

How to Form New Habits That Matter

'We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.'

[Darius Foroux](#)





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Nobody is fundamentally excellent or mediocre. Where you are in your life is a result of your habits. The historian and philosopher Will Durant said it best:

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

That's also true for the opposite of excellence. Mediocrity is a result of mediocre habits. The good news is that we can go from mediocrity to excellence — by changing our habits.

But how do you do that? Before we get into that, I want to clarify my statement: Habits change your life, but they do not guarantee success. That's what "the habits of millionaires" type of articles and books tell us. We get it, Elon Musk sleeps two hours a day and eats Cheerios for dinner — or something like that.

But what those articles don't mention is that correlation isn't causation. Waking up early, working hard, and taking cold showers do not cause

success. Those habits can often be found in successful people.

Only you can decide what a good habit is — for you.

So when I talk about habits, I don't talk about outcomes. I talk about changing our actual behavior so that it improves the quality of our lives. Now that we've got that out of the way, here's my four-step process for making life-changing habits stick.

Step 1: Decide which habits are worth it for you

Look, I can talk to you about the habits that have changed my life all day long, but that's not helpful. Only you can decide what a good habit is — for you.

Too often we hear about something, and we think: "I should do that!" Really? Should I wake up an hour earlier? Should I take cold showers? Should I eat like a cave person? Should I run every day?

Maybe waking up early is actually helpful to you. I don't know. When I wake up early, I behave like a grumpy old man who hates people — that reduces the quality of my life (and that of those around me). So, I don't wake up very early, no matter how many people tell me it will make me successful.

Before trying to adopt a new habit, ask yourself this: "Will doing this improve the quality of my life?" For a new habit to stick, we need a reason to change. And it can't just be a superficial reason.

"I want to read one book a week," you might say. Why? So you can do what? Is it just for bragging rights, or is there a vision or goal?

I read two books a week because I'm a teacher/trainer. I need to learn every single day so I can do my job better. I do strength training because I do many chores around my house and the office. I want to make and fix

things. I need to be in good shape to lift heavy things or do strenuous tasks.

That's my why. What's yours? Answer that. And then, adopt habits that bring you closer to the things you want in life.

Step 2: Form one habit at a time

A while back, I wrote about how [I successfully formed a daily exercise habit](#). It was something I had tried to do for years. There were many reasons I failed, and one of them was that I always tried to form a million habits at the same time.

I don't know why, but sometimes I get on this whole self-improvement spree. I feel like reading more, writing more, working more, living better, eating healthier — you name it.

If you're the same, you probably know this doesn't work very well. Usually, when you do too many things at the same time, you end up with chaos. Then you end up right back where you started. Sound familiar?

One of the reasons we try to do so many things at the same time is that we overestimate ourselves. We think we can achieve a lot in a short period. That's the so-called [planning fallacy](#), and it's a common delusion.

But if you choose one habit and truly commit to it, you can achieve a lot over a long period.

Step 3: Set the bar very low

We often want to do big things, without understanding what's involved in making them happen. Starting a business or building a career requires effort. In fact, everything in life that's remotely valuable requires a lot of work to achieve.

So before we do something big, let's start small. Leo Tolstoy put it well:

"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."

Focus on small steps. Build a strong foundation. Without that foundation, we can never achieve anything meaningful.

- Want to run daily? Start by walking.
- Want to write a book? Write one sentence.
- Want to start a business? Get one client.
- Want to read two books a week? Read a page a day.
- Want to save for your retirement? Don't buy that shirt that you'll probably just wear once.

Step 4: Use checklists

You want to do something. You do it for a while. And then you forget about it. It just happens, right? Well, don't let yourself off the hook like that.

I forget everything. A few years ago, [I started a daily reading habit](#). I messed up very often in the beginning. I would read for five or six days straight, and then all of a sudden, I would completely forget about it. The desire for reading more just vanished from my head.

Checklists are the best way to remind ourselves of what we're trying to achieve. Check off your habits daily. One day, you'll look back and be surprised by how much your life has changed.