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CLEAR
HABITS

*This article includes an excerpt
from Atomic Habits, my New
York Times bestselling book.*

If you want to stick
with a habit for good,
one simple and effective
thing you can do is keep a
habit tracker.

Here's why:

Elite performers will often
measure, quantify, and
track their progress in
various ways. Each little
measurement provides
feedback. It offers a signal
of whether they are
making progress or need

to change course.

Gabrielle Hamilton, a chef in New York City, provides a good example. During an interview with the *New York Times*, she said, “The one thing I see that consistently separates the chef from the home cook is that we taste everything, all the time, before we commit it to the dish, right down to the grains of salt. We slurp shot glasses of olive oil and aerate them in our mouths as if it were a wine we were trying to know. We taste the lamb, the fish, the butter, the milk before we use it... we chew salt to see how we like it in our teeth, on our tongues, and to know its flavor, its salinity.”

For the chef, tasting the ingredients tells them whether they are making progress toward their desired end goal. It provides the immediate feedback they need to get the recipe *just right*.

Like a chef improving a recipe through trial and error, we often improve our habits through trial and error. If one approach doesn't deliver the desired effect, then we adjust—like a chef tweaking the amount of an ingredient.

However, there is an important difference between getting feedback while cooking a meal and getting feedback while building a habit. When it comes to building a habit, feedback is often delayed.

It's easy to taste an ingredient or to watch bread rise in the oven. But it can be difficult to visualize the progress you are making with your habits. Perhaps you've been running for a month, but you still don't see a change in your body. Or maybe you managed to meditate for 16 straight days, but you still feel stressed and anxious at work.

Habit formation is a long race. It often takes time for the desired results to appear. And while you are waiting for the long-term rewards of your efforts to accumulate, you need a reason to stick with it in the short-term. You need some immediate feedback that shows you are on the

right path.

And this is where a habit tracker can help.

The Habit Tracker: What It Is and How It Works

A habit tracker is a simple way to measure whether you did a habit.

The most basic format is to get a calendar and cross off each day you stick with your routine. For example, if you meditate on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, each of those dates gets an X. As time rolls by, the calendar becomes a record of your habit streak.



To make this process as easy as possible, I created the Habit Journal, which includes 12 habit tracker templates—one for each month. All you have to do is add your habit and start crossing off the days.

Placing an X on each day is the classic look. I prefer something a little more design-oriented, so I shade in the cells on my habit tracker. You could also use checkmarks or fill your habit tracker with dots.

No matter what design you choose, the key point is your habit tracker provides immediate evidence that you completed your habit. It's a signal that you are making progress. Of course, that's not all it does...

Habit tracking is powerful for three reasons.

1. It creates a visual cue that can remind you to act.
2. It is motivating to see the progress you are making. You don't want to break your streak.
3. It feels satisfying to record your success in the moment.

Let's break down each

one.

Benefit #1: A habit tracker reminds you to act.

Habit tracking naturally builds a series of visual cues. When you look at the calendar and see your streak, you'll be reminded to act again.

Research has shown that people who track their progress on goals like losing weight, quitting smoking, and lowering blood pressure are all more likely to improve than those who don't. One study of more than sixteen hundred people found that those who kept a daily food log lost twice

as much weight as those who did not. A habit tracker is a simple way to log your behavior, and the mere act of tracking a behavior can spark the urge to change it.

Habit tracking also keeps you honest. Most of us think we act better than we do. Measurement offers one way to overcome our blindness to our own behavior and notice what's really going on each day. When the evidence is right in front of you, you're less likely to lie to yourself.

Benefit #2: A habit tracker motivates you to continue.

The most effective form of motivation is progress.

When we get a signal that we are moving forward, we become more motivated to continue down that path. In this way, habit tracking can have an addictive effect on motivation. Each small win feeds your desire.

This can be particularly powerful on a bad day. When you're feeling down, it's easy to forget about all the progress you have already made. Habit tracking provides visual proof of your hard work—a subtle reminder of how far you've come. Plus, the empty square you see each morning can motivate you to get started because you don't want to lose your progress

by breaking your streak.

Benefit #3: A habit tracker provides immediate satisfaction.

Finally, tracking feels rewarding. It is satisfying to cross an item off your to-do list, to complete an entry in your workout log, or to mark an X on the calendar. It feels good to watch your results grow and if it feels good, then you're more likely to endure.

Habit tracking also helps keep your eye on the ball: you're focused on the process rather than the result. You're not fixated

on getting six-pack abs,
you're just trying to keep
the streak alive and
become the type of
person who doesn't miss
workouts.

Habit Tracker Ideas

Alright, those benefits
sound great, but it's not
necessary to fill your
habit tracker with every
habit that makes up your
day. In fact, if you're
already sticking to a habit,
then it seems like extra
work to me to track it as
well. So what should you
measure in your habit
tracker?

Habit tracking can help
kickstart a new habit or
keep you on track with

behaviors that you tend to forget or let slide when things get busy.

In Atomic Habits, I recommend using the Two-Minute Rule, which suggests you scale your habits down until they take two minutes or less to perform. You can track whatever habits you want in your habit tracker, but I recommend starting with these super small habits to make sure that you are at least showing up in a small way each day. I'll share some examples below and break them out by daily, weekly, and monthly habits.

Common daily habits to track:

journal 1 sentence

read 1 page

meditate 1 minute

do 1 push up

stretch for 1 minute

write 1 thing I'm

grateful for

make your bed

wake up by [TIME]

go to bed by [TIME]

take a shower

floss teeth

weigh myself

take medication

take

vitamins/supplements

play [INSTRUMENT]

for 1 minute

contact 1 potential

client

prioritize to-do list

say "I love you" at

least once

put all dishes put
away

take a walk outside

call mom

walk the dog

Notice that most items on
this list can be completed
in two minutes or less.

Make your habits so easy
that you can stick to them
even on the hard days.

For something to become
truly habitual, you need
to repeat it frequently. As
a result, most habits are
daily. But it can also be
helpful to use a habit
tracker for various weekly
or monthly routines.

These behaviors won't
become "automatic" like
tying your shoes or
brushing your teeth, but a
habit tracker can remind

you to complete them
nonetheless.

Common weekly habits to track:

publish blog post

vacuum

take out

trash/recycling

do the laundry

water the plants

tidy up your bedroom

write a thank you note

Monthly habits:

review finances

transfer money to

savings account

pay off credit cards

pay bills

deep clean the house

You can also use a habit

tracker to simply count how often you do something. For example, if you want to keep track of how many days you travel for work each month.

Other ideas:

days spent traveling

conduct weekly
review

conduct monthly
review

Finally, you can use a habit tracker to measure what you *don't* do. I call these “habits of avoidance” (that is, behaviors you are trying to avoid).

Habits of avoidance:

no alcohol

no Netflix

no online purchases

no soda

no sugar

no caffeine

no smoking

Again, the Habit Journal offers a proven template and the fastest way to create your habit tracker. No need to spend an hour drawing your own grid. Just write your habits down and you're ready to go.

How to Get in the Habit of Using Your Habit Tracker

Despite all of the benefits, a habit tracker is not something that makes

sense in every situation or for every person. Many people resist the idea of tracking and measuring. It can feel like a burden because it forces you into two habits: the habit you're trying to build and the habit of tracking it. That said, nearly anyone can benefit from habit tracking in one form or another—even if it's only temporary.

What can we do to make habit tracking easier?

First, manual tracking should be limited to your most important habits. It is better to consistently track one habit than to sporadically track ten. I tend to keep my habit tracker simple and limit it to my three or four most

important habits.

Second, record each measurement immediately after the habit occurs. The completion of the habit is the cue to write it down. (This is a twist on the “habit stacking” approach I discuss in Chapter 5 of Atomic Habits.)

Here’s the basic formula:
After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [TRACK MY HABIT].

For example:

After I hang up the phone from a sales call, I will mark the “call 1 potential client” column.

After I finish meditating, I will fill the “meditate for 1

minute” column.

After I put my plate in the dishwasher, I will complete the “put all dishes away” column.

Basically, what we are talking about here is getting in the habit of using your habit tracker. These little rules help you remember to pick up your habit tracker and mark off another accomplishment.

How to Recover Quickly When Your Habits Break Down

Finally, I want to discuss what to do when you fall off the wagon.

Every habit streak ends at some point. Perfection is

not possible. Before long, an emergency will pop up—you get sick or you have to travel for work or your family needs a little more of your time. Whenever this happens to me, I try to remind myself of a simple rule:

Never miss twice.

If I miss one day, I try to get back into it as quickly as possible. Missing one workout happens, but I'm not going to miss two in a row. Maybe I'll eat an entire pizza, but I'll follow it up with a healthy meal. As soon as one streak ends, I get started on the next one. I can't be perfect, but I can avoid the second mistake.

Generally speaking, the first mistake is never the

one that ruins you. It is the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows. As I write in Atomic Habits, “Missing once is an accident. Missing twice is the start of a new habit.”

Too often, we fall into an all-or-nothing cycle with our habits. 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.

Sure, a perfectly filled-in habit tracker looks beautiful and you should strive to achieve it whenever possible. But life is messy. In the long run, what matters is that you find a way to get back on track.

How Long Do I Need to Track My Habits?

One of the most common questions I get is “How long does it take to build a habit?”

You’ll see all kinds of answers: 21 days, 30 days, 100 days. One popular answer right now is 66 days because there was one study that found that, on average, it took 66 days to build a habit. However, even within that study the range was quite wide depending on the difficulty of the habit.

I find that people are really trying to get at something else when they ask, “How long does it take to build a habit?”

What they often mean is,
“How long until it’s easy?
How long until I don’t
have to put much effort in
anymore?”

Look, all habits get easier
with practice. But this line
of questioning ignores the
real purpose of building
better habits in the first
place.

How long does it take?
The honest answer is:
forever. Because once you
stop doing it, it is no
longer a habit.

A habit is a lifestyle to be
lived, not a finish line to
be crossed. You are
looking to make small,
sustainable changes you
can stick with for years.
And a habit tracker is one
tool in your toolbox on
the road to behavior

change. It is an effective way to visualize your progress and motivate you to show up again tomorrow.

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 16 of my New York Times bestselling book [Atomic Habits](#). [Read more here.](#)

FOOTNOTES

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