



## The Habit Loop

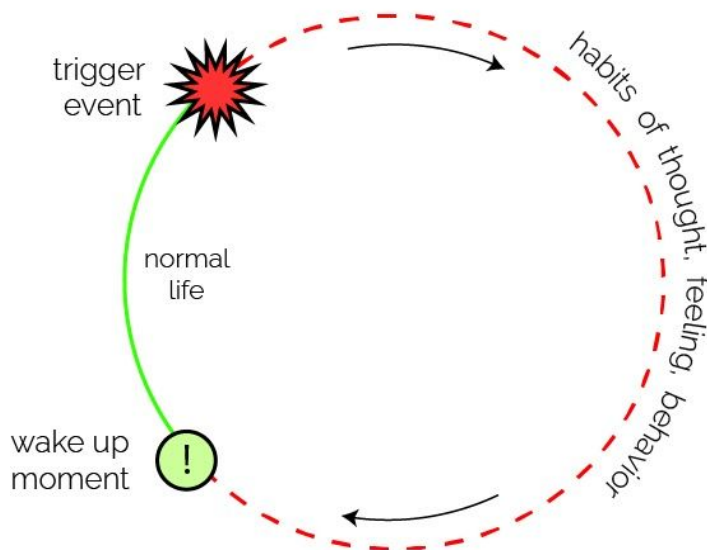
[Click here for Google Doc \(Click 'file' > 'Make a copy'\)](#)

The exercises here will help you practice identifying the “semi-autonomous” reactions and habits in your thoughts, feelings, and actions. As you practice observing these habits, you will learn to “catch yourself in the act” — to notice when you’re reacting in an automatic way. In the WorldMaker course, we’ve been calling such a path a “closed loop.” We also call it a “habit loop” when it describes a pattern of compulsive or habitual thoughts, feelings, and actions.

To observe the phenomena we’re describing can be very significant, because when you realize that you’re reacting in habitual ways, you gain a little distance from them. As you gain distance, you also start to see them more objectively. This is the key to ultimately governing, regulating, and eventually, transforming them entirely.

Our primary focus in this exercise is to observe the phenomena — not to explain “why” the pattern exists. You may gain insight into why a particular pattern plays out in your life — but we begin with observation. The first step is to observe without drawing conclusions or wanting to find “cause.”

This is the Habit Loop. In the pages that follow, we’ll go through it step by step.





When you did the **Closed Loops and Creative Potentials** exercise (module one, lesson four), you examined a “closed loop” or cyclical pattern in your life. For this exercise, you may choose to work with that pattern or any other one. It’s up to you.

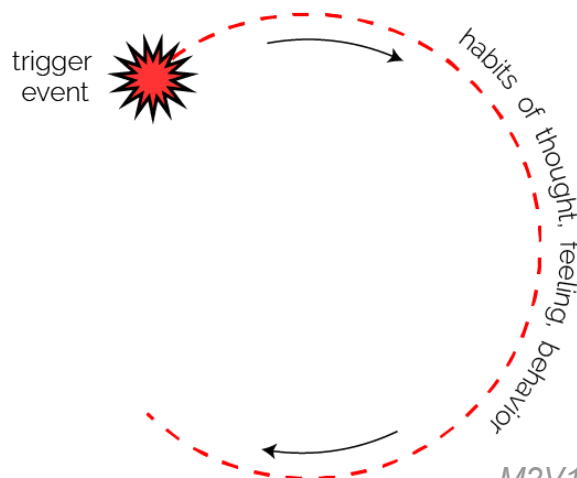
A simple thought exercise will explain the meaning of this diagram. Think back to a time when a family member, co-worker, friend, or someone else said or did something to you that upset you. Bring to mind your reaction to this “trigger event” — the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that occurred within you almost by themselves. These reactions arise so immediately and powerfully that they take us over, so to speak; they run their course within us, playing themselves out.

The diagram is a map of what typically happens.

First, you are “triggered.” We’re all triggered by different things for different reasons. We all have “buttons” that other people can push. This moment is indicated by the red star with the black outline.

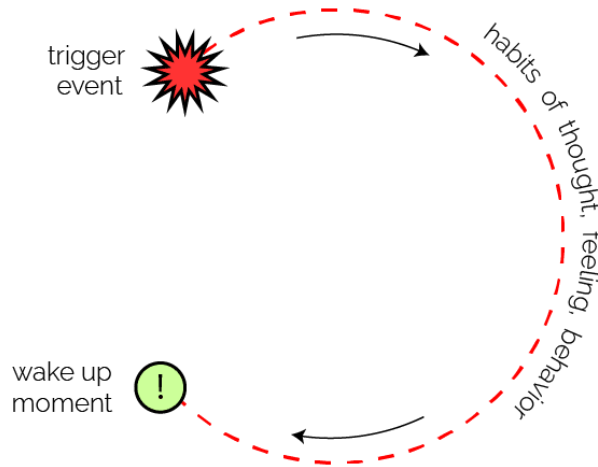


Once you’re triggered, the habitual reaction kicks in: certain thoughts arise, followed by feelings and actions. The reaction might manifest as negative thoughts and feelings, blame for others, self-hatred, irritation, doubt, fear, shame, withdrawal from others, or something else. You’ll have your own particular mix of reactions based on who you are and your life experiences. This complex of reactions is represented by the dashed red line.

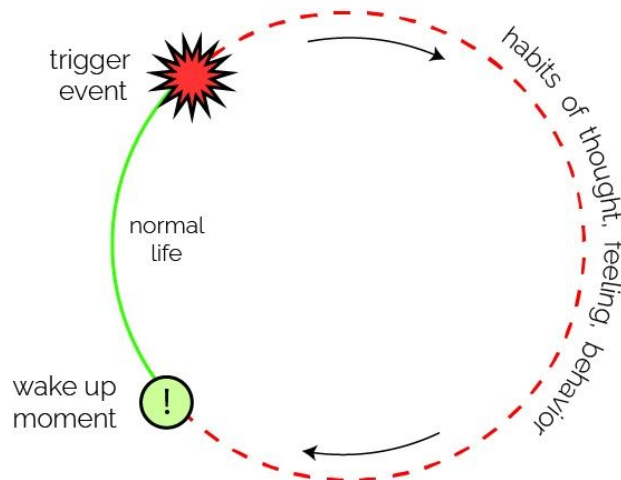




After this goes on for a period of time (a moment? five days? — it depends), the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that comprise the habitual reaction come to an end, and you either “wake up” — you realize that you’ve been reacting — or else you consciously or unconsciously let it go and get on with life. The “wake up” or “letting go” moment is shown with the green circle.



And finally, life returns to a more or less “normal” state, represented by the green line. Eventually, however, another trigger event occurs, and you go around the loop again.



Working with the Habit Loop can help you understand your patterns and habits, which is the first step to transforming them. So let's get started!



## Step One: The Trigger Event

In this step, you'll explore the particular pattern you have in mind or, if you haven't thought of one yet, discover one or more habit loops in your life that are limiting your creative and full potential.

Answer the following questions in your journal:

**What kinds of events are triggers for you? If you have trouble identifying any, think back to the last time something happened that upset you. What were the circumstances? What was said to you? Can you separate the people involved from the actions done and words spoken? It can be helpful to try and identify if this as a reactive tendency that you have in response to certain stimuli, or external events.**



*Examples of possible triggers:*

- *The potential for conflict with someone who has power or influence in your life — boss, intimate partner, parent, friend, bank manager, parole officer, etc.*
- *When your bank balance gets below a certain minimum.*
- *When someone makes jokes that are offensive to you*
- *When you have to talk or present in front of many people.*
- *When you are feeling certain feelings (like resentment) and you can't reveal them to others because you're afraid of creating conflict, or being judged.*
- *When someone in your life does and says certain things, or with a certain tone.*
- *When someone in your life does something in particular that annoys you.*



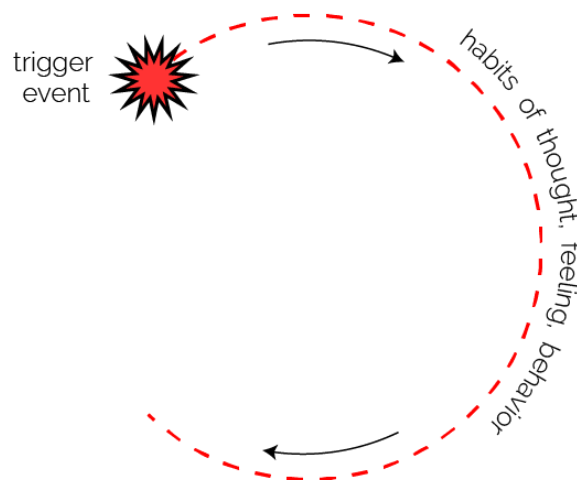
## Step Two: Habitual Thoughts

Next, we're going to trace what happens next as objectively as we can. The technique is to examine the phenomena in detail. It's like investigating the grammar of a sentence in which we can see how each word plays its part in a sentence. Here, we're looking at each part of the reactive pattern.

The first thing to notice, as we did with the Closed Loops exercise, is the thoughts. We focus here because when a trigger event occurs, the first thing that happens is that we make sense of the trigger: we interpret it in a certain way.

Write in your journal in response to the following questions:

**As the trigger event happens, what *thoughts* arise in you? Describe them as objectively as you can. Can you identify them? What kinds of conclusions or judgments, for example, do you typically form, either about yourself, another person, or the situation in general?**





## Step Three: Habitual Feelings

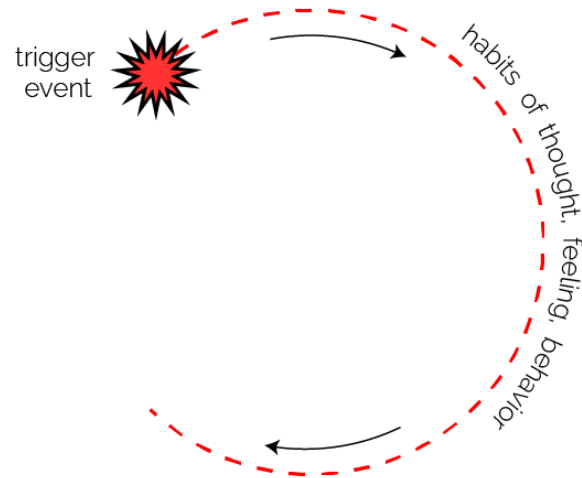
Next, we're going to delve into the feelings or emotions that occur in connection with the thoughts. Feelings are a bit tricky. They can be very strong, but they're also not as transparent as thoughts. We can "know" a thought, but a feeling operates on another level. Sometimes, it takes a bit of slowing down and "tuning in" or sensing inward to become aware of a feeling.

There's a second reason that feelings are not always easy to grasp. Some cultures actively discourage feelings; in others, feelings are considered tolerable but private. So you might not be accustomed to actually feeling or perceiving your feelings.

Finally, practice your phenomenology. We're looking for phenomena. This means something special here: as you explore your feeling life, you might be tempted to feel a certain way about your feelings. For example, you might notice that when you're triggered, you feel angry — and acknowledging this might then trigger another feeling in you, for example one of shame, which may in turn trigger a feeling of annoyance. These are all phenomena and they're all useful to observe — but the exercise is to **see them happening** in you — not to form a judgment about them or about yourself.

Given these challenges, it can be helpful to have a list of "feeling words" as you try to discern what you're feeling. As you write in your journal in response to the following questions, feel free to use the list of [feeling words](#) provided in this lesson.

**As the trigger event happens, certain thoughts arise. What *feelings* typically arise after these thoughts? Describe them as objectively as you can. Can you identify the feelings? If you need to, use the list of feeling words to help you articulate the feelings.**



In this step, be particularly conscious of the tendency to avoid, shift blame, omit, or ignore. Sometimes, we feel such intense shame and fear of our own shortcomings that we can scarcely admit we have any. If this is true for you, go gently, but resolutely, and remember, this is for your eyes only. But in service of your own self-knowledge and leadership, be a bit brutally honest with yourself.

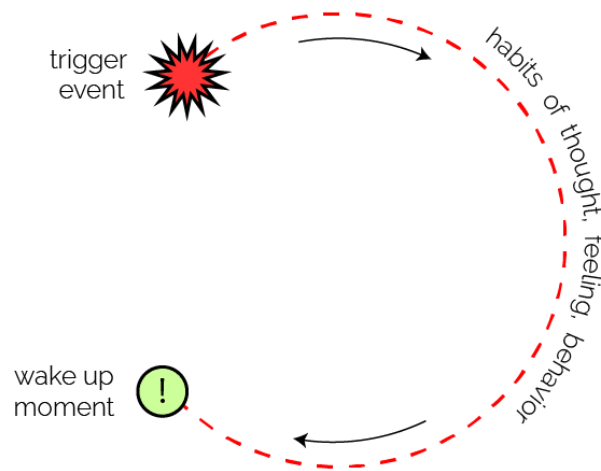
What feelings arise in you when you're triggered?



## Step Four: Habitual Actions

Next, we're going to look at your behaviors that result from the trigger event and the subsequent thoughts and feelings. Write in your journal about the following:

**What do you typically DO as a result of the trigger event, and the thoughts and feelings that arise? Do you shut down, do you lash out? What kinds of behaviors will follow? Again, there is no shame and no blame in this; it is an opportunity to look with impartial, unprejudiced, and objective eye on what happened. The facts only.**



It might be helpful to ask yourself, for example, whether you tend to withdraw or explode. These are two very common gestures, perhaps even “archetypes” of reactions. Some people react by going excessively inward, offline, out of touch — the walls go up. Others vent, fume, blame, blast, and otherwise take it out on others around them. It might also be a combination: perhaps you shut down, but do it in a very visible, almost “aggressive” way. Or perhaps you take it out on yourself, i.e. by withdrawing into seclusion and then punishing yourself somehow. This is the spectrum of human dysfunction, and we all share in it. What do you do?

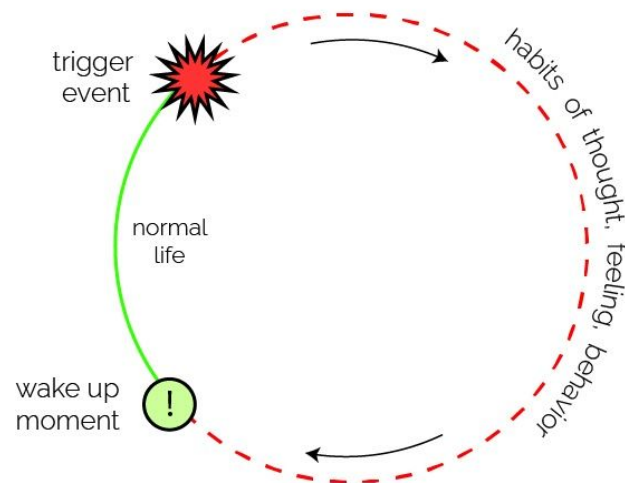




## Step Five: Back to Normal Life

And now, we're going to remember what it was like to wake up, to come out of the force of the feelings and thoughts, feel a bit more sober and calm about the whole thing, and get back to everyday life.

**In your journal, write about what happens during the “cooling off period” when you go back to normal life. What changes? Do you typically realize that you’ve been reacting, or do you just gradually let it go and get on with life? Do you become more wary —“once bitten twice shy”? Do you suppress and forget the whole affair (only to let it happen again later, probably with the same person or people)? How does it look for *you* to get back to “normal” and get on with life?**

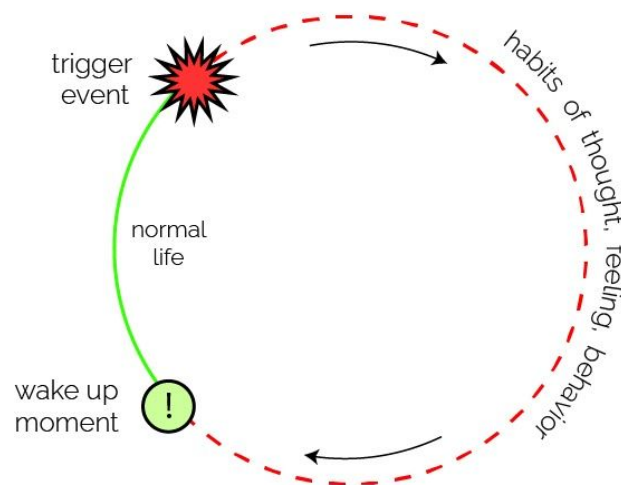




## Step Six: Reflections

And now, finally, we are going to reflect on the whole experience thus far.

**Journal on: What came up in you when you went through the habit loop?  
What do you notice?**



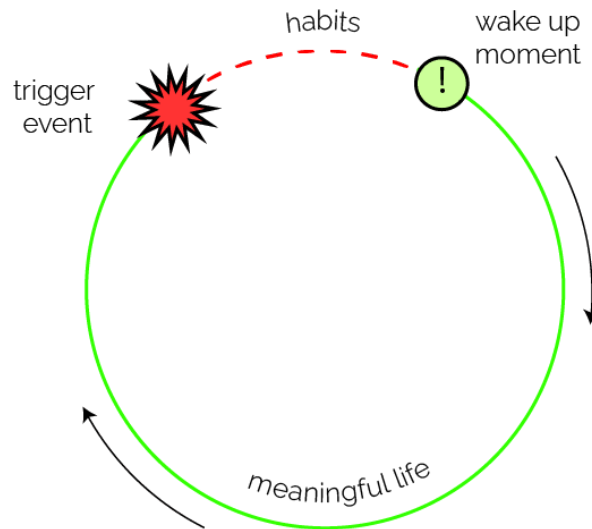
As you write, be gentle with yourself. Be a scientist of your own soul; be as objective as you can. There is no blame, no shame, no “problem” with any of this; you are simply observing it. It **happens**; it is **human** and **normal**. You are on the track of your own shadow, the whole nexus of shadows and habits that you have accumulated in life. It’s good work!

Over time, you can start to notice your reactions **in the moment** of being triggered and reacting. In those moments, you can more quickly catch yourself in the act, “wake up,” and stop reacting. With time, in our experience, this practice leads to the “shortening” of the habit loop. As you practice, you react less strongly and less often, and as less of

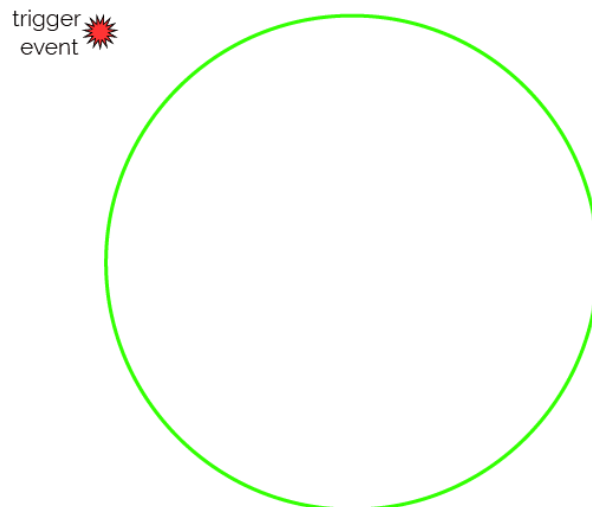


your inner life is consumed in patterns of reaction, you have more inner space and energy for life and meaning.

A shorter habit loop: you catch yourself more quickly, and spend less time and energy in habit or reactive mode.



With sufficient practice, you can actually outgrow that particular habit. A trigger event will happen, but you're not triggered! You know in that moment that once upon a time, you would have reacted — but now, you don't. Instead, you can see more deeply into the pattern and the dynamic — and you can have compassion for others. You can learn to let go of shame, bitterness, anger, and whatever else has bound you in closed loops.





## Step Seven (OPTIONAL): Dialogue

When you've finished working through your own habit loop, consider having a conversation with a friend, partner, or family member. What came up in you? What are you learning and seeing? What is possible for you when you stop engaging in habit loops and start freeing your energies and attention for more meaningful, creative work and relationships?

When you're ready, return to the lesson.