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RE WIRED

THE SCIENCE OF BREAKING
THE PORN CYCLE

FREE SAMPLE • CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER 1

Why This Isn't Just About Willpower

FREE SAMPLE • FROM THE 152-PAGE BOOK

You've probably tried the willpower approach already. Decide firmly, tonight, that this is over. Delete the apps. Feel a rush of resolve. And then, some days or weeks later, find yourself doing the exact thing you swore off, wondering what happened to that resolve — and what that says about you.

Here's what that doesn't say about you: that you're weak, undisciplined, or short on some moral fiber other people have more of. What actually happened is more interesting than that, and more useful to understand, because it points to something you can work with instead of something to just feel bad about.

You built a habit. And habits, once built, don't run on willpower. They run on a different system in your brain — one that operates below conscious decision-making, and one that conscious decision-making is bad at overriding.

This isn't a metaphor. It's the finding of decades of psychological research, gathered together most thoroughly by the psychologist Jeremy Dean in his book **Making Habits, Breaking Habits**, which this chapter draws on throughout. Understanding how that system works is the first real step toward changing it — not because understanding replaces effort, but because effort aimed at the wrong target wastes itself.

The habit loop

Start with the basic mechanics. A habit has three parts, and psychologists have studied them for over a century using rats, mazes, and — more recently — people wearing diary-tracking watches and website logs. There's a *cue*: something in your environment or your internal state that sets things in motion. There's a *routine*: the behavior itself, the thing you actually do. And there's a *reward*: whatever payoff, however small or fleeting, that behavior delivers.

Dean traces this back to early animal-learning research, where psychologists like Clark Hull ran rats through mazes searching for cheese. At first, the rats wandered — trying tunnels, hitting dead ends. But run after run, they got faster. What was happening, psychologically, is that the rats moved from associating their **actions with outcomes** — I did this, and that happened — to associating the **situation itself** with a fixed response. The maze became the cue. Turning right became the routine. The cheese became the reward. The

rat stopped thinking its way to the cheese and started simply responding to the maze, the way it always had.

Something structurally identical happens in you, dozens of times a day, with far more mundane material: you get in your car and your hand reaches for the radio before you've decided to turn it on. You walk into your kitchen and find yourself opening the fridge, not because you're hungry but because that's what happens in that kitchen. When Dean reviews research that tracked people hour by hour through their day, somewhere between a third and half of everything they did turned out to be habitual — repeated, automatic, cued by the situation rather than freshly decided in the moment.

This matters for understanding compulsive pornography use, because it means the behavior isn't best understood as a series of individual decisions, each one a fresh moral choice you failed to make correctly. It's better understood as a loop that has run enough times that the cue now triggers the routine with very little conscious input required. The cue might be boredom, loneliness, stress, a particular time of night, being alone in a particular room, or simply picking up your phone. The routine is the behavior. The reward is whatever relief, escape, or pleasure the behavior delivers, however briefly.

None of this is unique to pornography, and that's the point, not a way of minimizing it. Dean documents the same loop underneath compulsive email-checking, snacking, nail-biting, smoking, and dozens of other

behaviors people struggle to control. The mechanism doesn't know or care what the routine is. It treats a search for cheese, a glance at your inbox, and a familiar late-night pattern with exactly the same machinery.

Why the reward is more powerful than you'd expect

One detail from Dean's research is worth sitting with, because it explains something that otherwise feels baffling: why a habit can grip you even when the payoff is inconsistent, or when you don't particularly enjoy it anymore.

Dean describes a classic experiment with a lever-pressing rat. The rat presses the lever and gets a food pellet — good, more of that. Then the experimenter changes the rules. Sometimes a press produces a pellet, sometimes nothing, with no way to predict which. You'd expect the rat to give up on an unreliable lever. Instead, it settles into a steady, persistent habit of pressing it, again and again, undeterred by the long stretches of nothing. Psychologists call this the **partial reinforcement extinction effect** — behavior rewarded unpredictably is harder to extinguish than behavior rewarded every single time.

Dean draws a direct comparison to something almost everyone recognizes: compulsively checking email. Most checks turn up nothing worth the effort. But every so often, something genuinely interesting arrives — and that unpredictability is what keeps the checking habit so strong. It's the same principle, Dean notes, that keeps a

gambler feeding coins into a slot machine: not a guaranteed payout, but the chance of one.

Here's where I want to be careful and stay honest with you about sources: **Making Habits, Breaking Habits** isn't a book about pornography, addiction neuroscience, or sexual behavior, and I won't pretend it is. But the mechanism it documents — unpredictable reward locking in a behavior more powerfully than predictable reward ever could — helps explain why compulsive pornography use can feel disproportionately hard to shake compared with habits you've changed before. The routine may not always deliver, may not even feel good afterward, and that inconsistency isn't a reason it should be easy to walk away from. If anything, it's a reason the loop can run for years without your conscious mind ever fully signing off on it.

Why willpower keeps losing

Here's the most disorienting part, because it cuts against something almost everyone assumes: that if you want something enough, and decide firmly enough, your intentions will win out over your habits.

Dean reviews research that tested this directly. Researchers asked people how much they **intended** to do certain things over the following week — eat fast food, watch TV news, take the bus — and separately measured how strong their existing habits around those behaviors already were. Then they tracked what actually happened.

The results split cleanly along one line: when a habit was weak, intentions predicted behavior well. If you don't

have much of an established pattern around something, deciding to do it differently mostly works. But as the habit got stronger, intentions predicted behavior worse and worse. People with strong habits around fast food, for instance, kept eating fast food at roughly the rate their habit dictated — largely regardless of what they'd said they intended to do that week.

And there's a second finding buried in that same research that deserves more attention than it usually gets: the people with the strongest habits, who were the **worst** at predicting their own behavior, were also the **most confident** in their predictions. In other words, the stronger a habit gets, the more in-control you feel over it — and the less in control you actually are. That's not a flaw in your self-awareness specifically. Dean frames it as a near-universal feature of how habits distort our sense of agency: familiarity gets mistaken for control.

If you've ever felt certain, on a Tuesday afternoon, that tonight will be different — and then found yourself back in the same pattern by evening — this is very likely why. It isn't that your Tuesday-afternoon intention was insincere. It's that intention and habit are, in Dean's phrase, in an unfair fight, and the habit has a structural advantage: it doesn't need your conscious mind's permission to run.

Dean also reviews research asking a related question: what actually separates a strong habit from a weak one? The answer turned out to hinge on frequency and context. Behaviors performed about weekly or more, in

stable, familiar situations, behaved like strong habits — resistant to intentions, running largely on autopilot. Behaviors performed only a few times a year, like donating blood or getting a flu shot, stayed much more under the control of conscious intention throughout. The practical implication is worth sitting with: a behavior practiced multiple times a week, in the same rooms, at the same kinds of moments, sits squarely in the category of habit least responsive to willpower. That's simply where the behavior in this book tends to fall for most people who pick it up — not a special case, just an ordinary and well-studied one.

Willpower is also a resource, and it runs out

There's a second reason willpower struggles against an ingrained habit, and it has nothing to do with sincerity or character. Self-control, in the research Dean reviews, behaves less like a fixed trait you either have or don't, and more like a muscle that fatigues with use.

In one well-known study, people were asked to resist a plate of tempting chocolates and eat radishes instead, while a comparison group was allowed to eat the chocolates freely. Afterward, both groups were given a frustrating, unsolvable task and timed on how long they kept trying before giving up. The radish group — who'd just spent willpower resisting temptation — gave up in about eight minutes. The chocolate group, who hadn't had to exert any self-restraint, kept going for nineteen. The act of resisting one temptation had measurably drained the capacity to persist at something else entirely.

This matters for anyone trying to break a habit through sheer resolve, because it means your capacity for self-control isn't constant throughout the day. It's depleted by the ordinary friction of being alive — a stressful meeting, a difficult conversation, a bad commute, an argument you bit your tongue through. By the time evening arrives and the familiar cue shows up, the very resource you're relying on to resist it may already be running low, for reasons that have nothing to do with your commitment to change. That's not a character flaw showing up at a predictable hour. It's a depletable resource showing up at a predictable low point.

There's a hopeful detail buried in this same research, though, and it's worth holding onto: self-control appears to work like a muscle in the good sense too, not just the depleting one. Studies Dean cites found that people who built self-control in one area — sticking to a new exercise routine, or getting better at managing money — saw their self-control improve in completely unrelated areas as well, from studying more to keeping a tidier home to drinking less. The effort isn't wasted even when it doesn't feel like it's aimed at the right target. Practicing self-control anywhere seems to strengthen the capacity generally.

Dean's point isn't that willpower is useless — later parts of his book describe real, evidence-based ways to work with it more intelligently. But willpower used as your **only** strategy, especially against a well-worn habit,

is a bit like trying to hold a door shut with one arm indefinitely. You'll manage for a while. Eventually the arm tires, and the door was never really the problem — the fact that you were relying on your arm alone was.

Why context matters more than you'd think

One more piece from Dean's research changes how you should think about **when** and **where** this happens, and it may be the most useful idea in this chapter.

Habits, Dean shows, are tied to the specific situations in which they were built — not just the general behavior, but the particular room, time of day, emotional state, or sequence of events that has come to trigger it. Dean cites research on university students who changed campuses: the ones who moved found it easier to change habits like exercising and watching TV than students who stayed put, simply because their new surroundings didn't carry the same cues. Nothing there was primed to trigger the old response. Without the familiar cue, the automatic behavior had nothing to latch onto, and the students found themselves actually thinking about what they wanted to do — often for the first time in a long while.

This is why a pattern that feels impossible to shake at home, late at night, alone, with your phone in hand, isn't a verdict on your character. It's a sign of how tightly that set of circumstances has been linked to that routine, through nothing more mystical than repetition. It also means the circumstances that seem irrelevant — what room you're in, what time it is, whether you're tired, whether you're alone — aren't irrelevant at all. They're

the cue half of the loop, and they carry more weight in what you do next than your stated intentions do. We'll come back to this when we talk about practical change later in the book, because it opens up real options that "just try harder" doesn't.

Forget the 21 days

One more piece of mythology needs clearing away, because it quietly sets people up to feel like failures for the wrong reason.

You've likely heard that it takes 21 days to form or break a habit. Dean traces this number to a 1960 book by a plastic surgeon named Maxwell Maltz, who observed that his patients seemed to take about three weeks to adjust psychologically to a new face after surgery, and that amputees took roughly the same time to adjust to losing a limb. From that, Maltz extrapolated a general rule about human adjustment to any life change. The number caught on and has been repeated ever since, almost always without anyone checking where it came from or whether it applied to what they were claiming it applied to.

Dean went looking for the research behind the number and found none. So he turned to real data: a study out of University College London that tracked 96 people over 84 days as they each tried to build one new everyday habit — eating a piece of fruit at lunch, doing sit-ups, taking a short walk. Participants logged every day whether they'd done the behavior and how automatic it felt.

The average time to reach maximum automaticity was 66 days — roughly three times the popular figure, and that's just the average across simple, low-stakes daily behaviors. The range was enormous. Drinking a glass of water after breakfast became habitual for one participant in about 20 days. Fifty sit-ups after morning coffee hadn't become a habit for another participant even after the full 84 days the study ran, and Dean notes that extrapolating the data suggested some of the harder habits could have taken around 254 days to fully form — the better part of a year.

Two things follow from this. First, if the habit you're trying to change is more complex, more emotionally loaded, or more deeply practiced than eating a piece of fruit at lunch, no credible research says it should take three weeks to unwind. Expecting that of yourself sets up a test you were never going to pass, then hands you a false verdict about your character when the deadline quietly passes and nothing has changed. Second, and more hopeful: the same research found that missing a day here or there didn't derail habit formation overall. Progress wasn't a single chain that snaps the moment you slip. It was a curve, steep at first and leveling off gradually, the way a hill gets easier to climb the closer you get to the top. A single hard day doesn't erase the ground already covered.

What this means for you

Put these pieces together and a different picture forms.

A pattern of compulsive pornography use built up cue by cue, routine by routine, reward by reward, over however many repetitions it took — probably a great many, given how long these things take to become entrenched. It was likely reinforced by exactly the kind of unpredictable payoff that locks a habit in more firmly than a reliable one ever could. It's tied to particular situations, emotional states, and times of day, in ways that are mostly invisible from the inside, because that's how automatic behavior works: you don't experience the mechanics, only the pull. And every time you've tried to out-will it through sheer resolve, you were fighting a system that reliably beats intention once a habit is strong, using a resource that depletes over the course of an ordinary hard day, on a timeline that was never realistic to begin with.

None of that is a character reference. It's a description of how learning works, demonstrated in rats, dieters, email-checkers, people quitting smoking — and you. The behavior was learned. Not chosen once and for all in some single moment of weakness, but built, repetition by repetition, the same way any habit is built. Which means it can be unbuilt too — just not by the method you've probably been relying on, and not on the timeline you've probably been punishing yourself for missing.

That reframe matters because shame doesn't interrupt a habit loop. It can't: the loop doesn't run on judgment, it runs on cues, routines, and reward, operating well beneath the level where guilt does its work. Feeling like a

failure after a lapse doesn't weaken the habit. It usually just adds another layer of distress to the same machinery — something uncomfortable to escape from, and a well-worn escape route right there waiting.

What actually interrupts a habit loop is understanding its structure well enough to work with it — noticing the cues instead of being blindsided by them, recognizing why willpower alone keeps losing this fight, and building something to replace the routine rather than just suppressing it through white-knuckled resistance. That's not a lesser path than willpower. It's closer to the only path that was ever going to work.

There's a further layer to this we haven't touched yet, and it deserves a chapter of its own. So far, this chapter has treated your experience as a habit like any other — powerful, deeply cued, resistant to willpower, built on principles that apply equally to nail-biting and lever-pressing rats. That's true, and it's the right place to start. But it isn't the whole picture. Compulsive pornography use tends to follow a specific, well-documented pattern — one involving escalation, loss of control despite real consequences, and distress beyond what an ordinary habit like snacking or nail-biting produces. What that pattern is, and what the clinical research actually says about it, is where we're headed next.



That was one chapter *of ten.*

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