



# ATOMIC HABITS

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

JAMES CLEAR

**Tiny Changes,  
Remarkable  
Results**

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New York

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FIGURE 1: The effects of small habits compound over time. For example, if you can get just 1 percent better each day, you'll end up with results that are nearly 37 times better after one year.

Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement. The same way that money multiplies through compound interest, the effects of your habits multiply as you repeat them. They seem to make little difference on any given day and yet the impact they deliver over the months and years can be enormous. It is only when looking back two, five, or perhaps ten years later that the value of good habits and the cost of bad ones becomes strikingly apparent.

This can be a difficult concept to appreciate in daily life. We often dismiss small changes because they don't seem to matter very much in the moment. If you save a little money now, you're still not a millionaire. If you go to the gym three days in a row, you're still out of shape. If you study Mandarin for an hour tonight, you still haven't learned the language. We make a few changes, but the results never seem to come quickly and so we slide back into our previous routines.

Unfortunately, the slow pace of transformation also makes it easy to let a bad habit slide. If you eat an unhealthy meal today, the scale doesn't move much. If you work late tonight and ignore your family, they will forgive you. If you procrastinate and put your project off until tomorrow, there will usually be time to finish it later. A single decision is easy to dismiss.

But when we repeat 1 percent errors, day after day, by replicating poor decisions, duplicating tiny mistakes, and rationalizing little excuses, our small choices compound into toxic results. It's the accumulation of many missteps—a 1 percent decline here and there—that eventually leads to a problem.

The impact created by a change in your habits is similar to the effect of shifting the route of an airplane by just a few degrees. Imagine you are flying from Los Angeles to New York City. If a pilot leaving from LAX adjusts the heading just 3.5 degrees south, you will land in Washington, D.C., instead of New York. Such a small change is barely noticeable at takeoff—the nose of the airplane moves just a few feet—but when

of your identity. Anyone can convince themselves to visit the gym or eat healthy once or twice, but if you don't shift the belief behind the behavior, then it is hard to stick with long-term changes. Improvements are only temporary until they become part of who you are.

- The goal is not to read a book, the goal is to *become* a reader.
- The goal is not to run a marathon, the goal is to *become* a runner.
- The goal is not to learn an instrument, the goal is to *become* a musician.

Your behaviors are usually a reflection of your identity. What you do is an indication of the type of person you believe that you are—either consciously or nonconsciously. \* Research has shown that once a person believes in a particular aspect of their identity, they are more likely to act in alignment with that belief. For example, people who identified as “being a voter” were more likely to vote than those who simply claimed “voting” was an action they wanted to perform. Similarly, the person who incorporates exercise into their identity doesn't have to convince themselves to train. Doing the right thing is easy. After all, when your behavior and your identity are fully aligned, you are no longer pursuing behavior change. You are simply acting like the type of person you already believe yourself to be.

Like all aspects of habit formation, this, too, is a double-edged sword. When working for you, identity change can be a powerful force for self-improvement. When working against you, though, identity change can be a curse. Once you have adopted an identity, it can be easy to let your allegiance to it impact your ability to change. Many people walk through life in a cognitive slumber, blindly following the norms attached to their identity.

- “I'm terrible with directions.”
- “I'm not a morning person.”
- “I'm bad at remembering people's names.”
- “I'm always late.”

**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.

We can invert these laws to learn how to break a bad habit.

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.

It would be irresponsible for me to claim that these four laws are an exhaustive framework for changing *any* human behavior, but I think they're close. As you will soon see, the Four Laws of Behavior Change apply to nearly every field, from sports to politics, art to medicine, comedy to management. These laws can be used no matter what challenge you are facing. There is no need for completely different strategies for each habit.

Whenever you want to change your behavior, you can simply ask yourself:

1. How can I make it obvious?
2. How can I make it attractive?
3. How can I make it easy?
4. How can I make it satisfying?

If you have ever wondered, “Why don’t I do what I say I’m going to do? Why don’t I lose the weight or stop smoking or save for retirement or start

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

## 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.

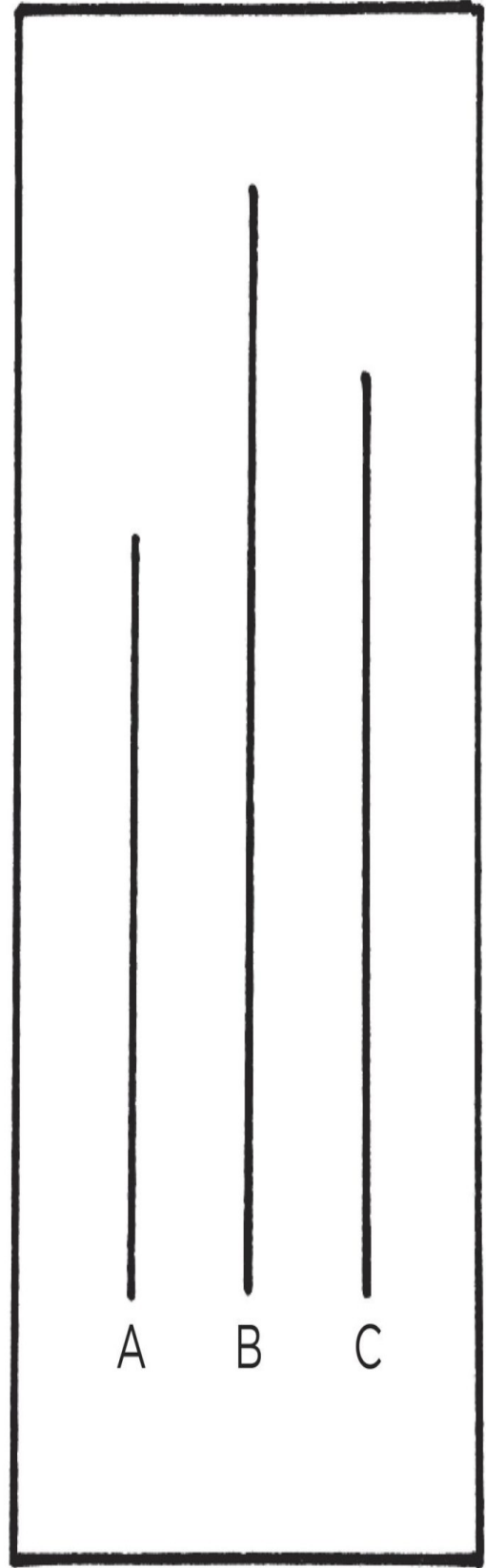
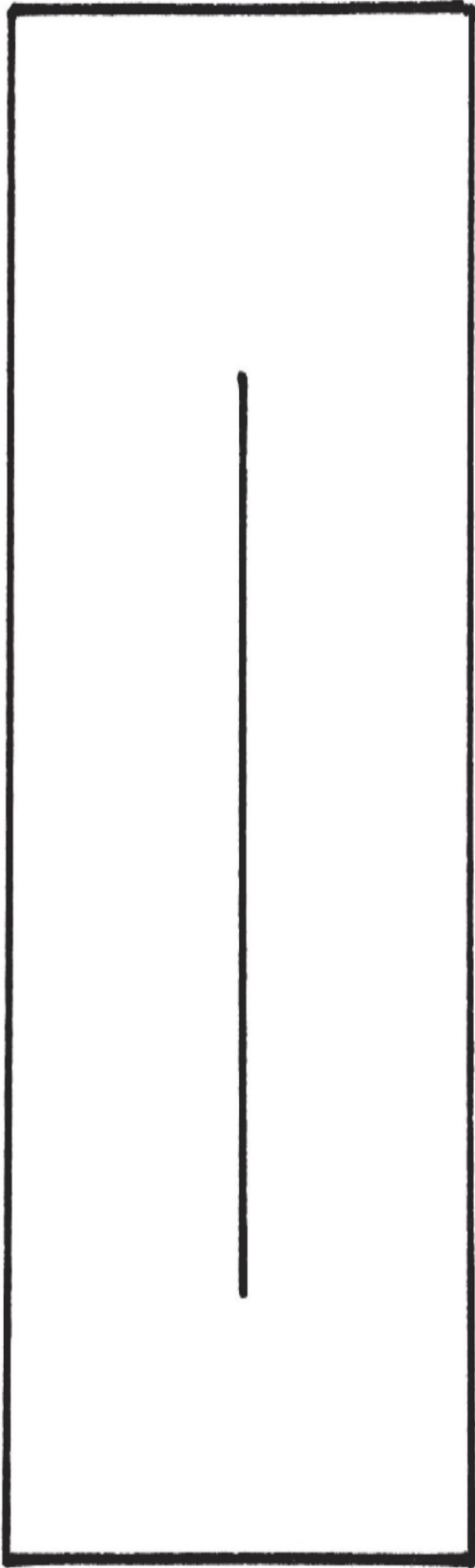
Inversion of the 2nd Law: Make It Unattractive

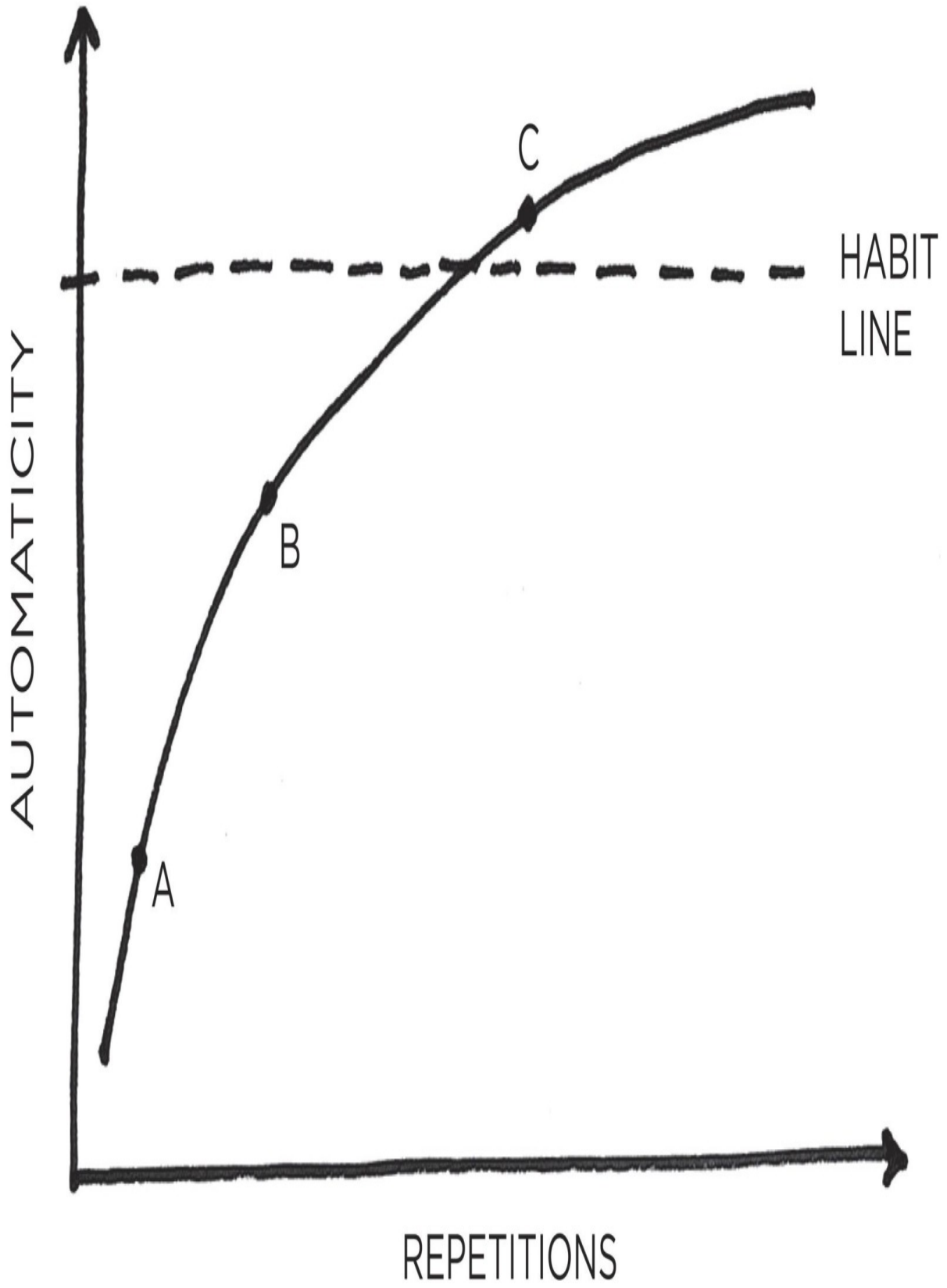
Inversion of the 3rd Law: Make It Difficult

Inversion of the 4th Law: Make It Unsatisfying

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basic skill of showing up, then you have little hope of mastering the finer details. Instead of trying to engineer a perfect habit from the start, do the easy thing on a more consistent basis. You have to standardize before you can optimize.

As you master the art of showing up, the first two minutes simply become a ritual at the beginning of a larger routine. This is not merely a hack to make habits easier but actually the ideal way to master a difficult skill. The more you ritualize the beginning of a process, the more likely it becomes that you can slip into the state of deep focus that is required to do great things. By doing the same warm-up before every workout, you make it easier to get into a state of peak performance. By following the same creative ritual, you make it easier to get into the hard work of creating. By developing a consistent power-down habit, you make it easier to get to bed at a reasonable time each night. You may not be able to automate the whole process, but you can make the first action mindless. Make it easy to start and the rest will follow.

The Two-Minute Rule can seem like a trick to some people. You know that the *real* goal is to do more than just two minutes, so it may feel like you're trying to fool yourself. Nobody is actually aspiring to read one page or do one push-up or open their notes. And if you know it's a mental trick, why would you fall for it?

If the Two-Minute Rule feels forced, try this: do it for two minutes and then stop. Go for a run, but you *must* stop after two minutes. Start meditating, but you *must* stop after two minutes. Study Arabic, but you *must* stop after two minutes. It's not a strategy for starting, it's the whole thing. Your habit can *only* last one hundred and twenty seconds.

One of my readers used this strategy to lose over one hundred pounds. In the beginning, he went to the gym each day, but he told himself he wasn't allowed to stay for more than five minutes. He would go to the gym, exercise for five minutes, and leave as soon as his time was up. After a few weeks, he looked around and thought, "Well, I'm always coming here anyway. I might as well start staying a little longer." A few years later, the weight was gone.

age of the brain, modern society is brand-new. In the last one hundred years, we have seen the rise of the car, the airplane, the television, the personal computer, the internet, the smartphone, and Beyoncé. The world has changed much in recent years, but human nature has changed little.

Similar to other animals on the African savannah, our ancestors spent their days responding to grave threats, securing the next meal, and taking shelter from a storm. It made sense to place a high value on instant gratification. The distant future was less of a concern. And after thousands of generations in an immediate-return environment, our brains evolved to prefer quick payoffs to long-term ones.

Behavioral economists refer to this tendency as *time inconsistency*. That is, the way your brain evaluates rewards is inconsistent across time. \* You value the present more than the future. Usually, this tendency serves us well. A reward that is *certain* right now is typically worth more than one that is merely *possible* in the future. But occasionally, our bias toward instant gratification causes problems.

Why would someone smoke if they know it increases the risk of lung cancer? Why would someone overeat when they know it increases their risk of obesity? Why would someone have unsafe sex if they know it can result in sexually transmitted disease? Once you understand how the brain prioritizes rewards, the answers become clear: the consequences of bad habits are delayed while the rewards are immediate. Smoking might kill you in ten years, but it reduces stress and eases your nicotine cravings *now*. Overeating is harmful in the long run but appetizing in the moment. Sex—safe or not—provides pleasure right away. Disease and infection won't show up for days or weeks, even years.

Every habit produces multiple outcomes across time. Unfortunately, these outcomes are often misaligned. With our bad habits, the immediate outcome usually feels good, but the ultimate outcome feels bad. With good habits, it is the reverse: the immediate outcome is unenjoyable, but the ultimate outcome feels good. The French economist Frédéric Bastiat explained the problem clearly when he wrote, “It almost always happens that when the immediate consequence is favorable, the later consequences are disastrous,

# Chapter Summary

- The inversion of the 4th Law of Behavior Change is *make it unsatisfying*.
- We are less likely to repeat a bad habit if it is painful or unsatisfying.
- An accountability partner can create an immediate cost to inaction. We care deeply about what others think of us, and we do not want others to have a lesser opinion of us.
- A habit contract can be used to add a social cost to any behavior. It makes the costs of violating your promises public and painful.
- Knowing that someone else is watching you can be a powerful motivator.

## 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

After my baseball career ended, I was looking for a new sport. I joined a weightlifting team and one day an elite coach visited our gym. He had worked with thousands of athletes during his long career, including a few Olympians. I introduced myself and we began talking about the process of improvement.

“What’s the difference between the best athletes and everyone else?” I asked. “What do the really successful people do that most don’t?”

He mentioned the factors you might expect: genetics, luck, talent. But then he said something I wasn’t expecting: “At some point it comes down to who can handle the boredom of training every day, doing the same lifts over and over and over.”

His answer surprised me because it’s a different way of thinking about work ethic. People talk about getting “amped up” to work on their goals. Whether it’s business or sports or art, you hear people say things like, “It all comes down to passion.” Or, “You have to really want it.” As a result, many of us get depressed when we lose focus or motivation because we think that successful people have some bottomless reserve of passion. But this coach was saying that really successful people *feel* the same lack of motivation as everyone else. The difference is that they still find a way to show up despite the feelings of boredom.

Mastery requires practice. But the more you practice something, the more boring and routine it becomes. Once the beginner gains have been made and we learn what to expect, our interest starts to fade. Sometimes it happens even faster than that. All you have to do is hit the gym a few days in a row or publish a couple of blog posts on time and letting one day slip doesn’t feel like much. Things are going well. It’s easy to rationalize taking a day off because you’re in a good place.

The greatest threat to success is not failure but boredom. We get bored with habits because they stop delighting us. The outcome becomes expected. And as our habits become ordinary, we start derailing our progress to seek novelty. Perhaps this is why we get caught up in a never-ending cycle, jumping from one workout to the next, one diet to the next, one business idea to the next. As soon as we experience the slightest dip in motivation, we

# Appendix

## CHAPTER 2

**You can imagine them like the layers of an onion** : Hat tip to Simon Sinek. His “Golden Circle” framework is similar in design, but discusses different topics. For more, see Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (London: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013), 37.

**I resolved to stop chewing my nails** : The quotes used in this section are presented as a conversation for reading clarity, but were originally written by Clark. See: Brian Clark, “The Powerful Psychological Boost that Helps You Make and Break Habits,” Further, November 14, 2017, <https://further.net/pride-habits> .

**Research has shown that once a person** : Christopher J. Bryan et al., “Motivating Voter Turnout by Invoking the Self,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 31 (2011): 12653–12656.

**There is internal pressure** : Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

**Your identity is literally your “repeated beingness”** : Technically, *identidem* is a word belonging to the Late Latin language. Also, thanks to Tamar Shippony, a reader of jamesclear.com, who originally told me about the etymology of the word *identity* , which she looked up in the American Heritage Dictionary.

**We change bit by bit** : This is another reason atomic habits are such an effective form of change. If you change your identity too quickly and become someone radically different overnight, then you feel as if you lose your sense of self. But if you update and expand your identity gradually, you will find yourself reborn into someone totally new and yet still familiar. Slowly—habit by habit, vote by vote—you become accustomed to your new identity. Atomic habits and gradual improvement are the keys to identity change without identity loss.



**In musicians, the cerebellum** : S. Hutchinson, “Cerebellar Volume of Musicians,” *Cerebral Cortex* 13, no. 9 (2003), doi:10.1093/cercor/13.9.943.

**Mathematicians, meanwhile, have increased gray matter** : A. Verma, “Increased Gray Matter Density in the Parietal Cortex of Mathematicians: A Voxel-Based Morphometry Study,” *Yearbook of Neurology and Neurosurgery* 2008 (2008), doi:10.1016/s0513-5117(08)79083-5.

**When scientists analyzed the brains of taxi drivers in London** : Eleanor A. Maguire et al., “Navigation-Related Structural Change in the Hippocampi of Taxi Drivers,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 97, no. 8 (2000), doi:10.1073/pnas.070039597; Katherine Woollett and Eleanor A. Maguire, “Acquiring ‘the Knowledge’ of London’s Layout Drives Structural Brain Changes,” *Current Biology* 21, no. 24 (December 2011), doi:10.1016/j.cub.2011.11.018; Eleanor A. Maguire, Katherine Woollett, and Hugo J. Spiers, “London Taxi Drivers and Bus Drivers: A Structural MRI and Neuropsychological Analysis,” *Hippocampus* 16, no. 12 (2006), doi:10.1002/hipo.20233.

**“the actions become so automatic”** : George Henry Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1860).

**repetition is a form of change** : Apparently, Brian Eno says the same thing in his excellent, creatively inspiring Oblique Strategies card set, which I didn’t know when I wrote this line! Great minds and all that.

**Automaticity is the ability to perform a behavior** : Phillippa Lally et al., “How Are Habits Formed: Modelling Habit Formation in the Real World,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, no. 6 (2009), doi:10.1002/ejsp.674.

**habits form based on frequency, not time** : Hermann Ebbinghaus was the first person to describe learning curves in his 1885 book *Über das Gedächtnis* . Hermann Ebbinghaus, *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology* (United States: Scholar Select, 2016).

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\* I'm so happy I was able to fit a *Game of Thrones* reference into this book.