The Habit Loop

Habits live in a part of the brain called the **basal ganglia,** which **helps store automatic behaviors** like driving a familiar route or scrolling your phone **without thinking**. Decision making lives in the prefrontal cortex, which gets tired throughout the day. **When life feels busy or stressful, your brain falls back on habits because they require less effort**. Rewards often include: dopamine release, stress relief, comfort, feeling productive, and social connection, to name a few. Your brain remembers the reward and tags the behavior as worth repeating. This is why "bad" habits can stick so easily. They usually meet a real need like boredom relief, comfort, stimulation, or avoiding discomfort.

What is the Habit Loop?

Habits are learned patterns your brain runs automatically. Each habit usually follows the Habit Loop:

Cue → Routine → Reward

Parts of the Habit Loop

Cue: what triggers the behavior
Routine: the behavior you actually do.
Reward: the "benefit" your brain gets that makes the habit stick.

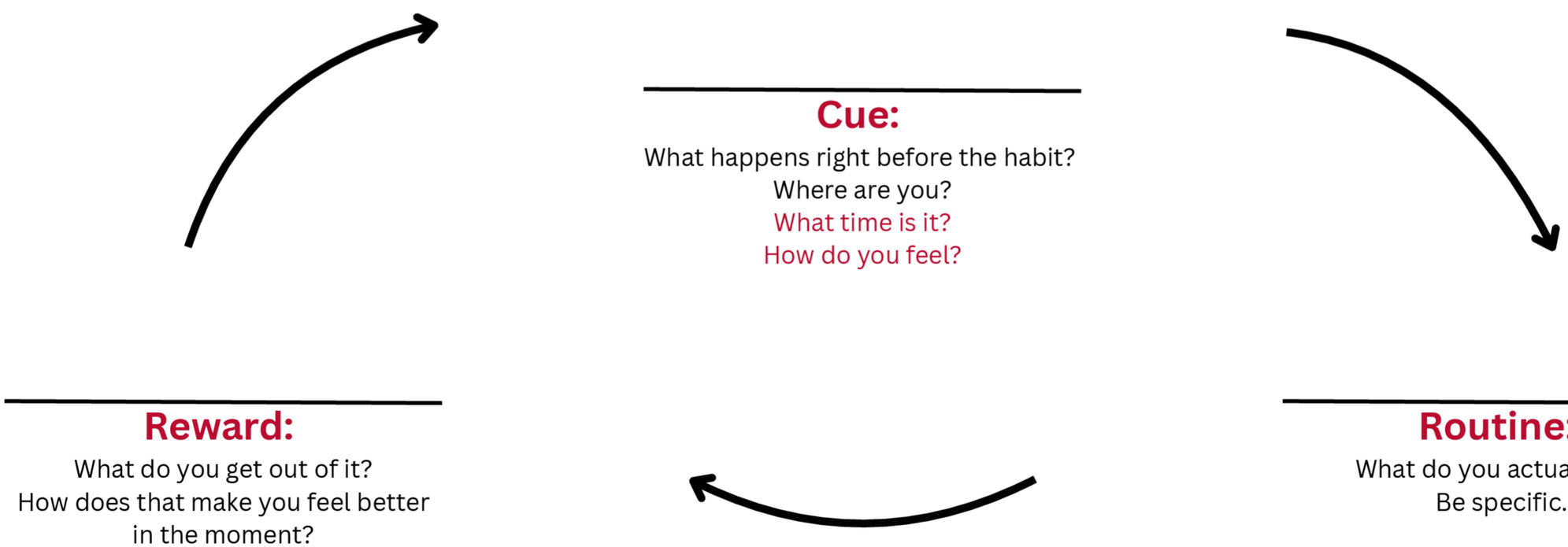
Example Habit Loop

Habit: Late night scrolling in bed
Cue: I get in bed. I feel tired, but my brain is still busy.
Routine/Habit: I start scrolling on my phone and lose track of time.
Reward: I feel distracted from stress, I get a small dopamine boost, and I avoid lying alone with my thoughts.

Why the Habit Loop Matters in College

Understanding your Habit Loop helps you: recognize what is really triggering your behavior, design habits that support your goals instead of fighting them, reduce procrastination by changing cues instead of relying on willpower, replace unhelpful routines with better ones that give similar rewards.
The goal is not to "be more disciplined." The goal is to work with your brain instead of against it.

Current Habit



Cue:

What happens right before the habit?
Where are you?
What time is it?
How do you feel?

Routine:

What do you actually do?
Be specific.

Reward:

What do you get out of it?
How does that make you feel better in the moment?

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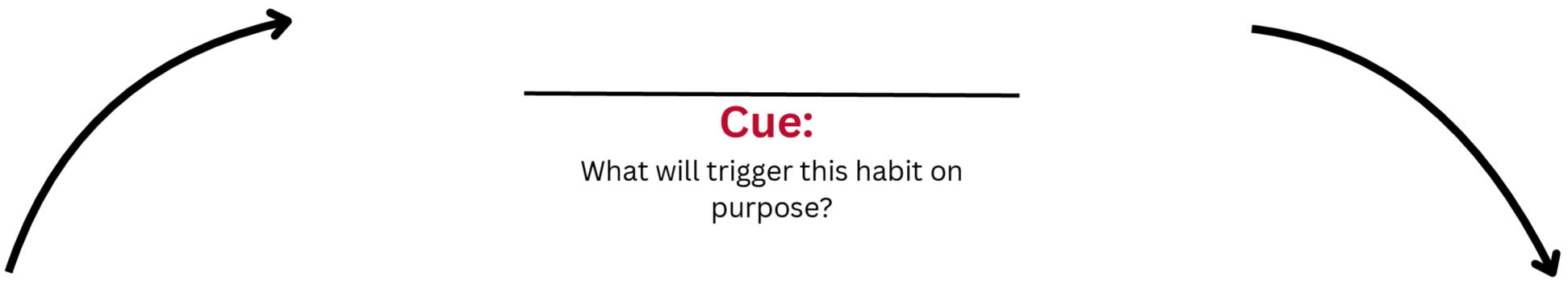
New Helpful Habit

You do not get rid of old habits by willpower alone. The most effective way to change is to build a new habit on purpose. Pick one small behavior that would actually help you in your real life right now. Then decide the cue that will trigger it and the reward that will keep it going. **Small, consistent habits create bigger change over time.** Choose a habit that would support your goals. For example: studying regularly, going to class, sleep routine, checking Canvas regularly, working out, journaling, or emailing professors back in a timely fashion.



Cue:

What will trigger this habit on purpose?

Routine:

What will you do?
What will offer positve results?

Reward:

How will you celebrate or reinforce this new routine?

Reflection

What emotions or situations trigger your unhelpful habits most often?

Who or what can help you stay accountable to this new habit?