

“Atomic Habits”
An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones
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A habit is a routine or behavior that is performed regularly—and, in many cases, automatically.

Changes that seem small and unimportant at first will compound into remarkable results if you’re willing to stick with them for years. The quality of our lives often depends on the quality of our habits. “the aggregation of marginal gains.” Why do small improvements accumulate into such remarkable results, and how can you replicate this approach in your own life? Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement. It is only when looking back two, five, or perhaps ten years later that the value of good habits and the cost of bad ones becomes strikingly apparent. The slow pace of transformation also makes it easy to let a bad habit slide. It’s the accumulation of many missteps—a 1 percent decline here and there—that eventually leads to a problem.

Success is the product of daily habits—not once-in-a-lifetime transformations.

You should be far more concerned with your current trajectory than with your current results. You get what you repeat. Time magnifies the margin between success and failure. Good habits make time your ally. Bad habits make time your enemy. People make a few small changes, fail to see a tangible result, and decide to stop. All big things come from small beginnings. The seed of every habit is a single, tiny decision. I began to realize that my results had very little to do with the goals I set and nearly everything to do with the systems I followed. Goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results. If you want better results, then forget about setting goals. Focus on your system instead.

A handful of problems arise when you spend too much time thinking about your goals and not enough time designing your systems. It was only when they implemented a system of continuous small improvements that they achieved a different outcome. We think we need to change our results, but the results are not the problem. What we really need to change are the systems that cause those results. Fix the inputs and the outputs will fix themselves. When you fall in love with the process rather than the product, you don’t have to wait to give yourself permission to be happy. Many people find themselves reverting to their old habits after accomplishing a goal.

True long-term thinking is goal-less thinking. It’s not about any single accomplishment. It is about the cycle of endless refinement and continuous improvement. You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems. Focusing on the overall system, rather than a single goal, is one of the core themes of this book. However, once your habits are established, they seem to stick around forever.

Outcomes are about what you get. Processes are about what you do. Identity is about what you believe.

Most people don’t even consider identity change when they set out to improve. Behind every system of actions are a system of beliefs. There are a set of beliefs and assumptions that shape the system, an identity behind the habits. Behavior that is incongruent with the self will not last.

It's hard to change your habits if you never change the underlying beliefs that led to your past behavior. It's one thing to say I'm the type of person who wants this. It's something very different to say I'm the type of person who is this. The more pride you have in a particular aspect of your identity, the more motivated you will be to maintain the habits associated with it. True behavior change is identity change. If you don't shift the belief behind the behavior, then it is hard to stick with long-term changes. Improvements are only temporary until they become part of who you are. Your behaviors are usually a reflection of your identity.

Doing the right thing is easy. After all, when your behavior and your identity are fully aligned, when you have repeated a story to yourself for years, it's easy to slide into these mental grooves and accept them as a fact. The more deeply a thought or action is tied to your identity, the more difficult it is to change it. The biggest barrier to positive change at any level—individual, team, society—is identity conflict. Good habits can make rational sense, but if they conflict with your identity, you will fail to put them into action. The more you repeat a behavior, the more you reinforce the identity associated with that behavior.

Your identity is literally your “Repeated Beingness.” The more evidence you have for a belief, the more strongly you will believe it. The most practical way to change who you are is to change what you do. Identity change is the North Star of habit change. Ultimately, your habits matter because they help you become the type of person you wish to be. They are the channel through which you develop your deepest beliefs about yourself. Quite literally, you become your habits.

There are three levels of change: Outcome change, Process change, and Identity change. A habit is a behavior that has been repeated enough times to become automatic. A choice that once required effort is now automatic. A habit has been created. Habits reduce cognitive load and free up mental capacity, so you can allocate your attention to other tasks. Habits do not restrict freedom, they create it. The people who don't have their habits handled are often the ones with the least amount of freedom. It's only by making the fundamentals of life easier that you can create the mental space needed for free thinking and creativity.

The process of building a habit can be divided into four simple steps: cue, craving, response, and reward. Breaking it down into these fundamental parts can help us understand what a habit is, how it works, and how to improve it. The cue triggers your brain to initiate a behavior. What you crave is not the habit itself but the change in state it delivers. Every craving is linked to a desire to change your internal state. Cues are meaningless until they are interpreted. A habit can occur only if you are capable of doing it. The cue is about noticing the reward. The craving is about wanting the reward. The response is about obtaining the reward. In summary, the cue triggers a craving, which motivates a response, which provides a reward. This cycle is known as the “Habit Loop.”

We can split these four steps into two phases: the problem phase and the solution phase. All behavior is driven by the desire to solve a problem. We need to transform these **four steps** into a practical framework that we can use to design good habits and eliminate bad ones.

The 1st step (Cue): Make it *obvious*.

The 2nd step (Craving): Make it *attractive*.

The 3rd step (Response): Make it *easy*.

The 4th step (Reward): Make it *satisfying*.

Inversion of the 1st step (Cue): Make it invisible. Inversion of the 2nd step (Craving): Make it unattractive.

Inversion of the 3rd step (Response): Make it difficult. Inversion of the 4th step (Reward): Make it unsatisfying. Whenever you want to change your behavior, you can simply ask yourself: How can I make it obvious? How can I make it attractive? How can I make it easy? How can I make it satisfying?

The key to creating good habits and breaking bad ones is to understand these fundamental steps and how to alter them to your specifications. Any habit can be broken down into a feedback loop that involves these four steps: Cue, Craving, Response, and Reward. People who make a specific plan for when and where they will perform a new habit are more likely to follow through. Many people think they lack motivation when what they really lack is clarity. One of the best ways to build a new habit is to identify a current habit you already do each day and then stack your new behavior on top. This is called “Habit Stacking.” Don’t ask yourself to do a habit when you’re likely to be occupied with something else. Habit stacking works best when the cue is highly specific and immediately actionable.

Habits like “read more” or “eat better” are worthy causes, but these goals do not provide instruction on how and when to act. Specificity is important. People often choose products not because of what they are, but because of where they are. Your habits change depending on the room you are in and the cues in front of you. Many of the actions we take each day are shaped not by purposeful drive and choice but by the most obvious option. The most powerful of all human sensory abilities, however, is vision. Visual cues are the greatest catalyst of our behavior. You don’t have to be the victim of your environment. You can also be the architect of it.

Every habit is initiated by a cue, and we are more likely to notice cues that stand out. When the cues that spark a habit are subtle or hidden, they are easy to ignore. If you want to make a habit a big part of your life, make the cue a big part of your environment. Making a better decision is easy and natural when the cues for good habits are right in front of you. Stop thinking about your environment as filled with objects. Start thinking about it as filled with relationships. It was easier for me to turn off the professional side of my brain when there was a clear dividing line between work life and home life.

Every habit should have a home. You need an environment that is stable and predictable. “disciplined” people are better at structuring their lives in a way that does not require heroic willpower and self-control. In other words, they spend less time in tempting situations. Once a habit has been encoded, the urge to act follows whenever the environmental cues reappear. An external trigger causes a compulsive craving to repeat a bad habit.

One of the most practical ways to eliminate a bad habit is to reduce exposure to the cue that causes it. Remove a single cue and the entire habit often fades away. Make the cues of your good habits obvious and the cues of your bad habits invisible.

HOW TO CREATE A GOOD HABIT

Make It Obvious

Make It Attractive

Make It Easy

Make It Satisfying

The more attractive an opportunity is, the more likely it is to become habit-forming. If you want to increase the odds that a behavior will occur, then you need to make it attractive. It is the anticipation of a reward—not the fulfillment of it—that gets us to take action. Desire is the engine that drives behavior. Every action is taken because of the anticipation that precedes it. It is the craving that leads to the response. Whatever habits are normal in your culture are among the most attractive behaviors you'll find. One of the deepest human desires is to belong. We don't choose our earliest habits, we imitate them. Often, you follow the habits of your culture without thinking, without questioning, and sometimes without remembering.

The close. The many. The powerful. Each group offers an opportunity to leverage the 2nd Step of Behavior Change and make our habits more attractive. Our friends and family provide a sort of invisible peer pressure that pulls us in their direction. Most days, we'd rather be wrong with the crowd than be right by ourselves. Once we fit in, we start looking for ways to stand out. Many of our daily habits are imitations of people we admire. Your current habits are not necessarily the best way to solve the problems you face; they are just the methods you learned to use. Our behavior is heavily dependent on how we interpret the events that happen to us, not necessarily the objective reality of the events themselves.

Your desire is the difference between where you are now and where you want to be in the future. Habits are attractive when we associate them with positive feelings. Reframing your habits to highlight their benefits rather than their drawbacks is a fast and lightweight way to reprogram your mind and make a habit seem more attractive. Once a habit has been built, the cue can prompt a craving, even if it has little to do with the original situation. When preparation becomes a form of procrastination, you need to change something. You don't actually want the habit itself. What you really want is the outcome the habit delivers. Habits are easier to build when they fit into the flow of your life.

The central idea is to create an environment where doing the right thing is as easy as possible. The greater the friction, the less likely the habit. Researchers estimate that 40 to 50 percent of our actions on any given day are done out of habit. We are limited by where our habits lead us. The idea is to make your habits as easy as possible to start. The truth is, a habit must be established before it can be improved.

Sometimes success is less about making good habits easy and more about making bad habits hard. The average person spends over two hours per day on social media. After I removed the mental candy from my environment, it became much easier to eat the healthy stuff. The problem wasn't knowledge. The problem was consistency. We are more likely to repeat a behavior when the experience is satisfying. Conversely, if an experience is not satisfying, we have little reason to repeat it.

The Cardinal Rule of Behavior Change: What is rewarded is repeated.

What is punished is avoided. The costs of your good habits are in the present. The costs of your bad habits are in the future. When the moment of decision arrives, instant gratification usually wins. The road less traveled is the road of delayed gratification. The last mile is always the least crowded.

At some point, success in nearly every field requires you to ignore an immediate reward in favor of a delayed reward. Incentives can start a habit. Identity sustains a habit. I try to remind myself of a simple rule: never miss twice. I can't be perfect, but I can avoid a second lapse. The first mistake is never the one that ruins you. It's the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows. Missing once is an accident. Missing twice is the start of a new habit. The problem is not slipping up; the problem is thinking that if you can't do something perfectly, then you shouldn't do it at all. When we choose the wrong measurement, we get the wrong behavior. If a failure is painful, it gets fixed. If a failure is relatively painless, it gets ignored.

The more immediate the pain, the less likely the behavior. Competence is highly dependent on context. If you want to be truly great, selecting the right place to focus is crucial. When you can't win by being better, you can win by being different. Even if you're not the most naturally gifted, you can often win by being the best in a very narrow category. It's more productive to focus on whether you are fulfilling your own potential than comparing yourself to someone else. Genes do not eliminate the need for hard work. They clarify it. They tell us what to work hard on.

The Goldilocks Rule states that humans experience peak motivation when working on tasks that are right on the edge of their current abilities. Not too hard. Not too easy. Just right. When you're starting a new habit, it's important to keep the behavior as easy as possible so you can stick with it even when conditions aren't perfect. Working on challenges of just manageable difficulty—something on the perimeter of your ability—seems crucial for maintaining motivation.

The greatest threat to success is not failure but boredom. At some point, everyone faces the same challenge on the journey of self-improvement. You have to fall in love with boredom. Stepping up when it's annoying or painful or draining to do so, that's what makes the difference between a professional and an amateur. Professionals stick to the schedule; amateurs let life get in the way.

Professionals know what's important to them and work toward it with purpose. Amateurs get pulled off course by the urgencies of life. When a habit is truly important to you, you have to be willing to stick to it in any mood. The only way to become excellent is to be endlessly fascinated by doing the same thing over and over. You have to fall in love with boredom. The greatest threat to success is not failure but boredom. Anyone can work hard when they feel motivated. It's the ability to keep going when work isn't exciting that makes the difference. Habits are the backbone of any pursuit of excellence.

The less energy you spend on trivial choices, the more you can spend it on what really matters. The way to be successful is to learn how to do things right, then do them the same way every time. Improvement is not just about learning habits, it's also about fine-tuning them. Habits deliver numerous benefits, but the downside is that they can lock us into our previous patterns of thinking and acting—even when the world is shifting around us. A commitment to tiny, sustainable, unrelenting improvements. The secret to getting results that last is to never stop making improvements.