the next step,” “Use another strategy,” or “Skip and return.” Repeated use of if-then planning can build resilience.

The third lesson is reflection after performance. Academic environments often treat mistakes as evidence of ability, while sport psychology treats performance feedback as information for adjustment. After a disappointing result, a recovery routine might prompt questions: What happened? What will I practice next? These questions shift attention from self-judgement to improvable behaviours. Continuous reflection can also support more stable, positive performance. This aligns with self-regulated learning, where students monitor performance, evaluate strategies, and adjust action (Zimmerman, 2002).



Training for Pressure Without Adding More Pressure

"Training like athletes" should not make primary school more competitive; it should help children manage the pressure they already face.

Psychological skills training can help students approach learning as a process that includes preparation, effort, reflection, adjustment, and recovery. Yet these skills do not develop in isolation, because children experience pressure shaped by the relationships and norms surrounding them.

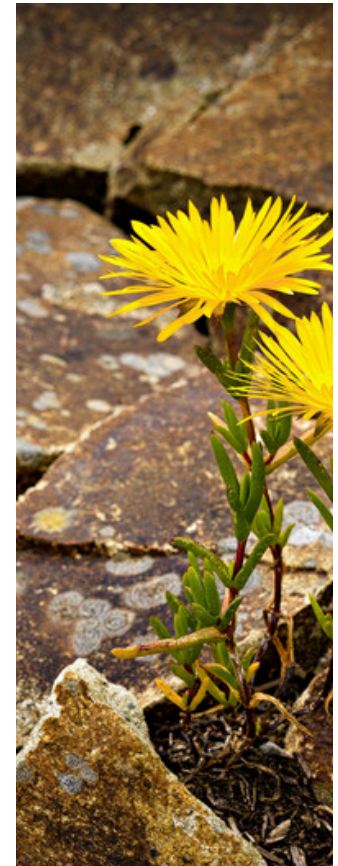
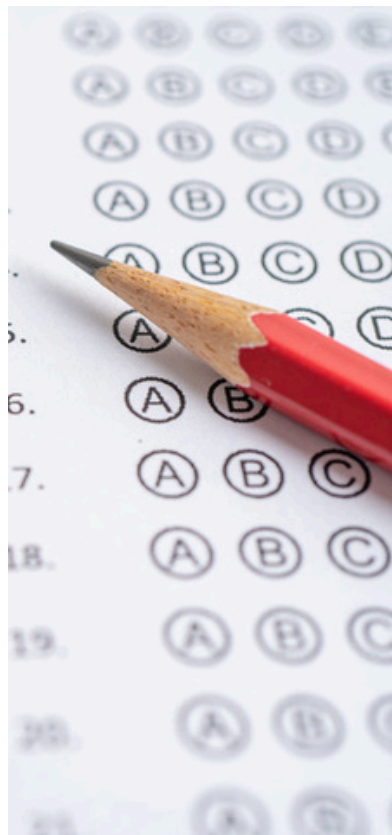
Sports psychology reminds us that performance is culturally situated: how students interpret pressure, feedback, comparison and failure may depend on classroom norms, family expectations, and broader cultural ideas about effort and success (Yasuda & Masuda, 2024).



In Singapore, academic pressure is often relational as well as individual. Students may not only strive for themselves, but also for parents, teachers, or peers. Classroom adaptations of sport psychology therefore need to be culturally sensitive, not merely performance-focused (Yasuda, 2022; Yasuda & Masuda, 2024). When mistakes repeatedly signal inadequacy—especially when achievement is tied to self-worth or social expectations—that pattern hardens. Conversely, pairing setbacks with reflection, strategy, and support enables new patterns of attention, persistence, and recovery.

A Call to Move from Values to Practice

Singapore values resilience and social-emotional development, but a gap remains: these skills must be practiced regularly to be effective under pressure. Sport psychology offers a training model: practice before pressure, regulate during pressure, and reflect before the next attempt.



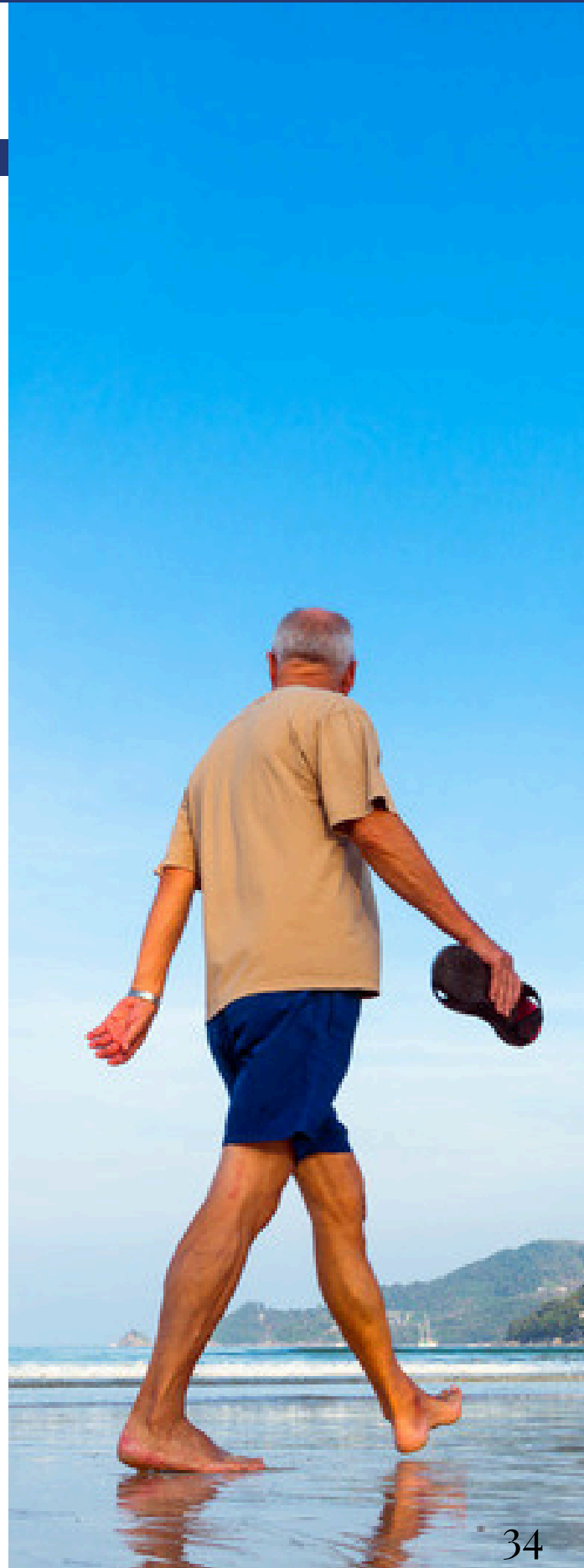
Perhaps the classroom sticker chart was never just about gold stars. It was an early reminder that habits are built through cues, repetition, feedback, and recognition. The same logic can apply not only to homework or behaviour, but to the psychological skills children need when learning becomes difficult. If young athletes can be taught to manage pressure and recover from mistakes, young learners deserve the same playbook.

Developing Healthy Habits for Preventing Cognitive Decline and Frailty in Ageing: Evidence-based Findings from Singapore.

By Tony Tay & Cindy Chan

Singapore attained super-aged society status in 2026, and by 2030, one in four residents is expected to be aged 65 years or older. Older adults aged 65 years today can expect to live to 86.6 years, with women outliving men. However, a longer lifespan does not necessarily translate into a longer healthspan. While lifespan refers to total years lived, healthspan reflects the years lived in good health. In Singapore, healthspan trails lifespan by an average of 10 years.

Growing research aims to maximise healthspan by identifying modifiable habits that protect against age-related decline. Drawing on Singapore-based studies published between 2022 and 2026, this article synthesises recent evidence on habits that may reduce cognitive decline and frailty. It also highlights emerging evidence on resonance breathing to improve heart rate variability, cognition, and frailty. By examining these modifiable protective factors, we underscore the value of evidence-based practices for promoting healthy ageing.



HABITS FOR PREVENTING COGNITIVE DECLINE

With a longer lifespan, a significant decline in cognition is an unwarranted burden for older adults living in the community. Recent findings suggest a high level of symptom awareness and help-seeking intent among older adults concerned with cognitive decline in the community (Liew et al., 2026). Therefore, interest exists among older adults for the preservation of cognitive functioning.

Firstly, results from the second wave recruitment cohort of the Singapore Longitudinal Ageing Study (SLAS-2) suggest that engagement in cognitive stimulating activities such as reading newspapers, doing puzzles, writing, and attending courses may be habits worth developing to improve the odds against cognitive decline (Lee et al., 2023). Similarly, older adults involved in mindfulness practice, choral singing, horticulture, and art therapy found sustained improvement in their cognitive functioning (Ng et al., 2022).

Secondly, maintaining high-quality dietary habits may also serve as a protective factor against cognitive decline. Planetary healthy diets involving high intake of plant-based foods and a reduction in processed food was found to reduce cognitive decline later in life among Chinese older adults (Zhang et al., 2024). The consumption of a curcumin-rich diet through meals containing curry has similarly been reported to reduce the rate of cognitive decline and risk of developing cognitive impairment (Lu et al., 2025). The consumption of more than two servings of mushroom weekly was also found to be associated with a reduction in risk of developing cognitive impairment among older adults (Yang et al., 2025).





HABITS FOR FRAILTY PREVENTION

Frailty is a health condition where body systems decline in their physiological reserve, thus increasing the vulnerability towards health stressors that occur in later life. Frailty is preventable and reversible. Therefore, developing habits that act as protective factors against frailty would maximise healthspan and delay functional decline.

First and foremost, practicing Tai Chi more than once a week resulted in a decrease in the odds of being diagnosed with frailty and helped to maintain physical functioning of older adults in the community (Lee et al., 2022a). For older adults who are unable to engage in strenuous exercises, physical activity in the form of regular participation in light housework has also been associated with a reduction in odds of being diagnosed with frailty (Lee et al., 2022b).

Next, older adults are at an increased risk of adverse frailty outcomes from social isolation and loneliness. Frailty has been reported to be significantly associated with loneliness, lower level of community integration, and smaller social networks of friends among older adults (Chong et al., 2022). It is thus integral for older adults to develop the habit of participating in social activities. An increase in the size of social networks is expected to combat social isolation and loneliness, which in turn reduces incidence of frailty.



CULTIVATING A RESONANCE BREATHING HABIT

Heart rate variability (HRV) refers to the variation in time between each oscillation of heartbeat and is increasingly recognised as a non-invasive marker of autonomic nervous system function (Tay et al., 2025). Autonomic dysfunction is common among older adults with cognitive impairment and frailty, making HRV a potential therapeutic target. Resonance breathing, performed at approximately six breaths per minute, synchronises heart rate and respiration to maximise HRV amplitude. This physiological feedback enhances autonomic regulation and may confer multiple health benefits for older adults.

Resonance breathing is readily implemented in community settings, with 10–20 minutes of daily practice over 4–8 weeks shown to improve autonomic regulation. However, maintaining the resonance breathing rate may initially be challenging for older adults. Structured programmes and group-based practice may therefore improve guidance, motivation, and adherence.



HABITS FORMATION AS CORNERSTONE FOR HEALTH

Maximising healthspan requires sustained commitment to healthy habits. An evidence-based approach provides a strong foundation for informed decisions and meaningful lifestyle changes throughout ageing. Consistently applying scientifically supported strategies can enhance long-term health and well-being.



HABIT FORMATION IN THE AGE OF AI COMPANIONS AND ALGORITHMIC PERSONALISATION: AGENCY, WELLBEING, AND THE DIGITAL SELF

*By Tanjina Ashraf Khan Mou,
Mental Health Professional
CEO, MentCouch Psychology Centre*



The New Landscape of Habit Formation

Why do we reach for our phones before we are fully awake? Why do some habits seem to form effortlessly while others require relentless discipline? Traditionally, psychologists have understood habits as behaviours that become automatic through repeated associations between cues and actions (Gardner, 2015). Today, however, many of these cues are no longer solely generated by our environments or intentions. Increasingly, they are designed, personalised, and delivered by algorithms.

Consider the daily commute on Singapore's MRT network. Many commuters instinctively reach for their phones the moment they board, scrolling through personalised news feeds, social media updates, or short-form videos. What appears to be a simple routine is often the product of a sophisticated interaction between environmental cues, psychological needs, and algorithmic systems designed to sustain engagement. The train arrives, the phone emerges, the application opens, and the scrolling begins — often with little conscious deliberation. Such patterns illustrate how habits are increasingly shaped not only by repetition, but also by digital environments engineered to anticipate and influence behaviour. From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, behaviour emerges through reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments, making algorithmically curated digital platforms powerful contexts that both shape and respond to users' behavioural patterns (Bandura, 1986; Corey et al., 2025).

Every day, recommendation systems suggest what we should watch, read, purchase, and even think about. AI companions remind us to exercise, meditate, or complete tasks. Notifications arrive precisely when predictive systems anticipate our engagement. In this context, habit formation is no longer simply a matter of repetition. It is becoming a dynamic interaction between human psychology and adaptive technological systems.

Habits, Automation, and Human Agency

From a psychological perspective, habits serve an important function. They reduce cognitive effort, allowing individuals to navigate daily life efficiently. Healthy habits can support physical health, emotional regulation, productivity, and wellbeing. However, the same mechanisms that facilitate beneficial routines can also reinforce behaviours that undermine flourishing. The critical question is not whether technology influences habits — it clearly does — but how that influence shapes human agency.

Agency refers to the capacity to intentionally direct one's behaviour toward personally meaningful goals. Self-Determination Theory suggests that wellbeing is enhanced when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Yet, algorithmic systems often operate by reducing decision-making effort. While this can increase convenience, it may also shift behaviour from conscious choice to passive compliance.

Consider the seemingly harmless act of opening a social media application. What begins as a deliberate decision can quickly evolve into an automatic behavioural sequence triggered by boredom, stress, or environmental cues. Sophisticated recommendation algorithms then sustain engagement by continuously providing novel and emotionally salient content. Over time, the habit becomes less about intentional use and more about responding to an externally engineered behavior loop.

When Algorithms Support Positive Behaviour Change

At the same time, digital technologies can also promote positive habit formation. Applications that support exercise, mindfulness, sleep hygiene, or gratitude practices can strengthen self-regulation through timely reminders, feedback, and goal tracking. Behavioural science demonstrates that immediate reinforcement increases the likelihood of repeated behaviour and digital platforms are uniquely positioned to provide such reinforcement consistently (Duarte-Anselmi et al., 2026). In this sense, algorithms can function as scaffolding that supports beneficial routines.

The psychological impact of these systems may be particularly relevant in highly connected urban societies such as Singapore. Digital technologies are deeply embedded in education, work, healthcare, and social life. At the same time, achievement-oriented cultural expectations can create pressure to optimise performance and productivity. Under these conditions, habit-forming technologies may offer efficiency and support while simultaneously increasing susceptibility to overwork, digital dependence, and attentional fragmentation.

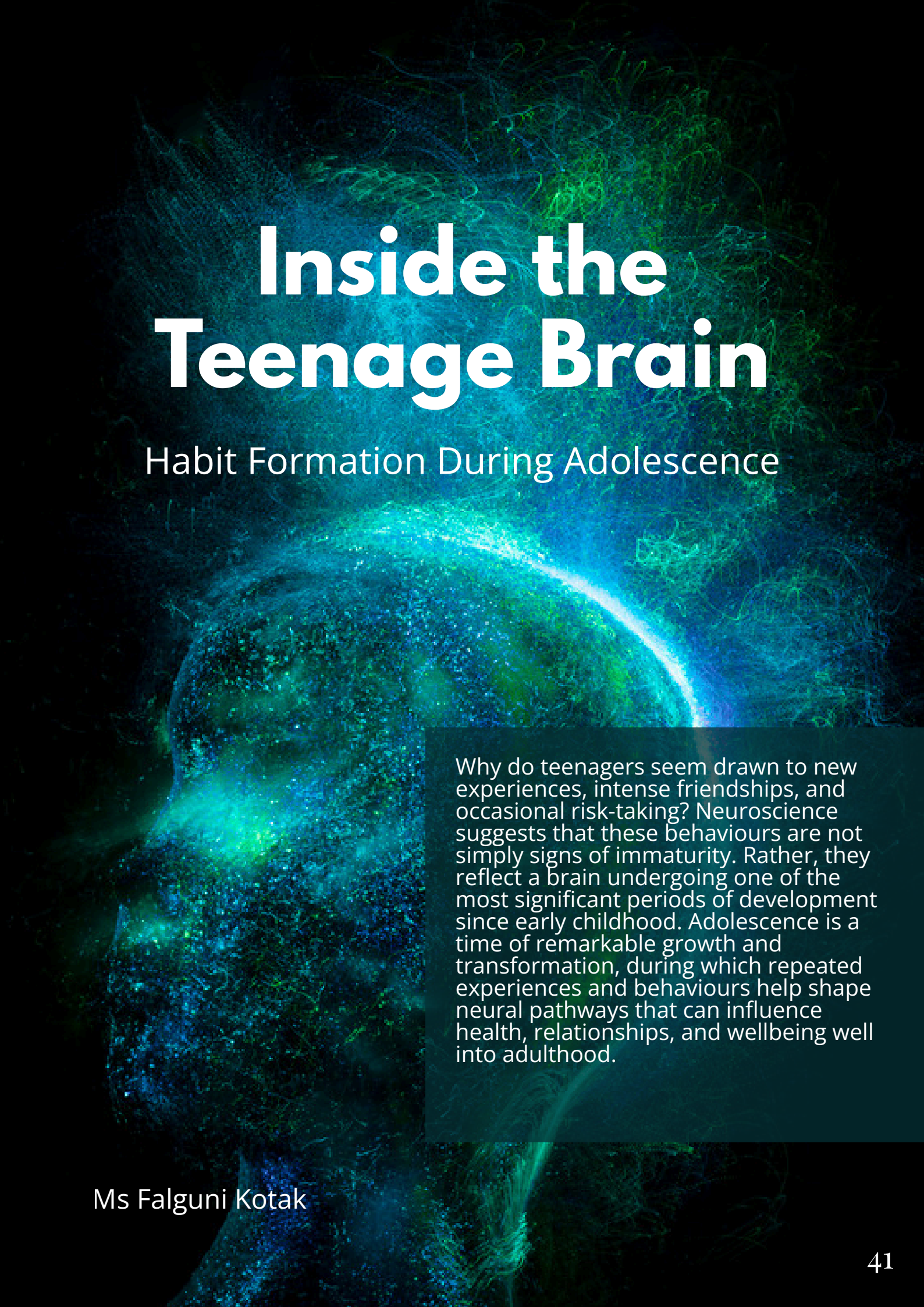
The Digital Self: Habits and Identity

An emerging concern involves the relationship between habits and identity. Repeated actions do not merely shape behavior; they gradually shape self-concept. People often come to view themselves through the lens of their habitual patterns: "I am someone who exercises," "I am productive," or conversely, "I am always distracted." When algorithmic systems increasingly influence what behaviors are repeated, they may indirectly participate in the construction of the digital self.

This does not imply that technology determines behavior. Human beings remain active interpreters of their environments. Nevertheless, psychological awareness is becoming increasingly important. Rather than asking whether technology is good or bad, we might ask a more useful question: Are our habits aligned with our values, or merely with what algorithms predict will capture our attention?

Towards Intentional Human-AI Partnerships

In an age of AI companions and personalised digital ecosystems, flourishing may depend not on resisting technology but on engaging with it intentionally. The challenge for modern psychology is to understand how individuals can preserve agency while benefiting from increasingly intelligent systems. Ultimately, the healthiest habits may be those that allow technology to serve human wellbeing rather than allowing human behaviour to be shaped by technology's invisible hand.



Inside the Teenage Brain

Habit Formation During Adolescence

Why do teenagers seem drawn to new experiences, intense friendships, and occasional risk-taking? Neuroscience suggests that these behaviours are not simply signs of immaturity. Rather, they reflect a brain undergoing one of the most significant periods of development since early childhood. Adolescence is a time of remarkable growth and transformation, during which repeated experiences and behaviours help shape neural pathways that can influence health, relationships, and wellbeing well into adulthood.



Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel describes the adolescent mind using the acronym ESSENCE:

ES - Emotional Spark

SE - Social Engagement

N - Novelty Seeking

CE - Creative Exploration

These characteristics help explain why teenagers often experience emotions intensely, become highly invested in friendships, seek out new experiences, and display creativity and innovation. Although these tendencies can sometimes create challenges, they also provide powerful opportunities for learning and growth. The goal is not to suppress these natural drives but to channel them constructively. At the heart of adolescent development is the brain's extraordinary capacity for neuroplasticity — its ability to change in response to experience. Over time, actions that initially require conscious effort can become automatic habits. Researchers often describe this process as a habit loop consisting of a cue, a routine, and a reward (Duhigg, 2012).

A cue triggers the behaviour, the routine is the behaviour itself, and the reward increases the likelihood that the behaviour will be repeated. For example, boredom or stress may prompt a teenager to check social media, resulting in entertainment or social connection. Whether a teenager practises a musical instrument, exercises regularly, scrolls through social media, or repeatedly avoids challenging tasks, repetition strengthens the neural circuits that support those behaviours.

This capacity for change is supported by specific brain systems involved in learning and habit formation. One of the most important is the basal ganglia, which helps transform repeated behaviours into automatic routines. Through a process known as chunking, the brain groups sequences of actions together so they can be performed with minimal conscious effort. At the same time, the prefrontal cortex — the region involved in planning, impulse control, decision-making, and long-term thinking — is still developing. Because brain systems involved in reward and motivation mature earlier than those responsible for self-regulation, adolescents may be more responsive to immediate rewards than distant consequences. This developmental imbalance helps explain why teenagers can demonstrate sophisticated reasoning in some situations yet act impulsively in others.

Reward sensitivity is further influenced by changes in the brain's dopamine systems. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter involved in motivation, learning, and reward processing. Developmental changes in dopamine functioning make adolescents particularly responsive to rewarding and novel experiences. These rewarding experiences reinforce the habit loop, increasing the likelihood that behaviours associated with positive outcomes will be repeated. As a result, activities that offer excitement, challenge, social recognition, or immediate gratification can become especially motivating during adolescence.



This heightened reward sensitivity contributes to several common adolescent behaviours. Teenagers may be more likely to prioritise immediate gratification over long-term outcomes and may be more vulnerable to habits built around highly rewarding activities such as gaming, social media use, or substance experimentation. Siegel (2014) describes a related concept known as hyperrationality. Rather than being irrational, adolescents may weigh risks and rewards differently from adults, placing greater emphasis on the potential benefits of an action than on its possible negative consequences. From an adolescent perspective, a risky behaviour may therefore appear worthwhile.

Social influences add another powerful layer to habit formation during adolescence. As belonging and peer acceptance become increasingly important, being with peers — or even anticipating their reactions — can heighten sensitivity to rewards and increase the likelihood of risk-taking. However, peer influence is not inherently negative. Friends and role models can also encourage positive habits, values, and behaviours, helping adolescents shape their emerging identities.

Another important factor influencing adolescent behaviour is sleep.

Biological changes in the timing of melatonin release — the hormone that regulates sleep — cause many teenagers to naturally fall asleep and wake later than adults.

Unfortunately, this shift often clashes with early school schedules, resulting in chronic sleep deprivation. Insufficient sleep can impair attention, emotional regulation, decision-making, and impulse control, making it more difficult to establish healthy habits and resist unhealthy ones.

Adolescence represents a unique window for cultivating habits that support lifelong wellbeing. Small, consistent behaviours — such as maintaining healthy sleep routines, exercising regularly, developing effective study habits, practising emotional regulation, and building supportive relationships — can strengthen neural pathways that promote resilience and psychological health.

Rather than viewing adolescence solely as a period of vulnerability, neuroscience encourages us to see it as a period of extraordinary potential. The teenage brain is highly adaptable, responsive to experience, and primed for learning. The habits formed during these years do more than shape daily behaviour; they help build the foundation for adult health, wellbeing, and resilience.





The Habits We Didn't Choose: Body Memory, Early Learning, and the Art of Noticing

By Maria Lourdes Rosita Mesa, MA, RPsy, MSPS, Registered Psychologist – Singapore

You're in a meeting. Someone across the table raises their voice, not at you, just louder than usual. Before you've had time to think, something in your body has already reacted. Your shoulders tighten. Your sentences shorten and you find yourself agreeing with a point you meant to hold.

Most of us call this personality. I'm conflict averse. I've always been sensitive. That's just how I am. But what if these automatic responses are not personality at all? What if some are emotional habits formed early and encoded deeply, running without your permission?

Where Habits Actually Live

Every habit, emotional or behavioral, runs on a loop: a cue, an automatic reaction, a reward reinforces it. The brain encodes the sequence at every cue until it collapses into a single automatic unit (Smith & Graybiel, 2013), without deliberation.

The same loop captures feeling as readily as behavior. A critical email, an ambiguous silence, a flooded inbox — and the brain runs its practiced loop: self-doubt, defensiveness, withdrawal. Importantly, a reward need not feel good because familiarity itself can reinforce the loop (Gross, 2015).



Anxiety, irritability, the urge to smooth things over could become habitual, returning whenever a similar cue appears because the pattern is known.

This is why emotional habits are so hard to catch. They don't feel like habits. They feel like us.

The Habits That Came First

Long before a child can reflect on experience, the nervous system is already forming patterns of what feels safe to express, how distress is managed, what restores warmth, and what quietly gets punished. These implicit patterns are encoded before language and self-reflection emerge.

Consider a child in a household where effort is the language of love.

Parents are genuinely caring, but achievement produces warmth, and underperformance produces a worried disappointment the child learns to avoid. Over hundreds of repetitions, the habit sets: the child puts down their homework and reaches for a game. The father says nothing, but there is a particular quality to the silence, a glance toward the unfinished homework on the desk. The child feels it as a low pull of guilt, a sense of choosing wrongly. They work harder and the discomfort recedes.

By adulthood this habit can define them: "I'm just someone who needs to give everything and I can't switch off." A habit formed through the same loop that encodes every other habit through ordinary repetition, in an environment they did not choose.

When the Habit Outlasts the Lesson

These habits are not flaws. They were intelligent adaptations. The trouble is that habits do not deliberate, they only recognise cues regardless of context. The habit of striving cannot distinguish necessary effort from effort that punishes someone who has already done enough. Burnout arrives as slow erosion from an inability to rest without guilt. The habit was never the problem. The automaticity was.

The Art of Noticing

Habits are not immutable. In one study, researchers used light delivered directly into rats' brains to briefly interrupt the cortical system that maintains a habit loop, and the habit stopped (Smith et al., 2012). Not faded. Stopped. If a habit depends on the circuitry staying active, then interrupting it by any sufficient means interrupts the habit. Human noticing works on the same principle, as the voluntary, conscious counterpart to that light. It does not silence the machinery, but it can interrupt it long enough to open a gap in the loop that automaticity previously foreclosed (Hölzel et al., 2011).

The key is distinguishing noticing from rumination, which criticises after the fact: "What is wrong with me that this keeps happening?" (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Genuine noticing is present-tense and curious. It is when we recognize the tightening chest, the urge to apologise, the tug to overwork. The cue and the old response are still available. But the sequence is no longer running on autopilot. The gap is often only a breath-long, we can take it and discover that, occasionally, we can respond rather than let habit run its course. Sometimes noticing is the beginning of the work. For some people, that work continues in therapy.



Some habits were formed before we had words for them.

They arrived in the body before they arrived in the mind, formed through repeated textures of early emotional life. They still, in many moments, serve us well.

What changes with noticing is not the habit but our relationship to it. The nervous system that built these patterns without our consent never stopped running. It could always be paused. We simply hadn't practiced asking it to.

The habit that once felt like, "just the way I am" becomes, with noticing, "the way I learned to be". In that shift, from being to learning, lies all the room that change requires.



WHEN THE BODY REMEMBERS

By Karishma Mascarenhas

There is a version of you that means to begin. You have planned it, imagined it, perhaps whispered it to yourself while the shower ran hot. Tonight, you said. After dinner. When things are quiet.

And then evening comes, and something shifts. Not a decision, not a distraction, something older than either. A heaviness settles. The idea that felt bright at noon now feels faintly unreachable. You are not lazy. You are not undisciplined. But somehow, you are still not moving.

This is not a failure of willpower. It is the body doing exactly what it was trained to do.

The Habit Loop

Most conversations about habit formation begin with the mind: set a clear goal, attach a cue, repeat the behaviour, expect a reward. But this framework assumes the body is a neutral vehicle, waiting for the brain to issue its instructions. It is not.



The body is a record-keeper. It holds emotional memory not as a narrative but as a sensation, posture, and a physiological state. Somatic psychology proposes that unresolved emotional experiences live in the body as incomplete patterns of activation, not named feelings, just tension, constriction, a low hum of readiness for something that never quite arrives (Van der Kolk, 2014; Levine, 2010). When we try to build a new habit, we are asking the nervous system, shaped by years of lived experience, to enter an unfamiliar state. And if that state carries the scent of something old and unsafe, the body will resist.

The Evening

Mei decides to begin a journaling practice. She has read the research, bought the notebook, and chosen a time. Evenings. The children are in bed. It is finally hers.

But week after week, she never starts. She scrolls instead. Tidies things that do not need tidying. She cannot explain why a blank notebook could feel so heavy.



What Mei does not immediately connect is this: evenings, for much of her childhood, were the hour of unpredictability. A parent would arrive home and the emotional temperature of the house would shift in ways she could not control. Her body learned to go still. To disappear into low-level tasks. To stay quietly vigilant.

That learning was adaptive then. It kept her safe. But her nervous system does not know she is now an adult in her own home. It only knows that this is the hour when we brace. And so she braces. And calls it procrastination.



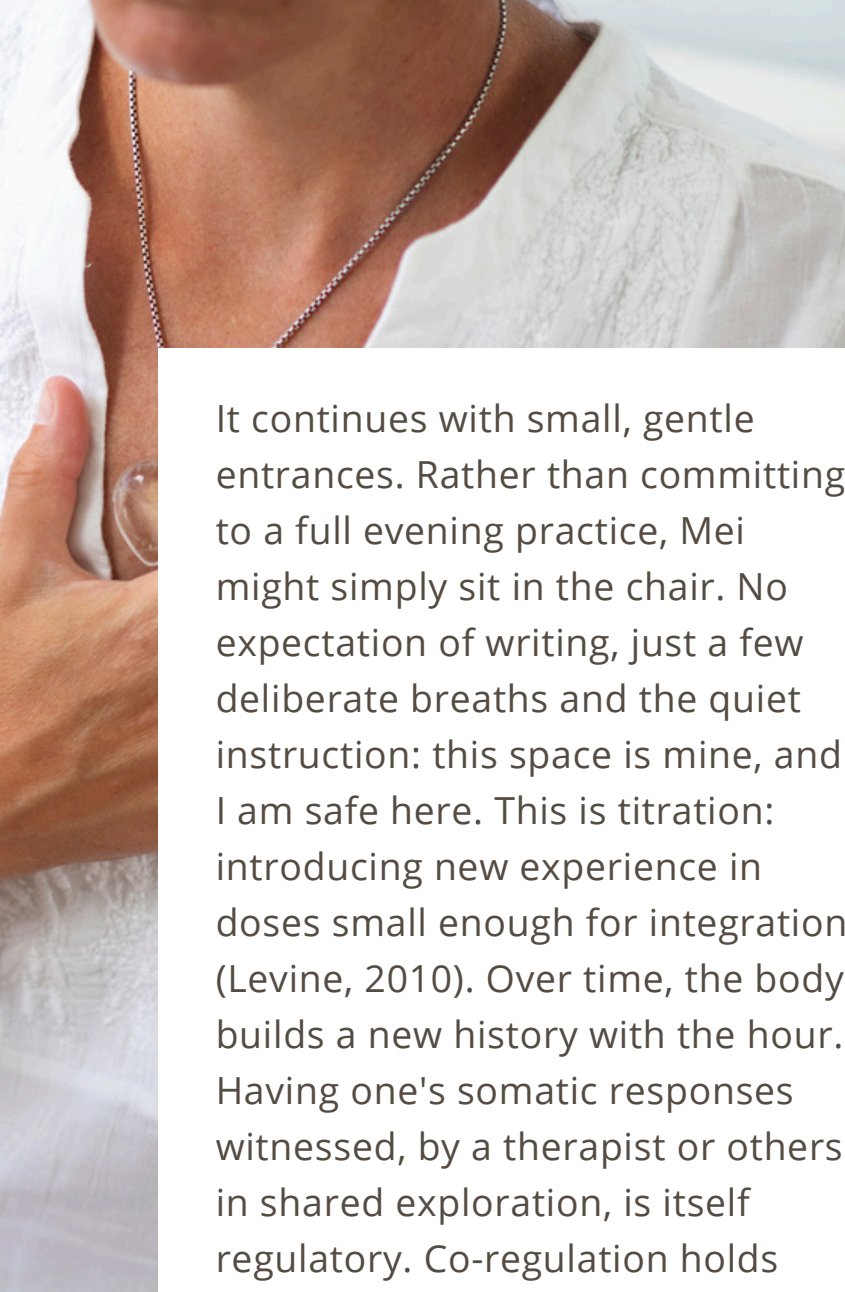
Why Repetition Alone Is Not Enough

“Conventional habit science tells us repetition is the engine of change (Duhigg, 2012). True, but under one important condition: the nervous system must be in relative safety when the repetition occurs. Siegel's (1999) concept of the window of tolerance describes the zone in which a person can engage meaningfully with their environment. Too much activation and we move into fight-or-flight. Too little, and we collapse into shutdown. In either state, new patterns do not stick.

Reconditioning From the Inside Out

The work of building sustainable habits is not only about motivation. It is about creating conditions in which the nervous system can update its sense of what is safe.

It begins with curiosity rather than correction. When you find yourself stuck, the most useful question is not why are you so lazy, it is what is happening in your body right now?



It continues with small, gentle entrances. Rather than committing to a full evening practice, Mei might simply sit in the chair. No expectation of writing, just a few deliberate breaths and the quiet instruction: this space is mine, and I am safe here. This is titration: introducing new experience in doses small enough for integration (Levine, 2010). Over time, the body builds a new history with the hour. Having one's somatic responses witnessed, by a therapist or others in shared exploration, is itself regulatory. Co-regulation holds that we settle our nervous systems partly through contact with calmer ones (Porges, 2011).

An Invitation

If you have tried, honestly tried, to build a habit and found yourself failing at the same moment in the same inexplicable way, your body is not your obstacle. It is your history, showing up faithfully, asking to be understood before it is asked to change.

You do not need to override the freeze. You need to thaw it, slowly, in the warmth of your own attention. One return to the chair. One breath in the difficult hour. One small act of choosing yourself in the space where you once had to disappear.

These are not just habits. They are revisions.

About The Author

Karishma Mascarenhas is the founder of Remind Sessions, a practice dedicated to helping individuals reconnect with their inner world through counselling, mindfulness-based group workshops, and parenting programmes. She is the published author of *Rediscover Yourself: A 31-Day Self Reset*, a psychological guided journal designed to help readers gently excavate, process, and rebuild their relationship with themselves, one day at a time.

To Not Just Rebuild, but Expand: The Development of Recovery Habits After Stroke

By Mr Chen, MSc and Ms Dewanti, BSc

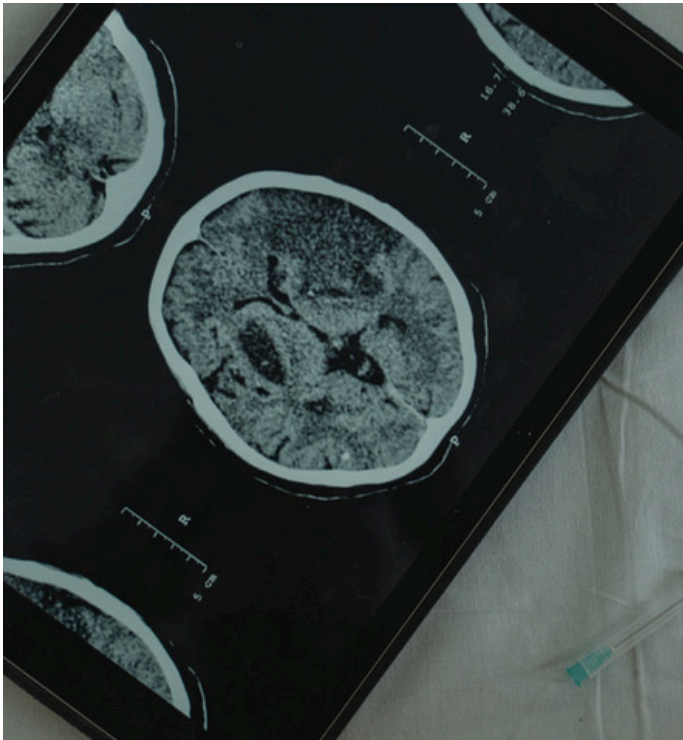
“That day, I was in my bedroom and going to carry up my cat who was lying at the corner. Then, I just fell down for no reason! I tried my best to crawl toward my bed. My phone was on my bed. I managed to reach it and make a random call for help.”



This is how one study participant remembered the exact moment when his old life ended, and a stroke took over. Strokes happen in a devastatingly short time. Within moments, a blood vessel in the brain becomes compromised, rapidly resulting in lasting brain damage and critical alterations in one’s physical and cognitive capabilities (Murphy & Werring, 2020). The true challenge, however, begins after the medical crisis ends. As stroke survivors return home with these radical, unforeseen changes, they face a new, stark reality that is clouded by unfamiliarity and uncertainty (Shaik et al., 2024). To reclaim control of this imposed life, stroke survivors undergo a profound habit reformation by casting away deeply ingrained habits, while slowly forming rehabilitative new ones.



Drinking and smoking are the habits that one should attend to immediately after a stroke. Although there are individuals who struggle to adjust these habits after a stroke, many survivors have managed to gradually reduce or entirely quit them. From the perspective of the Health Belief Model, this behavioural change is mainly driven by a heightened level of perceived susceptibility and severity, with which survivors acutely realise how vulnerable they could be to a devastating



consequence without a change in their habits (Strecher & Rosenstock, 1997). In an interview, a participant told the research team that he had stopped smoking completely after the stroke, because he witnessed a smoker being admitted to the hospital for a fourth stroke. For him, the risk of smoking is no longer distant, as it has become personified in the body of another survivor.

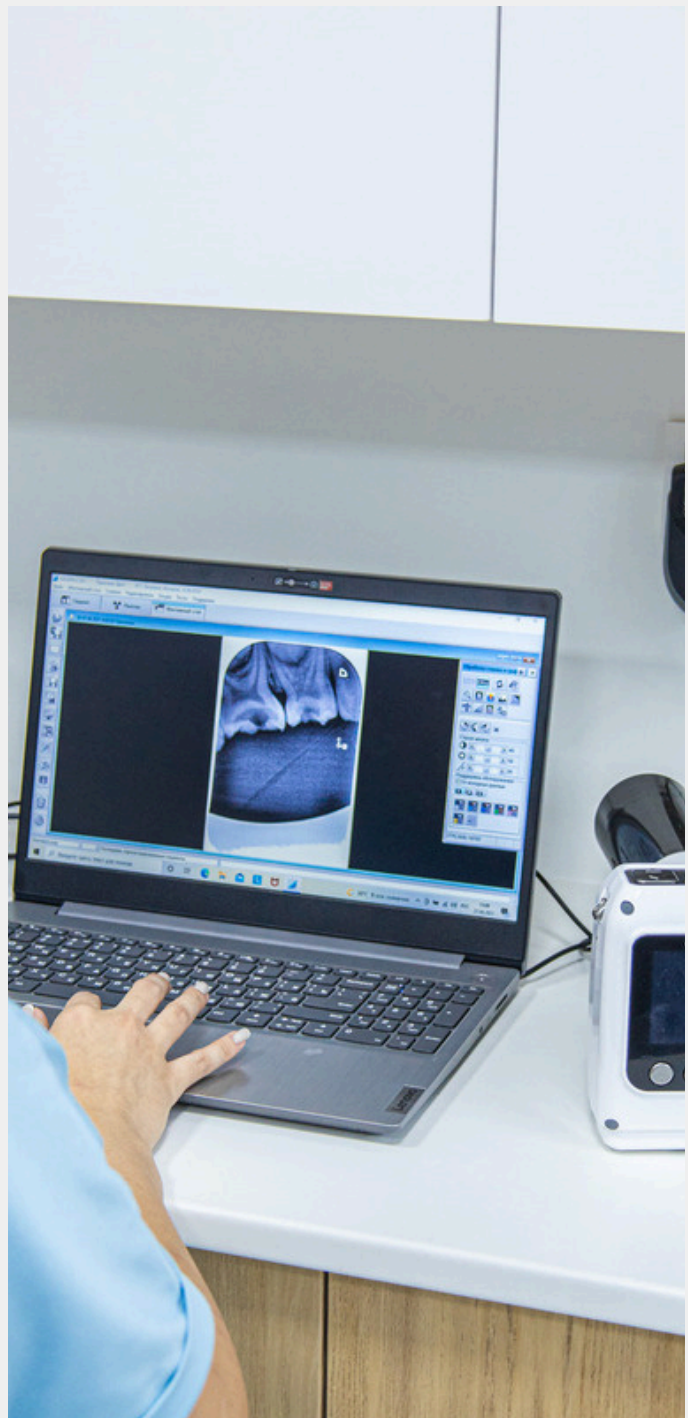
In addition to physical health, people with stroke need to take actions that safeguard their social health, which can be severely impaired by the condition. For stroke survivors, travelling outside the immediate community can be incredibly difficult due to physical disabilities, leading to a shrinking living sphere. Consequently, their face-to-face time with family and friends becomes limited, and



their social life could continue to erode if they cling to the original format of social interaction. To adapt, many weave phone calls and text messages into their daily routines — transforming digital connection into a vital substitute for in-person visits. “My first thing in the morning is to open WhatsApp and send a greeting message to all of my friends,” a participant shared. This adjustment in socialising habits is enabled by multiple factors: availability of the device and technology, capability of using the device, and a desire to stay socially connected, which stand for physical opportunity, psychological capability, and automatic motivation outlined by the COM-B Model of Behaviour (Michie et al., 2011). Although social behaviour is often beyond the scope of health behaviour theories, the reconstruction of social habits is essential for post-stroke recovery as it preserves social lives of stroke survivors when their physical world grows smaller.



Stroke recovery is not simply about rebuilding what once was, but about expanding new ways of living with purpose. By strengthening personal health and reconstructing daily routines, habit reformation is essential for this life expansion. Yet, this transformation is neither a seamless transition nor a solitary triumph. For stroke



survivors, reshaping habits is a demanding task that requires an ecosystem of support — from nutritional resources and healthcare communication to digital literacy. Thus, society needs to build an environment that fosters these vital behavioural shifts.

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