



Summary of Atomic Habits

Original book by James Clear

Do you struggle with bad habits? Do you try to create good habits that will bring positive changes to your life, but have trouble making them stick? In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear argues that **adopting the right habits will drastically improve your life**—but to do so, you must understand how habits work and how you can change yours.

In this guide, you'll discover why habits matter and the three mindsets you can use to create them. You'll then learn how habits form and the four keys to changing yours. Finally, you'll learn how to continue improving habits you've implemented. Along the way, we'll examine how other psychologists and experts approach habit formation, and we'll explore how Clear's theories either align with or differ from theirs.

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1-Page Summary

How can you change your life? In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear argues that the key lies in your habits: the automatic behaviors that make up more than half of what you do every day. Clear contends that **implementing the right habits will drastically improve your life**—but to do so, you must understand how habits work and how to change yours.

In this guide, you'll discover why habits matter and the three mindsets you can use to create them. You'll then learn how habits form and the four keys to changing yours. Finally, you'll learn how to continue improving habits you've implemented. Along the way, we'll examine how other psychologists and experts approach habit formation, and we'll explore how Clear's theories either align with or differ from theirs.

Small Adjustments Lead to Massive Transformations

Clear explains that **implementing "atomic habits," or small improvements in behavior, changes your life because behaviors compound**—that is, they build on each other to create more and more changes. Performing one good behavior leads to another, then another—and soon, you've transformed your life.

(Shortform note: Clear focuses on how continuing *the same* behavior compounds: Saying one nice thing to your spouse won't massively impact your relationship, but doing so every day will. In *The Power of Habit*, productivity expert Charles Duhigg adds that *different* habits can likewise compound upon each other: [Changing one core habit can trigger a chain reaction that encourages you to change other habits.](#))

Clear identifies three levels of habits: goal-driven, system-driven, and identity-driven habits.

Goal-Driven Habits

Clear explains that a goal-driven habit is a behavior you do in order to achieve a specific goal. This is the most common way people try to change their behavior: For example, you might choose to study two extra hours each day in order to ace a specific test.

(Shortform note: What kinds of goals should you shoot for? In *Principles: Life and Work*, billionaire Ray Dalio recommends that you [be audacious](#): If you *know* with certainty you can achieve a goal, then you're not aiming high enough.)

System-Driven Habits

Clear contends that system-driven habits are those that focus on the *systems*, or processes, that will get you to your goal, instead of focusing on the goal itself. For example, developing a study routine is a system-driven habit because it focuses on the *process* of studying rather than the *goal* of acing a specific test or course.

(Shortform note: Like Clear, *Indistractable* author Nir Eyal suggests that some people fail to develop habits because they fail to focus on the processes. Eyal adds to the idea by arguing that you can only form a mindless habit by repeating processes that require effort—but that [some people don't put in this effort because they mistakenly think habits should be easy from the beginning.](#))

Identity-Driven Habits

Clear explains that identity-driven habits are behaviors we perform because they match our beliefs about who we are—in other words, our identity. For example, if you *believe* you're a good student, you have a

study routine because that's what good students do.

(Shortform note: Like Clear, motivational speaker Tony Robbins also argues in *Awaken the Giant Within* that your identity dictates your behavior. But Robbins' definition of identity is broader than Clear's: He argues that [your identity also depends on factors like whether you define yourself by your past, present, or future.](#))

How to Change Your Habits: Start With Your Identity

Now that you know the types of habits, which ones should you try to implement? For long-lasting behavior change, Clear recommends that you **create identity-driven habits**.

Clear explains that this strategy is unique because most of us try to change our behavior by building *goal-driven* habits. However, goal-driven habits don't create long-term change because once you meet your goal, you stop performing the behavior. As Clear explains, **if you adapt your actions to serve one finite purpose, your actions also become finite**.

For example, say you ace the test for which you've spent two extra hours every day studying. Since you've achieved your goal, you'll stop this behavior because there's no reason to keep studying. But since you stop studying, you never develop the long-term habits you need to improve your *overall* academic performance.

(Shortform note: Letting goals drive your habits may also leave you vulnerable to [the "arrival fallacy," where you mistakenly think you'll be happy as long as you achieve your goals](#). In reality, achieving the goal may bring temporary happiness—but that happiness will quickly fade, driving you to chase a different goal that you think will bring you happiness in a never-ending cycle. Further, if you constantly change your goals, you'll constantly stop and start different habits to support them, too, and therefore won't develop long-term habits that can truly enhance your life.)

Instead of focusing on *goal-driven* habits, Clear recommends creating *identity-driven* habits because these, in turn, will dictate the system- and goal-driven habits you choose. Clear contends that **the beliefs of the person you want to be dictate what systems you implement**: Identity-driven habits help you decide what game to play, process-driven habits teach you how to play the game, and goal-driven habits help you win the game. So you need to start with the desired identity to find the right habits that lead to the right results. In other words, you need to create identity-driven habits.

According to Clear, creating identity-driven habits works because by behaving like the person you want to be, you gather evidence that you are that person—and eventually, you *believe* that you are that person. Once you *believe* you're that person, you'll perform the habits of that person because it's *who you are*. You no longer have to convince yourself to do the habit; you do the habit easily because it's an expression of your identity.

For example, you might determine that someone who aces their next test must be conscientious. You decide that a conscientious person doesn't just develop a good study routine, but they also get 8 hours of sleep so they're alert in class—so you do too. Over time, these habits lead to acing your tests—but you continue them even after you meet your goal. This is because you've gathered enough evidence to *believe* that you're a conscientious person: You now perform these habits because you *identify* as a conscientious person, not because you want to ace your tests.

Why Believing You Can Change Is Essential to Building Habits

In order to build identity-driven habits that will determine your system- and goal-driven habits in turn, you must believe that it's *possible* to change your identity—otherwise, you won't see the point in

embodying the behaviors of your desired identity. But what if you don't believe you can change?

In *Mindset*, psychology researcher Carol Dweck explains that people who don't believe they can change have a *fixed mindset: They believe their abilities are unchangeable*. The solution is to develop a *growth mindset, or a belief that you can change and improve your abilities*.

Clear contends that you can *develop a growth mindset by developing identity-driven habits*: By repeatedly behaving like the person you want to be, you prove to yourself that it's possible to change. But there are several other ways to develop a growth mindset, too, like *assessing what triggers your fixed mindset so you can reframe your thoughts appropriately*.

How Habits Form: The Four Stages

You now know how powerful habits can be—but how do they form? Clear explains that your brain understands behaviors as four separate stages that combine to form habits.

The cue is what triggers the brain to notice an opportunity for a reward. A cue can be a smell, a sound, an event, an interaction, or anything else that triggers a desire. This desire is known as the craving.

The craving is the emotional relevance attached to a certain cue. When you notice the cue, the brain anticipates an opportunity for a change in your physical or emotional state. You crave the satisfaction that change will elicit, and this craving is what prompts you to act.

The response is the behavior or habit you perform to elicit the change you desire. Your brain prompts you to take a certain action it believes will create the feeling of satisfaction you want.

The reward is the satisfaction you gain from the action you take. You have successfully satisfied your craving and changed your physical or emotional state. The brain builds a pathway from the cue to this state of pleasure. Every time you experience the same cue, the brain will be triggered to desire that pleasure again. You'll be prompted to perform the same action, thereby creating a habit.

The process works like this: **Cue:** You come home stressed from a long day of work. **Craving:** You want to feel more relaxed. **Response:** You drink a beer. **Reward:** Your stress levels reduce and you feel more relaxed. Coming home from work becomes associated with drinking a beer.

How Habits Form: Comparing Experts' Models

As Clear notes, his habit formation stages expand upon productivity expert Charles Duhigg's habit model from *The Power of Habit*—but Clear doesn't specify *how* his approach differs. Clear presents a four-stage model of habit formation, but *Duhigg's model has only three stages*: First, there's the cue, or the trigger that tells your brain which habit to use. Second, there's the routine, in which you act out the habit, and third, there's the reward, which is the result of the routine and reinforces the habit. Duhigg's model doesn't include Clear's *cravings* stage—although Duhigg does discuss how cravings drive behavior.

Clear isn't the first person to expand upon Duhigg's ideas—nor to use his language to describe how habits are formed. In 2014's *A Mind for Numbers*, educator Barbara Oakley also contends that habits consist of a cue, a routine, and a reward. Her definitions of these terms match Duhigg's—but *she adds a fourth piece: the belief, or the idea that your habits are grounded in your perception of reality*

and of your own identity. This is similar to Clear's argument that your habits support your identity.

But there are other models that describe the makeup of a habit, too—like the one behavioral scientist BJ Fogg presents in *Tiny Habits*. Unlike Clear, **Fogg focuses on the elements necessary for a habit instead of the sequential stages by which a habit forms**. Fogg contends that *all* behavior (both habitual and non-habitual) occurs if three elements exist: First, a *prompt* reminds you to execute the behavior—this is similar to Clear's cue. Then, you must have *motivation* to do the behavior—this is similar to Clear's craving. You must also have the *ability* to do the behavior—this relates to Clear's response. Most crucially, you only do the behavior if *both* your motivation and ability are above the threshold required to prompt action.

The key difference between habits and non-habits, Fogg argues, is that **habits are self-perpetuating**. The more often you do something, the better you get at doing it, so your ability to do it increases. Further, the habit reward (which Fogg discusses but doesn't present as an element of his habit model) provides motivation to keep doing it. This combination of increasing ability and increasing motivation makes a behavior more likely to exceed the threshold the next time you receive the prompt—thus making you more likely to engage in the habit again.

Four Keys to Creating Habits

Now that you know how habits form, you can alter each stage to your advantage to create new, beneficial habits. Clear presents four keys for doing so—one for each stage.

Key 1: Cues: Identify and Use Them to Your Advantage

Clear explains that since habits are automatic behaviors, you likely don't notice every cue triggering you to act. Therefore, **the first step in creating cues that lead to good behaviors is to become aware of them**.

To develop awareness of your behavior, Clear recommends listing all your current daily habits. Because behaviors influence each other, the end of one habit often serves as a cue for another. When you list your habits, you'll notice which actions precede them and which follow. By listing your cues and rewards in this way, you'll discover which current behaviors could cue new desired behaviors. For example, say you want to drink more water. You could drink a glass of water immediately after you turn off your alarm each morning.

(Shortform note: Many authors have argued that **to change an unwanted behavior, you must first consciously identify it**. When following Clear's advice to do so, **consider creating a time log: Spend a week tracking what you do every half hour**. Knowing exactly how you spend time might help you notice habits you weren't aware of—like if you play an online game after every meal.)

Use Awareness to Your Advantage

Clear recommends exploiting your newfound awareness of your habits in two ways to form better habits.

The first technique Clear recommends is to plan in advance when and where you'll perform a new behavior: Use the formula, "When X occurs, I will do Y." This strategy makes the cue noticeable by attributing a specific time and place to the behavior. Plus, research suggests that you're more likely to do activities you pre-schedule.

For example, if your list of habits has a gap between 5 pm and 7 pm, consider scheduling a new behavior during that time. For example, you might choose to study for an hour every day at 6 pm.

(Shortform note: Psychologists agree that planning a habit in advance works partly because it makes you more aware of the cue—but there are other reasons, too. Notably, [failing to honor a clear if-then goal makes you uncomfortable](#). Telling others amplifies this discomfort, because then failing your goal also causes embarrassment. So consider sharing your intention, too.)

The second technique Clear recommends is *habit chaining*, which he calls “habit stacking.” With this technique, instead of linking a desired behavior to an event (like a time of day), you link the behavior to an existing habit you do every day. Use the formula: “After I do X, I will do Y”—for example, “After I put my dinner dishes in the sink, I will study for one hour.” This strategy makes the cue noticeable by connecting a desired habit to a fully-formed habit.

(Shortform note: Clear argues that single habits compound into massive changes that improve your life. Similarly, in [The 5AM Club](#), leadership expert Robin Sharma contends that developing the right morning routine—the right *habit chain*—will compound into massive changes that improve your life. Sharma recommends waking at 5 am, then [exercising for 20 minutes, reflecting for 20 minutes, and learning for 20 minutes](#). This morning ritual sets a foundation of focus and productivity that you continue throughout each day—and by repeating it daily, you lead a more focused and productive life.)

Clear adds that to make a cue obvious, you must **be as specific as possible** in the behavior that will follow. Knowing exactly where, when, and how you'll do an action makes doing it easier. You must also **ensure the cue is realistic**: If the logistics surrounding a new behavior don't support its implementation, it won't get done.

For example, saying “I'll study at my desk [specific location] after putting dishes in the sink [specific cue] for one hour [specific intention] is better than saying “I'll study after dinner.” But if the hour after dinner is the only time you socialize with your roommate, it's unrealistic to plan a study session then.

(Shortform note: Research suggests that being specific about your behavior helps partly because [pre-planning good behavior makes you less likely to put off doing it](#). However, being *too* specific can backfire if you have unrealistic expectations—like if you only want to study when your kids are asleep. Consider [lowering your expectations and settling for “good enough.”](#) For example, if you have kids, study when the kids are quieter—not just when they're asleep.)

Key 2: Craving: Increase the Appeal of a New Habit

You can also make creating habits easier with techniques that affect the second stage of habit formation—the craving.

Clear contends that cravings lead to action because you *want* a reward—not because you *enjoy* the reward itself. Say you eat chocolate for the first time. Your brain will release a neurotransmitter called dopamine after you experience the pleasure of eating chocolate. Now, whenever you see chocolate, your brain will release dopamine because you *anticipate* the pleasure of eating it. It's this anticipatory surge of dopamine that drives you to act—not the dopamine you feel after you feel pleasure.

(Shortform note: In [The Willpower Instinct](#), health psychologist Kelly McGonigal demonstrates how much power anticipation can have by describing how [desire and dopamine drive action even if you don't enjoy the reward](#). If you're hooked on chocolate, you'll continue to eat a chocolate bar even if it's stale. This is due to dopamine: Your brain expects chocolate to be delicious—so your dopamine transmitters try to convince you that the next bite will be more delicious. It's *wanting*—not experiencing—the reward that drives the behavior.)

If anticipation drives action, Clear hypothesizes, you should maximize the appeal of a *desired* behavior so

that you anticipate it more. Clear outlines several ways you can do this, two of which are: (1) associating the new habit with other, positive behaviors and (2) reframing the struggle of a new habit in a positive light.

1) Connect Habits You *Should* Do to Things You *Want* to Do

Clear's first strategy for increasing the appeal of a new habit is to **sandwich a desired behavior between something you *already* do and something you *want* to do**. Use the formula: "After X [current habit], I will do Y [new habit]. After I do Y, I *get* to do Z [craved habit]."

For example, say you struggle to study after dinner because you'd rather play video games. Try saying to yourself, "After I eat dinner, I will study for an hour. After I study for an hour, I get to play video games for an hour." Soon, you'll crave the study session because you'll start to associate it with the more pleasurable activities.

(Shortform note: Only doing something you *want* to do after something you *should* do requires a lot of willpower. You might think to yourself, "Why not just play video games without studying?" In *The Willpower Instinct*, McGonigal explains that you can [combat temptations like this by adjusting your physiology with techniques like slowing your breathing](#). This [turns on your pause-and-plan response, which protects you from making decisions that are bad for you.](#))

2) Redefine Behaviors as Opportunities Instead of Obligations

Clear's second strategy for increasing the appeal of a new habit is to redefine your behaviors: **Reframe obligations as opportunities**. This small change in perspective leads you to focus on the positive elements of the behavior: If you have the *opportunity* to study, you start to appreciate how lucky you are to be able to work towards your dream job. Focusing on the reward (the dream job) helps you view your struggles as steps to your goal, which increases your motivation to do the behavior (study).

(Shortform note: Focusing on the reward of a behavior you view as an obligation to make yourself do it is a form of extrinsic motivation: You're doing the behavior because you want the extrinsic, external reward. In *Drive*, author Daniel Pink argues that [extrinsic motivation works for routine tasks—but can actually decrease creativity](#). So if you're trying to implement a creative habit, like painting every day, you may want to skip this strategy.)

Key 3: Response: Decrease the Difficulty

Another way to improve your habits is to focus on the third stage of habit formation: the response, or the behavior itself. Clear argues that it's human nature to only follow through on behaviors that are easy to perform—so, to stay motivated, he recommends making behavior as effortless as possible.

Clear clarifies that making behaviors easy doesn't mean only doing easy things. The idea is to make it easy for you to keep showing up for the behavior you want to perform. **By showing up, you maintain your desired identity, which gives you pride and confidence to keep making progress.**

(Shortform note: Contrary to Clear, some research suggests that, paradoxically, it's easier to make a dramatic change than a small one. Dr. Dean Ornish designed a program that successfully helped 77% of people with heart disease change their lifestyles. This is impressive because, without the program, 90% of heart patients who undergo severe surgery don't improve their lifestyles even if doing so would save their lives. Dr. Ornish attributes his results partly to the dramatic changes his program requires: [By making dramatic changes, heart patients saw fast, dramatic results that motivated them to continue.](#))

Make Behaviors Easier

Clear recommends reducing the effort an action requires by **removing any obstacles between you and**

the behavior. The more obstacles there are, the less likely you are to act.

For example, if you want to read more before bed, remove the obstacle of needing to get a book by placing a book on your pillow after waking up each morning.

(Shortform note: Removing an obstacle only makes performing an action easier if you remove the right obstacle. To identify what that is, [examine how compatible the behavior is with existing routines](#) as well as the time, money, physical effort, and mental effort involved. For example, placing a book on your pillow won't help you read before bed if you're too tired to concentrate on the book—in that case, the obstacle you really need to address is your energy level.)

Clear suggests another way to make a behavior easier: **Break it down into steps that only take two minutes (or less), then do just the first two-minute step.** This *doesn't* mean you do a two-minute version of the habit: If you want to cook dinner every night, the first step is opening the refrigerator, *not* microwaving a frozen meal. Most of us try to make dramatic changes when building new habits—but dramatic changes are difficult to maintain over time. When you focus on tiny increments instead, **each small success motivates you to achieve other successes.** So committing to two-minute actions at a time makes it easier to perform each required step until you've achieved the full habit.

For example, say you decide to start cooking dinner every day. You're successful for a few days, but on the fourth day, you're too tired, so you order takeout. Suddenly, the behavior has stopped. Instead, break down "cook dinner every day" into easy steps that only take two minutes to do, like "open the refrigerator at dinnertime." You can do that even when you're tired. Once you've mastered that habit, the next two-minute step is to pull out one vegetable you could eat raw. The next step is to pull out a knife and cutting board. Each of these two-minute actions connect to get you to the point of being ready to make some food. The obstacles to overcome are small compared with the overwhelming idea of cooking all the time.

(Shortform note: In [Tiny Habits](#), Fogg also recommends shrinking desired behaviors down to make them easier because small successes keep you motivated. But Fogg presents *two* strategies for doing so. His first strategy mimics Clear's: Do the first step of the desired behavior to maximize your chances of repeating it. But Fogg's second strategy is something Clear doesn't explicitly discuss: [Do a scaled-back version of your desired behavior](#). For example, if you want to cook dinner every night, both Fogg and Clear would recommend the first step of opening the refrigerator every night—but only Fogg would recommend the scaled-back version of microwaving a frozen meal.)

Key 4: Reward: Make It Fulfilling

Finally, Clear recommends habit formation techniques that focus on the final stage of habit formation—the reward.

Clear contends that rewards must be fulfilling for habits to form because if you don't enjoy the results of your efforts, you won't keep trying.

Many rewards you receive are delayed—for example, you only receive a degree after years of studying. But we're wired to want instant gratification, and most good behaviors need time before the positive results accumulate: You sacrifice now to benefit later. So to stay motivated to continue good habits, Clear recommends **finding ways to create rewards that are instantly fulfilling.**

(Shortform note: In [Switch](#), authors Chip and Dan Heath recommend one technique for providing instantly fulfilling rewards when working on a long-term goal: [Build small, frequent milestones into your plan and celebrate them](#). This ensures a regular supply of instant gratification opportunities. Consider adopting this technique when building habits: For example, if you want to run regularly, celebrate when you've run a total

of 5, 10, then 20 miles.)

End New Habits With Rewards

One way to create fulfilling rewards is to **add positive reinforcement at the end of the desired behavior**. Clear explains that we remember the end of a behavior more than any other part. So doing something immediately satisfying at the end of the behavior will keep you motivated in a way that delayed rewards can't.

For example, the reward of a better grade next month may not elicit enough pleasure to keep you motivated to study an extra hour every day. But if you end each study session by eating a cookie, you'll increase your motivation to study.

(Shortform note: Having trouble thinking of appropriate reinforcement? In *Tiny Habits*, Fogg suggests that **whenever you successfully perform a habit, you celebrate in a way that makes you feel accomplished and happy**: Think doing a little jig or congratulating yourself.)

Record Your Habits

Another way you can create fulfilling rewards is by consciously keeping track of your habits. Clear recommends creating a visual representation of your progress—like by marking a day on a calendar. **When you can visually see your accomplishments, you'll be motivated to continue acting.**

The act of tracking can feel rewarding in itself. It's satisfying to mark each successful completion of an action in some way. The pleasure experienced through that act becomes a cue to want to feel that satisfaction again.

(Shortform note: If you're a perfectionist, **consider tracking your habit less often than you'd like at first**. For example, do a habit you want to perform every day but only track it twice a week. You'll see enough progress to motivate you but reduce the likelihood that you'll miss a day on your tracker—and the chances you'll grow so discouraged by imperfection that you give up.)

Only track one major habit at a time to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the act. (Shortform note: In a separate forum, Clear adds that **you should only develop one habit at a time**: Many habits are actually combinations of behaviors, so taking on too many could overwhelm you.)

Breaking Bad Habits

You likely have habits you wish you didn't. Since a behavior must go through *all four* stages of habit formation to become a habit, disrupting one of those stages can break a bad habit. To do so, invert the keys from positive to negative in the following way:

1. Cue—Make it unnoticeable.
2. Craving—Decrease the appeal.
3. Response—Increase the effort.
4. Reward—Make it unfulfilling.

For example, if you want to break your habit of shopping at the mall on your way home from work, you could **make the cue less noticeable** by taking a different route home. You could **decrease the appeal** of the habit by attaching a paper to your rearview mirror that shows how much money you could save if you stopped shopping daily. You could **increase the effort** of shopping by parking on the bottom floor of the garage and making yourself climb the stairs to reach your desired store. Finally, since paying by cash rather than card makes you more aware of your spending, you could pay exclusively in cash: That way, shopping

won't give you the reward of stress relief but rather add to your stress by making you worry about your finances.

(Shortform note: In *The Power of Habit*, Duhigg presents an alternative model for breaking bad habits: [Uncover the main cue and reward, then change the response in between](#). For example, if you learn that on your way home from work (cue), you go to the mall (response) for stress release (reward), find another response that reduces stress—like calling a friend during your commute instead.)

Finding the Right Habits

You now know how to create habits—but which habits should you develop? Clear explains that the habits you gravitate toward and are able to maintain are influenced by your genetic make-up, predispositions, and natural talents. So he recommends choosing behaviors that highlight your strengths and interests—they'll be more enjoyable and easier to stick with.

The Big Five Personality Traits

One way to figure out your optimal behaviors is to learn what personality traits you possess.

There are five main personality traits, each with a spectrum of behavior that highlights who you are. All five are rooted in biology and typically remain unchanged throughout your life.

- **Openness to experience:** People high on this spectrum are more daring; people low on the spectrum are more careful.
- **Conscientiousness:** People high on this spectrum are more methodical; people low on this spectrum are more relaxed.
- **Extroversion:** People high on this spectrum are more sociable; people low on this spectrum are more reclusive.
- **Agreeableness:** People high on this spectrum are affable; people low on this spectrum are more withdrawn.
- **Neuroticism:** People high on this spectrum are more fretful; people low on this spectrum are more assured.

Why the Big Five May Not Be Useful

Assessing your personality using the Big Five traits may not be as useful as Clear contends. Psychologists use questionnaires to assess the Big Five traits—but the year after *Atomic Habits* was published, [researchers found that these questionnaires may not accurately assess the personality traits of people from non-Westernized countries](#). For example, researchers found that [people from non-Westernized countries tended to give different answers to different interviewers](#) instead of answering the same way each time.

Moreover, [these traits can fluctuate throughout your life](#). For example, people tend to become less open and extroverted as they become teenagers, then more conscientious and agreeable as they grow from younger to middle-aged adults. These traits also fluctuate because they're not *just* rooted in biology—environmental factors affect them, too. For example, trauma tends to trigger changes on the neuroticism spectrum. So while the Big Five may be a useful framework for understanding your personality, it has limitations—which means you shouldn't choose which habits to create based on that framework alone.

Clear explains that your personality doesn't dictate which behaviors you're capable of performing. However, **your personality does suggest which behaviors you'll most likely be successful with.** For example, an extrovert may have a harder time staying off of social media than an introvert.

Clear states that there is a version of every habit that works with your personality. He recommends **choosing the version that fits your natural personality—not the version that worked for others.** Doing so increases the chance you'll succeed. For example, your friend may have lost weight by working out at a gym. But if you hate crowds, skip the gym and take daily walks instead.

(Shortform note: In *The Four Tendencies*, Gretchen Rubin also contends that you should consider your personality when choosing what habits to develop, but her argument hinges on how your personality drives you to respond to expectations. For example, if you respond well to your own expectations, you'll go to the gym simply because you've committed to doing so. But if you respond to others' expectations better than your own, build external expectations into your habit to make sure you do it—like by hiring a personal trainer who's expecting you.)

Continuing to Show Up

Once you successfully develop a habit, how do you ensure that it continues working for you long-term? In this section, we'll discuss the three major potential downsides of creating habits—and the strategies Clear recommends for combating these downsides.

How to Prevent Boredom: Make Behaviors Harder

Clear contends that one potential downside with creating a habit is that you may grow bored. This is because boredom is inevitable with any repeated activity; at some point, your motivation for your new habit may wane. When this happens, it's easy to abandon new behaviors that are still working to find more exciting behaviors. (Shortform note: If you can push through the boredom of doing a habit you've grown accustomed to, you might experience some unexpected benefits: [Letting your mind wander during boring tasks has several benefits, like boosting creativity.](#))

Clear contends that making behaviors harder can help curb boredom. This is because your brain remains engaged and motivated to improve when it feels challenged. But the level of challenge is crucial: You should **make the behavior just hard enough to be interesting, but easy enough that you can still do it.** If the challenge is too easy, you'll lose interest; if it's too hard, you'll grow frustrated and give up.

(Shortform note: What if you're bored by a behavior you can't reasonably make harder? [Keep things exciting by introducing a fun, new element.](#) For example, make your healthy breakfast habit more fun by cooking your eggs in a humorously-shaped pan.)

How difficult should it be? Clear suggests **ensuring you succeed half the time.** This way, you'll experience enough success to warrant continued action and enough failure to make you work harder. Rewards experienced in this intermittent way make every attempt novel, which reduces boredom. (Shortform note: If you've ever struggled to not look at your phone, you've already experienced how intermittent rewards can create powerful habits. In *Digital Minimalism*, productivity expert Cal Newport describes how [many technological products—like our phones—are designed to provide intermittent rewards so that we continue using them.](#))

How to Keep Progressing: Build on Momentum

Clear contends that a second potential downside with creating habits is that you may stop progressing. This becomes an issue when you're using habits to automate certain behaviors you need to reach a long-term goal—like if you're mastering scales because you eventually want to master the piano.

Habits can prevent you from progressing, Clear explains, because once you automate a behavior, you stop paying close attention to it and start to miss small mistakes. You still think you're making progress because you're putting in the reps, but you're only reinforcing your bad habit. For example, once you've learned your scales, you might play them at the beginning of every piano practice and assume you're making progress. But since you're no longer focused on your scales, you don't realize that you're playing them at an inconsistent volume—so each time you run scales, you reinforce the habit of playing them at an inconsistent volume. Unless your actions change, you won't grow how you want.

(Shortform note: The popularity of *New York Times* bestseller *Outliers* may partially explain why people believe that repeating a behavior is enough to progress in it. In his book, Malcolm Gladwell popularized the 10,000 hour rule, which stated [that anybody who practices a skill for 10,000 hours can become an expert in it](#). But in *Peak*, author and psychologist Anders Ericsson, who wrote the study Gladwell based his rule on, refuted this rule, noting that [how you practice is much more important than how much you practice](#).)

You can ensure you keep progressing by building momentum into your system. Once a behavior becomes automated, Clear recommends **building on it with 1% improvements**. This keeps your behavior novel and your progress continuous—and thus prevents you from getting stuck. For example, if you're trying to master the piano, don't just run scales once you're comfortable playing them—improve this ability by adjusting your volume as you play the scale.

(Shortform note: In *The Compound Effect*, Darren Hardy also recommends shaking up your routine if your habits aren't leading to progress. But he contends that [changing your routine is enough to liven things up and help you recapture your passions](#)—you don't necessarily have to *improve* it.)

How to Continue Evolving: Craft an Adaptable Identity

Clear contends that a third potential downside with creating habits is that you can grow too attached to the identity they represent. This can make evolving past that identity difficult because if you lose that identity for any reason, you'll lose both yourself and motivation. For example, if you have a habit of studying every day and thus identify as a “good student,” who are you when you graduate?

(Shortform note: In *The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F*ck*, author Mark Manson elaborates on how growing attached to a particular identity prevents you from evolving. He contends that [people avoid changes that could improve their lives because these changes challenge their identity and push them out of their comfort zone](#).)

To avoid losing yourself, Clear recommends, **think of yourself in terms of characteristics instead of labels**. When you identify with multiple characteristics instead of one label, your identity remains adaptable. For example, “I’m a good student” becomes “I’m someone who invests in learning.” You can still be that after graduation.

In this way, **an adaptable identity allows you to continue beneficial habits even as the circumstances of your life inevitably change**. For example, “someone who invests in learning” still reads regularly about their field, but a “good student” stops reading after graduation. An adaptable identity goes with the flow of life; a label-based identity fights against it.

(Shortform note: Just be careful what characteristics you use to define yourself. In *Awaken the Giant Within*, Robbins warns that [tying your identity to anything likely to change will likely trigger an identity crisis in the](#)

future. So “I’m friendly” is a better characteristic to define yourself by than “I’m popular,” since popularity often fluctuates.)

Looking Forward: Continue to Reflect and Adjust

Clear contends that habit formation does not end once you build the habit. Your brain is constantly scanning your environment for cues and ways to automate behavior. Therefore, you need to continually check in with your identity and behaviors to ensure they’re still working for you.

So, Clear recommends, reflect on your habits and progress, and look for areas that promote growth and areas that require refinement. **The more small adjustments in behavior you make, the more likely you will end up on the path of your choosing.** You can become anyone you want and reach any goal you desire if you work hard and remain aware of the life you’re leading.

(Shortform note: You can only effectively reflect on your habits and progress if you’re able to admit when you’re failing and take that failure into stride. In *Make Your Bed*, retired Navy SEAL Admiral William H. McRaven shows how to do so: Instead of giving up when you fail, [use failure to push yourself harder and grow stronger](#). For example, during SEAL training, McRaven continually performed poorly on a swimming test and had to endure extra training as a result. But this training made him stronger, and McRaven eventually became the fastest swimmer in his cohort.)

Part I | Introduction: The History of Tiny Habits

There was no way James Clear could have known that an accident as a teenager would lead to his future career. But after learning the power of tiny habits in his life, he decided to share his insights and help others do the same, and it all started with a bat.

When Clear was a sophomore in high school, he dreamed of playing professional baseball. Then, one day, a teammate lost control of a bat he was swinging, and it hit Clear in the face. Clear suffered skull fractures as a result and was placed in an induced coma at the hospital.

After waking up, Clear found that the damage from his injuries had hindered his ability to see and perform certain motor functions. After a year of rehabilitation, Clear was back on the field, but his ability to play baseball was diminished. Still, he wanted to reclaim his dream.

Clear went to a small college, where he was able to walk onto the baseball team. He still wasn't back to his previous skill level, but instead of partying with his teammates, he started making small changes to help build his strength and confidence. He went to bed early, kept his dorm room tidy, created a daily study routine, and lifted weights several times each week.

As his habits grew, so did his grade point average. He increased his muscle mass and, over the next four years, became one of the top athletes at the school, receiving national attention for his prowess on the field and in the classroom.

There was nothing extraordinary about Clear's recovery or training that led to his success. Rather, a series of small choices built up over time and allowed him to reach his potential. He became motivated to learn more about the power of habits and studied both cognitive and behavioral sciences. Through this research, he developed a system to guide others in changing their lives and reaching their potential. This system is at the heart of *Atomic Habits*.

Shortform Note

The original book contains 6 parts with 17 chapters. We've condensed the text for efficiency of learning:

- *Part I* follows the book's organization with the introduction and first 3 chapters. We cover Clear's catalytic experiences and the overall framework of atomic habits.
- *Part II* groups the 4 stages of habit formation into 4 chapters (corresponding to Chapters 4-17 in the book). Each chapter provides a combined overview of how to understand and approach the individual stages of cue, craving, response, and reward.
- *Part III* groups the information from the final section and Appendix in the book to deliver additional tips about creating lasting changes in your life through habits.

Chapter 1: It's More Important to Play the Game Than Win

The concept behind *Atomic Habits* relates to **1% improvements in behavior that lead to significant, lasting behavioral transformations**. Often, when we want to change our lives, we get caught up in the belief that major change requires a massive expenditure of time and energy. However, by focusing on the *system* of behaviors, rather than the *outcome* of those behaviors, major shifts in who we are and what we do become easy and more sustainable.

Systems vs. Goals

In every facet of life, there are winners and losers. Whether it's a game, a job, an award, or an achievement, there are always going to be those who succeed and those who fail. But both winners and losers start with the same goal, so what makes the difference between the two? The answer lies in the priority put on goals and systems.

A goal is the end result you desire. If you're an entrepreneur, your goal may be to make the Fortune 500 list one day. Systems, on the other hand, are the processes that lead to the result. As an entrepreneur, your system might be to hire a competent staff, launch a major marketing campaign, and form high-profile partnerships. **If your processes are successful, you will eventually attain your desired result.**

If you place your priority on systems, you can avoid the problems associated with prioritizing goals that follow.

Problem #1: Attaining a goal is a momentary action.

Doing what is necessary only to achieve a temporary goal is like treating symptoms without addressing the cause of the illness. But goals have expiration dates. When you focus on achieving a goal, what happens when that goal is achieved? Do you set a new goal and go back to square one? Do you lack the motivation to put forth the energy to attain another goal?

Goals are about winning the game. Once the game is won, there is nothing left to do. **Systems are about learning how to play the game so that even after you've won, you can keep playing and succeeding.**

For example, you may be tired of living in a messy home. Your goal becomes cleaning your house. You get motivated one day and clean each room until there is no more mess. Your goal is achieved. However, after a week, the mess starts to accumulate and stays that way until you find the same burst of motivation as before, and the cycle continues.

- If your goal is to live in a cleaner environment, a 1% change in behavior, such as folding discarded clothes on the ground or placing them in the hamper at the end of each day, would slowly become a habit that would lead to the same end result—a less messy home—and be sustainable over time.

Problem #2: Goals can delay happiness or feelings of satisfaction.

Goals promote a feeling of failure because it may take a long time to reach them. And if your only path to changing your life is attaining your ultimate goal, you're delaying personal gratification. It's like putting all your eggs in one basket. If that goal is never accomplished, you never feel happy. **Changes in systems,**

however, are immediate and reinforce feelings of achievement.

For example, if you want to publish a novel and focus only on that action, you will only be satisfied when your book is published. The act of writing a book, which requires time and energy, is performed solely for the end result.

However, if your goal is to create a writer's life or find a better balance between work and writing, the sheer act of changing your behaviors to write each day will feel rewarding.

- Over time, those daily pages will accumulate into a book, which will serve as proof of your accomplishment in forming better writing habits. You may still want to get published, but the act of finishing a novel will be satisfying, even before submitting it for publication.

Problem #3: A focus on goals narrows the possible paths to achieve them.

Think of prioritizing a goal as placing a finish line at the end of a long tunnel. You only see one way forward, or one way to achieve your goal. But if you focus on the systems, the number of possible paths to success becomes immeasurable. You may find that certain processes work better than others and lead to better processes. There are several paths that lead to your desired destination, but if you have tunnel-vision, you'll miss seeing them.

- Using the same example, change your mindset from "I have to write this book to get published" to "I want to spend more time writing." This shift in perspective opens up the possibilities for how your goal can be achieved. The first assumes there is only one path to success; the latter finds success in creating a path that works for you.

When you fail to achieve a goal, the problem does not lie within you. The problem lies within your system.

When it comes to habits, **no habit is too big to change as long as you have a good system in place.**

Changing your system leads to inherent, continual, and positive behaviors that remain even after the goal is achieved.

The Compounding Effect of Atomic Habits

Small changes in behavior won't seem significant at first. You must give them time to compound into the notable life changes you want to see.

It's easy to become frustrated if you look at the immediate results of a new habit as a measure of success. When you're frustrated, it's easier to give up or revert back to what's comfortable or familiar.

If you accept that time is required for any small change to reach an effectual point, **you will not only be able to see the compound effect but also have formed a lasting positive habit that can lead to more improvement and happiness in the future.**

For instance, if you want to save money for a vacation to Hawaii, saving a dollar a day may be the habit you initiate. However, after a week, an increase of \$7 saved will seem insignificant, the goal will seem too big, and your efforts will feel futile. At that point, you give up. But after a year of saving a dollar a day, your savings account grows to \$365, then \$730 after two years, plus all the interest you've earned over the two years. You can now afford your trip and have also created a lasting system that will help you continue to save money.

Time becomes a measure of your habits. **With good habits, time works to support your actions and**

helps you become the person you want to be. With bad habits, time works against you by keeping you on a bad life trajectory. Let's look at some examples of habits that compound positively, and some that compound negatively.

Positive Habits

Productivity—Adding one extra task to your day can lead to big changes in your productivity. As the task is continually performed, it becomes a habit, and habits become automatic. **Automatic habits require little thought, thereby opening up mental space to consider new tasks or behaviors** and increasing your daily productivity.

- Deciding to make the next day's to-do list before going to bed might be a small change in your normal routine. But adding this small task to the previous day helps you start your day already organized and clears up time and mental space for something else in the morning.

Knowledge—Learning one new piece of information one day will not make you a more-informed person overall, at least not in an obvious way. But **deciding to learn one new thing each day will build up over time into a wealth of knowledge.** Not only are you broadening your scope of knowledge, but new information blends with old information to provide greater insight, thereby continuing to enhance your knowledge base.

- You want to learn more about investing. If you read one article, you'll learn more about one small aspect. But if you learn one new piece of knowledge regarding stocks and market prices a day, those pieces will compound into a larger understanding of how investments work. With this knowledge, you'll have a better grasp how other factors relate to the overall economic system, such as retirement accounts, real estate, and international relations.

Relationships—Getting to know one new person will not change your social landscape dramatically. But if you **make a point of getting to know one new person each week, you will slowly build a network of new friends and connections.**

- If you decide to become better acquainted with one co-worker each week, after a year, you'll have amassed a network of business connections.

Negative Habits

Stress—One moment of stress every now and then is common and harmless. But if you **remain in a continued state of stress, it will compound over time and have a negative impact on your overall health.** Also, as you dwell in this negative state, your overall outlook on life will shift until multiple aspects of your day become stress-inducing.

- If you leave the house late each morning, rush hour traffic becomes that much more stressful as you panic about getting to work on time. Starting each day with this frustration sets you on a negative trajectory from the beginning. From there, other little grievances will begin to frustrate you, and after a while, your entire day is one long frustration. This type of compounded stress five days a week for a whole year can equate to reduced mental and physical health and have lasting consequences.

Self-Esteem—Feeling low or bad about yourself one day won't change your general opinion about who you are. But **frequent thoughts about your lack of worth can build to a point of self-recrimination and poor self-esteem,** which can stifle future self-improvement attempts.

- If you do poorly on a test, you may feel bad about not taking more time to study properly. Over time,

if your study habits don't change, your continual poor grades will make you feel unintelligent or lacking in the skills required to perform at a high level, which will bleed into other aspects of life.

Outrage—One moment of agitation won't lead you down a path of constant discontent or rage. But if you fail to find better ways of dealing with anger, you will continue to spiral into a volatile state in which any disturbance sends you over the edge.

- Feeling outraged when you experience discrimination is a natural reaction. But if you allow that outrage to sully your perspective on life or expectations for how you will be treated, your outrage can build to a point where you are quick to argue or, worse, engage in violence.

(Shortform note: We created the preceding examples to illustrate the author's points.)

Reaching Your Full Potential

When you understand how compounding habits work and stay committed to change, you can achieve your full potential. A breakthrough moment is when that potential is reached and your goal achieved. From the outside, this breakthrough may seem like an "overnight success." But your success did not happen overnight. Breakthroughs are only possible if you make it through the *valley of disappointment* and push through the *plateau of latent potential*.

The *valley of disappointment* is the space between what you expect to happen when you change a habit and what actually happens. Prevailing wisdom deems that progress should be linear—one thing happens that builds to another and another until you reach the top. Therefore, you expect the trajectory of success to move in a straight line at a steady incline.

However, because time is required for small changes to have an effect, there will be a period at the beginning where the line of progress moves horizontally. This horizontal movement is the *plateau of latent potential*. Disappointment occurs in the gap, or valley, created between the assumed trajectory and the realistic plateau because you haven't seen any signs of improvement yet. But if a small behavior change is successfully continued, the plateau will eventually curve sharply up and continue to ascend.

All the benefits of your hard work to change your behavior wait on the other side of the plateau of latent potential. Every habit is a seed that must first be planted for the tree to grow, but the tree will not begin to sprout immediately after being planted. Each day that you continue the new habit and improve by 1% is like adding water to the seed, which nurtures the roots and allows them to embed into the earth. There must be a foundation created underground before the sapling can burst through to the outside.

The period in which you are on the plateau of latent potential is similar to the time needed for the roots to create that foundation. You must stick with a new behavior long enough to get past the plateau and begin your ascent upward.

Exercise: Have You Checked Your Systems Lately?

An atomic habit requires fortitude, patience, and a good process for it to grow into a significant and permanent change in your life. Now that you know how small behaviors lead to big habits, how can this information help you achieve your goals?

What are one or two habits you have tried to develop or break recently? Were you successful?

Were the changes you made system-based or goal-oriented? In what way?

What is a new habit you'd like to start?

What small (1%) improvements in behavior can you make that will compound to allow you to reach the end result desired?

Chapter 2: You Are What You Do

The process of changing habits is really the process of changing who you are or becoming who you want to be. **Your behaviors must match your sense of self for them to be lasting**, but understanding who you are can be tricky and knowing which behaviors to change even trickier. Once you understand the connection between identity and habits, you'll find the right path for your life and stick to it.

The Layers of Change

There are three ways, or layers, in which we think about change. The direction in which we think about them makes all the difference in our success.

The outer layer consists of outcomes. As stated, focusing on outcomes to prompt change is the most common approach. You have an end result in sight, so you adjust your behaviors to reach that goal.

The middle layer consists of processes. The behaviors involved in your system become the focus of your change. Most habits are associated with this layer.

The inner layer consists of your identity. This layer encompasses your opinions, beliefs, and assumptions about yourself and the world. Changes in behavior are motivated by the type of person you are or want to be.

Working from the outside in when striving to change behavior, or outcome-based habits (OBH), focuses your motivation on doing whatever it takes to reach a goal. But those behaviors may not be the most beneficial or capable of being repeated long-term. Further, once the goal is achieved, there is no reason to continue those specific behaviors. **If you adapt your actions to serve one finite purpose, your actions also become finite.**

- For example, you may decide you want to have six-pack abs. You decide that doing crunches will lead to that outcome. You do 100 crunches a day until you have six-pack abs. Now that you have the abs you want, 100 crunches start to seem like a burden, and you lose motivation to do them because they are not connected with a goal.

The problem with the OBH direction is that it removes the power of beliefs from the equation. Behind every system of behaviors is a set of beliefs. You focused on one action to create your desired outcome, not a system of behavior change that changed who you are as a person. You believe you are someone who can do 100 crunches, but beyond that, who are you? Are you a more fit person? A healthier person? **If your behaviors don't match the beliefs you feel inside, you will never be able to stick to them.** That is where identity-based habits (IBH) come into play.

The IBH direction means working from the inside out when striving to change behavior. The focus becomes wanting to be a certain type of person, so you behave in a way that type of person likely behaves.

- Using the six-pack abs example, you determine that someone with six-pack abs must have a healthy lifestyle. Therefore, you desire to become someone with a healthy lifestyle. You decide that a combination of 10 crunches before bed, a low-calorie diet, and riding a bike instead of driving to work equals a healthy lifestyle. Over time, continuing to perform these actions leads to an overall healthier body that includes six-pack abs. Now, you have the abs you wanted and the habit of living more healthily.

One of the best motivators for sticking with new habits is when they are helping you become the person you want to be. **You become motivated not by “I want this result,” but by “I am this person.”** You must be clear about who you are as much as about who you want to be. If you’re not sure who you are, look at your current habits and determine what beliefs support them.

There are two major aspects of IBH that support positive behavior change—*identity evidence* and *the feedback loop*.

Evidence of Identity and the Feedback Loop

Identity is not something you’re born with. Your experiences condition your beliefs about your identity. **The more you act a certain way, the more you become conditioned to believe that’s who you are.**

Think of it this way: every action you make is a vote for the type of person you are. As those votes begin to accumulate, you gain a larger picture of your actions and the associated identity. If your house is always messy, you will believe you are a messy person. Your actions become the evidence of your identity, and that can work for you or against you.

When the evidence suggests a positive view of yourself, you’ll be thrust forward toward positive behaviors.

- If you write one page a day for 30 days, the evidence suggests you are a writer. You will continue to write because that’s who you are.

When the evidence suggests you are someone with bad habits, you will have a hard time believing you are someone who can form good habits.

- If you only have two written pages after 30 days because you always watch TV, you will not believe you are a writer and will stop trying.

You must unlearn your long-held beliefs, despite the evidence, to open yourself up to change.

Identity change doesn’t happen overnight. It may take days or weeks for you to start believing you are a different person. **But the more you cast votes for a particular identity through tiny habits, the more you will be motivated to keep casting votes, which will continue to strengthen your identity, and so forth.** This is the *feedback loop* and one of the most significant aspects of habit formation.

- Put another way, the feedback loop signifies the following process: You want to be a certain type of person → that type of person acts in this way → the more you act in this way, the more you become that type of person → the more you feel like that type of person, the more you will act in the appropriate way. This feedback loop acts like a flywheel, gathering momentum as it keeps spinning.

The feedback loop occurs as your habits change to match your chosen identity. But if you behave in a manner opposite to your chosen identity, you will never become that person.

Two-Steps to Identity Change

You now know that habits represent who you are, but how do you become that person or make sure you are behaving in the right way?

First, **you must decide who you want to be.** What's important to you? What do you believe in? What do you wish to represent in life? Who would you rather be if not who you are currently?

If you don't have the answers, **look at the outer layer—outcomes—and work backwards.** For example, you may say, "I want a cleaner home."

- Ask, "What sort of things does a person with a clean home do?"
- Then ask, "If I do these things, what kind of person does that make me?"
- For instance, a person with a clean home is someone who puts clothes away and does dirty dishes immediately. Someone who does these things is conscientious and vigilant. Therefore, I want to become a conscientious, vigilant person who doesn't procrastinate.

Second, **prove that you are this new identity with atomic behaviors. Now that you have your identity in focus, let the aspects of it drive the feedback loop, not the results.** You may not feel like a conscientious, vigilant person, but the more you act in this way, the more you will start to feel like that person.

- If you start by simply washing each dish when you're done with it, your sink will always be clean. When you see your clean sink, you will feel proud of your new habit and look for ways to keep acting. You may want to take the recycling out daily to maintain a clean kitchen. If you're taking the recycling out, you may see the benefit of taking the garbage out at the same time. You do a sweep of the house for all garbage, which further declutters your space. The longer you live in this new clean space, the more you'll be motivated to keep it clean.

You can always change who you are if you can discover who you want to be and allow that identity to guide you.

Exercise: Are You Happy with You?

The relationship between identity and habits illuminates many factors that may be getting in the way of change in your life. How can this information help you to create better habits?

Look at three of your current habits. What do they say about the type of person you are?

Who do you wish to become, and what are two characteristics of that type of person?

What sort of behaviors does a person with those characteristics perform?

What is an atomic behavior change you can make today to support the type of person you want to become?

Chapter 3: How Habits Are Formed

Habits form when the brain processes the four stages of behavior: cue, craving, response, and reward. The brain is always actively taking in information from the outside world. When you are presented with a situation, the brain runs through a list of options to decide how best to respond. Through a process of trial and error, the brain deciphers which response elicits the best results. **The response that delivers the most satisfaction is the one that will stick.**

Each time you come across a similar situation, you will remember the satisfaction gained from that particular response and repeat it. Therefore, **habits are nothing more than solutions found to manage life's problems.**

The Great Cat Escape

In an experiment, cats were placed in boxes and had to press a lever to be let out. This experiment exemplifies how the mind becomes conditioned to a certain response once doing it leads to a positive result.

At first, the cats sniffed each corner of the box and clawed at the walls. Finally, either by accident or persistence, they found the lever, and one side of the box slid open. The test was repeated with each cat, and each time, the cat found the lever more easily than before.

Eventually, most cats were able to push the lever immediately after being placed in the box.

Four Stages of Habit Formation

Once you understand what each stage means and how they link together to create habits, changing your behavior becomes a simpler task.

1. **Cue**—The cue triggers the brain to recognize an opportunity for a possible reward.
2. **Craving**—The craving occurs once the cue indicates this opportunity. The craving is the desire to achieve the reward and becomes the motivation to act.
 - o Your desire to achieve the reward stems from your brain's desire to change some part of your physical or emotional state.
3. **Response**—The response is the actual action taken. Whether you choose to respond relies on the strength of the craving and how much effort is required to act.
 - o If the action is easy to do, you will do it. If the action is too difficult or requires too much effort, you won't do it.
4. **Reward**—The reward is the resulting benefit or satisfaction gained from the response.
 - o All of the other three stages revolve around the reward. The cue notices it, the craving desires it, and the response obtains it.

This process is endless and loops round and round, which is why changing behavior is so difficult. Here's an example of the stages in action:

- **Cue:** You sit down to respond to work emails. **Craving:** You begin to feel stressed by the number of emails and want to feel some relief. **Response:** You chew on your nails to relieve the stress. **Reward:** You feel less stressed. **Habit:** You now chew your nails while checking work emails.

These stages can be broken down into the *problem phase* and *solution phase* when looking at any habit. The cue and craving create the problem, and the response and reward provide the solution.

- **Problem phase**—Cue: You walk past a coffee shop on the way to work and smell fresh roasted coffee. Craving: Coffee gives you energy, and you want to feel energized. **Solution phase**—Response: You buy a cup of coffee. Reward: By the time you reach work, you are raring to go. Habit: You buy a cup of coffee each day you walk to work.

To develop a habit, all four stages need to occur. **If any one of the stages fails, the habit will not be formed.**

- If you remove the cue, your brain is not activated.
- If you remove the craving, you have no need to act.
- If the response is too hard, you won't be able to do it or won't try.
- If the reward is not satisfying, you have no reason to want to attain it again.

Cues can be anything in life and often don't differentiate from person to person. What does differ is the craving.

- Two people might hear the sound of a slot machine. This is the cue.
- One is a compulsive gambler and is triggered to crave the rush of gambling. They will find a way to gamble so their emotional craving is appeased, which is the reward.
- The other person might never gamble, so the cue of slot machines does nothing for them. They crave nothing, so they don't respond.

In a world full of cues, learning how to change your cravings or responses to more positive rewards is the first step in gaining control over your behavior.

The Four Laws of Habit Formation

Creating new habits is easier when you understand how to approach the different stages of habit formation. Each stage has an accompanying law that, when followed, promotes positive changes in your life.

1. Cue—*Make it obvious.*
2. Craving—*Make it attractive.*
3. Response—*Make it easy.*
4. Reward—*Make it satisfying.*

The inverse of these laws help break your bad habits.

1. Cue—*Make it invisible.*
2. Craving—*Make it unattractive.*
3. Response—*Make it difficult.*
4. Reward—*Make it unsatisfying.*

With these principles, you can tackle any habit you wish to create or break by making the stages

work for you. The following section will walk you through each law to give you the knowledge needed to do so.

Exercise: How Were Your Habits Formed?

Now that you know the stages through which habits are formed, let's look at some of your current habits to determine how you got them.

What is a bad habit you currently have?

What is the cue that triggers you to perform this habit?

What do you crave when you experience this cue?

What is the reward you gain when you perform this habit?

What other behavior might similarly satisfy this particular craving?

Part II: Applying the Framework Chapter 4: Making Cues More Obvious

Habits can form from cues you aren't even aware of. You are taking in information even when you don't realize it. In the world of habits, this means you are reacting to cues and forming habits often without your knowledge. **To be able to form a good habit or break a bad one, you must start with awareness of the habit and the cues that create them.** Therefore, you need to find ways to make your cues and habits obvious.

The Habit Scorecard

Making a list of your daily activities helps bring your habits out of the unconscious to the surface. A habit scorecard is one way to keep track of the things you do regularly. **Create a list of all the actions you make on a daily basis so your habits are brought into view.**

- Your scorecard might include the following list: 1. Wake up. 2. Get out of bed. 3. Use the bathroom. 4. Brush teeth. 5. Make coffee. 6. Etc.

Once you've filled out your scorecard, determine which habits serve you, hurt you, or neither in the long run. All habits are formed to address some issue or problem in your life, and only you can be the judge of which ones contribute to the person you want to be. There should be no judgments or criticisms about any particular habit. You are simply mapping the ones that serve you and the ones that don't. **One way to determine which habits serve you is to think of their net outcomes.**

- If a habit will compound into a behavior that fits your identity, it is effective.
- If a habit will compound into a behavior that betrays your identity, it is ineffective.
- Place a "+" next to effective habits, a "-" next to ineffective habits, and a "=" next to neutral habits.

These steps not only expose your current habits but also see the cues that trigger them.

Forming New Habits

There are two effective methods that can help you implement better habits into your life using the habit scorecard: *implementation intention* and *habit stacking*.

Implementation Intention

Implementation intention simply means making an advanced plan for what you will do and when you will do it. Research shows that scheduling an action or activity increases the likelihood that it will get done. Therefore, **the two most common cues are time and place.** Implementation intention harnesses the power of both for your benefit.

- The formula is simple: "When X occurs, I will do Y" or "At X time, I will do Y."

Trying to create a new behavior arbitrarily requires too much effort. You have to remember what you want to do and become motivated to do it. For instance, you may say, "I will exercise more each day," and leave it at that. But what sort of exercise will you do? When will it happen? For how long will you do it? When faced

with these questions, it is easy to become overwhelmed or indecisive. When you experience these feelings, you are more likely to lose motivation.

Be as specific as possible to help you stay on track. **Rather than saying, “I will exercise more each day,” describe in detail what that means.** Even stating, “I will walk each day,” is too vague. Keep narrowing the action down until it’s clear.

- Change the statement to, “I will walk for 20 minutes around my block/office building/park at 2 pm.”
- When 2 pm arrives, your brain will be triggered for the action.

Specificity removes the need for inspiration or motivation to kick in. All the decisions have already been made. You just need to perform the intended action.

The point of implementation intention is to address the first law of behavior change. **When you make time and place obvious, you are training your brain to create an association with those cues.** After enough time, the actions will become automatic, thereby forming a new habit.

Some habits are not meant to be daily habits. For desired behavior changes that occur infrequently, try setting the first day of each week, month, or year as your cue. The first day of these time markers tend to feel like a blank slate and inspire optimism, which may help motivate you to act.

Habit Stacking

Habit stacking exploits the phenomenon of accumulating behaviors, known as the Diderot Effect, to help create new habits. This effect describes the tendency for one major purchase to lead to another and another. Behaviors follow a similar tendency because no behavior exists in a vacuum. **One action triggers another and so on. Understanding this fact helps you use current habits to build new ones.**

The Diderot Effect

The Diderot Effect was named after French philosopher Denis Diderot who lived in poverty. One day, Diderot came into a large sum of money after selling his immense library of books.

After using the money for some essentials, like paying for his daughter’s wedding, Diderot bought a silk robe. The robe stood out among his shabby home, so he started purchasing other fine items to match, which led to more fine purchases until his money was gone.

Rather than planning a new time and location for a new habit, habit stacking links a new behavior to a current one. **The reward of the current habit becomes the cue for the new behavior.**

- The formula is, “After I do X, I will do Y.”
- Using the walking example, rather than using 2 pm as the cue, you might use lunch as the cue. “After I finish lunch, I will walk around the block for 20 minutes.”
- You’re still creating a plan for future action, but this time, you’re linking the new behavior with an obvious behavior.

Habit stacking can also work with routines. Say you have a nightly routine as follows: You finish dinner, wash the dishes, wipe down the counters, and set the coffeemaker for the morning. If your desired identity is someone who eats healthier foods, you might implement a habit that supports that identity. Your routine might become: You finish dinner, wash the dishes, wipe down the counters, place a bowl, spoon, and box of

cereal next to the coffeemaker, and set the coffeemaker for the morning.

The example of laying out the bowl, spoon, and cereal highlights an important aspect of habit stacking. **The cues you wish to create must make sense for the habit to be triggered** and the follow-through to be successful. You must take into account which habits fit into which routines and when.

- If you lay out your bowl and spoon before you wipe down the counters, you will be forced to move them, which may become an annoyance and hinder the action.
- If you decide to walk for 20 minutes after you finish lunch but only have a 30-minute lunch break, you'll never successfully perform the behavior, and the habit will not form.
- If you want to start a daily habit but pair it with an infrequent habit, you will not create a proper cue for the behavior.

As with implementation intention, make the behavior you will stack and the behavior upon which it will be stacked as specific as possible to create the highest level of success.

- "Write more" and "eat healthy" are goals with ambiguous systems. Likewise, "before dinner" is an ambiguous cue.
- Instead, say "After changing out of my work clothes, I will write for 30 minutes."
- **This attention to detail makes the cue and plan for action obvious.**

Habits and Your Environment

The way your environment is designed and utilized has a major impact on your behaviors. We are constantly influenced by environmental factors without realizing it. For instance, when we walk into a quiet room, like a church, we automatically whisper. **Environment shapes behavior, which makes habits more dependent on context than we know.**

The previous example of setting out items for cereal signifies another important aspect in behavior change—the power of sight. Of the nearly eleven million receptors in the body, sight uses 90% of them. Therefore, visual cues are the biggest instigators for action.

- For example, at the grocery store, you are more likely to buy items at eye level than those on the bottom shelf.

These types of choices are not due to thought or motivation but because they are more convenient.

In your own life, your habits center around what you see and what appears convenient. To form and maintain good habits, **ensure that the right visual cues exist in your environment.** You become the architect of your behavior when you design your environment to support obvious cues.

One way to organize your environment for success is to learn the context embedded in a cue. Objects in and of themselves are not cues alone. **Your relationship with the object—the context by which you understand the object—is the trigger.**

At first, all cues will be specific, but over time, the associated behavior will become linked to the general context of the cue.

- You may have a glass of wine when you go out to dinner with friends. Over time, being with your friends becomes the trigger, not the specific action of eating at a restaurant. Now, anytime you are with friends, you will crave a glass of wine, even if you're at home.

Different cues develop different contexts for every person.

- You might associate your couch with relaxing and watching movies, whereas someone else sees their couch as a place to read.
- If you want to form the habit of reading more, make the cue obvious by mixing a visual cue with a new context.
- (Shortform example: Before you leave for work, place a book on the couch cushion. When you come home from work, the book will be waiting, and over time, the context of the couch will become associated with reading.)

Your unique relationship with objects is useful in training your brain to view a particular part of your environment in a particular context. To create better habits, **ensure that each object or space is only associated with one context.** When contexts overlap, it's easier for the easiest action to win out.

- If you have trouble sleeping but always look at your phone while lying in bed, remove the context of checking social media or texting in bed. Use the bed only when it's time to sleep.
- By removing all other activities from the bed, you will create a relationship between the bed and sleep. When you lay down each night, your brain will be triggered to respond with sleep.

It's always easier to form a new habit in a new environment because you're not fighting old cues. However, if you are not able to change environments, redefine or rearrange yours to create different associations. Create zones for different behaviors, such as only eating at the table or only working at your desk.

The more you can create a stable and predictable environment with clear contextual cues, the more stable and predictable your behaviors will be.

Remove the Cue to Break Habits

The inverse of the first law—make it obvious—is *make it invisible*. **If you want to quit a bad habit, you must remove the cues.**

Despite what you've been conditioned to believe, discipline and self-control are not the most important aspects of habit formation. You can break bad habits, but you won't forget them or their cues. Once a habit is ingrained in the brain, the craving that triggers it will automatically kick in whenever the cue resurfaces.

Willpower is a temporary solution; changing your environment is a long-term solution. **When you create a predictable and stable environment, the need for discipline or willpower is reduced.**

- For instance, if you stay up too late watching TV in bed, remove the TV from the bedroom.

Reducing exposure to a bad cue is like cutting off the fuel supply to the engine driving the habit. You'll always remember how to drive, but you won't be able to start the car.

Bad Habits Can Be Cues

Bad habits often create the cues that trigger behavior. The habit creates a new sensation that triggers the same craving. This trap is known as "cue-induced wanting."

- When you feel anxious, you smoke a cigarette. Smoking makes you concerned about your health, which makes you anxious, so you reach for another smoke.
- You feel lethargic, so you watch television. Watching television makes you feel unproductive, which makes you more lethargic, so you watch more television.

Create a more positive environment to reduce your vulnerability to this detrimental cycle.

Exercise: Timing Is Everything

Now that you understand how to make cues more obvious, how can you use this knowledge to start new behaviors in your life?

What is one daily new habit you wish to form?

When would this new habit best fit into your day?

To practice implementation intention, what is the specific formula you can create to cue this new behavior ("When X occurs, I will do Y" or "At X time, I will do Y")?

What are one to three current behaviors that relate to this new behavior? What are the rewards of these behaviors?

To practice habit stacking, how can one of these rewards become a cue for your new behavior?

Exercise: Shaping Your Visual Environment

You've learned that sight is the most powerful cue, so how can this information help you create and break habits?

Using the new daily habit from the previous exercise, what is a visual object that relates to this habit? How can you use this object to create a visual cue for the habit?

Now, think of a habit you wish to break.

What is the visual cue that triggers that behavior?

What can you do to make that cue invisible?

Chapter 5: Making Cravings More Attractive

Cravings are the brain's way of signifying that something is missing inside. **Your habits are the time-tested strategies used to create shifts in your physical or emotional state to fill the void.** There are many ways to address satisfying either of these states, but you will use the one that satisfies them in the most pleasurable way. To ensure you are motivated to act in a positive way, you must make the right behavior a more attractive option for satisfying your craving. But first, you must understand where cravings come from and why they are so powerful.

Historical Relevance

Many of your current cravings are grounded in your ancestry. Humans have evolved significantly since the time of hunters and gatherers. Science and technology have increased your ability to live more efficiently and find a wealth of resources to address your needs. However, what hasn't changed are the underlying motivations that influence behaviors. **Every behavior stems from some type of underlying motive.** Your habits are contemporary solutions to address ancient motivations, which include the following:

- The need to survive, reserve or build strength, find companionship, be accepted by the tribe, belong, or achieve prestige and admiration.

The Motivation for Overeating

Our ancestors lived in a time where food was not plentiful, and calorie- and nutrient-rich food sources were scarce. The practical strategy was to find whatever food they could forage and eat as much as possible to survive.

In modern times, food is abundant in many regions of the world. Foods that are high in calories are no longer scarce. We no longer have to gorge ourselves to survive, and we have the added benefit of knowing that high-calorie foods are not good for us.

Still, because of this ingrained motivation, we crave unhealthy foods and consume them in mass quantities.

Businesses monopolize on these ancient motivations to sell more products or make more money. For example, the food industry capitalizes on your motivation to survive by making food more attractive and habit forming.

- Natural, unprocessed food varies little from bite to bite. When the novelty of the sensation these foods provide wears off, the brain becomes bored and determines the body is full.
- Processed food can be manipulated to ensure that boredom is never reached. Chemicals enhance flavors and textures, creating dynamic combinations that are pleasing to the mouth and make each bite pleasurable, which excites the brain and keeps you eating.

Other examples include how social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, capitalize on your inherent need for community and recognition, and dating apps capitalize on your need for companionship.

You are always looking for ways to satiate these inherent motivations, and **the more attractive and**

stimulating the experience is, the more you will crave it.

Scientific Relevance

All habits create a dopamine spike in the brain. Dopamine is a brain chemical produced when you anticipate pleasure and creates the sensation of desire. Dopamine is also released when you experience pleasure. These two experiences can be considered as *wanting* versus *liking*.

The anticipation of pleasure—the process of wanting—is triggered when the brain notices a cue and perceives a reward. At this moment, dopamine spikes and motivates you to act. A similar thing happens when you receive a reward. When something happens that is pleasurable—the act of liking—dopamine spikes to indicate your satisfaction. The only difference is that **the system involved in both wanting and liking is wired to be ten times stronger for wanting.**

- Consider how much more exciting the days leading up to Christmas were than actual Christmas morning as a child.
- Consider the butterflies felt before a date compared with how it feels to be on the date.

In relation to the stages of habit formation, your body releases dopamine in the following way:

- Reward—The first time you receive a reward, dopamine spikes, indicating your pleasure.
- Cue and Craving—When the same cue is noticed again, dopamine spikes and initiates a craving in anticipation of the reward.
- Response—The anticipation urges you to act, and dopamine remains at a neutral level.
- Reward—When you receive the reward the second time, dopamine does not spike, but stays neutral. This is because the reward was expected and the pleasure experienced less satisfying than anticipated.
 - If the reward is not received, dopamine drops from the disappointment.
 - If the reward comes later than expected, dopamine drops from the disappointment, then spikes at the relief of finally receiving the reward again.

(Shortform example: The habit formation stages can be seen clearly in drug addiction. The phrase “chasing the dragon” characterizes the difference between wanting and liking. The first time the drug is used and elicits a pleasing sensation, a connection is formed between the drug and pleasure. Each time you are cued to want the same type of pleasure, you will crave the drug. Dopamine spikes in anticipation of the same high as before, but because anticipation now overrides actual pleasure, the result will be less than before. Continuing to chase this high is the essence of habit formation.)

Social Relevance

Your underlying motivation to belong affects your behaviors. Group mentality is strong in society. You want to feel connected to others and a part of something larger than yourself. Therefore, what you see others do around you shapes what you do. Your earliest habits are formed by imitating how parents, friends, and teachers behave. **When certain behaviors help you fit in and belong, they are more attractive.**

There are three groups of people that greatly influence your choices in behavior.

The Close

You often pick up habits from those you are close to without realizing it. Like the physical environment, your social environments are riddled with various cues. **The manner in which your loved ones respond to a cue acts as a sort of subconscious peer pressure.** You imitate their behavior so you will be seen as one of them. This type of imitation is only negative when you're surrounded by bad influences.

- If your best friends smoke cigarettes, you will be more likely to start smoking.
- If your family members overeat, you become more susceptible to overeating.

Surrounding yourself with positive influences helps surround you with good behaviors. When you see others behaving in a way that is in line with the habits you want to create, forming those habits becomes easier. To use your social environment to its full potential, **seek out specific social groups where your desired behaviors are the norm** and with which you already share something in common.

- If you want to read more, join a book club. Even better, join a book club made up of similar people, such as those with similar careers or who are at similar stages in life.
- If you have a young child and want to exercise more, join a mommy/daddy and me yoga club.

The shared identity promotes your personal identity, and the sense of belonging fuels your motivation to maintain good habits and provides allies for the journey.

The Many

Group mentality is a powerful influencer because it is easier to go along with bad or incorrect behaviors than be good or right on your own. When you don't know how to respond in certain situations, you scan the people around you to see what everyone else is doing.

- When you want to buy a new appliance or piece of technology, you check Amazon reviews.
- When you want to see a movie, you look at Rotten Tomatoes to see what the critics thought.
- When you want to go to a restaurant, you check Yelp to see which establishments others liked.
- **You want to imitate the best behaviors, so you seek out the most popular options chosen by the public.**

Your natural instinct is to get along with others, but when the actions of the group cause you to disregard your own feelings or behaviors that fit your desired identity, this influence becomes negative. Following a different path than the group is unattractive, but with effort, you can learn to stick to your guns and seek out groups who support your identity.

The Powerful

Your underlying motivation to gain status and admiration for who you are causes you to imitate the behaviors of successful people. **You imitate those you envy and become motivated to act in a way that generates the praise and respect you perceive them to have.** You believe doing what powerful people do will garner the same results in your life. You also avoid behaviors that may reduce your status in society.

The reward you seek is acknowledgement for who you are and what you do, and you will continue to bounce between behaviors until you find the right one that works. Find the right role models with positive attributes and actions to help motivate you to form good habits.

How to Make the Right Behaviors Attractive

There are many different ways to address the underlying motivations of behavior, and your current

methods may not be the best ones. The habits you have now are merely the behaviors the brain latched onto because of dopamine stimulation when rewards were experienced. **To make behaviors more attractive and create new cravings, you can manipulate your thoughts and actions.**

Supernormal Stimuli and Temptation Bundling

The more attractive and stimulating an experience, the more you will crave it. Unfortunately, many healthy new habits (like exercising or eating more vegetables) don't trigger strong cravings. The solution to this is to **bundle the new habit with something you already want**. This is called **temptation bundling**.

Temptation bundling creates a supernormal stimuli—a heightened version of reality that elicits stronger-than-normal responses.

- For example, an engineer loved binge-watching Netflix but also knew he should get more exercise. He used his knowledge to manipulate the functions of a stationary bike and the Netflix app. In order to watch Netflix, he had to ride the bike and keep a certain pace. If the pace decreased, the streaming stopped.
- By creating a connection between his craving to watch Netflix with his desire to exercise more, he made the act of exercising more attractive.

Temptation bundling can also be used with habit stacking. The formula is as follows: "After X [current habit], I will do Y [new habit]. After I do Y, I get to do Z [craved habit]."

- You've already stacked your need to exercise more on top of your current habit of eating lunch. But you also want to play video games. Your formula changes from: "After I finish lunch, I will walk around the block for 20 minutes" to "After I finish lunch, I will walk around the block for 20 minutes. After I walk around the block for 20 minutes, I get to play video games for 30 minutes."
- If playing video games becomes the reward for walking, you've created a supernormal stimulus by making exercise more rewarding. You'll begin to crave the walk so you can claim your reward afterward.

If the habit you stacked previously is something you're passionate about, you can bundle another needed habit in between the two previous habits.

- You were successful in starting the habit of drawing more because you stacked it on top of washing dishes, but you also have bills to pay. Your formula changes from, "After I wash the dishes, I will draw for an hour" to "After I wash the dishes, I will pay the bills. After I pay the bills, I get to draw for an hour."

Through temptation bundling, you create a heightened version of your desired habit to elicit a stronger desire. Over time, you will look forward to performing the needed habit because it means you get to do the desired activity next.

Signal Switching

When you experience positive feelings about something or someone, that thing or person becomes more attractive. Since cravings are nothing more than a signal to change part of your physical or emotional state, you can switch the signal by connecting behaviors to positive feelings. If behaviors create positive feelings, they become more attractive.

1. A shift in paradigm is one way to generate more positive feelings. Think about your "to-do" list. The items on it likely feel like burdens, or things you *have* to do. Change the title of the list to "**get-to-do**" list,

and the burden of performing these acts now feels like an opportunity and a privilege.

- “I have to pick up my child from school” becomes “I get to pick up my child from school.” This small shift helps you recognize your fortune in having the freedom to be there for your child in this way.
- “I have to shop for groceries” becomes “I get to shop for groceries.” This different way of thinking about it highlights your fortunate position in being able to afford groceries and having the time to shop.

2. Redefining habits to highlight their advantages, rather than disadvantages, also creates more positive feelings.

- Exercise is typically thought of as strenuous and exhausting, but you could also think of it as strengthening and enhancing. “I need to exercise” becomes “Time to build muscle and endurance.”
- Saving money is often experienced as a sacrifice, but you could experience it as an act of liberation. Living frugally now helps you live more comfortably in the future.
- Meditation can leave you feeling the opposite of calm if you struggle to keep your mind clear. Instead of feeling frustrated with the intruding thoughts, see them as an opportunity to continue practicing and improving your ability to focus.
- Nerves can cause anxiety and an increased heart rate, which can feel stifling and hinder your behavior. Rather than experiencing nerves negatively, experience them as excitement and boosting your adrenaline.

3. Motivational rituals can also become cues to trigger positive feelings.

- If you listen to the same song every time you are intimate with your partner, after a while, that song will elicit feelings of intimacy and trigger you to act.
- Using the same warm-up regimen before athletic competitions will put you in the right frame of mind to compete.
- If scratching your dog behind the ears calms you down, attach other behaviors to the act to help you create that sensation at other times. For instance, take two deep breaths and smile before you pet your dog. In the future, when you want to feel calm, you can take two deep breaths and smile to trigger the brain to respond with calming feelings.

Creating more positive feelings for your habits will not happen overnight. Determine which strategy will work best and stick to it. **Small changes require time to fully engage with the mind and become automatic cravings for the appropriate actions.**

Exercise: Does Your Community Support Your Identity?

Who you associate with and where you live play big roles in the behaviors you perform. Do your social circle and environment help motivate you to be the person you want to be?

What is a bad habit you currently have that was influenced by your social group?

Are you able to stop this habit without losing your social network? If yes, how? If not, why?

What other social circle might be more suitable to help you stop this bad habit?

Name one positive habit your current social network has influenced in your life.

Exercise: Mind Over Matter

You've learned that the way you think about your life can influence your motivation for life. How can you use temptation bundling and signal switching to improve your behaviors?

What is one habit you'd like to do daily? What is a different, current habit you enjoy doing?

How can these behaviors be bundled for success? What is your formula?

Take one item from your daily to-do list that you "have" to do and rewrite it as what you "get" to do.

How does this change in perspective change your feelings about the action or behavior?

Chapter 6: Simplify Your Responses

Now that you understand how to create more positive cues and cravings, the time to act is upon you. The law governing the third stage of habit formation is to make the response easy. But making a habit easy doesn't mean doing easy things. **Making habits easy means creating pathways for behavior that are low in friction and high in follow-through.** So, what does it mean to act, and how are these pathways created?

Motion versus Action

Preparing for change is an effective way to trick yourself into thinking you're forming better habits when all you're really doing is procrastinating. You research the latest diet trends, seek out the best get-rich-quick scheme, or look for the most optimal side hustle. **When you get trapped in the process of looking for the best solution, you never move beyond the act of looking to actual action.**

Motion is what happens when you take time to plan, research, and design the process of changing. When working for you, motion helps you gather your thoughts and determine what your first steps will be to change your system. When working against you, motion gives you the illusion of making progress. You feel the forward movement of action without taking any of the risks of actually acting.

A persistent tendency to merely prepare for action becomes a bad habit over time. You notice a cue, crave the reward, and respond by planning the action. You feel productive, but motion doesn't lead to the result you *really* want.

Action, on the other hand, is actual forward motion. Without action, your goals will never be attained. You can rationalize planning as your desire to determine the perfect behavior for change, but a perfect system isn't what creates good habits. Repetition is. Only by getting reps of a desired habit in will you be able to create behavior that becomes easy and sustainable.

The Varying Results of Motion and Action

Notice the difference between the two processes and the end result of each.

- Outlining 30 ideas for a short story generates a list of ideas.
- Choosing one idea and writing 30 words a day will generate a short story over time.
- Reading blogs about weight loss and diet trends generates information about eating healthy.
- Eating a salad for lunch three times a week generates a habit of eating more healthy foods.

You can plan endlessly and never get anywhere. The only way for results to be generated is by beginning the desired behavior, whether it's perfectly planned or not.

Repetition Is Key

The question you should ask when attempting behavior change is not *how much time* will it take, but

how many times will it take. Hebb's Law, named after the 1949 neuropsychologist Donald Hebb, states that "neurons that fire together wire together." The brain is a muscle, and like all muscles, when parts of it are used frequently, they enlarge, grow strong, and become more effective. If certain parts go unused, the effectiveness of those parts reduces and they eventually atrophy. For this reason, repetition is at the key to forming a habit.

Neuroscientists use the term "long-term potentiation" to describe the process of automating habits. In the brain, neural pathways are created when a new behavior begins. **The more the brain recognizes a pattern of behavior, the deeper the pathways become.** With each repetition, the pathway strengthens and the action becomes fine-tuned and automatic.

The goal of habit formation is to strengthen the connections in your brain to reach a state of automaticity, or the ability to perform an action without thinking about each step. Because every habit must go through this process, **the frequency with which you perform a habit is more important than the length of time you perform it.**

Your current habits were formed from hundreds to millions of repetitions. Whether the repetitions occurred over years, months, or days is less significant. To create new habits, you must practice with the same rate of frequency. Every attempt to perform the new habit gets you closer to the habit line of automaticity, when it becomes ingrained in the brain.

The Path of Least Resistance

Since repetition is required for habit formation, making sure you get your reps in is vital. **You will practice a behavior more often if it is considered easy.** A behavior is deemed easy if the amount of effort required to perform it is low.

Energy is a precious commodity, and humans are hard-wired to conserve it. When provided with two choices that are similar in result and action, whichever requires the least amount of effort will win out. You are always looking to get the most value with the least amount of energy expended.

Motivation versus Convenience

Many self-help books promote motivation as the main ingredient for sticking with any new habit. If you want to change bad enough, you will. But people are more likely to do what is convenient, even when motivated.

- For example, you may feel motivated to go for a jog, but if you're already in your pajamas, it is more convenient to stay cozy and watch TV than change clothes and start a new activity.

The more inconvenient a behavior is, the less likely you are to do it. Check your habit scorecard to see how many of your daily activities are driven by motivation and how many are driven by convenience.

- Checking social media and watching TV are incredibly convenient activities.
- Washing dishes after you use them is more convenient than waiting until they pile up.

Habits are really just obstacles to becoming the person you want to be. You want the identity, not the habit; therefore, **the more convenient the habit, the more easily you can become the person you want to be.** This is why you can't trust motivation alone to start new behaviors.

There will always be days when you're not motivated to act but you still need to get your behavior reps in.

Only by reducing the effort required to act will you ensure you will still follow through. The amount of effort relates to the amount of friction existing between you and the act.

- Friction is like a kink in a hose. You can still push water through, but the effort to get water to come out is greater than if you simply removed the kink before sending water through.

By removing the friction from habits, they will become easier to maintain, even when you're unmotivated.

Getting Rid of Friction

You already learned how to design your environment to create more obvious cues. Now, you will learn how to design your environment to make responding to those cues easier.

Businesses make millions of dollars by making their products accessible, thereby more habit forming.

- Texting is less cumbersome than emailing or writing a letter.
- Meal delivery services make it easy to make dinner without the effort required to go to the grocery store or decide what you will eat.

You can create this same type of ease in your life by resetting your environment for success. **Resetting the environment means cleaning up after your last action in a way that prepares you for future actions.** Examples include placing the remote back on the TV stand when finished watching so you can find it easily or throwing trash away whenever you leave your car.

When things are in the right place, not only is finding them or maintaining the associated environment easier, but it also saves time and effort later, which can be transferred to other activities. A little effort toward organization in the beginning creates easy paths to good habits.

- Consider the cereal items set out as a cue to eat healthier. Setting up this cue translates into an easy action of eating cereal because you've removed three steps in the process of making a bowl of cereal.
- When you eat the cereal, wash the bowl and spoon, and set them out again, you're making the action easy again for the next day, which helps to strengthen the neural pathway for that habit.

Inversion: Make It Difficult

Because you are wired to always look for the path of least resistance, it doesn't take much friction to turn you off from a bad habit.

If you want to reduce how much television you watch, unplug the TV or take the batteries out of the remote. Watching television is not as easy if you have to go through several steps to make it happen.

If you want to focus more during work or avoid distractions while reading, leave your phone in a different room. The effort required to get up and seek out the phone is enough to keep you in place and focused on what you're doing.

The cumulative effect of increasing friction in small ways is immense over time.

Decisive Moments

As previously stated, behaviors don't happen in a vacuum. One automatic habit leads to another and so on. Think of each habit as a piece of railroad track. In succession, your pieces of track add up to a long railway. Depending on the first track you laid down, you could end up at the right destination or one far from where you wanted to go.

The first habit that sets the influence train in motion is called the *decisive moment*. These are small choices that snowball into future behavior. **From this one decision, you create a set of options that your future self will have to choose from.** You become limited in behavior because of the path your decisive moment laid out. In this way, your habits become the entry for behavior, not the end point.

It's easier to stay on a course of linked actions than stop and shift directions at some point down the line. There are three ways to ensure your decisive moments create positive paths: the two-minute rule, commitment devices, and one-time actions.

Two-Minute Rule

One of the biggest ways you can fail at forming a new habit before you begin is by starting too big. **If you break the system of a new habit down into smaller pieces, you will have more success in maintaining that habit.** When the first step is easy, it's more likely your decisive moment will be a positive one that snowballs into more positive behaviors in the near and distant future.

Committing to two minutes of activity is easier than trying to surmount the whole activity at once. Once you determine what actions are required in your system to reach your goal, rate them from easiest to hardest and commit to performing the easiest for two minutes.

- "I will read more" becomes "I'll read one page a day."
- "I will walk for 20 minutes" becomes "I will put on my walking shoes."
- "I will do the laundry" becomes "I will put the dirty clothes in a basket."

A new habit should be easy, so do the easy part first. What follows might be difficult or challenging, but **once momentum is built with the gateway habit, you are more likely to keep going.**

Let's say your end goal is to run a marathon. This goal encompasses the identity of someone who runs. The habit you wish to form is to run more often. You break your system into separate steps, but if you make the error of starting too big, your actions may look like the following:

- Step 1: Run for 20 minutes after returning home from work every day.
- Step 2: Increase running time by 10 minutes every week.
- You succeed in running for 20 minutes for two days in a row, but by Day 3, you're too tired and don't feel like running. On Day 4, you feel guilty for not running the day before, which makes you feel lazy, so you don't run again.

Starting with a big step like running every day was hard to maintain because it required effort, and the moment that effort outweighed your motivation, you stopped. However, **breaking down the system into two-minute increments will help you keep casting votes for your desired identity without a massive requirement of effort.**

- Step 1: Change into running clothes when you get home.
- Step 2: Put on running shoes.
- Step 3: Walk to the sidewalk.
- Step 4: Jog for two minutes.

You may not be able to motivate yourself for a full run, but you can surely motivate yourself enough to change clothes. That may be as far as you get that day, but you've triggered the brain to start forming a pathway toward your future goal by getting into the habit of changing into jogging clothes after work. Over time, putting on workout clothes becomes a ritual, which serves as a cue for the larger response of going for a run. With continued repetition, the snowball effect will take hold, and you will continue taking the necessary steps until you are in shape for your marathon.

(Shortform note: You can go one step further by reducing the friction of Step 1. If you lay your running clothes out before leaving for work, the effort required to put them on is reduced.)

The point of the two-minute rule is not to only do the easiest thing. **The point is to make a habit of showing up for your desired goal and identity.** The biggest enemy to progress is the anticipation of work. **The two-minute rule keeps you below the threshold of effort, which allows you to keep succeeding in accomplishing the task.** As you generate enough days of performing the two-minute step, your identity as the person you want to be strengthens, which motivates you to keep moving forward, two minutes at a time.

If the two-minute rule seems gimmicky or foolish, try restricting your behaviors to two minutes, instead of allowing the two minutes to snowball into more.

- You are only allowed to run for two minutes before you have to go home.
- After enough reps, you start to feel like you want to do more, but you are required to stop.
- You will now become the champion of running for longer periods of time when you begin to feel dissatisfied with your two-minute restriction.

Commitment Devices

Commitment devices are actions taken to ensure your decisive moments lead to the right future behavior.

A famous example of a commitment device is the one Victor Hugo used when faced with a deadline for his new novel. Having a year initially to complete his book, Hugo spent most of the time socializing or traveling out of the home. When his publisher threatened to cancel his contract if the book wasn't submitted in the next six months, Hugo did something to ensure he would work on his book. He had his assistant lock all of his clothes in a chest and keep the key. The only thing he had to wear was a shawl. With no clothes, Hugo was forced to stay home. Six months later, he submitted the manuscript for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

This type of commitment device is extreme, but it demonstrates how removing the elements that cause bad habits from your day sets you up for positive options.

- Instead of buying bulk-quantity snacks, buy individually packaged servings of snacks to curb overeating.
- Have the server at a restaurant box half your meal before he brings it to the table to ensure you only eat the amount you want.
- Set a timer that shuts down electronics or the WiFi connection so it's impossible to stay up late using them.

When you take actions in the present that dictate desired actions in the future, you abide by your desired habits before you even attempt them. **The key of a commitment device is to make *not* doing the good habit harder than it is to do it.** This is the inverse of the third law—make bad habits impossible.

One-Time Actions

A one-time action is a significant effort made once that translates into making bad habits impossible and good ones inevitable. Some simple examples include:

- swapping smaller plates for your current large plates to maintain small portion sizes
- buying personally tailored support shoes to ease muscle strain and pain
- moving to a supportive community where your desired identity is the norm.

An easy way to make significant, life-altering one-time decisions is with the use of technology. These days, you can do just about anything with technology, so why wouldn't you use it to your advantage to help you achieve your goals?

- You can automate a transfer of money from your checking account to a savings account daily or weekly.
- You can set-up automatic bill paying systems to ensure you always pay on time.
- You can wire your home with systems that can be timed to restrict access to certain parts of the home or activities.
- You can block access to certain websites, like social media or video games.

When everything in your life that can be automated is, good habits require no energy at all, which frees up time for other activities. Use technology to enhance your lifestyle to keep you moving in the right direction and stop you from slipping into bad habits.

However, technology also makes life more convenient, which has the opposite effect of automating bad habits and falling victim to temptation.

- Streaming services make binge watching convenient by automatically starting the next episode.
- Social media is easy to use and always available to turn to with a click of a button when you're bored.

Make sure technology is working to promote good behaviors and not make bad ones more visible and accessible.

Exercise: The Two-Minute Tango

Trying to tackle a new habit all at once can lead to disappointment and reduced activity. How can you incorporate the two-minute rule into your desired habits to help you stay motivated?

Name one habit you wish to begin this year.

What is the first two-minute action you can make in pursuit of this habit?

What are the next two two-minute steps that follow the first?

Exercise: Making a Big Commitment

Both commitment devices and one-time actions require foresight to keep you moving in the right direction. What are some ways these strategies can help improve your habits?

What is one current task or behavior in your life that could benefit from a commitment device?

What is the commitment device, and how would it help?

How could a major one-time action affect one or more of your current behaviors?

What steps are required to take that one-time action?

Chapter 7: The Pleasure Point

The cardinal rule of habits is “what is rewarded is repeated; what is punished is avoided.” So far, you’ve learned the necessary steps to help motivate you to begin a new habit or break a bad one. The first three stages of habit formation—cue, craving, and response—all work to help you create a new behavior. **The final stage—reward—helps you duplicate the behavior.**

All habits are based on anticipated pleasure because pleasure triggers the brain to remember what happened to create it. Satisfaction is the final link in the habit loop, which is why the fourth law of habit formation is “make it satisfying.” However, **for satisfaction to impact behavior, the sensation must be experienced immediately.**

Instant versus Delayed Rewards

Modern society is structured as a “delayed-return environment,” in which the rewards for many actions come at a later point in the future.

- Only after weeks of work do you receive payment for your services.
- Only after a steady routine of exercise and healthy eating do changes in your body become noticeable.

However, human nature is embedded in an “immediate-return environment” inherited from early humans and the animal kingdom, where survival and goals were daily concerns. Despite the changes to society, humans still value instant gratification over future gratification.

As far as habits are concerned, this tendency can work against or for you. Each behavior encompasses several outcome stages. With bad behaviors, the present outcome is positive, as bad habits serve some immediate purpose in your life.

- Smoking reduces anxiety.
- Social media reduces boredom.

However, the cumulative outcome of bad behaviors is negative.

- Smoking leads to poor health and medical issues.
- Social media leads to loss of time or anxiety.

Likewise, with good behaviors, the present outcome is less gratifying, but the eventual outcome is positive. In other words, **you pay for a good habit now and pay for a bad habit later.**

Because of delayed gratification with good behaviors, the best laid plans often go awry. Deciding to change your life empowers you toward positive action. But when the time comes to act, the temptation to do what provides the most immediate gratification often thwarts the process. Thus, the more you experience instantaneous pleasure, the more you should check the behavior that causes it.

Success in any aspect of life usually requires less attention on immediate gratification. Especially when forming habits, the focus typically is on sacrifice. To mitigate the strain of sacrifice, **you must find a way to link small bits of satisfaction to positive behaviors.** In essence, you are making human nature work in your favor.

You remember the ending of behavior more than the process, which makes the ending significant in habit formation. Like habit stacking to create a link between the reward of a current habit and a cue for a new habit, you can create a link between the ending of one habit and an immediate reward. These links between habits and rewards are called *reinforcements*.

Reinforcements

Reinforcements help maintain continued behavior by allowing you to experience a win after a certain action. They are especially useful when a habit does not encompass tangible action, or *habits of avoidance*.

Habits of avoidance include things like not drinking alcohol for a month and not spending money on unnecessary items. The habit is one of simply not doing something you don't want to do, so there is no real element of action that creates a sense of progress. Use reinforcements with these habits to make the behavior more satisfying.

- For example, each time you pass up buying an unnecessary item, you can transfer the money to a special account earmarked for something you want, like a vacation or leather boots.
- The satisfaction of watching your vacation or boot fund grow reduces the feelings of sacrifice in not buying something you don't need.

Importantly, **the reward must align with your desired identity**. For instance, if your desire is to become a more frugal person, saving money for a pair of expensive boots likely doesn't align well with the habits of a frugal person. In this case, the reward for not making an unnecessary purchase might be an afternoon at the beach or an extra long lunch break. These rewards support the identity of someone who has more freedom because they are financially stable.

As the small rewards help you maintain a desired habit, your chosen identity will build. Eventually, the identity will become the thing that reinforces the behavior because it feels good to do something that supports who you are or want to be. That satisfaction will make outside encouragement less important over time. Incentives help form habits. Identity makes habits inherent.

Habit Tracking

Another way to create satisfaction is by tracking or measuring your progress with a certain habit. **When you visually track progress, the success of your habit becomes tangible and reinforces the behavior.**

There are many ways to track habits: use objects to represent each completion of the habit, mark days on a calendar, or journal progress. Many successful people employ some form of habit tracking.

- One successful businessman created a large list of clients by transferring a paper clip from one jar to another after each sales call. He didn't stop until all the paper clips were transferred. The next day, he'd start again. This visual representative object allowed him to see the progress he made each day and kept him motivated to keep making calls.
- Benjamin Franklin carried a journal with a list of virtues he wished to live by. At the end of each day, he wrote down his progress in either upholding or failing to uphold each virtue.
- Comedian Jerry Seinfeld writes one joke every day. He doesn't worry about whether it's a good or bad joke. His only concern is to never break the chain of daily jokes.

Research suggests that people who track their behaviors are more likely to maintain progress than those who do not. **Create a visual representation of your success chain, and you will make it more difficult to break.** This idea is supported by three of the four laws of habit formation: make it obvious, make it

attractive, and make it satisfying.

Habit tracking makes a habit more obvious, in that each paper clip moved, day marked on a calendar, or journal page filled serves as a cue to perform the same action.

This technique makes behaviors more attractive because success drives desire. Progress is addicting, and the desire to continue feeling successful makes the behavior that led to those feelings attractive. This aspect is especially important on bad days when you're less motivated to act.

- When you can see the accumulation of successful days through visual measures, you are less likely to want to see an empty calendar square or lingering paper clip in the jar.
- The unattractiveness of breaking the chain motivates you to act.

Finally, habit tracking makes behavior more satisfying because the act of marking a day as successful is gratifying. The ability to move a paper clip or put a red slash over a calendar box becomes the reward of completing the positive behavior. Think of how good it feels to cross an item off of your to-do list. If something feels good, you're more likely to want to do it again.

Another benefit of habit tracking is that it keeps the focus of your efforts on the process, not the goal. **You are actively engaging in behavior that represents the person you want to be, not waiting to become that person.**

Mitigating Failure

There is no such thing as perfection. Every person, no matter how committed to changing behavior or tracking progress they may be, will face a moment of failure. Crises happen, weather happens, and changing life circumstances happen. **The perspective you bring to the process of behavior change will determine how successful you are in the long run.**

There are a number of pitfalls that can derail progress during behavior change: the burden of habit tracking, the disappointment of breaking the chain, and the folly of tracking the wrong measure.

The Habit of Habit Tracking

Habit tracking in and of itself is a habit. The requirement to start a new habit to help you begin another at the same time can feel overwhelming or like a burden. Why add another habit to keep track of when it's easier to say, "I'll simply make more business calls" or "I'll just write one joke a day"?

To help ease the burden of forming two habits at once, consider these mitigating actions:

1. Start with aspects of life already automated to track activity.

- Credit card statements track spending, Fitbits track physical activity, and electronic calendars track appointments and social behavior.
- Commit to checking these automated trackers regularly to reduce the need for manual tracking.

2. Only manually track significant habits.

- Not every action in life needs to be tracked. **It will be easier if you regularly track one major behavior than try to intermittently keep track of ten.** And you will have a better chance of maintaining stamina for the action if you focus on one behavior at a time.

3. Record the tracked measure immediately after the behavior is completed.

- This concept uses the technique of habit stacking to use the end of a certain behavior as a cue for tracking.
- The formula becomes “After [habit], I will [track habit].”

All Streaks Come to an End

It is inevitable that you will break the chain of a good habit at some point. But the end of a streak doesn't have to mean the end of the habit. Missing one day will happen. **The key is to try to avoid missing two or more days in a row.**

The downward spiral of repeated missed days of action is what leads to the end of good habits and the formation of bad ones. One missed action makes it easier to not do it again, and so on. An all-or-nothing mentality creates the false assumption that if you can't do it perfectly, you can't do it at all. But missed action hurts you more than a successful action helps.

- If you start with \$100 and increase it by half, you now have \$150. But it only takes a decrease of one-third to take you back to \$100.
- Avoiding a loss of one-third the value is more significant than increasing the value by half. Therefore, **doing half a habit is better than doing nothing at all.**

As stated earlier, showing up for your habit strengthens your identity, which is a major motivator in habit formation. Even on bad days, not putting up a zero for effort will be more significant than what that effort entails.

- When you feel sluggish or lazy, going to the gym for ten minutes is still a vote for the type of person you want to be.
- The workout you can get done in ten minutes is less important than maintaining the identity as someone who shows up and doesn't miss a workout.

Meaningful Measures

Society is driven by numbers. We are consumed with measuring success according to quantifiable proof, rather than the idea behind what the numbers represent. This instinct can lead you to measure the wrong thing when tracking habits.

If you make your measure of success a quantifiable number, you will do whatever it takes to make progress toward that number, even if the action is unhealthy or outside your identity. Therefore, **if you choose the wrong measure, you will create the wrong habit.**

For instance, when trying to become a healthier person, focusing on the number on the scale will lead you down the wrong path.

- You may start with a good process of eating healthier foods and exercising, but if the amount of weight you are able to lose plateaus and the number on the scale doesn't change for a few days, you may feel despair. To force the number to move faster, you may resort to crash diets or excessive and dangerous exercise routines. You may feel like a failure and stop trying completely. None of these actions represent the actions of a person living a healthier life.

Each measure you track should be a vote for the identity you want. **The habit of tracking measures is meant to provide meaning to the action and motivate you, not make the measure the ultimate goal.**

Just because something can be measured, doesn't mean it should be, and vice versa.

Instead of measuring the number on the scale, find nonscale victories to measure to keep the behavior satisfying.

- A healthier lifestyle helps improve energy. If you're able to be more physically active, that is a measure of success. Removing unhealthy foods from your diet can improve your skin's appearance, which makes you feel better about yourself. Losing weight can increase your sex drive, which can lead to more intimacy and stronger relationships.

The key is to find the measure that makes maintaining a habit consistently rewarding and allows you to continue becoming the person you want to be.

Making Bad Habits Unsatisfying

The inversion of the fourth law is to "make it unsatisfying." In the same way that adding a small reward can motivate behavior, adding a small consequence to certain behaviors helps reduce the motivation to act. Bad habits serve you in some way, which makes breaking them hard. **The more instantly costly a bad habit becomes, the faster you will turn from it.**

Find ways to hold yourself accountable for your actions, and slipping up or behaving badly will now have consequences. If you reframe bad habits so they elicit an instant punishment or sensation of pain, you will start plotting how to avoid them.

- If you own a restaurant, the fear of bad reviews keeps you working to improve your menu.
- If absences from class equate to a reduction in your overall grade, you will find a way to make it to class, even when you don't want to go.

A **habit contract** can create accountability in your life. It's a verbal or written agreement with one or two other people that states your intended habit and the consequences of not following through. Habit contracts are like laws that keep people in check.

Your desire for respect and approval is a major motivator, and **not wanting to fail or appear weak in front of others is a powerful incentive for good behavior.** It's easier to break promises to yourself than it is to break promises to other people. Decide what habits you want to create or break, and make the consequence of failing to do so significant.

- If you want to eat healthier foods, agree to pay your spouse \$100 every time you eat an unhealthy snack.
- If you want to exercise more, hire a personal trainer and agree to pay them double for missed sessions.
- If you want to stop smoking, agree to wear a shirt promoting your rival sports team in public for a week for each cigarette you smoke.

For accountability to work, **the strength of the consequence must match the strength of the benefit gained from the behavior.** Whatever the consequence is, make sure someone else knows about it who is in a position to notice when you don't succeed.

Exercise: Rewarding Behavior

We all have habits we want to start or break. But willpower is often not enough of a motivator. How can the tips from this chapter help you stick to good habits and leave bad ones behind?

What is one habit you wish to start that falls into the category of *habits of avoidance*? (These are habits that involve *not* doing something, like not drinking alcohol for a month or not spending money on unnecessary items.)

What is one way you can reinforce this habit to elicit a satisfying reward?

Name another habit you wish to create that is capable of being tracked?

What measure would you track and which method of tracking would you use?

How does this measure relate to your chosen identity?

Part III: Mastering Atomic Habits Chapter 8: It's What's Inside that Counts

If you want to develop habits that are easy to maintain and lead to success, choose habits that align with your capabilities. **Behaviors that highlight your strengths and interests will be more enjoyable and easier to stick with.**

Your Genes and Your Habits

Everyone has different talents, abilities, and interests, and your genetic make-up has a lot to do with what yours are. Your genes encompass characteristics that create your personality. Although genes are immutable, they are flexible in how they support your life choices. Put your energy toward things that excite you, and your genes will give you a successful edge.

When working for you, genetic predispositions give you an advantage. When working against you, they give you a disadvantage. **Genes do not determine your destiny, but they do determine which opportunities will benefit you the most.**

Environment has a lot to do with whether your genes work for or against you. This is why selecting the right behaviors and environment is crucial for your success.

- Consider a 7'0" muscular young man. His genetic make-up gives him height and strength, but these predispositions are only useful in the right environment.
- If he decides to play basketball, his genes will give him an advantage.
- If he decides to be a horse jockey, his genes will not suit him well.

One of the best ways to determine which behaviors and environments are right for you is by learning which personality traits you possess.

The Big 5 Personality Traits

There are 5 personality traits, each with a spectrum of behavior that highlights who you are. All five have biological underpinnings and typically remain unchanged throughout your life.

1. Openness to experience—from curious and daring to cautious and unvarying.
2. Conscientiousness—from organized and methodical to spontaneous and relaxed.
3. Extroversion—from sociable and gregarious to reclusive and reticent.
4. Agreeableness—from affable and caring to difficult and withdrawn.
5. Neuroticism—from fretful and sensitive to assured and resilient.

Understanding your personality doesn't dictate what behaviors you're capable of performing. However, **your personality does suggest which behaviors you will most likely gravitate toward and be successful with.**

- A less agreeable person will struggle to build a habit of forming one social connection a week or sending out greeting cards.
- An extrovert will have a harder time staying off of social media than an introvert.
- Someone who is conscientious will have more success creating better working habits.

There's a version of each habit and behavior that falls along your spectrum of personality. What works for someone else may not work the same way for you, so you must build habits based on what aligns with who you are and what you like, not on what society or your friends and family expect.

- To lose weight, you may find that nature hikes are more enjoyable than going to a gym.
- To write more, you may enjoy writing romance novels more than literary fiction.
- To quit smoking, you may need assistance with patch or therapy, rather than doing it cold turkey.

The right habit makes compliance simple and fun. The wrong habit is like pushing a cart of rocks uphill. Whatever your path of least resistance is to your desired behavior change, follow it to experience more enjoyment and motivation.

What Behaviors Are Right for You?

Even if you know what your personality is, knowing which behaviors suit you best may not be obvious. Use trial and error to find the right experiences and environments for success.

The process of trial and error includes periods of *exploration* and *exploitation*. **During exploration, you should remain open to the various paths that lead to your desired identity.** Exploration occurs at the beginning of any new behavior or activity.

- Relationships form after a number of dates.
- A college major is chosen after a year or two of general studies.
- A restaurant opens only after a number of soft openings.
- Cars are sold to the public after several trial runs at the factory.

Once you explore and find a good path for or response to your desired behavior, stick with it. When you find success with a certain response, exploit that behavior or activity.

Exploitation means repeating the successful behavior or activity again and again to gain more successful results. Once success starts to wane, it's time to start exploring again.

- (Shortform example: You determine that taking a spin class is the best solution for your desire to exercise more. You stick with it and form a routine. However, the cost of the class becomes a burden on your finances. You don't have to go back to the beginning to find something else that works. You already have a habit of sticking with exercise and like riding a bike. You explore other options, such as borrowing a friend's bike or renting a stationary one. You decide to make a one-time expense to purchase a stationary bike at home to use long-term.)

A good balance during trial and error is to exploit successful behaviors 80% to 90% of the time and to explore other options 10% to 20% of the time.

Time: Friend or Foe

Not everyone has the luxury of all the time in the world to explore what works best for them. Young people have more time and opportunities to explore. Older people might have to start exploiting right away to get faster results. Regardless of which category you fall into, there are four questions that help cut through the jumble of options to help you use your time effectively.

1. What is fun for me but hard for others?

Activities you enjoy that are not universally considered enjoyable point to behaviors that align with your genetic predispositions.

2. What makes time fly for me?

Being in the zone, or the “flow state,” only occurs if you’re successful and engaged in what you’re doing. **Any activity that creates this sensation is in line with your genetic make-up.**

3. Which behaviors or activities provide returns for me that are better than the returns of others?

Compare yourself with others and focus on behaviors that give you more success than they do other people.

4. What behaviors or activities come naturally to me?

When do you come alive or feel the most like your authentic self?

Specialization

Some people are lucky enough to know what behaviors favor them from the beginning. Their personality gravitates toward opportunities already existing, and all that is required is hard work to find success. Others struggle to find something in life that aligns with their talents and personality. If you’re in the latter group, one solution is to make up your own place in the world.

You may have multiple behaviors that feel natural and in line with your talents and personality. You may experience marginal success in several things. If this is the case, combine two or more talents to create a niche where you can excel and where the competition is low.

- For example, the cartoonist for the comic strip *Dilbert* combined his talents to create his popular comic. He could draw but wasn’t as good as most artists. He was funny but not enough to be a comedian. He knew he wasn’t going to succeed in solely following one of those two paths, so he combined them and used his business background to create a career that allowed both his talents to flourish in an effective way.

Specialization helps overcome the detriment of “bad” or “subpar” genes. **You can turn any odds toward your favor if you create a more favorable environment for your talents.** Win by being different, not by being better. Create your own path for success to ensure your talents stand out.

Genetics Are Only Half the Battle

Your inherent talents and personality will not make you successful on their own. Genes make the most of your expended energy by suggesting what you should focus on. But genes do not stand in for hard work.

You must first work hard at something before you know if the behavior or activity is truly in your wheelhouse. **Even if you are naturally gifted at something, doing nothing or putting in the smallest amount of effort will not equal success.**

- Micheal Phelps is likely not the only person alive with a body designed optimally for swimming. But of those, he is the most successful because of years of training and sacrifices made to make the most of his genetic predisposition.

Likewise, not having a specific talent or natural gift for a certain activity does not equate to failure. You can

succeed at anything you want to do as long as you put in the work. You may not reach the highest levels of achievement, like the Olympics, or have the easiest time working toward your goal, but **if you don't put in the work, you'll never know what you're capable of.**

Genetics are only as useful as the means by which you use them. Find the right path for you and give it your time and focus to succeed.

Exercise: Making Who You Are Work for You

Do you know what your genetic predispositions say about what habits are right for you?

What is fun for you but hard for others?

What makes time fly for you or puts you in the *flow state*?

Which behaviors or activities bring you greater success than they do for others?

What activities make you feel like your authentic self?

Chapter 9: How to Keep Showing Up and Pushing Through

Losing motivation is one of the biggest killers of habit formation. You lose motivation for several reasons, including choosing the wrong habits to start, not seeing progress fast enough, and failing to allow small changes to lead to others. However, **one of the biggest killers of motivation is boredom.**

Why You Lose Interest

We tend to believe that successful people work from a supercharged place of eagerness and fortitude. Because of this, you likely believe that you must get “amped up” to accomplish a difficult task. You take any signs of boredom as evidence that you need a new challenge. These ideas promote quitting a positive behavior simply because it’s not exciting anymore.

To really succeed at forming positive habits, you must accept that boredom is inevitable. You must also acknowledge that feeling bored doesn’t mean the behavior is no longer valid.

What Is Boredom?

Boredom is the state experienced when something stops being novel or entertaining. Regarding habits, **boredom occurs when new habits become automatic and easy.**

Mastery requires practice, but the more you practice one behavior, the more mundane that behavior becomes. When habits become mundane, you lose interest and start seeking novelty. You often look for something new and different to regain a sense of excitement, even if the old or current behavior is still working.

When you lose interest in a behavior, you lose motivation to keep working on your system. You are not unique in experiencing this sensation. Successful people also experience boredom. The difference is they are able to push through the lack of novelty and excitement and keep working. Successful people learn to love boredom, and to achieve success, you must learn to love it, too.

If you are only motivated to act when things are novel or exciting, you’ll never attain consistent results. Showing up and working hard even when bored or uninspired is what separates greatness from goodness. You may not enjoy the work when you’re bored or not in the mood, but you have to put in the reps if you want to keep improving toward your ultimate goal and identity.

How to Combat Boredom

Learning how to stay motivated means designing habits that draw you in, rather than repel you. One of the best-known strategies for keeping behaviors interesting is working at a level of *just manageable difficulty*.

Your brain loves a challenge, but this love is fickle. If the challenge is not hard enough, you will lose interest. If the challenge is too hard, you will be unsuccessful in your behavior attempts and shy away from trying.

- Playing tennis against a 5-year-old will be too easy and lead to boredom.
- Playing tennis against Serena Williams will be way too hard and certainly lead to failure. (If not, you may have a Grand Slam championship in your future!)

- Either extreme will not help you engage with the activity or behavior.

The perfect degree of challenge for the brain is when you perform at a level that lives on the edge of your current abilities. This idea is referred to as the *Goldilocks Rule*, which states that degrees of difficulty must be *just right* to attain peak motivation.

The Goldilocks Rule

You must start a new behavior by *making it easy*, as the third law states. Making a new behavior easy to perform and maintain is necessary and helps you stay focused even when motivation is challenged. But once a behavior has reached the habit line, you must increase the boundary of difficulty in small increments to keep it challenging.

If a behavior is just challenging enough, you will be more interested in sticking with it. Hitting the “just right” zone of difficulty is what creates the flow state, wherein you are fully engaged in the behavior or activity. A 4% increase in difficulty above your current abilities or behaviors is required to reach the flow state.

- Imagine playing with a new tennis partner equal in skill level. You play for months, and you start to naturally progress beyond your current abilities.
- If your partner doesn't progress at the same rate, you will soon beat them easily and lose interest.
- If you find a new partner who is slightly better than your new level, you will be more engaged when you play because you are being challenged more.
- You will eventually progress to the new level and so on as you continue to play better opponents.

Improvement requires a balance between pushing beyond status quo to stay challenged and keeping the level of challenge at a point that still allows for satisfying results.

Part of this process of increasing degrees of difficulty is the *variable reward*. When you increase your challenge level to the just-right point, whether you fail or succeed becomes equal in likelihood.

When there is a 50/50 chance of success or failure, your desire to win increases. You experience enough success to warrant continued action and enough failure to make you work harder. **Rewards experienced in this type of variable way make every attempt novel, which reduces boredom.**

Still, at some point, even if you are able to create variable rewards through just manageable difficulty, you will be faced with boredom. Understanding that this will occur, regardless of your efforts, will help you address it when it comes and keep you from falling into the traps automated habits can create.

The Bad and Ugly of Automatic Behaviors

As discussed, you can only move to the next level in your habit system after forming automatic behavior. However, there are aspects of automatic behaviors that hurt more than help.

When behavior becomes automated, the action becomes mindless, which reduces your ability to notice small errors or opportunities for growth. You become less receptive to feedback the more mindless a behavior becomes. You stop thinking of ways to improve because you have learned to perform the behavior “good enough.”

Once you can perform a behavior at a “good enough” level, you start to believe that simply putting in good-enough reps equals experience and progress. Really, **all you're doing is reinforcing current behavior, not attempting to build on that behavior.** This assumption is what leads to decline after a good-enough level

is mastered. You can't continue the same behavior and expect to get different results.

Stopping with the first or second habit in your system doesn't lead to the overall identity or optimal goal you're seeking. Working through the tiny aspects of your system means allowing each level to become automatic, then using that foundation to move to the next level. **You have to continue building on habits once they become "good enough" so you can keep moving through your system to the end.**

A combination of automatic behaviors and deliberate practice is required. Deliberate practice means finding ways to increase the degree of difficulty in your system to add new skills or behaviors. **Once a habit is formed, you must deliberately practice the next level to keep improving.**

(Shortform example: Your desired identity is to be a skilled athlete. You choose basketball as your opening and learn to make a jump shot from five feet away. You master this skill, making basket after basket until you no longer have to think about form. If you were to stop with this good-enough behavior, you'd find little success in an actual basketball game. If you move back a foot after mastering each preceding distance, you'll eventually be able to shoot a three-pointer. Similarly, if you add a defender to your practice, you'll learn how to make the five-foot shot under pressure. Now, you'll be able to compete in a game-like scenario.)

Negative Thoughts

Another negative aspect of automated behaviors is the way in which they skew your thinking about your skills and identity. As you begin to form behaviors that support your chosen identity, it's easy to become cocky or boastful about who you're becoming.

Like good-enough behaviors, **when you are cocky about mastering one aspect of your identity, you stop seeing weak spots or ways to grow.** You latch on to this mastered behavior and the supported identity and believe the work is done.

The problem with this narrow focus is that life does not stop presenting challenges just because you've stopped growing. When you define your identity through the lens of one action, behavior, or aspect, you are not prepared for the challenges that arise and your identity becomes fragile. **If you lose the thing that defines your identity, you lose yourself.**

- If you've been successful at removing animal products from your diet and latch on to your new identity as a vegan, what happens if you are no longer able to maintain that diet? If you develop a health condition that requires animal proteins, who will you become now that you can no longer identify as a vegan?
- If your band discovers a unique sound and reaches #1 with your debut album, your identity may be tied up in that sound. But your sound is no longer unique after people hear your first album, so what does that mean for your band and your second album?

The key is to redefine your identity to include the important aspects of the system, not the end result of one aspect. Therefore, if you lose that one aspect, you still have others and the identity they add up to.

- "I'm a vegan" becomes "I'm a person who eats conscientiously and healthily."
- "We're a band with a unique sound" becomes "We're a band who pushes boundaries and strays from conventions."

When defining your identity in the right way, it becomes flexible, not fragile. **A flexible identity goes with the flow of life, rather than fights against it.** If you're struggling to improve, reflect on your habits and

thoughts about identity to ensure they're still working for you. If not, readjust your thinking to create more space for growth.

A Few Words About Reflection

When you reflect on your behaviors and habits, you review your progress thus far, which provides a measure of successes and failures. With this measure, you learn where improvements are needed and locate the right paths for growth.

Identify mistakes and paths for growth to ensure you're putting energy toward the right systems of behavior. Examine your processes to learn how to adjust your behaviors for optimal success. Without reflection and review, it's easy to fall into the traps of mindless good-enough behaviors and negative thoughts. You start making excuses for why you're not improving instead of making informed decisions about what to adjust.

Reflection and review are excellent strategies for keeping you honest about your behaviors and identity, but too much can be a bad thing. Too much examination or feedback doesn't provide time to see the accumulative benefits or detriments of current behaviors. **Change and growth are slow processes, so reflection and review should only be performed periodically** to get an accurate gauge.

Exercise: Are You Being Challenged?

Keeping your behaviors moving in a direction of variable rewards is a good way to keep them challenging and interesting. How can you improve your good-enough behaviors to keep moving forward?

What is one habit you currently do well? What identity does this habit support?

What is the next level of difficulty you could strive for, or how can you increase the challenge of this current habit?

How does this increased challenge support your chosen identity?

Exercise: Is Your Identity Flexible or Fragile?

When you define your identity through the lens of a single action, behavior, or aspect, your identity

becomes fragile. Redefine your identity to focus on a system of characteristics.

What is your current identity or desired identity? Is it flexible (e.g. "I'm a person who eats conscientiously and healthily") or fragile (e.g. "I'm a vegan")?

What characteristics make up that identity? How could you use them to make your identity more flexible? (In other words, how can you redefine your identity to focus on these characteristics, rather than on a single end result?)

Chapter 10: Habits for the Future and Beyond

It's hard to fathom that one small change in behavior can truly transform your entire life. But through the processes described in *Atomic Habits*, you've learned that small adjustments in the right behavior systems can lead to long-term success. Knowing this, is there any reason to think that one small change can't snowball into a different mode of living?

If you're still dubious, think about the example of a self-made millionaire. This person didn't start out with a pile of money and simply add more to it. They started with nothing and made small gains financially. They built upon those gains one by one until they'd amassed a large sum of money, or their first million. The processes by which they did this varied.

- They made small investments, turning small sums of cash into large sums of cash.
- They used their profits to expand their business or purchase property, which brought in more money.
- They put money into savings accounts with high interest returns.

They have all the money they could need now because of the success of these actions, but they had to start with that first dollar before any of it could have happened.

That first dollar is no different than your first 1% increase in behavior change. **Your life cannot dramatically change without the first small effort toward doing so.** If you maintain small changes and continue moving forward, eventually the scales of success will tip in your favor.

Habit formation is not a flash-in-the-pan process with a beginning and end. **Habits require constant reflection and refinement so you can adjust behaviors to suit your systems and goals as you grow and transform.**

The main ingredient to lasting success is persistence in looking for ways to keep adding small improvements to your behaviors. If you keep moving forward, you'll eventually reach the life you want to live.

Helpful Concepts to Keep in Mind

(Shortform note: The information that follows was provided as an appendix in the book. These ideas are meant to further breakdown some tips and insights about the 4 Laws of Habit Formation.)

1. Awareness must precede desire.

Your brain must first assign an emotion or feeling to a cue for a craving to kick in. Therefore, you can only crave an opportunity your brain has become aware of.

2. Happiness equals a state of contentment.

Contrary to popular belief, the state of being happy is not a product of experiencing pleasure. Happiness is what occurs in between the rewards phase and the craving phase, when you are content with your current state and have no immediate desires.

3. We are motivated by the idea of pleasure, rather than pleasure itself.

When you respond to fulfill a desire, you have an inkling of the reward you will receive, but you don't know how much satisfaction you will feel. Therefore, the idea of the reward is what motivates you to act.

4. Observations are only problems if you make them such.

A craving is a desire to solve a problem. You will only be prompted to act if you observe that there is a problem to solve. If you do not assign a change in an emotional or physical state to a cue, you can simply observe it and be at peace.

5. You can form any behavior as long as you understand *why* it's being formed.

If your desire is great enough, your motivation to act will be equally strong. Therefore, if you understand the depths of why you will act, you will feel prompted to act, even if the action is extreme or difficult.

6. Always seek more knowledge.

You may be the smartest person in the world, but your current intelligence alone is not a motivator for action. Only craving a state of change will drive your behavior. Therefore, if you remain curious and thirsty for more knowledge, you will be open to action.

7. Emotions influence action.

There may be a million intellectual reasons to do something, but you will only feel motivated to do it if there are emotions attached to the behavior. This is why the craving precedes the response and why two people can experience the same cue and react differently.

8. Emotions must proceed rationale and logic.

Your brain is structured to always consider the emotional aspects of something first and the logic second. Understanding this will help you learn how to approach and manage emotional responses to cues in your life.

9. Suffering leads to progress.

The root of all suffering is a yearning for change. Wanting something different or more in life is what causes you to respond with action. Therefore, suffering can be seen as the pathway for progress, rather than a static state of dissatisfaction.

10. Behaviors highlight your desire.

What you do relates to what you want. Because you will only act when a desire for change occurs, you can take an honest look at your current actions to see what your current desires are. If you say something is a priority but take no action, you likely don't really believe that.

11. Sacrifice leads to rewards.

You must sacrifice energy to receive the subsequent reward. Doing nothing will provide nothing. You must be willing to sacrifice if you wish to see results.

12. Self-control is never satisfying.

A reward is only experienced when a desire is satisfied. Therefore, denying your cravings is not satisfying and will not lead to habit formation. To change a bad habit, a new response must be linked with your desire.

13. Keep your expectations at a satisfactory level.

A reward only links back to a cue if it is satisfying. Therefore, set realistic expectations for how satisfying the result of an action will be. If you have low expectations and receive more, you are delighted and satisfied. If you have high expectations and receive less, you feel dissatisfied. When your wants begin to outweigh your likes, you will be in a constant state of dissatisfaction.

14. The pain of failing corresponds to the degree of expectations.

The phrase, "Don't get your hopes up," is meant to warn of the dismal feelings that follow not receiving what you thought you would get. Failing to attain something small hurts less than failing to attain something massive. A failure in one part of the system doesn't have to mean total failure if you manage your expectations for each action.

15. Wanting motivates, winning maintains.

Wanting inspires action. Liking solidifies behavior. This is why the rewards of your actions must be satisfying. You can feel motivated to act, but if you don't like the result, you won't feel the desire to act in the same way again.

16. Hope will eventually fade into acceptance with experience.

The first time you assign a desire to a cue, you develop hope for the promise encompassed in the corresponding action. After that first time, you understand what the reward is, so there's no reason to hope. The need to experience hope can be powerful enough to pull you away from stable, predictable actions.

Exercise: The Path to the Moon

You might be wondering why it's better to manage expectations than shoot for the moon. Now that you understand the relationship between satisfaction and expectations, how can you apply this relationship to previous pain experienced due to failure?

When was the last time you felt pained by failing to achieve what you wanted?

What were the small steps in your overall system required to reach your ultimate goal? Name three.

What smaller expectations could you have set for the various steps, rather than placing all your hope in the final outcome? Name three.

What is another goal you wish to attain, and what is one small expectation you can set on your path to the moon?

Exercise: Your Future Identity and Behaviors

Throughout this summary, you've learned about different ways of thinking about habits and how to address behaviors in your life. How has the information in *Atomic Habits* helped you view your behavioral trajectory now and in the future?

What aspect of habit formation resonated the most with you?

How has learning about the four stages of habit formation changed your understanding of what you can do to become the person you want to be?

How would you explain habit formation to a friend in a nutshell?

What is the first thing you will do with the information you've learned from this summary?