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The Best Way to Start a New Habit

IN 2001, RESEARCHERS in Great Britain began working with 248 people to build better exercise habits over the course of two weeks. The subjects were divided into three groups.

The first group was the control group. They were simply asked to track how often they exercised.

The second group was the "motivation" group. They were asked not only to track their workouts but also to read some material on the benefits of exercise. The researchers also explained to the group how exercise could reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and improve heart health.

Finally, there was the third group. These subjects received the same presentation as the second group, which ensured that they had equal levels of motivation. However, they were also asked to formulate a plan for when and where they would exercise over the following week. Specifically, each member of the third group completed the following sentence: "During the next week, I will partake in at least 20 minutes of vigorous exercise on [DAY] at [TIME] in [PLACE]."

In the first and second groups, 35 to 38 percent of people exercised at least once per week. (Interestingly, the motivational presentation given to the second group

seemed to have no meaningful impact on behavior.) But 91 percent of the third group exercised at least once per week—more than double the normal rate.

The sentence they filled out is what researchers refer to as an *implementation intention*, which is a plan you make beforehand about when and where to act. That is, how you *intend* to *implement* a particular habit.

The cues that can trigger a habit come in a wide range of forms—the feel of your phone buzzing in your pocket, the smell of chocolate chip cookies, the sound of ambulance sirens—but the two most common cues are time and location. Implementation intentions leverage both of these cues.

Broadly speaking, the format for creating an implementation intention is:
"When situation X arises, I will perform response Y."

Hundreds of studies have shown that implementation intentions are effective for sticking to our goals, whether it's writing down the exact time and date of when you will get a flu shot or recording the time of your colonoscopy appointment. They increase the odds that people will stick with habits like recycling, studying, going to sleep early, and stopping smoking.

Researchers have even found that voter turnout increases when people are forced to create implementation intentions by answering questions like: "What route are you taking to the polling station? At what time are you planning to go? What bus will get you there?" Other successful government programs have prompted citizens to make a clear plan to send taxes in on time or provided directions on when and where to pay late traffic bills.

The punch line is clear: people who make a specific plan for when and where they will perform a new habit are more likely to follow through. Too many people try to change their habits without these basic details figured out. We tell ourselves, “I’m going to eat healthier” or “I’m going to write more,” but we never say when and where these habits are going to happen. We leave it up to chance and hope that we will “just remember to do it” or feel motivated at the right time. An implementation intention sweeps away foggy notions like “I want to work out more” or “I want to be more productive” or “I should vote” and transforms them into a concrete plan of action.

Many people think they lack motivation when what they really lack is clarity. It is not always obvious when and where to take action. Some people spend their entire lives waiting for the time to be right to make an improvement.

Once an implementation intention has been set, you don’t have to wait for inspiration to strike. *Do I write a chapter today or not? Do I meditate this morning or at lunch?* When the moment of action occurs, there is no need to make a decision. Simply follow your predetermined plan.

The simple way to apply this strategy to your habits is to fill out this sentence:
I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION].

- Meditation. I will meditate for one minute at 7 a.m. in my kitchen.
- Studying. I will study Spanish for twenty minutes at 6 p.m. in my bedroom.
- Exercise. I will exercise for one hour at 5 p.m. in my local gym.
- Marriage. I will make my partner a cup of tea at 8 a.m. in the kitchen.

If you aren't sure when to start your habit, try the first day of the week, month, or year. People are more likely to take action at those times because hope is usually higher. If we have hope, we have a reason to take action. A fresh start feels motivating.

There is another benefit to implementation intentions. Being specific about what you want and how you will achieve it helps you say no to things that derail progress, distract your attention, and pull you off course. We often say yes to little requests because we are not clear enough about what we need to be doing instead. When your dreams are vague, it's easy to rationalize little exceptions all day long and never get around to the specific things you need to do to succeed.

Give your habits a time and a space to live in the world. The goal is to make the time and location so obvious that, with enough repetition, you get an urge to do the right thing at the right time, even if you can't say why. As the writer Jason Zweig noted, "Obviously you're never going to just work out without conscious thought. But like a dog salivating at a bell, maybe you start to get antsy around the time of day you normally work out."

There are many ways to use implementation intentions in your life and work. My favorite approach is one I learned from Stanford professor BJ Fogg and it is a strategy I refer to as *habit stacking*.

HABIT STACKING: A SIMPLE PLAN TO OVERHAUL YOUR HABITS

The French philosopher Denis Diderot lived nearly his entire life in poverty, but that all changed one day in 1765.

Diderot's daughter was about to be married and he could not afford to pay for the wedding. Despite his lack of wealth, Diderot was well known for his role as the co-

founder and writer of *Encyclopédie*, one of the most comprehensive encyclopedias of the time. When Catherine the Great, the Empress of Russia, heard of Diderot's financial troubles, her heart went out to him. She was a book lover and greatly enjoyed his encyclopedia. She offered to buy Diderot's personal library for £1,000—more than $150,000 today.* Suddenly, Diderot had money to spare. With his new wealth, he not only paid for the wedding but also acquired a scarlet robe for himself.

Diderot's scarlet robe was beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that he immediately noticed how out of place it seemed when surrounded by his more common possessions. He wrote that there was "no more coordination, no more unity, no more beauty" between his elegant robe and the rest of his stuff.

Diderot soon felt the urge to upgrade his possessions. He replaced his rug with one from Damascus. He decorated his home with expensive sculptures. He bought a mirror to place above the mantel, and a better kitchen table. He tossed aside his old straw chair for a leather one. Like falling dominoes, one purchase led to the next.

Diderot's behavior is not uncommon. In fact, the tendency for one purchase to lead to another one has a name: the Diderot Effect. The Diderot Effect states that obtaining a new possession often creates a spiral of consumption that leads to additional purchases.

You can spot this pattern everywhere. You buy a dress and have to get new shoes and earrings to match. You buy a couch and suddenly question the layout of your entire living room. You buy a toy for your child and soon find yourself purchasing all of the accessories that go with it. It's a chain reaction of purchases.

Many human behaviors follow this cycle. You often decide what to do next based on what you have just finished doing. Going to the bathroom leads to washing and drying your hands, which reminds you that you need to put

the dirty towels in the laundry, so you add laundry detergent to the shopping list, and so on. No behavior happens in isolation. Each action becomes a cue that triggers the next behavior.

Why is this important?

When it comes to building new habits, you can use the connectedness of behavior to your advantage. One of the best ways to build a new habit is to identify a current habit you already do each day and then stack your new behavior on top. This is called *habit stacking*.

Habit stacking is a special form of an implementation intention. Rather than pairing your new habit with a particular time and location, you pair it with a current habit. This method, which was created by BJ Fogg as part of his Tiny Habits program, can be used to design an obvious cue for nearly any habit.*

The habit stacking formula is:
"After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT]."

For example:

- Meditation. After I pour my cup of coffee each morning, I will meditate for one minute.
- Exercise. After I take off my work shoes, I will immediately change into my workout clothes.
- Gratitude. After I sit down to dinner, I will say one thing I'm grateful for that happened today.
- Marriage. After I get into bed at night, I will give my partner a kiss.
- Safety. After I put on my running shoes, I will text a friend or family member where I am running and how long it will take.

The key is to tie your desired behavior into something you already do each day. Once you have mastered this basic structure, you can begin to create larger stacks by chaining small habits together. This allows you to take advantage of the natural momentum that comes from one behavior leading into the next—a positive version of the Diderot Effect.

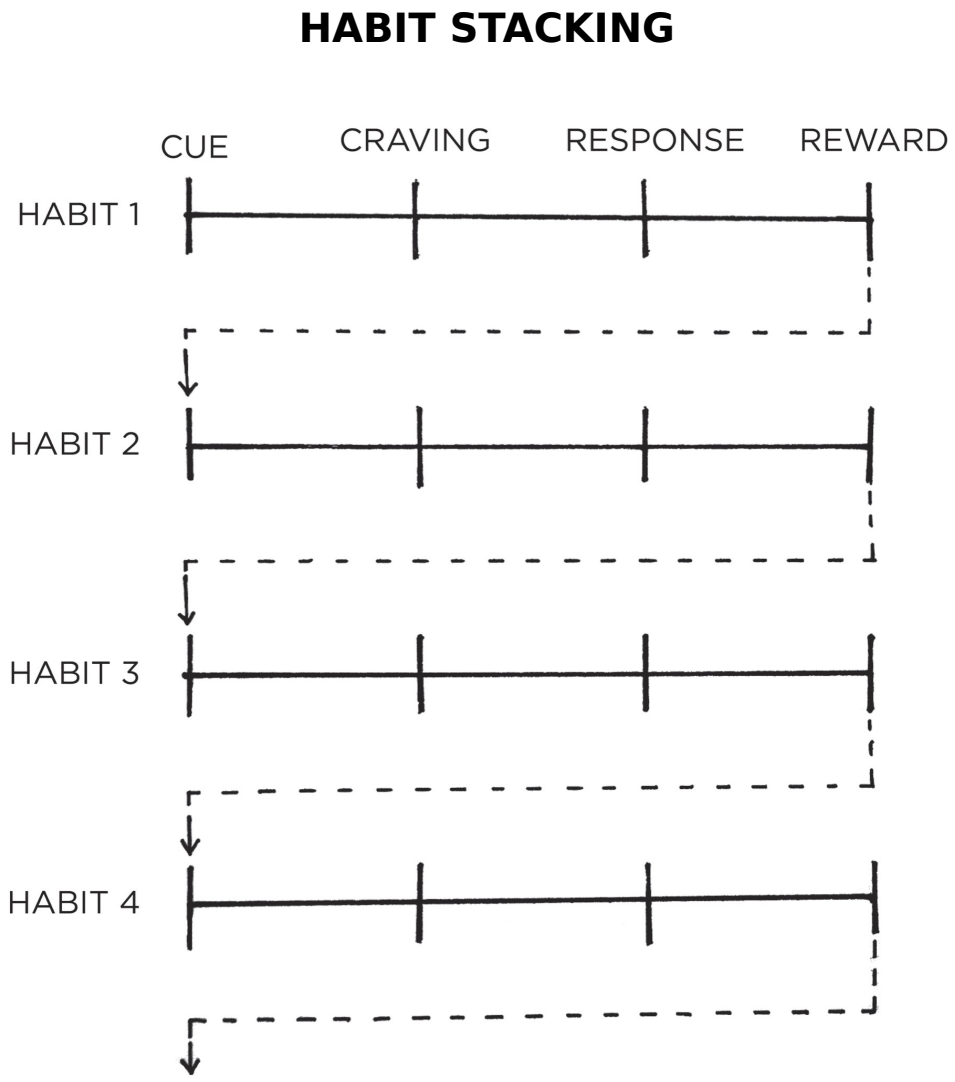

FIGURE 7: Habit stacking increases the likelihood that you'll stick with a habit by stacking your new behavior on top of an old one. This process can be repeated to chain numerous habits together, each one acting as the cue for the next.

Your morning routine habit stack might look like this:

1. After I pour my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for sixty seconds.
2. After I meditate for sixty seconds, I will write my to-do list for the day.
3. After I write my to-do list for the day, I will immediately begin my first task.

Or, consider this habit stack in the evening:

1. After I finish eating dinner, I will put my plate directly into the dishwasher.
2. After I put my dishes away, I will immediately wipe down the counter.
3. After I wipe down the counter, I will set out my coffee mug for tomorrow morning.

You can also insert new behaviors into the middle of your current routines. For example, you may already have a morning routine that looks like this: Wake up > Make my bed > Take a shower. Let's say you want to develop the habit of reading more each night. You can expand your habit stack and try something like: Wake up > Make my bed > *Place a book on my pillow* > Take a shower. Now, when you climb into bed each night, a book will be sitting there waiting for you to enjoy.

Overall, habit stacking allows you to create a set of simple rules that guide your future behavior. It's like you always have a game plan for which action should come next. Once you get comfortable with this approach, you can develop general habit stacks to guide you whenever the situation is appropriate:

- Exercise. When I see a set of stairs, I will take them instead of using the elevator.
- Social skills. When I walk into a party, I will introduce myself to someone I don't know yet.
- Finances. When I want to buy something over $100, I will wait twenty-four hours before purchasing.
- Healthy eating. When I serve myself a meal, I will always put veggies on my plate first.
- Minimalism. When I buy a new item, I will give something away. ("One in, one out.")
- Mood. When the phone rings, I will take one deep breath and smile before answering.
- Forgetfulness. When I leave a public place, I will check the table and chairs to make sure I don't leave anything behind.

No matter how you use this strategy, the secret to creating a successful habit stack is selecting the right cue to kick things off. Unlike an implementation intention, which specifically states the time and location for a given behavior, habit stacking implicitly has the time and location built into it. When and where you choose to insert a habit into your daily routine can make a big difference. If you're trying to add meditation into your morning routine but mornings are chaotic and your kids keep running into the room, then that may be the wrong place and time. Consider when you are most likely to be successful. Don't ask yourself to do a habit when you're likely to be occupied with something else.

Your cue should also have the same frequency as your desired habit. If you want to do a habit every day, but you stack it on top of a habit that only happens on Mondays, that's not a good choice.

One way to find the right trigger for your habit stack is by brainstorming a list of your current habits. You can use

your Habits Scorecard from the last chapter as a starting point. Alternatively, you can create a list with two columns. In the first column, write down the habits you do each day without fail.*

For example:

- Get out of bed.
- Take a shower.
- Brush your teeth.
- Get dressed.
- Brew a cup of coffee.
- Eat breakfast.
- Take the kids to school.
- Start the work day.
- Eat lunch.
- End the work day.
- Change out of work clothes.
- Sit down for dinner.
- Turn off the lights.
- Get into bed.

Your list can be much longer, but you get the idea. In the second column, write down all of the things that happen to you each day without fail. For example:

- The sun rises.
- You get a text message.
- The song you are listening to ends.
- The sun sets.

Armed with these two lists, you can begin searching for the best place to layer your new habit into your lifestyle.

Habit stacking works best when the cue is highly specific and immediately actionable. Many people select cues that

are too vague. I made this mistake myself. When I wanted to start a push-up habit, my habit stack was “When I take a break for lunch, I will do ten push-ups.” At first glance, this sounded reasonable. But soon, I realized the trigger was unclear. Would I do my push-ups before I ate lunch? After I ate lunch? Where would I do them? After a few inconsistent days, I changed my habit stack to: “When I close my laptop for lunch, I will do ten push-ups next to my desk.” Ambiguity gone.

Habits like “read more” or “eat better” are worthy causes, but these goals do not provide instruction on how and when to act. Be specific and clear: After I close the door. After I brush my teeth. After I sit down at the table. The specificity is important. The more tightly bound your new habit is to a specific cue, the better the odds are that you will notice when the time comes to act.

The 1st Law of Behavior Change is to *make it obvious.* Strategies like implementation intentions and habit stacking are among the most practical ways to create obvious cues for your habits and design a clear plan for when and where to take action.

Chapter Summary

- The 1st Law of Behavior Change is *make it obvious*.
- The two most common cues are time and location.
- Creating an implementation intention is a strategy you can use to pair a new habit with a specific time and location.
- The implementation intention formula is: I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION].
- Habit stacking is a strategy you can use to pair a new habit with a current habit.

- The habit stacking formula is: After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].