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Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones

by James Clear

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95 Highlights | 1 Note

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 149

changes that seem small and unimportant at first will compound into remarkable results if you're willing to stick with them for years.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 215

"The whole principle came from the idea that if you broke down everything you could think of that goes into riding a bike, and then improve it by 1 percent, you will get a significant increase when you put them all together."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 243

Here's how the math works out: if you can get 1 percent better each day for one year, you'll end up thirty-seven times better by the time you're done.

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1% better every day for one year. $1.01365 = 37.78$

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 270

Success is the product of daily habits—not once-in-a-lifetime transformations.

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Your outcomes are a lagging measure of your habits. Your net worth is a lagging measure of your financial habits. Your weight is a lagging measure of your eating habits. Your knowledge is a lagging measure of your learning habits. Your clutter is a lagging measure of your cleaning habits. You get what you repeat.

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Complaining about not achieving success despite working hard is like complaining about an ice cube not melting when you heated it from twenty-five to thirty-one degrees. Your work was not wasted; it is just being stored. All the action happens at thirty-two degrees.

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Goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 359

Goals are good for setting a direction, but systems are best for making progress.

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Achieving a goal only changes your life for the moment. That's the counterintuitive thing about improvement. We think we need to change our results, but the results are not the problem. What we really need to change are the systems that cause those results.

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Furthermore, goals create an "either-or" conflict: either you achieve your goal and are successful or you fail and you are a disappointment. You mentally box yourself into a narrow version of happiness. This is misguided. It is unlikely that your actual path through life will match the exact journey you had in mind when you set out.

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When all of your hard work is focused on a particular goal, what is left to push you forward after you achieve it? This is why many people find themselves reverting to their old habits after accomplishing a goal.

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There are three layers of behavior change: a change in your outcomes, a change in your processes, or a change in your identity.

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Many people begin the process of changing their habits by focusing on what they want to achieve. This leads us to outcome-based habits. The alternative is to build identity-based habits. With this approach, we start by focusing on who we wish to become.

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The ultimate form of intrinsic motivation is when a habit becomes part of your identity. It's one thing to say I'm the type of person who wants this. It's something very different to say I'm the type of person who is this.

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Decide the type of person you want to be. Prove it to yourself with small wins.

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Habits reduce cognitive load and free up mental capacity, so you can allocate your attention to other tasks.

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The process of building a habit can be divided into four simple steps: cue, craving, response, and reward.

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In summary, the cue triggers a craving, which motivates a response, which provides a reward, which satisfies the craving and, ultimately, becomes associated with the cue.

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How to Create a Good Habit The 1st law (Cue): Make it obvious. The 2nd law (Craving): Make it attractive. The 3rd law (Response): Make it easy. The 4th law (Reward): Make it satisfying.

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How to Break a Bad Habit Inversion of the 1st law (Cue): Make it invisible. Inversion of the 2nd law (Craving): Make it unattractive. Inversion of the 3rd law (Response): Make it difficult. Inversion of the 4th law (Reward): Make it unsatisfying.

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THE 1ST LAW Make It Obvious

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

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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.

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The Diderot Effect states that obtaining a new possession often creates a spiral of consumption that leads to additional purchases.

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

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1136

If your space is limited, divide your room into activity zones: a chair for reading, a desk for writing, a table for eating. You can do the same with your digital spaces. I know a writer who uses his computer only for writing, his tablet only for reading, and his phone only for social media and texting. Every habit should have a home.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1164

Someone becomes addicted at home or with friends, goes to a clinic to get clean—which is devoid of all the environmental stimuli that prompt their habit—then returns to their old neighborhood with all of their previous cues that caused them to get addicted in the first place. It’s no wonder that usually you see numbers that are the exact opposite of those in the Vietnam study. Typically, 90 percent of heroin users become re-addicted once they return home from rehab.

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When scientists analyze people who appear to have tremendous self-control, it turns out those individuals aren’t all that different from those who are struggling. Instead, “disciplined” people are better at structuring their lives in a way that does not require heroic willpower and self-control. In other words, they spend less time in tempting situations.

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Once a habit has been encoded, the urge to act follows whenever the environmental cues reappear. This is one reason behavior change techniques can backfire. Shaming obese people with weight-loss presentations can make them feel stressed, and as a result many people return to their favorite coping strategy: overeating. Showing pictures of blackened lungs to smokers leads to higher levels of anxiety, which drives many people to reach for a cigarette. If you’re not careful about cues, you can cause the very behavior you want to stop.

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Here’s the punch line: 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. And that means that simply resisting temptation is an ineffective strategy.

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One of the most practical ways to eliminate a bad habit is to reduce exposure to the cue that causes it.

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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. This is the secret to self-control. Make the cues of your good habits obvious and the cues of your bad habits invisible.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1257

After spending hundreds of thousands of years hunting and foraging for food in the wild, the human brain has evolved to place a high value on salt, sugar, and fat. Such foods are often calorie-dense and they were quite rare when our ancient ancestors were roaming the savannah.

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When it comes to habits, the key takeaway is this: dopamine is released not only when you experience pleasure, but also when you anticipate it.

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Temptation bundling is one way to make your habits more attractive. The strategy is to pair an action you want to do with an action you need to do.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1410

Humans are herd animals. We want to fit in, to bond with others, and to earn the respect and approval of our peers. Such inclinations are essential to our survival. For most of our evolutionary history, our ancestors lived in tribes. Becoming separated from the tribe—or worse, being cast out—was a death sentence.

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We imitate the habits of three groups in particular: The close. The many. The powerful.

Highlight (Yellow) and Note | Location 1475

Their agitation would grow as one person after another delivered the same incorrect response. Soon, the subject began to doubt their own eyes. Eventually, they delivered the answer they knew in their heart to be incorrect.

Given a line, pick the matching one

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1489

Most days, we'd rather be wrong with the crowd than be right by ourselves.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1511

The culture we live in determines which behaviors are attractive to us.

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One of the most effective things you can do to build better habits 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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1554

Find love and reproduce = using Tinder Connect and bond with others = browsing Facebook Win social acceptance and approval = posting on Instagram Reduce uncertainty = searching on Google Achieve status and prestige = playing video games

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there are many different ways to address the same underlying motive. One person might learn to reduce stress by smoking a cigarette. Another person learns to ease their anxiety by going for a run. Your current habits are not necessarily the best way to solve the problems you face; they are just the methods you learned to use.

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our behavior is heavily dependent on how we interpret the events that happen to us, not necessarily the objective reality of the events

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1599

I once heard a story about a man who uses a wheelchair. When asked if it was difficult being confined, he responded, "I'm not confined to my wheelchair—I am liberated by it. If it wasn't for my wheelchair, I would be bed-bound and never able to leave my house." This shift in perspective completely transformed how he lived each day.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1602

Reframing your habits to highlight their benefits rather than their drawbacks is a fast and lightweight way to reprogram your mind and make a habit seem more attractive.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1604

Instead of telling yourself "I need to go run in the morning," say "It's time to build endurance and get fast."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1681

When you're in motion, you're planning and strategizing and learning. Those are all good things, but they don't produce a result. Action, on the other hand, is the type of behavior that will deliver an outcome.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1698

The more you repeat an activity, the more the structure of your brain changes to become efficient at that activity. Neuroscientists call this long-term potentiation, which refers to the strengthening of connections between neurons in the brain based on recent patterns of activity. With each repetition, cell-to-cell signaling improves and the neural connections tighten. First described by neuropsychologist Donald Hebb in 1949, this phenomenon is commonly known as Hebb's Law: "Neurons that fire together wire together."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1702

Repeating a habit leads to clear physical changes in the brain. In musicians, the cerebellum—critical for physical movements like plucking a guitar string or pulling a violin bow—is larger than it is in nonmusicians. Mathematicians, meanwhile, have increased gray matter in the inferior parietal lobule, which plays a key role in computation and calculation.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1775

Energy is precious, and the brain is wired to conserve it whenever possible. It is human nature to follow the Law of Least Effort, which states that when deciding between two similar options, people will naturally gravitate toward the option that requires the least amount of work.

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"Japanese firms emphasized what came to be known as 'lean production,' relentlessly looking to remove waste of all kinds from the production process, down to redesigning workspaces, so workers didn't have to waste time twisting and turning to reach their tools. The result was that Japanese factories were more efficient and Japanese products were more reliable than American ones.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1845

Whenever you organize a space for its intended purpose, you are priming it to make the next action easy.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1852

Want to draw more? Put your pencils, pens, notebooks, and drawing tools on top of your desk, within easy reach. Want to exercise? Set out your workout clothes, shoes, gym bag, and water bottle ahead of time.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1855

These are simple ways to make the good habit the path of least resistance.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1875

Reduce the friction associated with good behaviors. When friction is low, habits are easy. Increase the friction associated with bad behaviors. When friction is high, habits are difficult. Prime your environment to make future actions easier.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1923

The idea is to make your habits as easy as possible to start. Anyone can meditate for one minute, read one page, or put one item of clothing away. And, as we have just discussed, this is a powerful strategy because once you've started doing the right thing, it is much easier to continue doing it.

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Your goal might be to run a marathon, but your gateway habit is to put on your running shoes.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1948

As you master the art of showing up, the first two minutes simply become a ritual at the beginning of a larger routine.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2000

Many habits occur at decisive moments—choices that are like a fork in the road—and either send you in the direction of a productive day or an unproductive one.

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Using technology to automate your habits is the most reliable and effective way to guarantee the right behavior.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2174

We are more likely to repeat a behavior when the experience is satisfying. This is entirely logical. Feelings of pleasure—even minor ones like washing your hands with soap that smells nice and lathers well—are signals that tell the brain: “This feels good. Do this again, next time.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2202

You live in what scientists call a delayed-return environment because you can work for years before your actions deliver the intended payoff. The human brain did not evolve for life in a delayed-return environment.

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the costs of your good habits are in the present. The costs of your bad habits are in the future.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2233

As a general rule, the more immediate pleasure you get from an action, the more strongly you should question whether it aligns with your long-term goals.*

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People who are better at delaying gratification have higher SAT scores, lower levels of substance abuse, lower likelihood of obesity, better responses to stress, and superior social skills.

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Eventually, as intrinsic rewards like a better mood, more energy, and reduced stress kick in, you'll become less concerned with chasing the secondary reward. The identity itself becomes the reinforcer. You do it because it's who you are and it feels good to be you.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2277

Incentives can start a habit. Identity sustains a habit.

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The first three laws of behavior change—make it obvious, make it attractive, and make it easy—increase the odds that a behavior will be performed this time. The fourth law of behavior change—make it satisfying—increases the odds that a behavior will be repeated next time.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2302

Making progress is satisfying, and visual measures—like moving paper clips or hairpins or marbles—provide clear evidence of your progress.

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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.

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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.

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Thomas Frank, an entrepreneur in Boulder, Colorado, wakes up at 5:55 each morning. And if he doesn't, he has a tweet automatically scheduled that says, "It's 6:10 and I'm not up because I'm lazy! Reply to this for \$5 via PayPal (limit 5), assuming my alarm didn't malfunction."

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An accountability partner can create an immediate cost to inaction.

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A habit contract can be used to add a social cost to any behavior.

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HOW TO CREATE A GOOD HABIT The 1st Law: Make It Obvious 1.1: Fill out the Habits Scorecard. Write down your current habits to become aware of them. 1.2: Use implementation intentions: "I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION]." 1.3: Use habit stacking: "After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT]." 1.4: Design your environment. Make the cues of good habits obvious and visible. The 2nd Law: Make It Attractive 2.1: Use temptation bundling. Pair an action you want to do with an action you need to do. 2.2: Join a culture where your desired behavior is the normal behavior. 2.3: Create a motivation ritual. Do something you enjoy immediately before a difficult habit. The 3rd Law: Make It Easy 3.1: Reduce friction. Decrease the number of steps between you and your good habits. 3.2: Prime the environment. Prepare your environment to make future actions easier. 3.3: Master the decisive moment. Optimize the small choices that deliver outsized impact. 3.4: Use the Two-Minute Rule. Downscale your habits until they can be done in two minutes or less. 3.5: Automate your habits. Invest in technology and onetime purchases that lock in future behavior. The 4th Law: Make It Satisfying 4.1: Use reinforcement. Give yourself an immediate reward when you complete your habit. 4.2: Make "doing nothing" enjoyable. When avoiding a bad habit, design a way to see the benefits. 4.3: Use a habit tracker. Keep track of your habit streak and "don't break the chain." 4.4: Never miss twice. When you forget to do a habit, make sure you get back on track immediately.

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HOW TO BREAK A BAD HABIT Inversion of the 1st Law: Make It Invisible 1.5: Reduce exposure. Remove the cues of your bad habits from your environment. Inversion of the 2nd Law: Make It Unattractive 2.4: Reframe your mind-set. Highlight the benefits of avoiding your bad habits. Inversion of the 3rd Law: Make It Difficult 3.6: Increase friction. Increase the number of steps between you and your bad habits. 3.7: Use a commitment device. Restrict your future choices to the ones that benefit you. Inversion of the 4th Law: Make It Unsatisfying 4.5: Get an accountability partner. Ask someone to watch your behavior. 4.6: Create a habit contract. Make the costs of your bad habits public and painful.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2573

In short: genes do not determine your destiny. They determine your areas of opportunity.

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“It is now at the point where we have stopped testing to see if traits have a genetic component because we literally can’t find a single one that isn’t influenced by our genes.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2634

Google famously asks employees to spend 80 percent of the workweek on their official job and 20 percent on projects of their choice, which has led to the creation of blockbuster products like AdWords and Gmail.

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Genes do not eliminate the need for hard work. They clarify it. They tell us what to work hard on.

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The Goldilocks Rule states that humans experience peak motivation when working on tasks that are right on the edge of their current abilities. Not too hard. Not too easy. Just right.

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A flow state is the experience of being “in the zone” and fully immersed in an activity. Scientists have tried to quantify this feeling. They found that to achieve a state of flow, a task must be roughly 4 percent beyond your current ability.

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The greatest threat to success is not failure but boredom.

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When a habit is truly important to you, you have to be willing to stick to it in any mood. Professionals take action even when the mood isn’t right. They might not enjoy it, but they find a way to put the reps in.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2795

Professionals stick to the schedule; amateurs let life get in the way.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2826

The process of mastery requires that you progressively layer improvements on top of one another, each habit building upon the last until a new level of performance has been reached and a higher range of skills has been internalized.

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One solution is to avoid making any single aspect of your identity an overwhelming portion of who you are. In the words of investor Paul Graham, “keep your identity small.” The more you let a single belief define you, the less capable you are of adapting when life challenges you.

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The upside of habits is that we can do things without thinking. The downside is that we stop paying attention to little errors.

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Success is not a goal to reach or a finish line to cross. It is a system to improve, an endless process to refine.

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Sometimes a habit will be hard to remember and you’ll need to make it obvious. Other times you won’t feel like starting and you’ll need to make it attractive. In many cases, you may find that a habit will be too difficult and you’ll need to make it easy. And sometimes, you won’t feel like sticking with it and you’ll need to make it satisfying.

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The secret to getting results that last is to never stop making improvements. It’s remarkable what you can build if you just don’t stop. It’s remarkable the business you can build if you don’t stop working. It’s remarkable the body you can build if you don’t stop training. It’s remarkable the knowledge you can build if you don’t stop learning. It’s remarkable the fortune you can build if you don’t stop saving. It’s remarkable the friendships you can build if you don’t stop caring. Small habits don’t add up. They compound.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3008

“Happiness is the space between one desire being fulfilled and a new desire forming.” Likewise, suffering is the space between craving a change in state and getting it.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3024

Every decision is an emotional decision at some level. Whatever your logical reasons are for taking action, you only feel compelled to act on them because of emotion.
