

Atomic Habits

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The Fundamentals

Chapter 1 - The Surprising Power of Atomic Habits

Cue > Craving > Response > Reward

Desire is the engine that drives behavior. Every action is taken because of the anticipation that precedes it. It is this craving > anticipation that leads to our response. That response, more often than not, is embedded in a subconscious habit.... by design.

The aggregation of marginal gains. ([David Brailsford](#), Team Sky, 2012 TDF)

- > 1% better every day, compound inertia
- > success is the product of daily habits, not once-in-a-lifetime transformations
- > progress is rarely linear - mastery requires patience
- > proper daily habits are tiny seeds that plant trees that grow into a new life

GOALS are about end results. SYSTEMS are processes that lead to those results.

- > Goals = direction
- > Systems = the motion, the progress

Problems with Goal-Centered Thinking

1. Winners and losers have the same goals. The goal does not differentiate them.
2. Achieving a goal only results in momentary change. Solve at the systems level.
3. Goals restrict happiness. You must fall in love with the PROCESS and the journey, not the PRODUCT.
4. Goals are at odds with life-long progress/learning/contentment. Life-long process improvement is a cycle of endless refinement and continuous improvement. Ultimately, it is your commitment to the process that will determine your progress.

You do not RISE to the level of your goals. You FALL to the level of your systems.

Chapter 2 - How Your Habits Shape Your Identity (and Vice Versa)

There are 3 layers of change focusing:

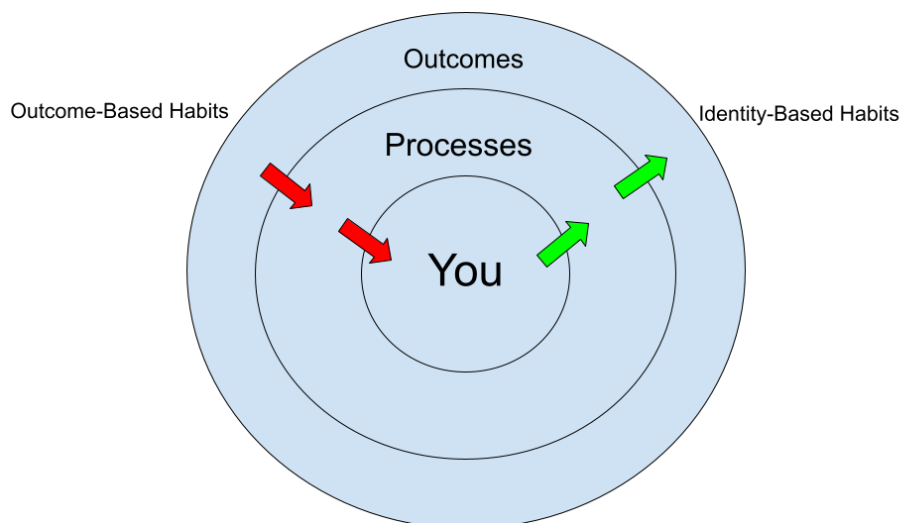
1. Changing your outcomes
2. Changing your processes
3. Changing your identity

With **outcome-based** habits, the focus is on what you want to achieve. **With identity-based** habits, the focus is on who you wish to become. True change derives with changing from the inside out - not outside in.

It is one thing to say I'm the type of person who **WANTS** this. It is something quite different to say I'm the type of person who **IS** this. You must become an **EXERCISER** - not someone who simply exercises. You must become a person who eats healthy, nutrient-dense foods - not someone who is on a **DIET**.

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.

True behavior change is **IDENTITY** change.



Identity - Who are you? What do you believe? What do you want? What is your plan?

Processes - What you do, your habits, your Process Week.

Outcomes - What you get via the summation of your processes.

Identity Conflict

The biggest barrier to positive change at any level - individual, team, society - is identity conflict. People will find whatever they can to avoid contradicting themselves. Becoming the best version of ourselves requires us to continuously consider and edit our self-beliefs and to upgrade and expand our identities. You are **not** every idea you consider.

What do you prioritize?

Comfort or accomplishment?

Conformity or individualism?

Are you an unconscious sponge or a conscious creator?

The most practical way to change who you are is to change WHAT YOU DO.

Are you becoming the person you want to become?

You need to know WHO you want to be.

Chapter 3 - How to Build Better Habits

“Habits are, simply, reliable solutions to recurring problems in our environment. As habits are created, the level of activity in the brain decreases.” [Jason Hreha](#)

The primary reason the brain remembers the past is to better **predict** what will work in the future.

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

Cue > Craving > Response > Reward

Cue - a bit of external or internal information that predicts a reward

Craving - the motivation or desire to change your INTERNAL state

Response - the actual habit you perform in thought or action

Reward - the end goal of every habit:

1. Rewards satisfy your craving - relieve/change your emotional state.
2. Rewards teach us which actions are worth remembering in the future.
3. Rewards close the neurological feedback loop and complete the habit cycle.

The habit feedback loop is nonconscious, automatic, continuous and endless until you decide to change it. Changing takes spending more time in CONSCIOUS THOUGHT.

The Four Laws of Behavior Change

Cue = Make it obvious < or > or make it invisible

Craving = Make it attractive < or > or make it unattractive

Response = Make it easy < or > or make it difficult

Reward = Make it satisfying < or > or make it unsatisfying

Patience Wins The Day

As a reward becomes unsatisfying/unattainable, the cue and its effect on craving dampens and eventually disappears. The key to all habits, good or bad, is that they become entrenched in the nonconscious brain with chronic FREQUENCY.

The 1st Law - Make It Obvious

Chapter 4 - The Man Who Didn't Look Right

Before you can effectively build new habits you have to get a handle on CURRENT habits. Behavior change begins with AWARENESS.

“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

[Carl Jung](#)

Pointing and Calling - verbal checklists with physical checks

Hearing your bad habits spoken aloud makes the consequences seem more real. It adds weight to the action

Chapter 5 - The Best Way to Start a New Habit

Implementation Intention - a plan you make beforehand about when and where to act. The two most common cues are TIME and LOCATION. >> **Specificity**

Learn to say NO more often. Stay on course, stay with the plan

Do not mistake lack of motivation with lack of CLARITY. People do not plan to fail. They fail to plan.

Habit Stacking - identify a current habit and stack a new one on top. It works best when the cue is highly specific and immediately actionable.

Chapter 6 - Motivation is Overrated; Environment Often Matters More

Environment is the invisible hand that shapes human behavior. Despite our unique personalities, certain behaviors tend to arise again and again under certain environmental conditions.

Many of the actions we take each day are shaped not by purposeful drive and choice but by the most obvious (and convenient) option.

Most people live in a world that others have created for them. Be the ARCHITECT of your environment - not the VICTIM of it!

The Culture of Convenience > drives < The Culture of Comfort

The external environment of convenience drives the internal environment of comfort which then seeks the external environment of convenience in an endless loop of mediocrity.

You have to get UNCOMFORTABLE to change.

It is easier to associate a new habit with a new CONTEXT than to build a new habit in the face of competing cues.

If you want behaviors that are STABLE and PREDICTABLE, you need an environment that is STABLE and PREDICTABLE.

Chapter 7 - The Secret to Self-Control

Perseverance, grit and willpower are essential to success, but the way to improve these qualities is not by wishing for these qualities, but by creating a more disciplined environmental context to create them.

Self-disciplined people are better at structuring their lives in a way that does NOT require heroic willpower and self-control. They simply spend less time in negative environments.

You must reduce exposure to the CUES that cause negative behaviors.

Make good cues OBVIOUS. Make bad cues INVISIBLE.

It's nearly impossible to maintain a focused, Zen-like existence in a world filled with WHITE NOISE and INTERRUPTIONS.

The 2nd Law - Make It Attractive

Chapter 8 - How to Make a Habit Irresistible

Humans are prone to fall for exaggerated versions of reality - **supernormal stimuli**.

We live in a convenient, calorie-rich environment but our brains are wired to crave calories as if they are scarce. Placing a high value on salt, sugar and fat is no longer advantageous to our health.

The food industry has created an ENVIRONMENT of food and convenience that does not match our physiology - and it is killing us.

The trend is for cues/rewards to become more concentrated and stimuli to become more enticing.

“We’ve gotten too good at pushing our own buttons.” **Stephen Guyenet** - [The Hungry Brain](#)

Habits are a DOPAMINE-driven feedback loop. Every habit that is highly habit-forming - taking drugs, eating junk food, playing video games, browsing social media - is associated with higher levels of dopamine.

Dopamine is not only released when you EXPERIENCE pleasure,
but also when you ANTICIPATE it.

It is the anticipation of the reward - not the fulfillment of it - that gets us to take action.

Temptation bundling works by linking an action you WANT to do with an action you NEED to do.

Chapter 9 - The Role of the Tribe - Family and Friends

We don't choose our earliest habits, we imitate them. We follow the script handed down by our family and friends, our church or school, our local community and society at large.

We imitate the habits of the close, the many and the powerful.

1. Imitate the Close

Proximity has a powerful effect on behavior. People we CHOOSE to associate with (and people that are chosen FOR us) influence us directly and indirectly. Friends and family exert an invisible peer pressure that pulls us in their direction.

One of the most powerful changes you make is to join or create a culture where your desired behaviors are the NORM - not the EXCEPTION.

Joining or creating a tribe of like-minded people can transform a personal quest into a shared one. In this tribe you can share strength with others or borrow it from them.

2. Imitating the Many

The normal behavior of the masses often overpowers the desired behavior of the individual.

The dopamine-driven feedback loop of social media narratives keeps us nonconsciously enslaved to our current reality. True change can only come from questioning the masses and considering ideas in a different context. What's best for the masses is rarely what is best for everyone and quite often - anyone.

3. Imitating the Powerful

Historically, a person with greater power and status has access to more resources, worries less about survival, and proves to be a more attractive mate.

We are drawn to behaviors that earn us respect, approval, admiration and status. Once we fit in, we begin looking for ways to stand out and avoid behaviors that lower our 'perceived' status.

Many of our daily habits are imitations of people we admire, who have what we want.

Always question the source: Is that person REAL? Do they really have what I WANT?
Or is it all a fantasy created to SELL me something, entice me to DO something or convince me to THINK a certain way?

Chapter 10 - Find and Fix the Causes of Your Bad Habits

Our base motives and how the Culture of Convenience/Comfort provides them:

Conserve energy - order from Amazon

Obtain food and water - order from DoorDash

Find love and reproduce - using Tinder

Connect and bond with others - browse Facebook

Achieve social acceptance and approval - post on Instagram

Reduce uncertainty - search Google

Achieve status and prestige - play video games

Everything the WORLD wants you to do is tied to one of your base motives. Your mobile phone is a tool. It is not your friend. It is more than likely not helping you stay focused and on task at best. At worst, it is keeping you right where it wants you - immobile and unconscious, making decisions for you.

Your current habits are not necessarily the best way to achieve your basic needs and solve problems - they are just the methods you have learned to use.

Life feels REACTIVE, but is it actually PREDICTIVE. The cause of your habits is actually the prediction that precedes them.

A craving is the sense that something is missing. It is the DESIRE to change your INTERNAL STATE.

Our EMOTIONS tell us whether to hold steady in a current state or to make a change.

“It is emotion that allows you to mark things as good, bad or indifferent.” [Antonio Damasio](#)

One key to finding and fixing the causes of your bad habits is to reframe the associations you have about them. Focus on the benefits of the NEW HABIT - not the drawbacks.

You have to reprogram the PREDICTION, change the CONTEXT of thought.
Context is EVERYTHING.

The 3rd Law - Make It Easy

Chapter 11 - Walk Slowly, But Never Backward

Never mistake MOTION for PRODUCTION.

It's easy to get bogged down looking for the OPTIMAL plan for change. Be acutely aware of being in ANALYSIS PARALYSIS.

“The best is the enemy of the good.” [Voltaire](#)

If you want to master a habit, the key is to start with repetition, not perfection. Repeating a habit leads to clear physical changes in the brain. “Neurons that fire together, wire together.” Hebb's Law, [Donald Hebb](#).

All habits follow a similar trajectory from effortful practice to automatic behavior, a process known as AUTOMATICITY. Changing habits is more about FREQUENCY, not length of TIME.

Chapter 12 - The Law of Least Effort

The Principle of Least Action - in physics, it states that the path followed between any two points will always be the path requiring the least energy.

The Law of Least Effort - when deciding between two similar options, you will naturally gravitate toward the option that requires the least amount of work. In a sense, every habit is just an obstacle to getting you what you really want.

The less FRICTION you face, the easier it is for your stronger self to emerge. Remove points of friction that waste TIME and ENERGY - **environmental design**.

Proactively Lazy - The central idea is to create your WORLD where doing the right things is as easy as possible. Prime your environments for each future use.

Chapter 13 - How to Stop Procrastinating by Using the Two-Minute Rule

Habits are automatic choices that influence and shape the conscious decisions that follow. Habits are the entrance ramps to the highways of behaviors we traverse each day. Each day has DECISIVE MOMENTS that send us towards successes or failures.

When you start a new habit, it should take less than TWO MINUTES to do. These are “gateway habits” that lead you down a more productive path.

The first rule of success - you have to show up.

Standardize first, then optimize. Start with the smallest action that confirms the type of person you want to be.

Chapter 14 - Making Good Habits Inevitable and Bad Habits Impossible

Ulysses Pact - a commitment device, a choice you make in the present that controls your actions in the future.

Automate good habits - put technology to work FOR YOU!

“Civilization advances by extending the number of operations (work) we can perform without thinking about them (so we can spend more time becoming more differentiated and unique).”

[Alfred North Whitehead](#)

Create an environment of INEVITABILITY.

The 4th Law - Make It Satisfying

Chapter 15 - The Cardinal Rule of Behavior Change

What is rewarded is repeated. What is punished is avoided.

We are more likely to repeat any behavior, no matter how small, if the experience is satisfying, pleasurable, especially if the reinforcement is IMMEDIATE.

The way your brain evaluates rewards is inconsistent over time. The costs of your good habits tend to be in the PRESENT. The cost of your bad habits tend to be in the FUTURE.

The road less traveled is the road to delayed gratification. On the road to SUCCESS, the last mile is always the least crowded.

Immediate reinforcement can be essential. Work with physiology - not against it. Select short-term rewards that REINFORCE your identity rather than conflict with it.

Over time, the behavior will reinforce itself because it is WHO you are and it feels GOOD being you.

Chapter 16 - How to Stick with Good Habits Every Day

A habit tracker is simply a way to measure whether you performed a habit or not. Don't break the chain of good habits.

[Benjamin Franklin](#) carried a booklet everywhere he went and used it to track thirteen personal virtues.

The Benefits of Habit Tracking

1. Habit tracking is obvious. It also keeps you honest - we think we act better than we do.
2. Habit tracking is attractive. The most efficient form of motivation is PROGRESS.
3. Habit tracking is satisfying. It can become its own form of reward. It keeps your eye on the ball, keeps you focused on PROCESS rather than results.

Habit tracking provides visual proof that you are casting votes for the type of person you wish to BECOME.

You will make mistakes. The first mistake is never the one that ruins the process, it is the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows that leads to failure. Admit the mistake - MOVE ON.

The difference between winners and losers is how they respond to failure. We learn by failing. Failing is not a NEGATIVE. It is a PRIMARY part of the PROCESS. Change the context in your mind. Recover quickly from failure and redouble your efforts with PURPOSE.

Measurement is only useful when it guides you and adds context to the larger picture. The measurement is NOT the goal - it is the PROCESS to the goal.

Just because you can measure something doesn't mean it's the most important thing (especially to you). And just because you can't measure something doesn't mean it is not important (especially to you).

Chapter 17 - How an Accountability Partner Can Change Everything

In general, the more local, tangible, concrete, and immediate the consequence (good or bad), the more likely it is to influence behavior. The more global, intangible, vague and delayed the consequence (good or bad), the less likely it is to influence behavior.

A HABIT CONTRACT is a verbal or written agreement in which you state your commitment to a particular habit and the punishment that will occur if you do not follow through. Find 1-2 people to sign off with or join the contract with you. Failing yourself is one thing - failing others adds additional motivation.

Advanced Tactics - Good to Great

Chapter 18 - The Truth About Talent

Habits are easier to perform, and more satisfying to stick with, when they align with your natural inclinations and abilities. Our environment determines the suitability of our genes and the utility of our natural talents. Competency is highly dependent on context.

Genes do not determine your destiny - they determine your areas of OPPORTUNITY.
“Genes predispose, but they do not predetermine.” [Gabor Mate](#)

Your unique cluster of genetic traits predispose you to a particular personality that is fairly consistent over time. There is a version of every habit that can bring you joy and satisfaction.
FIND IT.

Work on strategies that seem to deliver the best results 80 percent of the time and keep exploring other avenues 20 percent of the time. Be DIFFERENT. REWRITE the RULES.

People get caught up in the fact that they HAVE limits that they rarely exert the effort required to get very close to them. Until you work as hard as those you admire, don't explain away their success as LUCK or GENES.

Chapter 19 - How to Stay Motivated in Life and Work

The best way to maintain motivation and achieve peak levels of performance is to work on tasks of “just manageable difficulty”. There is an optimal zone of difficulty in which we have optimal experiences or “flow”.

“**Flow** is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it”. [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) (this is a must read book)

BOREDOM is perhaps the greatest villain on the quest for self-improvement. You must find the sweet spot between Fast Brain and Slow Brain.

As good habits become entrenched we tend to start derailing them on some level to seek NOVELTY.

“Men desire novelty to such an extent that those who are doing well wish for a change as much as those who are doing badly.” [Niccolo Machiavelli](#)

Do not negotiate with yourself. You will LOSE every single time. It's not just you - it's the way your brain is designed - so quit fighting yourself.

Make the plan - show up - do the work.

You have to do the work when it is annoying, painful, draining. The only way to excellence is to become fascinated with the PROCESS of doing those things you have DECIDED to do over, and over, and over again.

Chapter 20 - The Downside of Creating Good Habits

Repetition develops fluency, speed and skill, but practice does not make perfect - PERFECT practice makes PERFECT.

Be acutely aware of a downside of repetition. When you believe you do something "good enough" you relinquish the task to nonconsciousness, and you stop thinking about how to do it better, to improve by 1% - every day.

Habits are necessary, but not sufficient for mastery. You need a combination of automatic habits and deliberate practice.

Habits + Deliberate Practice = Increased Mastery > Repeat

You must REVIEW your habits and make MODIFICATIONS when necessary

Stop > Breathe > Think/Consider > Decide > Prioritize > Execute Next Plan

Decision Journal - record the major decisions you make each week, why you make them, and what you expect the outcome to be. Then review your choices at the end of the week and end of the month and at the end of the year to see when you were correct and where things went wrong. You will find flaws in your "decision tree" - the process you use to arrive at your decisions.

Integrity Report

1. What are the core values that drive my life and work? Past/Present
2. How am I living and working with integrity right now? Present
3. How can I set a higher standard in the future? Future

The more sacred an idea is to us - the more deeply it is tied to our identity - the more strongly we will defend it against criticism. **Keep your identity small** and your mind wide open.

“It is the mark of an educated (thoughtful) mind to be able to entertain an idea without accepting it (or refusing it)” [Aristotle](#) (?)

A lack of SELF-AWARENESS is poison. Reflection and review are the antidotes.

“...thus, whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death. Whoever is soft and yielding is a discipline of life. The hard and stiff will be broken. The soft and supple will prevail.” [Lao Tzu](#)

The universe is rhythmically asymmetric. There are no straight lines. Find your rhythm and go with the flow. The world created by humans is not your FRIEND. Create YOUR life.

There is no end to this. Quit trying to find it.