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Dr. Patricia Cardner with Jonathan Little

PEAK POKER PERFORMANCE

HOW TO BRING YOUR 'A' GAME TO EVERY SESSION



POKER SERIES

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Chapter Two

Create Winning Habits

Good habits are worth being fanatical about.

John Irving

Think back to the first day of last year. If you are like most people, you probably made a list of New Year's resolutions. Resolutions usually fall into one of two camps: they are either good habits we'd like to install or bad habits we'd like to break. Every January, people decide to lose weight, exercise more, study more poker, and tackle all sorts of other new habits they would like to start or break. Research shows that New Year's resolutions have a success rate of about 8%. In other words, as many as 92% of people who declare resolutions do not meet their goals. In fact, most resolutions don't even last the month of January. Why do you suppose so many people fail to keep their resolutions?

What we've learned through research is that it's one thing to *know* what needs to be done to get the results we are after, but quite another to *do* those things daily. You are probably well aware that eating better and exercising more increase stamina, improve focus and attention, and even have some anti-depressant effects. But how often do you actually

eat better and exercise more? As a general rule, we don't fail to keep our resolutions because we lack knowledge about why they would be good for us. We fail because we don't know how to consistently do what is required to make reaching our goals a habit. Excellence is not something you do once in a while; it's what you do repeatedly and consistently. Players, who do reach their goals in poker (or in life generally), endeavor consistently to do things that make them more successful. This is so important that I want to repeat it. The difference between those who are successful and those who are not is not due to a difference in intelligence or talent but because of the habits that they keep. Habits are the cornerstone of peak performance.

Obviously, it is not an easy thing to get the habit-ball rolling. If it was, everyone would be successful! You have to learn how to establish habits and routines that guarantee your success. Relying on your intention to behave in a beneficial way rarely works out. What does work is to put these behaviors on autopilot by using your limited willpower to install them as habits. Once a behavior is an ingrained habit, we will do it no matter what. Habits allow us to translate what we know we should do into things we actually do. Let's take a deeper look into how it all works.

A habit is simply a recurrent, often unconscious, pattern of behavior acquired through frequent repetition. In recent years, the subject of habits has become quite popular in psychological circles. Several bestsellers have been written on the topic and, more importantly, hundreds of studies have been conducted. There is a good reason why habits are garnering so much attention. They are extremely important to your success in the poker world and in life generally because greatness is formed by good habits. As Aristotle once said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

Hal Elrod, author of *The Miracle Morning* says, "Considering that our habits create our life, there is arguably no single skill that is more important for you to learn and master than controlling your habits" (2014). He concludes that identifying, implementing, and maintaining the habits necessary for creating the life you want, while letting go of negative habits, is

the key ingredient to living up to our fullest potential.

Another author, Og Mandino said, “The only difference between those who have failed and those who have succeeded lies in the difference of their habits. Good habits are the key to all success. Bad habits are the unlocked door to failure.” Mandino was an American author who sold over 50 million copies of his books, so he knows something about being successful. He advised that we “form good habits and become their slave.”

Whether you know it or not, many (if not most) of the actions you take and the thoughts you think each day are simply habits. Even procrastination is a habit. Many scientists suggest that up to 50% of all the actions we take on any given day are based on habit. Habitual behavior is super important because those repetitions do add up. For example, if you make it a habit to write 1,000 words a day, at the end of one year you will have written the equivalent of seven novels! Because of this, it makes sense to orchestrate your habits in such a way that they help you achieve what you want. Understanding more about how to shape and mold your habits is probably the single most efficient and effective route to improving your overall results and to performing at your peak.

Knowing the science behind habit formation can be extremely useful because there are a myriad of ways you can use the information to enhance your game. Habits act as mental shortcuts. If you want to use your brain more efficiently and make the most of the prefrontal cortex’s limited mental processing capabilities, then managing your habits is the way to go.

As you will see, putting certain behaviors on autopilot frees up your brain’s processing power for more important things – like maintaining good self-discipline while you are playing. This is because every time we make a decision or think through a problem, we are depleting some of our precious willpower. Habitual behaviors (and thoughts for that matter) do not require any willpower or motivation. If you are after optimization, your goal should be to build as many good habits as possible while avoiding bad ones.

Habits as Superpowers

Habits are the ultimate form of ease. You could almost call them superpowers. Once something becomes a habit, you won't need willpower to do it, and it won't even matter if you aren't motivated to do it. That's because once something becomes a habit, we do it unconsciously. Make the right habits, and you'll be able to do the right things with very little effort.

Let's look at how habits form in your brain. This is perhaps an oversimplification because many of the brain's inner workings are still a mystery, but here's what we generally know. Everything that you do is associated with a specific neural pathway in the brain. This pathway is triggered by a thought or an external cue. Once it's triggered, an electrical charge fires and culminates in you engaging in the habitual behavior. If you brush your teeth every morning right after you wake up, you have a neural pathway for morning tooth brushing which fires when you wake. You'll find yourself brushing your teeth with no conscious thought whatsoever. The more times we do something, the thicker and stronger our neural networks become. This leads us to be able to do things without motivation, willpower, or even conscious awareness. This can be a good or bad thing depending on whether or not we are talking about a good habit or a bad one. For us to create good habits, all we need to do is create and strengthen specific neural pathways through a process of repetition. Sounds easy enough, but not so fast! There are certain neurological and psychological limitations that impede the process.

The first sign that a habit is starting to develop is a decrease in resistance. This is because our brain communicates using electrical impulses, which take the path of least resistance. The more developed a neural pathway is, the more our brain will prefer to fire it rather than fire an unknown pathway. As I'm sure you have already figured out, the brain likes two things: repetition and rewards. The more you repeat a behavior and the more your brain associates it with a reward, the more entrenched it will become.

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, explains that there are two types of brain function: automatic and controlled. Auto-

matic processes include our habits and routines that run on autopilot. They are ingrained and reside in an older part of the brain known as the basal ganglia. If you have ever had the experience of driving to work, but didn't remember the trip, you were under the spell of your basal ganglia. Automated processes are unconscious for the most part. Our brain is biased towards using the least amount of effort possible, so it relies on and reverts to automatic processes wherever possible. Controlled processes require conscious thought. When you engage in effortful thinking at the table, you are using your prefrontal cortex. This is the most recently evolved part of the brain, and it is responsible for controlled processes like thinking, planning, evaluating, imagining, and reasoning.

On the face of it, you might think that it would be a better idea to use conscious, rational thought as often as possible, but there are a couple of reasons why that's not a good idea. First, it takes a tremendous amount of energy to operate the controlled process system. It tires easily and is fuel inefficient. The brain is 2–3% of our body weight and yet consumes 20–30% of our calories. Second, it is slow. Scientists have found that our conscious brain can only process 50 bits of information per second, whereas the unconscious brain processes 11 million bits per second. For efficiency reasons, the brain prefers to take the unconscious route and thus it relies on habits as much as possible.

We have two choices when we manage our brains. We can force it to do what we want through sheer will, or we can let our unconscious take the reins and put it on autopilot. You'll see that going on autopilot is one of the best ways to free up mental processing power, which you can then devote to poker. This is because willpower is finite. We only have a certain amount of it and making conscious decisions depletes it. You can use your limited willpower to install good habits.

Automating habits of daily living has the advantage of freeing up the prefrontal cortex, which then allows us to more fully focus on game strategy. Doing so will make it easier for you to solve problems at the table and reduces decision fatigue. There are countless benefits to establishing as many good habits as you can. So the question becomes, how do we dele-

gate tasks to the automatic system by developing habits? Building habits is a great thing to do because it allows your brain to operate more efficiently.

Anatomy of a Habit

Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*, emphasizes that habits emerge because the brain is always attempting to save effort. When we turn things into habits, it frees up our brain to think about more complex things. So how does something become a habit? Duhigg (2012) says that habits evolve from a three-step loop:

Cue + Routine + Reward = Habit

The cue, or trigger, is what tells your brain to initiate automatic mode and which habit to use. A trigger can be an emotion, something in the environment, a specific time of day, a sound, or a smell. If you smell pastries, it might trigger you to eat them, or if you see someone smoking, it may trigger a cigarette craving (if you are a smoker; non-smokers are not triggered with this craving). If you want to install the habit of exercise, you might leave your exercise clothes by your bed to act as a trigger. That way when you wake up, you'll see your cue first thing, and being exposed to your cue makes it more likely you'll do the routine.

The routine is the behavior that the cue evokes. We all have routines. When your alarm goes off in the morning, it probably sets off a chain of events that you do every day. Every time you enact a routine, it creates a neural pathway in your brain, and that path grows stronger as you repeat the routine. Your brain automatically creates a habit when you do the same things over and over again, but know that you can consciously choose to cultivate habits that work better for you.

If we get a consistent reward from enacting our routine, it really cements the behavior as a habit. When we engage in desirable activities, like eating, our brain releases neurotransmitters like dopamine that make us feel good. While exercising our brain releases endorphins, which are natu-

rally rewarding. A sense of accomplishment is also rewarding. The important thing is that once your brain starts expecting or craving a reward when you do a certain behavior, the habit becomes locked in.

There is one caveat. Hal Elrod discussed the phases of habit creation in his book *The Miracle Morning*. He says that for the first couple of weeks, you can expect enacting your new habit to feel unbearable. Suppose you take up running. It is likely to be painful for a few weeks, but if you persist through the pain, you'll get to the next phase, which is merely uncomfortable. This phase is not quite as bad as the previous one, though it is still not exactly pleasant. With each passing day, running gets just a bit easier. In the final phase, he says your habit becomes unstoppable. This is when you start to feel the benefits of implementing the habit and willpower is no longer necessary for you to get going! At this stage, you cannot imagine not engaging in your habit. To get yourself to the stage of automaticity, you have to move through all the stages. Most people give up in the first stage or two, so they never see the results of their efforts.

Be aware that as habits increase in complexity, it takes longer for them to develop. The oft-touted 21-day rule is not a reality for anything but the simplest of habits. The idea that it takes 21 days to form a habit comes from a 1960 book called *Psycho-Cybernetics* by Dr. Maxwell Maltz. He found that it took amputees on average 21 days to adjust to the loss of a limb. From this finding, it was widely reported that it takes 21 days to make a new habit. While it would be nice if habits formed that quickly, some habits take longer to form. A recent study tracked 96 people as they attempted to turn a behavior into a habit. It took on average 66 days for simple behaviors like drinking a glass of water in the morning or eating a piece of fruit at lunch to become a habit. More complex habits took much longer. For example, becoming a regular exerciser took at least a year or even 18 months in some cases. The good news is that no matter how complex the habit you want to build, the process for acquiring it remains the same.

Chapter Five

Common Psychological Hurdles

You don't want to beat yourself up for beating yourself up in the vain hope that it will somehow make you stop beating yourself up.

Kristen Neff

Imagine this scenario. You are playing a hand on a final table that is being broadcast. The hand has played out in such a way that it's perfectly set up for you to shove all-in as a bluff on the river. All signs point to you running this big bluff. The entire audience is holding their breath waiting for you to pull the trigger, and the commentators are practically shouting into their microphones that you should do it. Being an experienced player, you are fully aware that this is a near perfect spot to attempt this play and win a decent sized pot. Instead of bluffing, you freeze and show down your weak hand, which loses to your opponent's slightly less weak hand. In hindsight, it's clear that he would have folded to your shove, and you regret not making the play. Plus, you keep hearing about this hand from the viewers, and you wish people would just stop talking about it! You spend the next few days mentally kicking yourself for not going with

what you knew in your gut was the right move.

I'm asked some variation of why things like this happen weekly. One answer is that it is a mental game leak caused by an emotional reaction to fear. Some of the more common ones are fear of looking silly or being wrong. Sometimes we are more fearful of busting out than we are of not climbing as high on the payout ladder as we could. Our mind warns us about these "dangers" in an effort to protect us from harm, and we often heed our mind's warnings unilaterally. There are many types of fear that may inhibit us, such as:

- ♠ fear of failure
- ♠ fear of success
- ♠ fear of leaving money on the table
- ♠ fear of losing money
- ♠ fear of being judged.

No matter the root cause of the fear, it's important to note that in the particular scenario described above your emotion overruled your logic, which clearly saw an excellent bluffing opportunity. In psychological language, we say that you were emotionally hijacked.

Emotional hijackings are strongly correlated with high levels of physiological arousal, intense emotions, and an inability to focus and think clearly. A sure sign of a hijacking is when emotions dominate decision making. For example, when you are running bad, confidence withers and emotions can easily become more prominent in decision making. The result: we take feelings-driven actions, which seem correct at the time, but in hindsight are completely wrong. Attention narrows and we exclude possibilities and options that would have occurred to us, if we were thinking more clearly. Game plays are taken to address unpleasant internal states rather than addressing game dynamics. Once the pressure is off, though, we can see that we were out of control, thus the name emotional hijacking. Strong emo-

tions like fear, anger, boredom, or even joy and euphoria can lead to emotional hijackings, which can cause us to act imprudently.

As you can see, the inner game of poker is a paradox. On the one hand, we know that playing too emotionally can be bad for us. On the other, trying to control our emotions is often an exercise in futility. Think back to a time when you tried to force yourself to stop feeling angry or fearful. It is quite difficult. What's more, trying consciously to control our feelings is a major distraction, which can lead us to play worse! Besides all that, psychologists have recently discovered empirical evidence that suggests much of the prevailing conventional wisdom about controlling and eliminating strong emotions is wrong. As you will learn throughout this book, the mind operates in such a way that trying to suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions actually increases their presence. Trying to get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings using a conventional problem-solving approach causes more problems than it solves. We get stuck in a stubborn mental pattern, and our game suffers.

There's an upside, though. There are specific actions you can take to decrease the chances that you will become emotionally hijacked. Some of the information I'm going to share may go against advice that you have heard before, because new data is being collected all the time, and we continue to improve our understanding of what drives peak performance. We have to transform the way we think about the mental game of poker if we want to overcome the universal mental challenges of poker.

This chapter is going to teach you all about emotions by outlining how unwanted feelings and thoughts manifest themselves and affect behavior. I'll also cover several mental game leaks. But first, here is an exercise on emotional awareness, which you can use to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings while playing. Awareness is the first step to optimizing your play.

Emotional Awareness Exercise

Over your next three to five sessions, I want you to take notes on any sub-optimal lines (or poorly played spots) that you take. Write down

what you did (played too loose, too tight, missed a clear bluff spot, etc.). Next, write out the thoughts you had while this was going on. What did your mind tell you about the game, your opponents, or your play? Finally, note the emotions that you were feeling (e.g. fear of being wrong, losing, anger, annoyance, joy, excitement, etc.). By taking notes, you'll quickly see patterns of the thoughts and emotions that do the most damage to your game (Table 2).

Sub-optimal lines What did you do?(Played too loose, too tight, missed a clear opportunity, etc.)	
Specific thoughts What did your mind tell you about the game, your opponents, or your play?	
Emotions What did you feel? (Fear of being wrong, losing, anger, annoyance, joy, excitement, etc.)	

Table 2: Exercise on emotional awareness

How Emotions Develop

Emotions are a psychological enigma that have intrigued psychologists and lay people alike for thousands of years. Even defining emotions accurately is tricky, which is probably one reason why we tend to use the all-purpose term "tilt." Scientists currently agree on three sets of facts regarding emotions:

Peak Poker Performance

- ♠ Emotions originate from the part of the brain known as the limbic system, and the amygdala plays a key role in their generation.
- ♠ Emotions cause a complex set of physical reactions to occur throughout the brain and body.
- ♠ The purpose of these reactions is to energize us to take action.

Suppose you are playing for a significant amount of money. It's natural to feel at least somewhat anxious in situations where a lot of money is on the line. Experience tends to mitigate nerves to some degree, but almost everyone has some amount of money that will get their heart pumping. When the emotion of anxiety rears its head, your brain releases chemicals and hormones that raise your blood pressure, make your heart beat faster, and change the pace of your breathing. Your stomach may churn and your palms might get sweaty. Your discomfort is palpable. All of this leads to an "action tendency," which is an inclination to do something. Your mind urges you to do whatever it takes to end the misery, immediately. So you fold or shove or take whatever action ends the tension for you, in this moment. You may feel a sense of relief, but your wallet may be a little lighter for your choice.

Notice that emotions cause an action *tendency*. It's just a tendency – not a command – so you can choose how you respond to it. We often act as though we don't have a choice, but we do. Even if you are so angry you could bite iron nails in two, you are capable of acting calmly if there is a compelling reason to do so. We can have a tendency to shove all-in on the flop to end a hand when we feel anxious, but we can choose not to. The key point to remember is that it is far more useful to focus on what you can control (your behavior) than what you cannot (the physiology of emotions). When we are under the spell of tilt, we may do all sorts of things that we later regret. There are any number of destructive choices we can make that range from throwing a computer monitor to changing our playing style to a non-optimal one.

Another facet I want to bring to your attention is the variability of

emotions. There's a saying in Texas; if you don't like the weather, wait 10 minutes and it will change. Emotions are much like that. They are always present, but they come and go – just like the weather. They can range from mild to intense, pleasant to unpleasant, and they can rapidly flow from predictable to unexpected. No matter what, you'll always be experiencing some form of emotion. Much of the time our feelings are so mild and uninteresting that we don't really notice them. Mild and uninteresting emotions are not the focus of our concern at the poker table, though. Let's look at how a strong emotional response is produced.

The Creation of a Tilt Response

You have probably noticed that sometimes you'll have an emotional reaction that seems to come out of nowhere. That's because the creation of an emotional response comes in phases, and we tend to be deep into an emotional hijacking before we even become aware of it. Let's look at the three phases that typically occur:

- ♠ *There's an event that your brain recognizes as significant in some way.* The event that happens could be internal (like a thought, memory, or image) or something that happens externally (you get sucked out on, smell a noxious odor, have an unpleasant table mate who won't stop talking, etc.). Your brain alerts you to the event and triggers the next phase.
- ♠ *Preparation for action is triggered.* If your brain judges the event as a "threat" it will trigger the fight or flight response. If it is judged as a good thing, your brain prepares you to approach and explore it more carefully. In the face of a "threat," the brain kicks into high gear to release hormones and chemicals, to better prepare you to take action to address the event.
- ♠ *The mind finally gets involved.* Finally, we start to become aware of the physical sensations, and we attach some meaning to those changes. At this point we can identify the emotion(s) we are feeling (anger, joy, frustration, sadness, fear, frustration, etc.).