

FIGURE 11: In the beginning (point A), a habit requires a good deal of effort and concentration to perform. After a few repetitions (point B), it gets easier, but still requires some conscious attention. With enough practice (point C), the habit becomes more automatic than conscious. Beyond this threshold—*the habit line*—the behavior can be done more or less without thinking. A new habit has been formed.

On the following page, you'll see what it looks like when researchers track the level of automaticity for an actual habit like walking for ten minutes each day. The shape of these charts, which scientists call *learning curves*, reveals an important truth about behavior change: habits form based on frequency, not time.

WALKING 10 MINUTES PER DAY

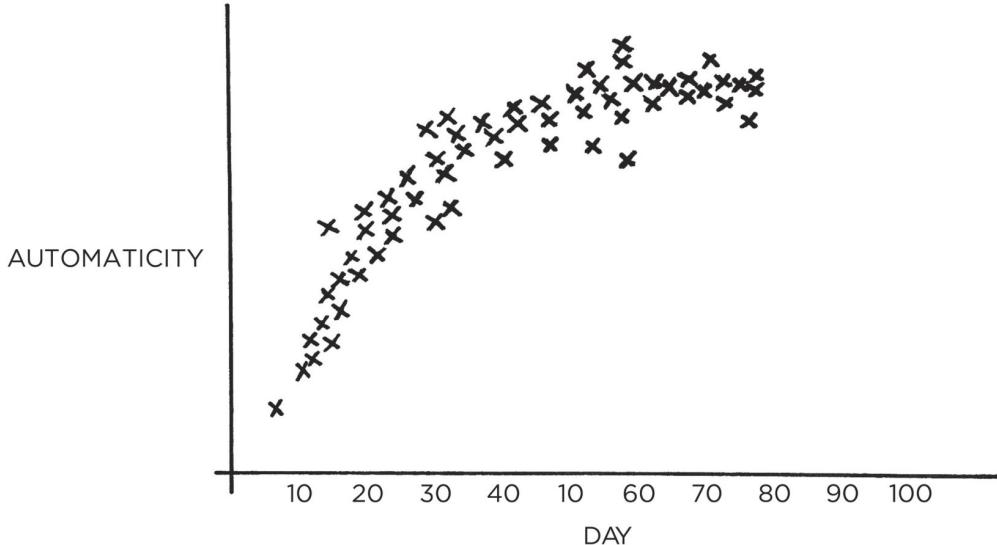


FIGURE 12: This graph shows someone who built the habit of walking for ten minutes after breakfast each day. Notice that as the repetitions increase, so does automaticity, until the behavior is as easy and automatic as it can be.

One of the most common questions I hear is, “How *long* does it take to build a new habit?” But what people really should be asking is, “How *many* does it take to form a new habit?” That is, how many repetitions are required to make a habit automatic?

There is nothing magical about time passing with regard to habit formation. It doesn't matter if it's been twenty-one days or thirty days or three hundred days. What matters is the rate at which you perform the behavior. You could do something twice in thirty days, or two hundred times. It's the frequency that makes the difference. Your current habits have been internalized over the course of hundreds, if not thousands, of repetitions. New habits require the same level of frequency. You need to string together enough successful attempts until the behavior is firmly embedded in your mind and you cross the Habit Line.

In practice, it doesn't really matter how long it takes for a habit to become automatic. What matters is that you take the actions you need to take to make progress. Whether an action is fully automatic is of less importance.

To build a habit, you need to practice it. And the most effective way to make practice happen is to adhere to the 3rd Law of Behavior Change: *make it easy*. The chapters that follow will show you how to do exactly that.

Chapter Summary

- The 3rd Law of Behavior Change is *make it easy*.
- The most effective form of learning is practice, not planning.
- Focus on taking action, not being in motion.
- Habit formation is the process by which a behavior becomes progressively more automatic through repetition.
- The amount of time you have been performing a habit is not as important as the number of times you have performed it.



12

The Law of Least Effort

IN HIS AWARD-WINNING BOOK, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, anthropologist and biologist Jared Diamond points out a simple fact: different continents have different shapes. At first glance, this statement seems rather obvious and unimportant, but it turns out to have a profound impact on human behavior.

The primary axis of the Americas runs from north to south. That is, the landmass of North and South America tends to be tall and thin rather than wide and fat. The same is generally true for Africa. Meanwhile, the landmass that makes up Europe, Asia, and the Middle East is the opposite. This massive stretch of land tends to be more east-west in shape. According to Diamond, this difference in shape played a significant role in the spread of agriculture over the centuries.

When agriculture began to spread around the globe, farmers had an easier time expanding along east-west routes than along north-south ones. This is because locations along the same latitude generally share similar climates, amounts of sunlight and rainfall, and changes in season. These factors allowed farmers in Europe and Asia to domesticate a few crops and grow them along the entire stretch of land from France to China.

THE SHAPE OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

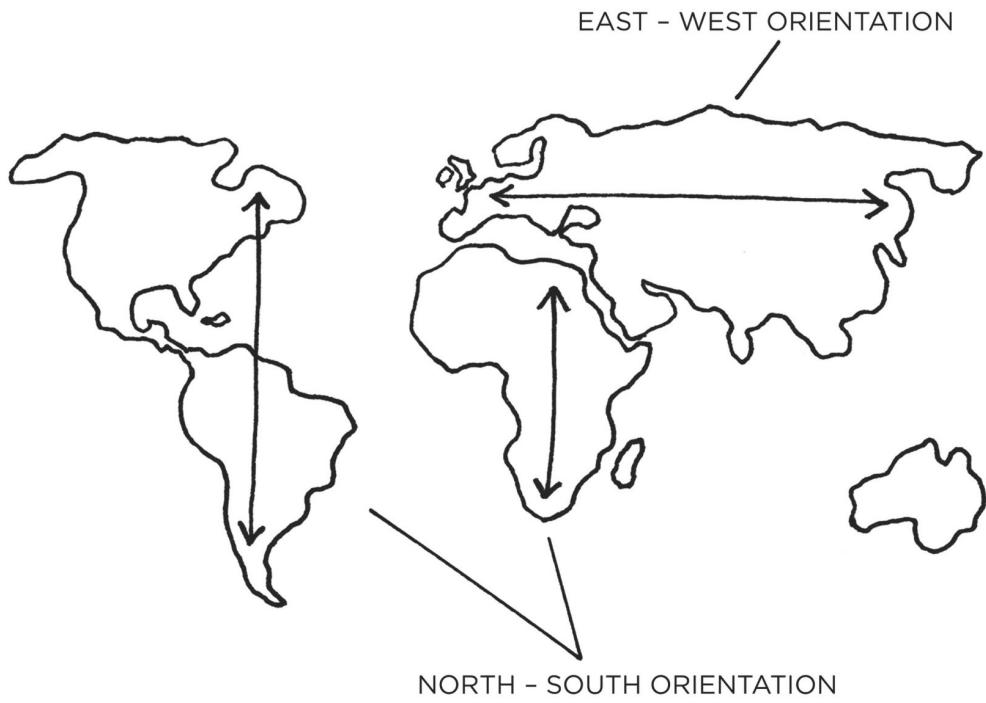


FIGURE 13: The primary axis of Europe and Asia is east-west. The primary axis of the Americas and Africa is north-south. This leads to a wider range of climates up-and-down the Americas than across Europe and Asia. As a result, agriculture spread nearly twice as fast across Europe and Asia than it did elsewhere. The behavior of farmers—even across hundreds or thousands of years—was constrained by the amount of friction in the environment.

By comparison, the climate varies greatly when traveling from north to south. Just imagine how different the weather is in Florida compared to Canada. You can be the most talented farmer in the world, but it won't help you grow Florida oranges in the Canadian winter. Snow is a poor substitute for soil. In order to spread crops along north-south routes, farmers would need to find and domesticate new plants whenever the climate changed.

As a result, agriculture spread two to three times faster across Asia and Europe than it did up and down the Americas. Over the span of centuries, this small difference had a very big impact. Increased food production allowed for more rapid population growth. With more people, these cultures were able to build stronger armies and were better equipped to develop new technologies. The changes started out small—a crop that spread slightly farther, a population that grew slightly faster—but compounded into substantial differences over time.

The spread of agriculture provides an example of the 3rd Law of Behavior Change on a global scale. Conventional wisdom holds that motivation is the key to habit change. Maybe if you *really* wanted it, you'd actually do it. But the truth is, our real motivation is to be lazy and to do what is convenient. And despite what the latest productivity best seller will tell you, this is a smart strategy, not a