

Why and how you need to create a brain-friendly celebration habit

Liz Guthridge

“What do you celebrate?”

The top five answers I hear from my coaching clients, primarily high-performing business professionals, are “birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, graduations and other special occasions.”

“And anything else?” I ask next.

This question often elicits a puzzled expression or blank stare.

“What about celebrating work accomplishments?” I query. “Do you pause to acknowledge successes of any size, such as:

- Meeting a project milestone?
- Making a difficult decision?
- Having a breakthrough insight on a tough problem?
- Taking the first step in a brand-new process?
- Helping colleagues patch up a difference?
- Or whatever?

“No” is the frequent answer.

Yet, any time you rush ahead without acknowledging an accomplishment, even a tiny success, you miss an opportunity to take advantage of the brain’s reward system.

To understand why, consider what happens when you pause to acknowledge your progress, even an initial effort. You’re able to name the success, credit the individuals involved, reflect on what you did, and start to figure out how to repeat or revise your actions to produce more successes.

When you and others receive recognition, you get a hit of [dopamine](#), the “feel-good” brain chemical. Dopamine acts as a neurotransmitter, sending signals to other neurons that serve as a pleasurable reward.

The brain also pays attention to the particular actions that deserved the dopamine. The brain then calculates what’s needed to repeat the behavior to get more of this “feel-good” chemical. This is the [Hebbian learning rule](#) in action: “The brain neurons that fire together now start getting wired together.”

The act of celebrating has another benefit. Celebration puts you in a positive state of mind. When you’re in a positive state, you can think more clearly and be more open to new ideas and experiences.

By contrast, if you speed ahead to the next challenge without acknowledging what you've accomplished, you're not gaining the full benefits of your experience. You'll still feel the dopamine but you miss out on fully capturing your key learnings.

So how do you take advantage of the brain's reward system, especially if celebrating doesn't come naturally to you?

Build a special celebration habit. Habits are naturally brain-friendly, efficient learned behaviors.

You do habits automatically or with minimal thinking -- once you get the hang of them. Even better, habits are energy efficient actions. That's because the brain's executive function, the pre-frontal cortex, monitors them in the background without actively directing them.

The [basal ganglia](#) deep in the brain's base plays the active role in habit formation as well as reward and reinforcement and addictive behaviors. This part of the brain also oversees habits as well as motor control, motor learning, and emotional behaviors.

Almost 10 years ago, I started studying habits. My two favorite researchers on the topic are [Dr. Ann Graniel](#) of MIT and [Dr. BJ Fogg](#) of Stanford.

Dr. Graniel has devoted most of her career studying the brain's basal ganglia. She not only has conducted groundbreaking research, but also explains her findings clearly in journal papers and articles.

Dr. Fogg is the founder/director of Stanford's Behavior Design Lab and the creator of the [Tiny Habits](#) method. He also authored the 2020 best-seller [Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything](#).

Once I discovered that building habits is a skill you can learn, I started helping others design their own habits. **To create your own celebration habit, follow these seven steps, which include a mini celebration.**

1. Verify that you *want* a celebration habit. You'll be more successful at doing this habit if you view it as a choice you've made rather than an obligation foisted upon you.

2. Choose an anchor behavior that will prompt you to do your celebration habit. Your prompt may be: *After we reach an identified marker, we'll celebrate our progress.* Or, *after I complete a milestone, I'll take a victory lap (or nap).*

3. Make the behavior simple and meaningful to do. Since celebration isn't a natural action for many, consider developing a celebration ritual. This could be one or two phrases, movements, or sounds that are easy to do yet feel meaningful.

For example, you can pump your fists and say "Yes!"; give yourself a high five; or wave a flag. Also picture athletes and the ways they mark their victories, such as victory dances, hugs, fist pumps and bumps, and everything in between.

For teams, social celebrations are valuable because they help strengthen personal relationships while acknowledging the team's achievements. You can convene for a short debrief meeting followed by an informal get-together, either remote or in-person, to enjoy a meal or snacks. (Some teams that work remotely send team members goody bags of food that everyone opens on their own at the appointed time.) These get togethers are a great opportunity to reflect on teamwork, share stories, relax and bask in your accomplishments.

4. Adjust your environment to make it easier for you to celebrate. Make the effort to set yourself up for success. For example, if you need reminders to celebrate, insert "celebration cues" throughout your project plan. Or, place your celebration flag and other gear in an easy-to-see place to access.

5. Celebrate when you do the habit to embed and rewire your brain. Yes, you need to celebrate doing your celebration habit. This extra celebration, which can be any size you want, further stimulates the brain's reward system. Besides giving you pleasure in the moment, the extra celebration reinforces your chances for replicating this feeling -- and just as importantly -- the behavior in the future.

6. Repeat your new celebration habit as often as possible. Repetition helps the habit become automatic. And keep in mind, celebrating **the efforts** you're making rewires your brain, just as your achievements do.

7. Evaluate and experiment. Each person's brain is unique. What works for one individual won't necessarily work for another. And teams may want their own adaptations. By actively trying different ways, you and your team members will find a good solution that increases your commitment to the new behavior. This applies to both doing your new celebration habit as well as acknowledging yourself for remembering to do this new habit.

With this habit, you're embracing the science of celebration. And if you get stuck, just ask yourself: "How do I want to acknowledge myself for this accomplishment?"

Acknowledging and celebrating your accomplishments helps you and your brain make a strong connection between the achievement you're celebrating and the behaviors that got you there.