



FIGURE 4: With outcome-based habits, the focus is on what you want to achieve. With identity-based habits, the focus is on who you wish to become.

Imagine two people resisting a cigarette. When offered a smoke, the first person says, “No thanks. I’m trying to quit.” It sounds like a reasonable response, but this person still believes they are a smoker who is trying to be something else. They are hoping their behavior will change while carrying around the same beliefs.

The second person declines by saying, “No thanks. I’m not a smoker.” It’s a small difference, but this statement signals a shift in identity. Smoking was part of their former life, not their current one. They no longer identify as someone who smokes.

Most people don’t even consider identity change when they set out to improve. They just think, “I want to be skinny (outcome) and if I stick to this diet, then I’ll be skinny (process).” They set goals and determine the actions they

should take to achieve those goals without considering the beliefs that drive their actions. They never shift the way they look at themselves, and they don't realize that their old identity can sabotage their new plans for change.

Behind every system of actions are a system of beliefs. The system of a democracy is founded on beliefs like freedom, majority rule, and social equality. The system of a dictatorship has a very different set of beliefs like absolute authority and strict obedience. You can imagine many ways to try to get more people to vote in a democracy, but such behavior change would never get off the ground in a dictatorship. That's not the identity of the system. Voting is a behavior that is impossible under a certain set of beliefs.

A similar pattern exists whether we are discussing individuals, organizations, or societies. 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. You may want more money, but if your identity is someone who consumes rather than creates, then you'll continue to be pulled toward spending rather than earning. You may want better health, but if you continue to prioritize comfort over accomplishment, you'll be drawn to relaxing rather than training. It's hard to change your habits if you never change the underlying beliefs that led to your past behavior. You have a new goal and a new plan, but you haven't changed *who* you are.

The story of Brian Clark, an entrepreneur from Boulder, Colorado, provides a good example. "For as long as I can remember, I've chewed my fingernails," Clark told me. "It started as a nervous habit when I was young, and then morphed into an undesirable grooming ritual. One day, I resolved to stop chewing my nails until they grew out a bit. Through mindful willpower alone, I managed to do it."

Then, Clark did something surprising.

"I asked my wife to schedule my first-ever manicure," he said. "My thought was that if I started paying to maintain my nails, I wouldn't chew them. And it worked, but not for the monetary reason. What happened was the manicure made my fingers look really nice for the first time. The manicurist even said that—other than the chewing—I had really healthy, attractive nails. Suddenly, I was proud of my fingernails. And even though that's something I had never aspired to, it made all the difference. I've never chewed my nails since; not even a single close call. And it's because I now take pride in properly caring for them."

The ultimate form of intrinsic motivation is when a habit becomes part of your identity. 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. If you're proud of how your hair looks, you'll develop all sorts of habits to care for and maintain it. If you're proud of the size of your biceps, you'll make sure you never skip an upper-body workout. If you're proud of the scarves you knit, you'll be more likely to spend hours knitting each week. Once your pride gets involved, you'll fight tooth and nail to maintain your habits.

True behavior change is identity change. You might start a habit because of motivation, but the only reason you'll stick with one is that it becomes part of your identity. Anyone can convince themselves to visit the gym or eat healthy once or twice, but 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.

- The goal is not to read a book, the goal is to *become* a reader.
- The goal is not to run a marathon, the goal is to *become* a runner.
- The goal is not to learn an instrument, the goal is to *become* a musician.

Your behaviors are usually a reflection of your identity. What you do is an indication of the type of person you believe that you are—either consciously or nonconsciously.\* Research has shown that once a person believes in a particular aspect of their identity, they are more likely to act in alignment with that belief. For example, people who identified as “being a voter” were more likely to vote than those who simply claimed “voting” was an action they wanted to perform. Similarly, the person who incorporates exercise into their identity doesn't have to convince themselves to train. Doing the right thing is easy. After all, when your behavior and your identity are fully aligned, you are no longer pursuing behavior change. You are simply acting like the type of person you already believe yourself to be.

Like all aspects of habit formation, this, too, is a double-edged sword. When working for you, identity change can be a powerful force for selfimprovement. When working against you, though, identity change can be a curse. Once you have adopted an identity, it can be easy to let your allegiance to it impact your ability to change. Many people walk through life in a cognitive slumber, blindly following the norms attached to their identity.

- “I’m terrible with directions.”
- “I’m not a morning person.”
- “I’m bad at remembering people’s names.”
- “I’m always late.”
- “I’m not good with technology.”
- “I’m horrible at math.”

. . . and a thousand other variations.

When you have repeated a story to yourself for years, it is easy to slide into these mental grooves and accept them as a fact. In time, you begin to resist certain actions because “that’s not who I am.” There is internal pressure to maintain your self-image and behave in a way that is consistent with your beliefs. You find whatever way you can to avoid contradicting yourself.

The more deeply a thought or action is tied to your identity, the more difficult it is to change it. It can feel comfortable to believe what your culture believes (group identity) or to do what upholds your self-image (personal identity), even if it’s wrong. 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.

On any given day, you may struggle with your habits because you’re too busy or too tired or too overwhelmed or hundreds of other reasons. Over the long run, however, the real reason you fail to stick with habits is that your self-image gets in the way. This is why you can’t get too attached to one version of your identity. Progress requires unlearning. Becoming the best version of yourself requires you to continuously edit your beliefs, and to upgrade and expand your identity.

This brings us to an important question: If your beliefs and worldview play such an important role in your behavior, where do they come from in the first place? How, exactly, is your identity formed? And how can you emphasize new aspects of your identity that serve you and gradually erase the pieces that hinder you?

## **THE TWO-STEP PROCESS TO CHANGING YOUR IDENTITY**

Your identity emerges out of your habits. You are not born with preset beliefs. Every belief, including those about yourself, is learned and conditioned through experience.\*

More precisely, your habits are how you *embody* your identity. When you make your bed each day, you embody the identity of an organized person. When you write each day, you embody the identity of a creative person. When you train each day, you embody the identity of an athletic person.

The more you repeat a behavior, the more you reinforce the identity associated with that behavior. In fact, the word *identity* was originally derived from the Latin words *essentitas*, which means *being*, and *identidem*, which means *repeatedly*. Your identity is literally your “repeated beingness.”

Whatever your identity is right now, you only believe it because you have proof of it. If you go to church every Sunday for twenty years, you have evidence that you are religious. If you study biology for one hour every night, you have evidence that you are studious. If you go to the gym even when it’s snowing, you have evidence that you are committed to fitness. The more evidence you have for a belief, the more strongly you will believe it.

For most of my early life, I didn’t consider myself a writer. If you were to ask any of my high school teachers or college professors, they would tell you I was an average writer at best: certainly not a standout. When I began my writing career, I published a new article every Monday and Thursday for the first few years. As the evidence grew, so did my identity as a writer. I didn’t start out as a writer. I *became* one through my habits.

Of course, your habits are not the *only* actions that influence your identity, but by virtue of their frequency they are usually the most important ones. Each experience in life modifies your self-image, but it’s unlikely you would consider yourself a soccer player because you kicked a ball once or an artist because you scribbled a picture. As you repeat these actions, however, the evidence accumulates and your self-image begins to change. The effect of one-off experiences tends to fade away while the effect of habits gets reinforced with time, which means your habits contribute most of the evidence that shapes your identity. In this way, the process of building habits is actually the process of becoming yourself.

This is a gradual evolution. We do not change by snapping our fingers and deciding to be someone entirely new. We change bit by bit, day by day, habit by habit. We are continually undergoing microevolutions of the self.

Each habit is like a suggestion: “Hey, maybe *this* is who I am.” If you finish a book, then perhaps you are the type of person who likes reading. If you go to the gym, then perhaps you are the type of person who likes exercise. **If you practice playing the guitar, perhaps you are the type of person who likes music.**

**Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become. No single instance will transform your beliefs, but as the votes build up, so does the**

evidence of your new identity. This is one reason why meaningful change does not require radical change. Small habits can make a meaningful difference by providing evidence of a new identity. And if a change is meaningful, it actually is big. That's the paradox of making small improvements.

Putting this all together, you can see that habits are the path to changing your identity. The most practical way to change *who* you are is to change *what* you do.

- Each time you write a page, you are a writer.
- Each time you practice the violin, you are a musician.
- Each time you start a workout, you are an athlete.
- Each time you encourage your employees, you are a leader.

Each habit not only gets results but also teaches you something far more important: to trust yourself. You start to believe you can actually accomplish these things. When the votes mount up and the evidence begins to change, the story you tell yourself begins to change as well.

Of course, it works the opposite way, too. Every time you choose to perform a bad habit, it's a vote for that identity. The good news is that you don't need to be perfect. In any election, there are going to be votes for both sides. You don't need a unanimous vote to win an election; you just need a majority. It doesn't matter if you cast a few votes for a bad behavior or an unproductive habit. Your goal is simply to win the majority of the time.

New identities require new evidence. If you keep casting the same votes you've always cast, you're going to get the same results you've always had. If nothing changes, nothing is going to change.

It is a simple two-step process:

1. Decide the type of person you want to be.
2. Prove it to yourself with small wins.

First, decide who you want to be. This holds at any level—as an individual, as a team, as a community, as a nation. What do you want to stand for? What are your principles and values? Who do you wish to become?

These are big questions, and many people aren't sure where to begin—but they do know what kind of results they want: to get six-pack abs or to feel less

anxious or to double their salary. That's fine. Start there and work backward from the results you want to the type of person who could get those results. Ask yourself, "Who is the type of person that could get the outcome I want?" Who is the type of person that could lose forty pounds? Who is the type of person that could learn a new language? Who is the type of person that could run a successful start-up?

For example, "Who is the type of person who could write a book?" It's probably someone who is consistent and reliable. Now your focus shifts from writing a book (outcome-based) to being the type of person who is consistent and reliable (identity-based).

This process can lead to beliefs like:

- "I'm the kind of teacher who stands up for her students."
- "I'm the kind of doctor who gives each patient the time and empathy they need."
- "I'm the kind of manager who advocates for her employees."

Once you have a handle on the type of person you want to be, you can begin taking small steps to reinforce your desired identity. I have a friend who lost over 100 pounds by asking herself, "What would a healthy person do?" All day long, she would use this question as a guide. Would a healthy person walk or take a cab? Would a healthy person order a burrito or a salad? She figured if she acted like a healthy person long enough, eventually she would become that person. She was right.

The concept of identity-based habits is our first introduction to another key theme in this book: feedback loops. Your habits shape your identity, and your identity shapes your habits. It's a two-way street. The formation of all habits is a feedback loop (a concept we will explore in depth in the next chapter), but it's important to let your values, principles, and identity drive the loop rather than your results. The focus should always be on becoming that type of person, not getting a particular outcome.

## THE REAL REASON HABITS MATTER

Identity change is the North Star of habit change. The remainder of this book will provide you with step-by-step instructions on how to build better habits in yourself, your family, your team, your company, and anywhere else you wish.

But the true question is: “Are you becoming the type of person you want to become?” The first step is not *what* or *how*, but *who*. You need to know who you want to be. Otherwise, your quest for change is like a boat without a rudder. And that’s why we are starting here.

You have the power to change your beliefs about yourself. Your identity is not set in stone. You have a choice in every moment. You can choose the identity you want to reinforce today with the habits you choose today. And this brings us to the deeper purpose of this book and the real reason habits matter.

Building better habits isn’t about littering your day with life hacks. It’s not about flossing one tooth each night or taking a cold shower each morning or wearing the same outfit each day. It’s not about achieving external measures of success like earning more money, losing weight, or reducing stress. Habits can help you achieve all of these things, but fundamentally they are not about *having* something. They are about *becoming* someone.

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.



## Chapter Summary

- There are three levels of change: outcome change, process change, and identity change.
- The most effective way to change your habits is to focus not on what you want to achieve, but on who you wish to become.
- Your identity emerges out of your habits. Every action is a vote for the type of person you wish to become.
- Becoming the best version of yourself requires you to continuously edit your beliefs, and to upgrade and expand your identity.
- The real reason habits matter is not because they can get you better results (although they can do that), but because they can change your beliefs about yourself.



### 3

## How to Build Better Habits in 4 Simple Steps

**I**<sup>N 1898</sup>, A psychologist named Edward Thorndike conducted an experiment that would lay the foundation for our understanding of how habits form and the rules that guide our behavior. Thorndike was interested in studying the behavior of animals, and he started by working with cats.

He would place each cat inside a device known as a puzzle box. The box was designed so that the cat could escape through a door “by some simple act, such as pulling at a loop of cord, pressing a lever, or stepping on a platform.” For example, one box contained a lever that, when pressed, would open a door on the side of the box. Once the door had been opened, the cat could dart out and run over to a bowl of food.

Most cats wanted to escape as soon as they were placed inside the box. They would poke their nose into the corners, stick their paws through openings, and claw at loose objects. After a few minutes of exploration, the cats would happen to press the magical lever, the door would open, and they would escape.

Thorndike tracked the behavior of each cat across many trials. In the beginning, the animals moved around the box at random. But as soon as the lever had been pressed and the door opened, the process of learning began. Gradually, each cat learned to associate the action of pressing the lever with the reward of escaping the box and getting to the food.

After twenty to thirty trials, this behavior became so automatic and habitual that the cat could escape within a few seconds. For example, Thorndike noted, “Cat 12 took the following times to perform the act. 160 seconds, 30 seconds, 90 seconds, 60, 15, 28, 20, 30, 22, 11, 15, 20, 12, 10, 14, 10, 8, 8, 5, 10, 8, 6, 6, 7.”

During the first three trials, the cat escaped in an average of 1.5 minutes. During the last three trials, it escaped in an average of 6.3 seconds. With practice, each cat made fewer errors and their actions became quicker and more automatic. Rather than repeat the same mistakes, the cat began to cut straight to