

Atomic Habits

Tiny changes, remarkable results
Build good habits and break bad ones

James Clear

British cycling changed in 2003. Top bike brands in Europe refused to sell bikes to the British team because they were so bad and hence brands worried about their reputation. That's when David Brailsford was hired.

David Brailsford started searching for tiny improvements in everything the team did. We always think we need massive effort to make massive change, when it actually needs small effort repeated everyday.

If you get 1 % better everyday, you will get 37 times better at the end of the year. If you decline 1 % everyday, you will be nearly zero at the end of the year.

Habits are the compound interest of self improvement

It does not matter whether you are successful or unsuccessful right now. What matters is whether your habits are putting you on the path to success.

Your outcomes are a lagging measure of your habits. Your weight is a lagging measure of your eating habits. Your net worth is a lagging measure of your financial habits. Your knowledge is a lagging measure of your learning habits.

Time magnifies the margin between success and failure. It will multiply whatever you feed it. Good habits make time your ally. Bad habits make time your enemy.

Habits do not make a difference till you cross a critical threshold and unlock a new performance.

If you find yourself struggling to build a good habit or break a bad habit, it is because you have lost the ability to improve.

Mastery requires patience.

Winners and losers have the same goals, so goals cannot differentiate winners from losers. Achieving your goal changes life only for the moment.

Fix the inputs and the output will fix itself.

The purpose of setting goals is to win the game, the purpose of building systems is to continue to play the game. Your commitment to the process will determine your progress

Changing habits is challenging for two reasons – we change the wrong thing, or we try to change our habits in the wrong way.

We must change our approach from outcome based habits to identity based habits. Its like offering a cigarette to two people who are trying to quit smoking. The first one says "no, thanks I am trying to quit smoking" which is output based, the second one says " No, thanks, I am not a smoker" which is identity based.

**True behavior change is identity change.
you might start a habit because of
motivation, but the only reason you will
stick with it will be because it becomes part
of your identity.**

The more you repeat a behavior, the more you reinforce the identity associated with that behavior.

In 1898, a psychologist named Edward Thorndike established with his studies that behaviors followed by satisfying consequences tend to be repeated while those that produce unpleasant consequences are less likely to be repeated. A habit is a behavior that has been repeated enough times to become automatic.

Habits are simply, reliable solutions to recurring problems in our environment.
As habits are created, the level of activity in the brain decreases.
Habits are mental shortcuts learned from experience.
Habits do not restrict freedom, they create it.

The process of building a Habit has four simple steps – cue, craving, response, reward.

Many people think they lack motivation to start a habit, when in reality they lack clarity.

One of the best ways to build anew habit is to identify a current habit and stack this new one on top, this is called habit stacking. E.g., as I pour my coffee every morning, I will meditate for a minute, as I sit down for dinner, I will call out one thing in the day I am grateful for etc. etc.

In 1939, psychologist Kurt Lewin wrote a simple and powerful equation. Behavior is a function of the person in the environment.

$$B = f(P, E)$$

In 1965, a Hungarian man named Laszlo Polgar wrote a series of strange letters to a woman name Klara. Laszlo believed in hard work, he believed if you worked hard you could become talented.

Laszlo courted Klara and married her. They had three girls – Susan, Sofia, and Judit. Their lives were dedicated to chess only. All conversation at home was chess and everything one could ask for was there at home relating to chess.

The Polgar sisters were praised and rewarded for chess achievements.

All three Polgar sisters did very well at chess at a world level. Judit the youngest, was the youngest grandmaster of all time even before Bobby Fischer and was the world No 1 for 27 years

Charles Darwin said “In the long history of humankind, those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed”

we don't choose our earliest habits, we imitate them. We go with what the family does or society does or a school does. Going along with the group does not feel like a burden and has no risk.

We imitate habits of three groups in particular:

a. Those close to us

b. The many and

c. The powerful

**When we are unsure about how to behave ,
we look to the group to guide our behavior.
We are drawn to behaviors that earn us
respect, approval, admiration and status.**

We copy the behaviors of successful people because we desire success ourselves. Many of our daily habits are imitations of people we admire.

Jerry Uelsmann, a professor in Florida divided his photography class into two sections. He told one section that they would be graded by the quantity of pictures they shot in the course. He told the second section that this group will be evaluated for the quality of the picture even if they brought only one picture at the end of the term.

At the end of the term, he was surprised to find that all the good photos came from the quantity group and there were no good pictures from the quality group.

The quantity group hones their skills as they shot picture after couture while the quality group was thinking about that perfect shot!

This concept is called being in motion(quality group) versus taking action (quantity group).

Motion makes you feel that you are getting somewhere , when in reality you are not progressing. Action on the other hand delivers an outcome.

If I outline twenty ideas for articles I want to write, that's motion, if I actually sit down and write an article, that's action.

The behaviors that fill up our daily life can be performed with very little motivation. These are convenient habits, like scrolling a phone, like not being prepared for meetings, like cancelling things at the last minute.

Much of the building of better habits comes down to reducing the friction associated with our good habits and increasing the friction associated with our bad habits. That's what governments do with smoking-increase friction.

Researchers estimate that 40 to 50 pc of our actions on any given day are done out of habit.

**When you start a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to do
e.g. Read before each night become “read one page”**

In the summer of 1830, Victor Hugo was facing an impossible deadline. Twelve months earlier, the author had promised his publisher a new book and wasted the year. The publisher gave him six months by February 1831.

Victor Hugo called his servant and asked him to lock away all his clothes except one pair and a large shawl. This forced Victor Hugo to stay indoors and finish the book. The book was published on January 14, 1831, two weeks ahead of schedule. The book ? “ The hunchback of Notre Dame”

Making your bad habits more difficult in this way is called a *commitment device*.

A commitment device is a choice you make in the present that controls your actions in the future.

In the late 1990s, a public health worker Stephen Luby left Omaha and bought a one way ticket to Karachi, Pakistan.

Karachi has poor sanitation and this led to widespread illness and disease.

Luby and team contacted Procter and Gamble Pakistan.

Luby and P and G partnered to supply safeguard soap to society. Luby saw this not as behavior change but as a habit adoption. Luby argued that it was easy for people to adopt a product with a strong positive sensory signal.

Within months, Luby and team saw a massive drop , diarrhea fell by 52%, pneumonia by 48%, and skin infection by 35%. (surprising that P and G did not roll this out in India but Unilever copied this and did it with Lifebuoy)

Animals in the plains of Africa hunt other animals for food. This is what scientists call an immediate return environment.

In society many of the choices we make do not benefit you immediately. When you work, you get a paycheck in a week or in a month. These are examples of delayed return environment.

Our brains are coming to grips with delayed return environment only after society has got civilized.

The consequences of bad habits are delayed while the rewards are immediate. Smoking might kill you in ten years but it reduces stress now.

Put another way, the costs of your good habits are in the present, the costs of your bad habits are in the future.

The vital thing in getting a habit to stick is to feel successful, even if its in a small way. The feeling of success is a signal that your habit paid off and the effort was worth it. In a perfect world, the reward of a good habit is the habit itself.

It is important to have a habit tracker, It is a simple way to measure whether you did a habit.

What's important is to recover quickly if you miss a routine and get back. This is what differentiates winners from losers.

We should not track meaningless numbers. If you run a restaurant, revenue might not be the best way to measure if your food is good and the chef is doing a great job. Measuring how many people finished their meals or the size of tip they left might be better indicators of satisfaction. The dark side is that we get driven by a number rather than the purpose behind it.

In a data driven world, we tend to overvalue numbers and undervalue the soft and the difficult to quantify parameters.

The people at the top of any competitive field are not only well trained , they are also well suited to the task. And hence, if you want to be great, choosing the right place to focus is crucial.

Competence is highly dependent on context.

What habits are most satisfying to you?

Here is a quick check, as these 4 questions:

1. What feels like fun to me, but work to others
2. What makes me lose track of time?
3. Where do I get greater returns than the average person?
4. What comes naturally to me?

The greatest threat to success is not failure but boredom. We get bored with habits because they stop delighting us. Professionals stick to the schedule, amateurs let life get in the way. Professionals know what is important and work towards it, amateurs get pulled off course by the urgencies of life.

