

Atomic Habits - James Clear

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INTRODUCTION

What's in it for me? Learn how small habits can have a big impact on your life.

What positive change would you like to make in your life? Maybe you want to eat healthier. Maybe you want to read more books, learn a new language, or master the clarinet. Whatever changes you'd like to make, actually making them and sticking to them is easier said than done. Just wanting to eat more salad doesn't actually mean you will. Simply saying you'll read more books doesn't mean you'll pick up War and Peace instead of binging Netflix.

But that's where habits come in.

In these blinks, I'm going to take you through the key ideas from James Clear's best seller Atomic Habits.

Together, we're going to discover that the key to making big changes in your life doesn't have to involve major upheaval; you don't need to revolutionize your behavior or reinvent yourself. Rather, you can make tiny changes to your behavior, which, when repeated time and time again, will become habits that can lead to big results.

KEY IDEA 1

Small habits can have a surprisingly powerful impact on your life.

To kick things off, I want you to imagine a plane preparing to take off from Los Angeles. The plane's destination is New York City. The pilot enters all the correct information into the plane's computer, and the plane takes off heading in the right direction. But now imagine that, not long after takeoff, the pilot accidentally changes the flight path slightly. He only changes it by 3.5 degrees – which is nearly nothing, just a few feet. The plane's nose shifts slightly to one side, and no one – not the pilot, not the passengers – notices anything.

But over the journey across the United States, the impact of this slight change would be considerable. At the end of their journey, the confused passengers – and even more confused pilot – would find themselves landing in Washington DC, not New York City.

So, why am I telling you this?

It's because – just like the confused pilot – we don't notice tiny changes in our lives. Small changes leave a negligible immediate impact. If you are out of shape today, and go for a 20-minute jog, you'll still be out of shape tomorrow. If you eat a family-size pizza for dinner, it won't make you overweight overnight.

But if we repeat these small behaviors day after day, our choices compound into major results. Eat pizza every day, and you will likely have gained considerable weight after a year. Go jogging for 20 minutes every day, and you'll eventually be leaner and fitter, even though you won't notice the change happening.

You've probably worked out the main insight here: it's that small habits can have a surprisingly powerful impact on your life – and you won't necessarily see this impact happening in real-time. You'll only see the results of your habits after a while.

Now, we know that not seeing the impact of your efforts can be dispiriting. If this is happening to you – if you're feeling discouraged by the lack of immediate positive change – then it's important to try to focus on your current trajectory rather than your current results.

Let's say you have little money in the bank. But you are saving something each month. Your current results might not be that great – your nest egg is still pretty small. But you can be confident that your trajectory is right. Keep going in this direction and, in a few months or a few years, you will notice a major improvement. When the lack of perceived progress gets you down, remember that you're doing the right things and that you're moving in the right direction. But how do you get yourself on the right trajectory? You need to develop habits. In the next blink, we'll learn how they are built.

KEY IDEA 2

Habits are automated behaviors that we've learned from experience.

When you walk into a dark room, you don't think about what to do next; you instinctively reach for a light switch. Reaching for a light switch is a habit – it's a behavior that you've repeated so many times that it now happens automatically.

Habits like this dominate our lives, from brushing our teeth to driving our car. They are immensely powerful.

But how are they formed?

In the nineteenth century, a psychologist named Edward Thorndike tried to answer this question. First, he placed some cats inside a black box. Then, he timed how long it took them to escape. To start with, each cat behaved exactly as you'd expect when placed inside a box. It desperately looked for a way of escape. It sniffed and pawed at the corners; it clawed at the walls. Eventually, the cat would find a lever that, when pressed, would open a door, enabling it to escape.

Thorndike then took the cats that'd successfully escaped and repeated the experiment: he placed them back inside the box. And what did he find? After being put in the box a few times, each cat learned the trick. Rather than scrambling around for a minute or more, the cats went straight for the lever. After 20 or 30 attempts, the average cat could escape in just six seconds.

In other words, the process of getting out of the box had become habitual for the cats.

With his experiment, Thorndike had discovered something important: behaviors that give satisfying consequences – in this case, gaining freedom – tend to be repeated until they become automatic.

We've learned a lot more about habits in the decades after Thorndike's experiment. We now know that habits are made up of four distinct elements.

First, there's the cue, or a trigger to act. Walking into a dark room cues you to perform an action that will allow you to see. Then comes a craving for a change in state – in this case, from darkness to light. Then comes a response, or action – flicking the light switch. The final step in the process, and the end goal of every habit, is the reward. In this case, it's the feeling of mild relief and comfort that comes from being able to see your surroundings.

Every habit follows the same process. Do you drink coffee every morning? Waking up is your cue, triggering a craving to feel alert. Your response is to drag yourself out of bed and make a cup of joe.

Your reward is feeling wide awake and ready to face the world. OK, now that you have an idea of how habits work, let's look at how you can develop good habits that can change your life for the better.

KEY IDEA 3

Building new habits requires hard-to-miss cues and a plan of action.

So, we have just discovered how habits are formed. Let's briefly recap. A habit consists of four things: a cue – a trigger that gets you to act; a craving – a desire you want to achieve; a response – the action of the habit itself; and a reward – the positive feeling you get from completing the habit.

Once you know how they work, you can start to hack the habit-forming process to get good, productive habits to stick.

Let's say you're desperate to learn the guitar. You've got your instrument, you've picked up the basics, but you struggle to keep up with practice. Each morning, you tell yourself that you'll play later on, but the end of the day soon comes, and you haven't picked up your guitar once.

But now that you know the secrets to building a habit, you can use it to your advantage. In this case, you want to make the cue to pick up your guitar impossible to miss. Instead of keeping your instrument in the cupboard or in the corner of your spare room, leave it right in the middle of your living room – in full view. Make your cue visible and unmissable; this will make it easier to turn your desire to practice into a habit.

Changing your environment to put your cues front and center will help, but if you want to perfect your triggers even more, you can use what's known as implementation intentions. So what are these?

When it comes to setting good habits, most of us tend to be too vague about our intentions. We say, "I'm going to eat better," or "I'm going to learn guitar." And we simply hope that we'll follow through.

An implementation intention can help us move beyond the vague intention. Implementation intentions introduce a clear plan of action; they help you set out when and where you'll carry out the habit you'd like to cultivate.

OK, let's return to our guitar example. Instead of telling yourself that "you're going to practice guitar sometime this week," tell yourself, "On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, when the alarm goes off, the first thing I'll do is pick up my guitar and practice for one hour." And don't forget to leave your guitar in the middle of the room.

By creating an implementation intention, you'll give yourself both a clear plan and an obvious clue, and it may surprise you how much easier it will be to build a positive habit.

Let's take a little pause in our exploration here.

So you might be wondering, this all sounds quite plausible, but does it really work? Can I actually tweak my environment and make it easy to form positive habits? Sounds good on paper, right? But in practice?

To answer the question, let's look at the work of Anne Thorndike, a doctor based in Boston, and in case you're wondering, she isn't related to the cat lover, Edward Thorndike. Dr. Anne Thorndike faced a problem most health professionals face: she wanted to help her patients improve their diets and their snacking habits. But she also knew that making a conscious decision to eat healthier can be hard. It takes a lot of willpower and discipline – and not all of us have endless supplies of willpower and discipline.

So, Anne Thorndike and her colleagues designed a test. As part of the experiment, she had the hospital cafeteria rearranged. The soda in the refrigerators next to the cash registers was replaced with bottled water, and baskets of bottled water were placed all around the cafeteria. Dr. Thorndike and the team then watched to see what would happen.

And what do you think happened? Well, over three months, soda sales fell by 11 percent, and water sales shot up by over 25 percent. Simply by creating more cues for people to drink water, Dr. Thorndike and her team were able to get people to make the healthier choice.

In other words, they were able to help people build better habits, without forcing them to make a conscious decision to do so. Clear evidence that altering your environment can help you adopt better habits.

KEY IDEA 4

Humans are motivated by the anticipation of reward, so making habits attractive will help you stick to them.

We're now about halfway through our exploration of Atomic Habits. We've looked at how powerful habits are, how they are made, and how you can use habit cues to your advantage.

Now, it's time to talk about the rewards side of habit building.

In 1954, neuroscientists James Olds and Peter Milner ran an experiment to look into the neuroscience behind desire. Using electrodes, they blocked the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine in some rats. The results were surprising; the lab rats simply lost the will to live. Without dopamine, they had no desire to eat, drink, reproduce or do anything else. Just a few days later, they all died of thirst.

This rather disturbing story tells us one thing: dopamine is a crucial motivator. When we do something beneficial for our survival – eating, drinking, having sex – dopamine is released, and we feel good. This feeling of pleasure motivates us to do the beneficial action again and again.

So far, so clear. But what does this have to do with habit-building?

Well, we don't actually have to do the pleasurable activity to get the hit of dopamine. The mere anticipation of doing something pleasurable is enough to get the dopamine flowing. In the brain's reward system, desiring something is on par with getting something!

We can turn this to our advantage. When building our new habit, if we make it something we look forward to, we'll be much more likely to follow through and actually do it.

Here's where I'd like to introduce you to the concept of temptation bundling. Temptation bundling is where you take a behavior that you think of as important but unappealing and link it to a behavior that you're drawn to. This is how you can use dopamine to your advantage when building a new habit.

Consider the story of Ronan Byrne, an engineering student from Ireland. Ronan knew he should exercise more, but he got little enjoyment from working out. However, he did enjoy watching Netflix. So Ronan hacked an exercise bike. He connected the bike to his laptop and wrote some code that only allowed Netflix to run if he was cycling at a certain speed. By linking exercise to a behavior that he was naturally drawn to, he transformed a distasteful activity into a pleasurable one.

You don't have to engineer a complex Netflix/exercise bike contraption to apply this to your own life. There are easier ways to do this. For example, if you need to work out, but you want to catch up on the latest A-list gossip, you could commit to only reading magazines while at the gym. Or if you want to watch sports, but you need to make sales calls, promise yourself a half-hour of ESPN after you talk to your tenth prospect. Just find a way of making those unattractive but important tasks enjoyable, and you'll be surfing a wave of dopamine, and creating positive habits, at the same time.

KEY IDEA 5

If you want to build a new habit, make that habit as easy to adopt as possible.

Making a habit pleasurable is a surefire way to make it stick. Another way we can hack the habit-building process is to make it easy.

Easy behaviors dominate our lives. We scroll through social media or munch through a bag of potato chips because these are easy things to do. On the other hand, doing a hundred push-ups or studying Mandarin are both pretty tough and take a lot of effort. This is why we don't find ourselves drawn to intensive exercise or language learning in our spare time.

By making our desired behaviors as easy as possible, we stand the best chance of turning them into a habit. And the good news is, there are various ways we can make this happen.

The first way is by reducing friction. Here's what it means.

James Clear has always been hopeless at sending greeting cards. His wife, though, never misses an occasion to send a card. And there's a clear reason for this. She keeps a box of greeting cards at home, presorted by occasion. This little bit of preparation makes it easier to send congratulations or condolences or whatever is called for. She doesn't have to go out and buy a card when someone gets married or gets a new job, and this reduces the friction involved in sending one.

Friction is a two-way process. You can reduce friction to turn a beneficial behavior into a habit, but you can also increase friction if you want to kill a bad habit.

So, if you want to waste less time in front of the TV, unplug it and take the batteries out of the remote. This will introduce enough friction to ensure you only watch when you really want to.

So that's friction. The second trick for making a habit easier in the long term is what's known as the two-minute rule. This is a way to make any new activity feel manageable. The principle is that any behavior can be distilled into a habit that is doable within two minutes. So, if you want to read more, don't commit to reading one book every week. Instead, make a habit of reading two pages per night.

Or, if you want to run a marathon, commit to simply putting on your running gear every day after work.

The two-minute rule is a way to build easily achievable habits – small accomplishments that can lead you to greater things. Once you've pulled on your running shoes, you'll probably head out for a run. Once you've read two pages, you'll likely continue. Simply getting started is the first and most important step toward doing something.

KEY IDEA 6

Making your habits immediately satisfying is essential to effective behavior change.

We're getting closer to the end now. But before we're done, let's talk about the final rule for using habits to improve your life. And to do this, we need a story. It's the story of a very successful public-health researcher named Stephen Luby.

Back in the 1990s, Luby was working in a neighborhood of Karachi, Pakistan – and was excellent at his job. He reduced diarrhea among the local children by a huge 52-percent. He also cut pneumonia rates by 48 percent and the rate of skin infection by 35 percent.

So what was his secret?

Nice soap. Yes, that's right, Luby's huge public health achievements were the result of nice soap.

Luby knew that handwashing and basic sanitation were essential to reducing illness. The locals understood this, too. But they just weren't turning their knowledge into a habit. Everything changed when Luby worked with Proctor and Gamble to introduce a premium soap into the neighborhood for free. Overnight, handwashing became a satisfying experience. The new soap lathered easily and smelled delightful. Suddenly, everyone was washing their hands because it was now a pleasing activity.

Stephen Luby's story illustrates the final and most important rule for behavioral change: habits need to be satisfying.

Making good behaviors satisfying can be difficult. This is due to human evolution. Today, we live in what is known as a delayed-return environment. You turn up at the office today, but the return – a paycheck – doesn't come until the end of the month. You go to the gym in the morning, but you don't lose weight overnight.

Unfortunately, our brains evolved to cope with an immediate-return environment. Our distant ancestors weren't thinking about long-term returns like saving for retirement or sticking to a diet. They were focused on immediate concerns like finding their next meal, seeking shelter, and staying alert enough to escape any nearby saber-toothed tigers.

This focus on immediate returns can encourage bad habits. Smoking may give you lung cancer in 20 years, but, in the moment, it relieves your stress and the craving for nicotine. The immediate hit from your cigarette will likely override the long-term costs to your health.

All this means is that when pursuing habits with a delayed return, you need to try to attach some immediate gratification to them.

I can explain this best by using the experiences of a couple the author knows. This couple wanted to eat out less, cook more, get healthier and save money. These are goals with delayed returns. To give their objectives a little immediate-return kick, they opened a savings account called "Trip to Europe." Every time they avoided a meal out, they transferred \$50 to the account. The short-term satisfaction of seeing \$50 land in that savings account provided the immediate gratification they needed to keep them on track for the ultimate, longer-term reward.

KEY IDEA 7

Create a framework to keep your habits on track, using trackers and contracts.

OK, so we've learned how to build great habits. But no matter how pleasurable and satisfying we make our habits, we may still fail to maintain them. So in this final blink, let's take a look at how we can stick to our good intentions.

One simple trick for making new habits stick is called habit tracking.

Throughout history, many people have succeeded by keeping a record of their habits. One of the most well-known is Benjamin Franklin. From the age of 20, Franklin kept a notebook where he recorded adherence to 13 personal virtues. These virtues included aims like avoiding frivolous conversation and to always be doing something useful. Each night, Franklin would record his progress in each area.

You can follow Franklin's habit-tracking lead by using a simple calendar or diary, and crossing off every day that you stick with your chosen behaviors. You'll find it effective – habit tracking is itself an attractive and satisfying habit. The anticipation and action of crossing off each day will feel good and keep you motivated.

The next thing I recommend you do is to develop a habit contract that imposes negative consequences if you fail to stay on track.

Bryan Harris is an entrepreneur from Nashville, and he took his habit contract very seriously. In a contract signed by him, his wife, and his personal trainer, he committed to get his weight down to 200 pounds. He identified specific habits that would help get him there. These included tracking his food intake each day and weighing himself each week. He then set up penalties for not doing those things. If he failed to track food intake, he would have to pay \$100 to his trainer; if he failed to weigh himself, he would owe \$500 to his wife.

The strategy worked, driven not just by his fear of losing money but by his fear of losing face in front of two people who mattered to him. Humans are, after all, social animals. We care about the opinions of those around us – simply knowing that someone is watching you can be a powerful motivator for success.

So why not set yourself a habit contract? Even if it isn't as detailed as Bryan Harris's, consider making a commitment to your partner, your best friend, or one of your coworkers. If you agree upon a set of consequences for failing to follow through, you'll be much more likely to stick to your habits. And as we've seen, sticking to a positive habit, however small, is a surefire way to achieve big things in life.

Final summary

So, we've reached the end of the blinks. Here's what we've learned.

A tiny change in your behavior will not transform your life overnight. But turn that behavior into a habit that you perform every day, and it absolutely can lead to big changes. Changing your life is not about making big breakthroughs or revolutionizing everything you do. Rather, it's about building a positive system of habits that, when combined, deliver remarkable results.

And, I'd like to leave you with one final piece of advice: Use habit stacking to introduce new behaviors.

If you want to build a new habit, you could try stacking it on top of an existing habit. Let's say you want to start meditating, but you're struggling to find the time. Try thinking about those things you do effortlessly each day, like drinking coffee in the morning. Then just stack the new habit on top. Commit to meditating each morning when you've finished your coffee, and build on the natural momentum that comes from a habit you already have.