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## How to Stick with Good Habits Every Day

IN 1993, a bank in Abbotsford, Canada, hired a twenty-three-year-old stockbroker named Trent Dyrsmid. Abbotsford was a relatively small suburb, tucked away in the shadow of nearby Vancouver, where most of the big business deals were being made. Given the location, and the fact that Dyrsmid was a rookie, nobody expected too much of him. But he made brisk progress thanks to a simple daily habit.

Dyrsmid began each morning with two jars on his desk. One was filled with 120 paper clips. The other was empty. As soon as he settled in each day, he would make a sales call. Immediately after, he would move one paper clip from the full jar to the empty jar and the process would begin again. “Every morning I would start with 120 paper clips in one jar and I would keep dialing the phone until I had moved them all to the second jar,” he told me.

Within eighteen months, Dyrsmid was bringing in $5 million to the firm. By age twenty-four, he was making $75,000 per year—the equivalent of $125,000 today. Not long after, he landed a six-figure job with another company.

I like to refer to this technique as the Paper Clip Strategy and, over the years, I’ve heard from readers who have employed it in a variety of ways. One woman shifted a

hairpin from one container to another whenever she wrote a page of her book. Another man moved a marble from one bin to the next after each set of push-ups.

Making progress is satisfying, and visual measures—like moving paper clips or hairpins or marbles—provide clear evidence of your progress. As a result, they reinforce your behavior and add a little bit of immediate satisfaction to any activity. Visual measurement comes in many forms: food journals, workout logs, loyalty punch cards, the progress bar on a software download, even the page numbers in a book. But perhaps the best way to measure your progress is with a *habit tracker*.

## HOW TO KEEP YOUR HABITS ON TRACK

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

Countless people have tracked their habits, but perhaps the most famous was Benjamin Franklin. Beginning at age twenty, Franklin carried a small booklet everywhere he went and used it to track thirteen personal virtues. This list included goals like “Lose no time. Be always employed in something useful” and “Avoid trifling conversation.” At the end of each day, Franklin would open his booklet and record his progress.

Jerry Seinfeld reportedly uses a habit tracker to stick with his streak of writing jokes. In the documentary *Comedian*, he explains that his goal is simply to “never break the chain” of writing jokes every day. In other words, he is not focused on how good or bad a particular joke is or

how inspired he feels. He is simply focused on showing up and adding to his streak.

"Don't break the chain" is a powerful mantra. Don't break the chain of sales calls and you'll build a successful book of business. Don't break the chain of workouts and you'll get fit faster than you'd expect. Don't break the chain of creating every day and you will end up with an impressive portfolio. Habit tracking is powerful because it leverages multiple Laws of Behavior Change. It simultaneously makes a behavior obvious, attractive, and satisfying.

Let's break down each one.

### Benefit #1: Habit tracking is obvious.

Recording your last action creates a trigger that can initiate your next one. Habit tracking naturally builds a series of visual cues like the streak of *X*'s on your calendar or the list of meals in your food log. When you look at the calendar and see your streak, you'll be reminded to act again. Research has shown that people who track their progress on goals like losing weight, quitting smoking, and lowering blood pressure are all more likely to improve than those who don't. One study of more than sixteen hundred people found that those who kept a daily food log lost twice as much weight as those who did not. The mere act of tracking a behavior can spark the urge to change it.

Habit tracking also keeps you honest. Most of us have a distorted view of our own behavior. We think we act better than we do. Measurement offers one way to overcome our blindness to our own behavior and notice what's really going on each day. One glance at the paper clips in the container and you immediately know how much work you have (or haven't) been putting in. When the evidence is right in front of you, you're less likely to lie to yourself.

### Benefit #2: Habit tracking is attractive.

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

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

### Benefit #3: Habit tracking is satisfying.

This is the most crucial benefit of all. Tracking can become its own form of reward. It is satisfying to cross an item off your to-do list, to complete an entry in your workout log, or to mark an *X* on the calendar. It feels good to watch your results grow—the size of your investment portfolio, the length of your book manuscript—and if it feels good, then you're more likely to endure.

Habit tracking also helps keep your eye on the ball: you're focused on the process rather than the result. You're not fixated on getting six-pack abs, you're just trying to keep the streak alive and become the type of person who doesn't miss workouts.

In summary, habit tracking (1) creates a visual cue that can remind you to act, (2) is inherently motivating because you see the progress you are making and don't want to lose it, and (3) feels satisfying whenever you record another successful instance of your habit. Furthermore, habit tracking provides visual proof that you are casting votes for

the type of person you wish to become, which is a delightful form of immediate and intrinsic gratification.*

You may be wondering, if habit tracking is so useful, why have I waited so long to talk about it?

Despite all the benefits, I've left this discussion until now for a simple reason: many people resist the idea of tracking and measuring. It can feel like a burden because it forces you into *two* habits: the habit you're trying to build and the habit of tracking it. Counting calories sounds like a hassle when you're already struggling to follow a diet. Writing down every sales call seems tedious when you've got work to do. It feels easier to say, "I'll just eat less." Or, "I'll try harder." Or, "I'll remember to do it." People inevitably tell me things like, "I have a decision journal, but I wish I used it more." Or, "I recorded my workouts for a week, but then quit." I've been there myself. I once made a food log to track my calories. I managed to do it for *one meal* and then gave up.

Tracking isn't for everyone, and there is no need to measure your entire life. But nearly anyone can benefit from it in some form—even if it's only temporary.

What can we do to make tracking easier?

First, whenever possible, measurement should be automated. You'll probably be surprised by how much you're already tracking without knowing it. Your credit card statement tracks how often you go out to eat. Your Fitbit registers how many steps you take and how long you sleep. Your calendar records how many new places you travel to each year. Once you know where to get the data, add a note to your calendar to review it each week or each month, which is more practical than tracking it every day.

Second, manual tracking should be limited to your most important habits. It is better to consistently track one habit than to sporadically track ten.

Finally, record each measurement immediately after the habit occurs. The completion of the behavior is the cue to

write it down. This approach allows you to combine the habit-stacking method mentioned in Chapter 5 with habit tracking.

The habit stacking + habit tracking formula is:
After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [TRACK MY HABIT].

- After I hang up the phone from a sales call, I will move one paper clip over.
- After I finish each set at the gym, I will record it in my workout journal.
- After I put my plate in the dishwasher, I will write down what I ate.

These tactics can make tracking your habits easier. Even if you aren't the type of person who enjoys recording your behavior, I think you'll find a few weeks of measurements to be insightful. It's always interesting to see how you've *actually* been spending your time.

That said, every habit streak ends at some point. And, more important than any single measurement, is having a good plan for when your habits slide off track.

## HOW TO RECOVER QUICKLY WHEN YOUR HABITS BREAK DOWN

No matter how consistent you are with your habits, it is inevitable that life will interrupt you at some point. Perfection is not possible. Before long, an emergency will pop up—you get sick or you have to travel for work or your family needs a little more of your time.

Whenever this happens to me, I try to remind myself of a simple rule: never miss twice.

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

The first mistake is never the one that ruins you. It is the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows. Missing once is an accident. Missing twice is the start of a new habit.

This is a distinguishing feature between winners and losers. Anyone can have a bad performance, a bad workout, or a bad day at work. But when successful people fail, they rebound quickly. The breaking of a habit doesn't matter if the reclaiming of it is fast.

I think this principle is so important that I'll stick to it even if I can't do a habit as well or as completely as I would like. Too often, we fall into an all-or-nothing cycle with our habits. The problem is not slipping up; the problem is thinking that if you can't do something perfectly, then you shouldn't do it at all.

You don't realize how valuable it is to just show up on your bad (or busy) days. Lost days hurt you more than successful days help you. If you start with $100, then a 50 percent gain will take you to $150. But you only need a 33 percent loss to take you back to $100. In other words, avoiding a 33 percent loss is just as valuable as achieving a 50 percent gain. As Charlie Munger says, "The first rule of compounding: Never interrupt it unnecessarily."

This is why the "bad" workouts are often the most important ones. Sluggish days and bad workouts maintain the compound gains you accrued from previous good days. Simply doing something—ten squats, five sprints, a push-up, anything really—is huge. Don't put up a zero. Don't let losses eat into your compounding.

Furthermore, it's not always about what happens during the workout. It's about being the type of person who

doesn’t miss workouts. It’s easy to train when you feel good, but it’s crucial to show up when you don’t feel like it—even if you do less than you hope. Going to the gym for five minutes may not improve your performance, but it reaffirms your identity.

The all-or-nothing cycle of behavior change is just one pitfall that can derail your habits. Another potential danger—especially if you are using a habit tracker—is measuring the wrong thing.

## KNOWING WHEN (AND WHEN NOT) TO TRACK A HABIT

Say you’re running a restaurant and you want to know if your chef is doing a good job. One way to measure success is to track how many customers pay for a meal each day. If more customers come in, the food must be good. If fewer customers come in, something must be wrong.

However, this one measurement—daily revenue—only gives a limited picture of what’s really going on. Just because someone pays for a meal doesn’t mean they *enjoy* the meal. Even dissatisfied customers are unlikely to dine and dash. In fact, if you’re only measuring revenue, the food might be getting worse but you’re making up for it with marketing or discounts or some other method. Instead, it may be more effective to track how many customers *finish* their meal or perhaps the percentage of customers who leave a generous tip.

The dark side of tracking a particular behavior is that we become driven by the number rather than the purpose behind it. If your success is measured by quarterly earnings, you will optimize sales, revenue, and accounting for quarterly earnings. If your success is measured by a lower number on the scale, you will optimize for a lower number on the scale, even if that means embracing crash

diets, juice cleanses, and fat-loss pills. The human mind wants to “win” whatever game is being played.

This pitfall is evident in many areas of life. We focus on working long hours instead of getting meaningful work done. We care more about getting ten thousand steps than we do about being healthy. We teach for standardized tests instead of emphasizing learning, curiosity, and critical thinking. In short, we optimize for what we measure. When we choose the wrong measurement, we get the wrong behavior.

This is sometimes referred to as Goodhart’s Law. Named after the economist Charles Goodhart, the principle states, “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.” Measurement is only useful when it guides you and adds context to a larger picture, not when it consumes you. Each number is simply one piece of feedback in the overall system.

In our data-driven world, we tend to overvalue numbers and undervalue anything ephemeral, soft, and difficult to quantify. We mistakenly think the factors we can measure are the only factors that exist. But just because you can measure something doesn’t mean it’s the most important thing. And just because you *can’t* measure something doesn’t mean it’s not important at all.

All of this to say, it’s crucial to keep habit tracking in its proper place. It can feel satisfying to record a habit and track your progress, but the measurement is not the only thing that matters. Furthermore, there are many ways to measure progress, and sometimes it helps to shift your focus to something entirely different.

This is why *nonscale victories* can be effective for weight loss. The number on the scale may be stubborn, so if you focus solely on that number, your motivation will sag. But you may notice that your skin looks better or you wake up earlier or your sex drive got a boost. All of these are valid ways to track your improvement. If you’re not feeling

motivated by the number on the scale, perhaps it's time to focus on a different measurement—one that gives you more signals of progress.

No matter how you measure your improvement, habit tracking offers a simple way to make your habits more satisfying. Each measurement provides a little bit of evidence that you're moving in the right direction and a brief moment of immediate pleasure for a job well done.

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## Chapter Summary

- One of the most satisfying feelings is the feeling of making progress.
- A habit tracker is a simple way to measure whether you did a habit—like marking an X on a calendar.
- Habit trackers and other visual forms of measurement can make your habits satisfying by providing clear evidence of your progress.
- Don't break the chain. Try to keep your habit streak alive.
- Never miss twice. If you miss one day, try to get back on track as quickly as possible.
- Just because you can measure something doesn't mean it's the most important thing.