

Habits FAQ

*Common questions and where you'll
find the answers.*

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The 1st Law

HOW CAN I ESTABLISH A NEW ROUTINE?

There are many ways to build a new habit, but one of the first strategies I recommend is a technique I call “habit stacking.” This method was popularized by professor BJ Fogg, who calls it the “tiny habits recipe” and teaches it in his Tiny Habits program. The key idea is to “stack” your new habit on top of a current habit. That is, your current behavior becomes the cue for your new behavior.

The habit stacking formula is:

“After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].”

For example, “After I put on my running shoes, I will fill up my water bottle.” By creating simple sets of rules, you can make it easier to remember when to perform a new habit.

– For more examples of habit stacking, see Chapter 5

HOW DO I KNOW IF A HABIT IS GOOD OR BAD?

Technically speaking, habits aren’t “good” or “bad.” It might be better to call them “effective” or “ineffective.” If a habit effectively solves the problem you’re facing, then you’ll have a reason to repeat it. All habits serve you in some way—even the bad ones—which is why you do them. Biting your nails might ease your stress or anxiety, for example.

However, people still use the terms “good habit” and “bad habit” all the time, and I think there is a simple way to distinguish between the two. Whether a habit is good or bad usually depends on the long-term benefits or consequences of the behavior. Generally speaking, good habits will have net positive outcomes in the long-run. Bad habits have net negative outcomes.

Smoking a cigarette may reduce stress right now (that’s how it’s serving you),

but it's not a healthy long-term behavior. It might be effective in the short-run, but it tends to be harmful over time. The longer you expand the time scale, the more clearly you can notice the differences between good and bad habits.

– *For more on the long-term outcomes of habits, see Chapters 1, 4, and 15*

HOW CAN I RECOGNIZE AND AVOID THE TRIGGERS THAT LEAD TO BAD HABITS?

One of the most practical ways to eliminate a bad habit is to reduce exposure to the cue that causes it. For example, if you seem to be easily distracted by your phone and can't get any work done, then turning off notifications or even leaving your phone in another room for a few hours can provide an immediate productivity boost. When the cues that cause distraction and ineffective behavior are eliminated, bad habits often fade away.

Of course, before you can eliminate the cues that prompt your bad habits you have to recognize them. One way to do this is to carry a 3x5 notecard in your pocket or create a new note on your phone. Whenever you find yourself repeating a bad habit, write down the following five things...

1. Who am I with?
2. What am I doing right now?
3. Where am I?
4. When is it?
5. What emotions are driving my actions?

If you do this for a week or two, you'll often notice some patterns that seem to precede your habit. Are you usually in the same place or around the same people? Does it happen at the same time of day? Or do you tend to feel a certain way before you do the habit?

Once you have a good idea of what triggers your bad behavior, you can search for ways to eliminate or avoid the cue that causes it. This practice is an inversion of the 1st Law of Behavior Change. Rather than make it obvious, you can make it invisible.

I'm often surprised by how effective simple changes like these can be. Remove a single cue and the entire habit often fades away.

– *For more on breaking bad habits, see Chapter 7, 10, and 14*

HOW CAN I CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT CONDUCTIVE TO GOOD HABITS?

Physical environment is one of the most overlooked drivers of habits and behavior change. Your habits are often triggered by what is obvious or available to you in your current environment. For example, if I walk into the kitchen and see a plate of cookies, I'll eat one (or ten) even if I'm not hungry. We often want things simply because we are presented with them. Drive down any major road. It is no surprise we eat so much fast food when we are surrounded by it. It's hard to resist the pull of what engulfs us.

Thankfully, you don't have to be the victim of your environment. You can also be the architect of it. Want to practice guitar more frequently? Place your guitar stand in the middle of your living room. Want to read more? Put a book on top of your pillow when you make your bed each morning. Read a few pages when you go to bed at night.

If you want to make a habit a big part of your life, make the cue a big part of your environment. By sprinkling triggers throughout your surroundings, you increase the odds that you'll think about your habit throughout the day. Making a better decision is easier when the cues for good habits are right in front of you.

Don't rely on willpower and self-control. It is a lot easier to stick to better habits when you are surrounded by better choices. Make the cues of your good habits obvious.

– *For more on environment design, see Chapters 6 and 12*

IS IT TRUE YOU CAN NEVER REALLY “BREAK” A BAD HABIT?

Sort of. You can break a habit, but you’re unlikely to forget it. Once the mental grooves of habit have been carved into your brain, they are nearly impossible to remove entirely—even if they go unused for quite a while.

This is not because it is impossible to remove a bad habit from your mind. Technically, you can re-condition the brain and eliminate an old behavior (effectively breaking a bad habit). For example, imagine if you received a painful electric shock the next 10,000 times you tried to eat a doughnut. You would probably learn to hate doughnuts fairly quickly. It would no longer be satisfying (an Inversion of the 4th Law), and you would have no reason to repeat the action in the future.

But in practice, it is hard to permanently “delete” a bad habit from your brain. Your best option is to use the 4 Laws of Behavior Change to make your unwanted habits invisible, unattractive, difficult, and unsatisfying.

– *For more on breaking bad habits, see Chapter 7, 10, and 14*

HOW CAN I DEVELOP SELF-CONTROL?

Self-control is a short-term strategy, not a long-term one.

You may be able to resist temptation once or twice, but it’s unlikely you can muster the willpower to override your desires every time. Instead of summoning a new dose of willpower whenever you want to do the right thing, your energy would be better spent optimizing your environment.

– *For more on designing an environment where self-control is unnecessary, see Chapters 6, 7, and 12*

The 2nd Law

WHAT IF A HABIT GETS BORING? HOW CAN I STICK WITH IT?

There are many ways to stick with a new habit, and I cover the most important ones throughout the book. I'll offer one of them here: temptation bundling.

Temptation bundling is one way to apply a psychology theory known as Premack's Principle. Named after the work of professor David Premack, the principle states that "more probable behaviors will reinforce less probable behaviors."

In other words, if you can find something you already want to do and connect it with the habit that you need to do, you'll be more likely to complete the habit. To put it another way: You're more likely to find a behavior attractive if you get to do one of your favorite things at the same time.

Perhaps you want to hear about the latest celebrity gossip, but you need to get in shape. Using temptation bundling, you could only read the tabloids and watch reality shows at the gym. This simple rule allows you to bundle your temptation to read tabloids with your habit of going to the gym. And you're more likely to do what you need to do if it means you get to do something you really want to do along the way.

– For more ideas on how to make good habits stick, see Chapters 8, 9, 14, and 19

HOW CAN I STAY MOTIVATED WHEN MY HABITS GO AGAINST THE GRAIN OF MY SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT?

As I cover in Chapter 9, social norms are a powerful driver of our everyday behavior. If you find yourself in a social situation where your desired habit goes against the grain of the group, then it will be hard to stick with it because doing so seems unattractive (an inversion of the 2nd Law).

The best option is to join a culture where (1) your desired behavior is the normal behavior and (2) you already have something in common with the group.

When this is not possible, you'll need to leverage the remaining three Laws of Behavior Change. If you can manage to make a habit obvious, easy, and satisfying, then it's possible you'll be able to stick with it—even if it runs against the social norm.

– *For more on habits and social norms, see Chapter 9*

The 3rd Law

I KNOW I SHOULD DO IT, BUT I STILL DON'T. WHY CAN'T I GET STARTED?

Even when you know you should start small, it's easy to start too big.

When people want to build a new habit like running every week, they think they are making it easy by saying something like "I'll just run for 15 minutes." In reality, this is still too big. A truly tiny behavior is something like, "Put on my running shoes." Or, "Fill up my water bottle."

You want to take on the smallest possible behavior that gets you moving in the right direction. The most effective way I know to counteract this tendency is to use the Two-Minute Rule, which states, "When you start a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to do."

The idea is to make your habits as easy as possible to start. A new habit should not feel like a challenge. The actions that follow can be challenging, but the first two minutes should be easy.

– For more examples of how to use the Two-Minute Rule, see Chapter 13

I KNOW I SHOULDN'T DO IT, BUT I CAN'T STOP. HOW CAN I STAY DISCIPLINED?

If you find yourself falling into an unwanted habit again and again, one of the most effective strategies is to create a commitment device. A commitment device is a choice you make in the present that controls your actions in the future. It is a way to lock in future behavior, bind you to good habits, and restrict you from bad ones.

For example, if you wish you didn't sleep in late, then setting up an early morning meeting is a commitment device that forces you to get out of bed. Suddenly, there is a cost to staying in bed. The unwanted behavior becomes more painful and less satisfying (an Inversion of the 4th Law).

There are many ways to create a commitment device. You can reduce overeating by purchasing food in individual packages rather than in bulk size. You can voluntarily ask to be added to the banned list at casinos and online poker sites to prevent future gambling sprees.

Commitment devices are useful because they enable you to take advantage of good intentions before you can fall victim to temptation.

– *For more examples of commitment devices and how to use them, see Chapter 14*

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO FORM A NEW HABIT?

This is one of the most common questions I hear, so I'll give you the answer straight away: the research says that, on average, it takes about two or three months for a habit to form. (One study calculated that the average was 66 days to create a new habit. Of course, that was just one study and the range in that particular study varied widely depending on the habit—anywhere from three weeks to over eight months.)

However, all of this discussion about “how long” obscures the real issue. What people should really be asking is, “How many does it take to form a new habit?” That is, how many repetitions are required to make a habit automatic?

There is nothing magical about time passing with regard to habit formation. It doesn't matter if it's been twenty-one days or thirty days or three hundred days. What matters is the rate at which you perform the behavior. You could do something twice in thirty days, or two-hundred times. It's the frequency that makes the difference.

The key point is that building a new habit is not a finish line to cross, but a lifestyle to be lived. There is no point where you “cross the finish line” and—poof—a new habit is created. If you want a habit to last, then you need to be willing to make it a part of your long-term life.

– *For more on how habits form, see Chapters 3 and 11*

HOW CAN I MAKE CHANGES AS EASY AS POSSIBLE?

Making habits easy to do is so crucial that I named it the 3rd Law of Behavior Change. There are many ways to increase the ease of a habit, but one of the most useful strategies is to search for points of friction and eliminate them.

For example, if you want to exercise before work, but your gym is twenty minutes out of the way from your commute, then you'll be less likely to make the trip. The friction is too high. Conversely, if you join a gym that is on the way to work, then fitting in a workout becomes much easier.

You can use this idea in reverse too. If you delete your email application off your phone after each individual use, then you'll be less likely to check email throughout the day. It's a bit of a hassle to download the app if you're simply going to glance at it—the friction is too high—and so you only download it and log in when you really need to use it.

The central idea is to create an environment where doing the right thing is as easy as possible and the unproductive thing is as difficult as possible.

– For more ideas on how to reduce the friction associated with good habits, see Chapter 12

HOW SMALL CAN A CHANGE BE AND STILL REMAIN USEFUL?

It can be easy to dismiss small habits as not being worthwhile.

The truth is, small habits can reinforce the identity you want to build. If you show up at the gym five days in a row—even if it's just for two minutes—you are casting votes for your new identity. As the votes accumulate, so does the evidence of your new identity.

If a small habit reinforces your desired identity, then it is meaningful. And if it is meaningful, then it is actually a big deal.

– For more on how small habits add up and shape your identity, see Chapters 1 and 2

The 4th Law

IF I ONLY HAVE TIME FOR ONE NEW HABIT, WHAT IS THE BEST HABIT TO PICK?

This is a crucial question. Picking the right habit might be the most pivotal aspect in determining whether or not you are successful. Choose the right habit (something obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying), and progress is simple. Choose the wrong habit, and progress is nearly impossible.

If you're going to stay focused on one habit to start, then I suggest selecting a habit that also ripples into other areas of your life. Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*, refers to these behaviors as “keystone habits.” For example, exercise is my keystone habit. When I work out, I not only get the benefits of exercise, but I also tend to sleep better, focus longer, and eat healthier—even though I don't consciously focus on these things. Exercise is the one habit that pulls the rest of my life in line.

Of course, finding the “best” habit also depends on the person. This is partially because people often have different goals, but also because the right habit depends on your personality and disposition. People can get ripped working out like a bodybuilder, but if you prefer rock climbing or cycling or rowing, then shape your exercise habit around your interests. Choose the habit that best suits you, not the one that is most popular.

– For more on choosing the right habit, see Chapter 18

HOW CAN I STAY MOTIVATED WHEN I WON'T SEE RESULTS IMMEDIATELY?

It is very common to start working on a new habit (or any goal) and, despite your best efforts, not see progress right away. In Chapter 1, I refer to this phenomenon as The Plateau of Latent Potential.

One way to get over this plateau and maintain motivation is to adhere to The Goldilocks Rule. The Goldilocks Rule states that humans achieve peak motivation when working on tasks of “just manageable difficulty.” I explain this more fully in Chapter 19.

However, there is a second point to add here. One of the most motivating feelings is the feeling of progress. But the key is that you need to be able to visualize your progress for it to be motivating. If you don’t have any way of noticing that you’re moving forward, then it’s easy to lose motivation. This is where visual measures of progress like the Paper Clip Strategy or Habit Tracking come into play.

– For more on these concepts, see Chapters 1, 16, and 19

HOW CAN I HOLD MYSELF ACCOUNTABLE?

Staying disciplined can be hard, which is why it can be helpful to enlist the support of someone else. A simple way to do this is by creating a habit contract, which is a written agreement in which you state your commitment to a particular habit and the punishment that will occur if you don’t follow through.

In Chapter 17, I provide examples and additional templates for creating your own habit contract. And even if you don’t want to create a full-blown habit contract, simply having an accountability partner is useful.

– For more on habit contracts, see Chapter 17

WHAT ARE THE BEST STRATEGIES TO RESTART A HABIT AND GET BACK ON TRACK?

If you need to reclaim a lost habit (or if you simply fall off course for a day or two), then the mantra I like to keep in mind is this: Never Miss Twice.

If I am trying to lose weight, but binge eat for one meal, then I put all of my energy into getting back on track the next meal. If I was hoping to publish a new

article every Monday, but skip a week, then I make sure the next Monday I'm back on course.

The first mistake is never the one that ruins you. It is the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows. Never miss twice.

– For more on this philosophy, see Chapter 16

HOW DO YOU SPECIFICALLY TRACK YOUR HABITS?

First, it's not necessary to track every habit. If you employ the four Laws of Behavior Change, then you'll find that you can often stick to a tiny behavior whether you track it or not.

However, I do believe tracking can be beneficial for the most important tasks. Personally, I track my exercise habits (how many workouts I do), writing habits (how many new articles I write), and travel habits (how many new places I visit).

I generally believe using a habit tracker is the simplest way to get started. The most basic format is a calendar on which you mark an "X" on each day you do the habit. To make this easier, I have created a Habit Journal, which includes a habit tracking template. You can learn more at atomichabits.com/journal

*– For a deeper explanation of habit tracking and additional examples,
see Chapter 16*