

BOOK SUMMARY

Atomic Habits

by James Clear

Tiny changes, compounded daily, beat big resolutions. A practical system for building good habits and breaking bad ones.

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Key ideas

1. **Systems beat goals.** Winners and losers share the same goals. What separates them is the system of daily habits that moves them forward.
2. **Change your identity first.** Every action is a vote for the person you want to become. Focus on who you want to be, not what you want to get.
3. **The four laws.** Make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, make it satisfying — and invert them to break a bad habit.
4. **Environment is the invisible hand.** Design your space so the cue for a good habit is visible and the cue for a bad one is hidden.
5. **Never miss twice.** Missing once is an accident. Missing twice is the start of a new habit. Get back on track immediately.



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Introduction: My Story

Atomic Habits opens with two definitions that frame everything that follows. Something atomic is an extremely small amount of a thing, the single irreducible unit of a larger system, and it is also the source of immense energy or power. A habit is a routine or practice performed regularly, an automatic response to a specific situation. Put together, the title promises that tiny routines can carry enormous force. The book is organized around four laws of behavior change: make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy and make it satisfying, followed by advanced tactics for going from good to great.

James Clear then tells the story behind his interest in habits. On the final day of his sophomore year of high school in 2002, a classmate lost his grip on a baseball bat mid swing and it struck Clear in the face. The impact crushed his nose into a U shape, fractured his skull in several places and shattered both eye sockets. He lost consciousness, had multiple seizures, stopped breathing and was airlifted to a Cincinnati hospital, where he was placed in a medically induced coma. It was the same hospital where, a decade earlier, his younger sister had been treated for leukemia at age three and eventually recovered.

Clear survived, but recovery was slow. He temporarily lost his sense of smell, his left eyeball was pushed out of its socket when he blew his nose, he had double vision for weeks and he could not drive for eight months. A year after the injury he was cut from the varsity baseball team, the only junior to be cut, and he cried in his car after hearing the news. He made varsity as a senior but played only eleven innings in total.

The turnaround came at Denison University, and it did not come from any dramatic change. Clear focused on small habits: going to bed early while his peers stayed up, keeping his dorm room tidy and lifting weights several times a week, which took him from 170 to 200 pounds on his six foot four frame. The results compounded. He earned straight A's his first year, became a starting pitcher as a sophomore and was named team captain and all conference as a junior. As a senior he was chosen as Denison's top male athlete, named to the ESPN Academic All-America Team, an honor given to only thirty-three players nationally, and awarded the President's Medal, the university's highest academic honor.

Clear is careful to say he never played professionally. His point is that small, consistent habits helped him reach his potential, and that readers can do the same. In his words, changes that seem small and unimportant at first will compound into remarkable results if you are willing to stick with them for years. He shows the same pattern in his writing career. He began publishing

at jamesclear.com in November 2012, posting every Monday and Thursday, and grew from his first thousand email subscribers to over thirty thousand by the end of 2013, over one hundred thousand in 2014 and two hundred thousand by 2015, the year he signed the deal for this book.

The Surprising Power of Atomic Habits

In 2003, British Cycling hired Dave Brailsford as performance director. The team had endured nearly a century of mediocrity. British riders had won a single Olympic gold medal since 1908 and had never produced a Tour de France winner, and one top European bike maker refused to sell them bikes for fear it would hurt sales. Brailsford applied what he called the aggregation of marginal gains: break down everything that goes into riding a bike and improve each piece by 1 percent. The changes were small: redesigned bike seats, alcohol rubbed on tires for grip, lessons in handwashing to avoid colds, the best pillow for each rider and even a team truck painted white inside to spot dust. At the 2008 Olympics the team won 60 percent of the available gold medals. Bradley Wiggins became the first British Tour de France winner in 2012, and Chris Froome won in 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017. Between 2007 and 2017, British cyclists won 178 world championships and sixty-six Olympic or Paralympic gold medals.

From this story Clear draws his central idea: habits are the compound interest of self-improvement. Getting 1 percent better every day for a year leaves you about thirty-seven times better, while getting 1 percent worse every day takes you nearly to zero. He compares it to a plane leaving Los Angeles for New York. Shift the heading just 3.5 degrees south and the change is barely noticeable at takeoff, yet the plane lands in Washington, D.C. People overestimate the importance of defining moments and underestimate the value of small daily improvements. Outcomes are lagging measures of habits: your net worth reflects your financial habits, your weight your eating habits and your knowledge your learning habits. What matters is your trajectory, not your current results. Time magnifies whatever you feed it, so good habits make time your ally and bad habits make it your enemy.

Compounding works in both directions. Knowledge and relationships compound positively, while stress and negative thoughts compound negatively. Clear then describes the Plateau of Latent Potential with the image of an ice cube in a cold room. As the room warms from 25 to 31 degrees, nothing seems to happen. At 32 degrees, the ice melts. Breakthroughs are the result of many earlier actions building potential. Bamboo can stay barely visible for five years while it builds roots, then grow ninety feet in six weeks. The frustrating stretch before results appear is what Clear calls the Valley of Disappointment. The work is not wasted; it is being stored. He cites the image of a stonecutter who hits a rock a hundred times without a crack, then splits it on the hundred and first blow.

The second half of the chapter separates goals from systems, an idea Clear credits to Scott Adams. Goals are the results you want. Systems are the processes that lead to those results. Clear lists four problems with focusing on goals. Winners and losers have the same goals, so goals cannot be what separates them; British cyclists always wanted to win, but only succeeded once they built a system of small improvements. Achieving a goal is only a momentary change, like cleaning a messy room without fixing the habits that made it messy. Goals restrict happiness, because they push satisfaction off to the next milestone. And goals are at odds with long-term progress, as when runners stop training after a race. The purpose of goals is to win the game; the purpose of systems is to keep playing it.

This leads to one of the book's best known lines: you do not rise to the level of your goals, you fall to the level of your systems. If you struggle to change your habits, the problem is not you but your system. Clear also explains the full meaning of the title. An atomic habit is a small habit that is part of a larger system. Just as atoms are the building blocks of molecules, atomic habits are the building blocks of remarkable results, small and mighty at the same time.

How Your Habits Shape Your Identity (and Vice Versa)

Clear argues that people often fail to change their habits because they try to change the wrong thing. He describes three layers of behavior change, arranged like the layers of an onion. The outer layer is outcomes, such as losing weight or winning a championship. The middle layer is processes, meaning your habits and systems. The deepest layer is identity: your beliefs, self-image and judgments about yourself and others. Outcomes are about what you get, processes about what you do and identity about what you believe. Most people build outcome-based habits, starting from what they want to achieve. Clear recommends identity-based habits, starting from who you want to become.

He illustrates the difference with two people turning down a cigarette. One says, “No thanks, I’m trying to quit,” which means they still see themselves as a smoker. The other says, “No thanks, I’m not a smoker,” which reflects a small but real shift in identity. Behavior that conflicts with your sense of self will not last. Entrepreneur Brian Clark stopped chewing his nails after getting a manicure, because he became someone who took pride in his nails. The goal is not to read a book but to become a reader, not to run a marathon but to become a runner. Clear cites research showing that people who identified as being a voter were more likely to vote than people who simply wanted to vote.

Identity also has a dark side. Once adopted, it resists change. People repeat self-limiting stories such as “I’m not a morning person” or “I’m bad at math,” and the more a behavior is tied to identity, the harder it is to change. Clear calls identity conflict the biggest barrier to positive change, whether for individuals, teams or societies. Progress requires unlearning and editing your beliefs over time.

The good news is that identity emerges from habits. Clear notes that the word identity comes from the Latin *essentitas*, meaning being, and *identidem*, meaning repeatedly, so your identity is literally your repeated beingness. You believe what you have proof of, and habits supply most of that proof. Clear did not think of himself as a writer until years of publishing every Monday and Thursday gave him the evidence. Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become. No single vote changes everything, but as the votes add up, so does the evidence of a new identity. Each time you write a page you are a writer, and each time you start a workout you are an athlete. That is why meaningful change does not require radical change.

How to Build Better Habits in 4 Simple Steps

The science of habits begins with psychologist Edward Thorndike's puzzle box experiments with cats in 1898. Cats placed in a box could escape by pulling a cord, pressing a lever or stepping on a platform. At first they wandered and clawed randomly, but after stumbling onto the escape and the food outside, they learned. One cat's escape time dropped from 160 seconds to an average of 6.3 seconds over its last three trials, and after twenty to thirty trials the behavior was automatic. Thorndike concluded that behaviors followed by satisfying consequences tend to be repeated, while those that produce unpleasant consequences are less likely to be repeated.

Clear defines a habit as a behavior repeated enough times to become automatic. Habits are mental shortcuts learned from experience that free up conscious attention, the brain's bottleneck. He rejects the worry that habits make life dull. Without good financial, health or learning habits, you stay stuck making decisions about the basics, with little room left for creativity. Habits create freedom.

Every habit follows four steps: cue, craving, response and reward. The cue triggers the brain to start a behavior by predicting a reward. The craving is the motivation behind it, and what you crave is not the habit itself but the change in state it brings: not the cigarette but the relief, not brushing your teeth but a clean mouth. Cues mean nothing until they are interpreted, which is why slot machine sounds excite a gambler and fade into background noise for everyone else. The response is the habit you perform, and it only happens if you are motivated and able. The reward satisfies the craving and teaches the brain which actions are worth remembering. If any step is missing, the behavior will not become a habit.

These four steps form a continuous feedback loop that runs every moment you are alive. Cue and craving make up the problem phase, when you notice something needs to change. Response and reward make up the solution phase, when you act and get what you wanted. A phone buzzes, you want to read the message, you grab the phone and you are rewarded, so grabbing the phone becomes linked to the buzz. Clear quotes behavioral scientist Jason Hreha, who describes habits as reliable solutions to recurring problems in our environment. Each of the four steps becomes one of the book's four laws for building good habits and breaking bad ones.

The Man Who Didn't Look Right

A paramedic noticed that her father-in-law's face looked wrong. Years of treating heart failure had taught her to recognize a subtle change in how blood was distributed in the face. She insisted he go to the hospital, where he had lifesaving surgery for a major arterial blockage. Clear collects similar stories. Lieutenant Commander Michael Riley saved a battleship during the Gulf War by ordering a missile shot down even though it looked exactly like his fleet's own planes on radar. Museum curators spot expert forgeries without being able to say why, and hairdressers can sometimes tell a client is pregnant from the feel of her hair.

The lesson is that the brain is a prediction machine. With enough practice, it picks up cues that predict outcomes without conscious thought. That makes habits useful, but it also means your actions can come under the control of your nonconscious mind. Clear offers funny examples: a retail clerk who cut a customer's credit card in half on autopilot, a former preschool teacher who asked adult coworkers if they had washed their hands and a former lifeguard who yelled "Walk!" at running children. Over time, cues like the remote by the couch become invisible. Clear quotes Carl Jung: until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.

The first way to raise awareness is Pointing-and-Calling, a safety system used by Japanese railway conductors, who point at signals and call out what they see. It looks silly but reduces errors by up to 85 percent and cuts accidents by 30 percent. When New York City's MTA adopted a point-only version, incidents of incorrectly berthed subways fell 57 percent within two years. Clear's wife uses the same idea when packing, calling out each essential item, ending with "I've got my husband."

The second tool is the Habits Scorecard. You list your daily habits from the moment you wake up and mark each as good, bad or neutral. Labels depend on your goals; a bagel with peanut butter is bad if you want to lose weight and good if you want to build muscle. Clear argues there are really only effective habits, since every habit serves you in some way. For unclear cases, ask whether the habit casts a vote for or against your desired identity. At first, do not change anything. Just observe, without judgment. You can also say your actions aloud, such as "I'm about to eat this cookie, but I don't need it," which makes the consequences feel real. Behavior change always starts with awareness.

The Best Way to Start a New Habit

A 2001 British study followed 248 people trying to build exercise habits. One group simply tracked their exercise. A second group also read material on the benefits of exercise. A third group read the same material and wrote a plan stating the day, time and place they would exercise. Only 35 to 38 percent of the first two groups exercised at least once a week, but 91 percent of the third group did. That plan is called an implementation intention: “When situation X arises, I will perform response Y.” Hundreds of studies show it works for everything from flu shots to recycling to voter turnout.

Clear’s insight is that many people think they lack motivation when what they really lack is clarity. Vague goals like “I’m going to eat healthier” leave the when and where to chance. His formula is simple: I will [behavior] at [time] in [location], for example, “I will meditate for one minute at 7 a.m. in my kitchen.” Being specific also makes it easier to say no to distractions. He adds that the first day of a week, month or year is a good time to start, thanks to the fresh start effect.

The second strategy, habit stacking, comes from Stanford professor BJ Fogg. Clear explains the idea through the Diderot Effect. In 1765, the French philosopher Denis Diderot received a large sum from Catherine the Great and bought a beautiful scarlet robe. Next to it, his other possessions looked shabby, so he replaced them one by one with a new rug, sculptures, a mirror and a leather chair. One purchase led to another. Many behaviors are linked in the same way, each one cueing the next. Habit stacking uses this by attaching a new habit to an existing one: after [current habit], I will [new habit]. After I pour my morning coffee, I will meditate for one minute. Small stacks can then be chained into full routines.

The key is choosing the right cue. It must be specific and immediately actionable. Clear’s first attempt, “When I take a break for lunch, I will do ten push-ups,” was too vague, so he changed it to “When I close my laptop for lunch, I will do ten push-ups next to my desk.” The cue should fit your real schedule and happen as often as the habit you want. To find good cues, write two lists: things you do every day without fail, like brushing your teeth, and things that happen to you every day, like the sun rising. Both strategies serve the first law: make it obvious.

Motivation Is Overrated; Environment Often Matters More

Dr. Anne Thorndike, a physician at Massachusetts General Hospital, changed how people ate in the hospital cafeteria without saying a word. She added bottled water to the refrigerators next to the registers and placed baskets of water around the food stations. Over three months, soda sales fell 11.4 percent and bottled water sales rose 25.8 percent. Clear's point is that people often choose products not because of what they are but because of where they are. He cites Kurt Lewin's 1936 equation, behavior is a function of the person in their environment, and notes that 45 percent of Coca-Cola sales come from end of aisle racks.

Vision is our most powerful sense. About ten million of the body's eleven million sensory receptors are devoted to sight, so visual cues are the biggest drivers of behavior. In the Netherlands during the 1970s energy crisis, homes with electrical meters in the main hallway used 30 percent less energy than similar homes with meters in the basement. At Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, fly stickers placed in urinals improved aim and cut cleaning costs by 8 percent a year. Clear started eating apples every day after moving them from the fridge drawer to a bowl on the counter.

The practical lesson is environment design: be the architect of your surroundings, not the victim of them. Put your pill bottle next to the bathroom faucet, your guitar stand in the middle of the living room and filled water bottles around the house. If you want a habit to be a big part of your life, make its cue a big part of your environment.

Habits also attach to whole contexts, not single triggers. The same couch can be a reading spot for one person and a place for TV and ice cream for another. In one study, insomniacs were told to get into bed only when tired and to leave if they could not sleep, and over time the bed became linked with sleep. Clear suggests two strategies. New habits are easier to build in a new environment, where old cues do not pull at you. When you cannot move, follow the rule of one space, one use. Early in his career, Clear worked from his couch and kitchen table and could never switch off, until a separate home office created a clear line. Mixing contexts mixes habits, and the easier habit usually wins, which is why a phone that can do anything is hard to tie to any one task.

The Secret to Self-Control

In 1971, two congressmen discovered that 15 percent of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam were addicted to heroin. Researcher Lee Robins then tracked what happened when those soldiers came home. Only 5 percent became readdicted within a year, and just 12 percent relapsed within three years. Roughly nine out of ten eliminated their addiction almost overnight. This contradicted the belief that heroin addiction was permanent. The explanation was the environment. In Vietnam, soldiers were surrounded by cues: easy access, war stress and friends who used. At home, those cues vanished. By contrast, a typical drug user who gets clean in a clinic returns to the same neighborhood and cues, and about 90 percent relapse.

Clear uses this to challenge the idea that bad habits reflect weak character. Research shows that people who seem highly disciplined are not fundamentally different from others. They are better at structuring their lives to avoid temptation. The people with the best self-control are the ones who need to use it the least.

Once a habit is encoded in the brain, the urge returns whenever the cues reappear. Therapist Patty Olwell used to smoke while riding horses. She quit both, and decades later, the moment she got back on a horse, she craved a cigarette. Bad habits are also autocatalytic: they feed the feelings they try to numb. Showing smokers pictures of blackened lungs raises anxiety that leads them to smoke. In one study, a picture of cocaine flashed for just thirty-three milliseconds, too fast to register consciously, still sparked craving in addicts. You can break a habit, but you are unlikely to forget it. Clear says he has never seen someone consistently stick to positive habits in a negative environment.

The solution inverts the first law: make it invisible. Reduce exposure to the cue. Leave your phone in another room, unfollow accounts that make you jealous, move the TV out of the bedroom and put the game console in a closet after each use. Removing a single cue often makes a whole habit fade. Self-control is a short-term strategy; you might resist temptation once or twice, but not every time. The secret to self-control is to make the cues of good habits obvious and the cues of bad habits invisible.

How to Make a Habit Irresistible

Nobel Prize-winning scientist Niko Tinbergen found that herring gull chicks pecked at a cardboard beak with a red dot, and pecked even harder at one with three exaggerated red dots. Greylag geese would roll any round object back into the nest, including billiard balls and a volleyball, with bigger objects getting a stronger response. These exaggerated triggers are called supernormal stimuli, and Clear argues humans respond to them too. Our brains evolved when calories were scarce, so we still crave salt, sugar and fat. Food scientists engineer products for crunch, fizz, mouthfeel and dynamic contrast, like an Oreo's crunch around a smooth center, and search for the bliss point of salt, sugar and fat. As neuroscientist Stephan Guyenet puts it, we have gotten too good at pushing our own buttons. Social media likes and Photoshopped ads work the same way. We have the brains of our ancestors but temptations they never had to face.

The mechanism behind craving is dopamine. In 1954, researchers James Olds and Peter Milner blocked dopamine in rats, which lost all will to eat, drink or mate and died of thirst within days. The rats still liked sugar when it was placed in their mouths, but they no longer wanted it. Dopamine drives desire, not pleasure. And it spikes in anticipation: gambling addicts get a surge before placing a bet, and cocaine addicts when they see the powder. The brain devotes far more circuitry to wanting than to liking. The entire nucleus accumbens activates during wanting, while only 10 percent activates during liking. That is why looking forward to a vacation can feel better than the vacation itself.

Once a habit is learned, dopamine rises at the cue rather than at the reward. If the expected reward does not arrive, dopamine drops. So to make a habit attractive, you need to create anticipation.

Clear's tool for this is temptation bundling: link an action you want to do with an action you need to do. Ronan Byrne, an engineering student in Dublin, rigged his stationary bike so Netflix would only play while he pedaled at a certain speed. ABC did something similar with its TGIT campaign for Shonda Rhimes' Thursday night shows, encouraging viewers to make popcorn and pour red wine. The network bundled what it needed viewers to do, watch the shows, with things viewers already wanted to do: relax and unwind.

The Role of Family and Friends in Shaping Your Habits

Hungarian Laszlo Polgar believed that a genius is not born but educated and trained. To prove it, he raised his three daughters, Susan, Sofia and Judit, in a home full of chess: home schooling, chess books everywhere and constant competition. Susan was beating adults within six months of learning the game at age four. Sofia became a world champion by fourteen and later a grandmaster. Judit became the youngest grandmaster in history at fifteen years and four months, breaking Bobby Fischer's record, and was the top ranked female player for twenty-seven years. The sisters remembered their childhood fondly. Once Laszlo found Sofia playing chess in the bathroom and told her to leave the pieces alone. She replied, "Daddy, they won't leave me alone!"

The lesson is that the habits that are normal in your culture become the most attractive behaviors available to you. Humans are herd animals, and belonging once meant survival, so we are wired to fit in. We do not choose our earliest habits; we imitate them. Clear names three groups we copy: the close, the many and the powerful.

We imitate the close. A thirty-two-year study of twelve thousand people found that your odds of becoming obese rose 57 percent if a friend became obese. Astronaut Mike Massimino's MIT robotics class of ten students produced four astronauts. Clear's advice is to join a culture where your desired behavior is the normal behavior, ideally one where you already share something with the group. He points to Steve Kamb's Nerd Fitness, which helps "nerds, misfits, and mutants" get fit while bonding over things like Star Wars. Belonging shifts identity from "I am a reader" to "we are readers."

We imitate the many. In Solomon Asch's famous experiments, people asked to compare line lengths often went along with obviously wrong answers given by planted actors, and nearly 75 percent conformed at least once. Most people would rather be wrong with the crowd than right alone. We also imitate the powerful. Once we fit in, we look for ways to stand out, so we copy the habits of successful people we admire. Behaviors become attractive when they help us fit in, earn approval and gain status.

How to Find and Fix the Causes of Your Bad Habits

On a 2012 trip to Istanbul, Clear had dinner with a group of Turkish friends, half of whom had quit smoking. His guide, Mike, credited Allen Carr's *Easy Way to Stop Smoking*. The book reframes smoking again and again. You are not giving anything up, because cigarettes do nothing for you. You do not need them to socialize, and they do not relieve stress but wreck your nerves. By the end, smoking seems ridiculous, and without any expected benefit there is no reason to smoke. This is the inversion of the second law: make it unattractive.

Every behavior has a surface craving and a deeper motive. Clear's craving for tacos is a specific form of the ancient drive to obtain food. Core motives include conserving energy, finding love, connecting with others, winning approval, reducing uncertainty and achieving status. Products latch onto these motives rather than creating new ones: Tinder for love, Facebook for connection, Google for reducing uncertainty. Habits are modern solutions to ancient desires, and there are many possible solutions to the same desire. One person relieves stress by smoking, another by running.

What links a cue to a habit is prediction. Two people can see the same cigarette, and one feels an urge while the other is repulsed. The cause of a habit is the prediction that comes before it, and predictions produce feelings we experience as cravings. A craving is the sense that something is missing, the desire to change your internal state. When you binge eat or scroll social media, what you really want is to feel different.

That means you can reprogram your brain to enjoy hard habits by changing the associations. Swap one word: you do not have to wake up early, you get to. Exercise can be framed as building endurance, saving money as increasing future freedom and pregame nerves as excitement. You can also create motivation rituals by pairing a habit with something you enjoy until the cue itself triggers the right state. Boxer and writer Ed Latimore found that just putting on headphones made him focus, even without music. Clear used a ten-minute stretching and throwing routine before baseball games to get into a competitive mindset.

Walk Slowly, but Never Backward

University of Florida professor Jerry Uelsmann split his photography class into two groups. The quantity group would be graded only on the number of photos they produced. The quality group needed just one nearly perfect photo. At the end of the semester, all the best photos came from the quantity group. They had been shooting, experimenting and learning from mistakes, while the quality group sat around theorizing and produced little besides one mediocre photo.

Clear uses this to separate motion from action. Motion is planning, researching and strategizing. It is useful but produces no result on its own. Action is the behavior that delivers an outcome. Outlining twenty article ideas is motion; writing an article is action. People slip into motion because it feels like progress while avoiding the risk of failure. The first takeaway of the third law is to get your reps in.

Repetition physically changes the brain through long-term potentiation, the strengthening of connections between neurons. Neuropsychologist Donald Hebb summed it up in 1949: neurons that fire together wire together. Musicians have larger cerebellums than nonmusicians. Mathematicians have more gray matter in a region key to computation. London taxi drivers have larger hippocampuses, a region tied to spatial memory, and that region shrinks after they retire. Like muscles, parts of the brain grow with use and weaken when neglected.

People often ask how long it takes to build a habit. Clear says the better question is how many repetitions it takes. The goal is automaticity, doing something without thinking through each step. He describes a habit line: early on a behavior takes real effort, then it gets easier, and eventually it becomes automatic. There is nothing magical about twenty-one or thirty days. Habits form based on frequency, not time. Your current habits were built over hundreds or thousands of repetitions, and new ones need the same. The best way to make those reps happen is to make them easy.

The Law of Least Effort

Drawing on Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Clear notes that the Americas and Africa run mainly north to south, while Europe and Asia stretch east to west. Places at the same latitude share similar climates, so crops could spread from France to China. Moving north or south meant new climates and new crops to domesticate. As a result, farming spread two to three times faster across Europe and Asia, and that advantage compounded over centuries. Behavior, Clear argues, is shaped by friction.

The Law of Least Effort says that when choosing between two similar options, people drift toward the one that takes less work. This is smart, not lazy, because the brain is wired to save energy. It is why scrolling and watching TV take up so much time. Clear reframes habits as obstacles between you and what you want: dieting stands between you and fitness, meditation between you and calm. Good habits need to be so easy you will do them even when you do not feel like it. The goal is not to only do easy things, but to make it as easy as possible in the moment to do what pays off later.

He compares this to a bent garden hose. You can turn up the pressure, or you can remove the bend. Choose a gym on your commute rather than one a few blocks away. In the 1970s, Japanese factories redesigned workspaces so workers did not waste motion, and by 1979 American workers took three times as long to assemble television sets. Clear calls this addition by subtraction. Successful products remove friction, from meal delivery to ride sharing. When the UK linked people directly to a tax form instead of a download page, response rates rose from 19.2 percent to 23.4 percent.

You can also prime your environment for the next action. Oswald Nuckols of Natchez, Mississippi, resets each room after using it, putting the remote back and folding blankets, and calls himself proactively lazy. Clear's wife keeps greeting cards sorted by occasion, so she always sends them, while Clear rarely did because buying a card was too much hassle. Set out your workout clothes, chop vegetables on the weekend and leave the breakfast skillet on the stove. For bad habits, do the reverse. Unplug the TV after each use, take the batteries out of the remote or leave your phone in another room. Clear keeps his phone out of reach until lunch and gains three to four hours of focused work.

How to Stop Procrastinating by Using the Two-Minute Rule

Choreographer Twyla Tharp starts each day at 5:30 a.m. by putting on workout clothes and hailing a cab to the gym for a two-hour workout. She says the ritual is not the workout; the ritual is the cab. Once she tells the driver where to go, the rest follows. Clear has a similar decisive moment at 5:15 p.m. when his wife comes home. If he changes into workout clothes, he works out. If he sits on the couch, he ends up ordering Indian food and watching *The Office*.

Decisive moments are small choices that shape everything after them, like walking into a steakhouse, where you can order a sirloin but not sushi. Habits are entrance ramps to a highway. Once you are on one path, it is easier to keep going than to change direction, which is why checking your phone for a second can cost you twenty minutes. Researchers estimate that 40 to 50 percent of daily actions are habits, and their real influence is even larger because they steer the conscious choices that follow.

The Two-Minute Rule says that when you start a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to do. “Read before bed” becomes “Read one page.” “Run three miles” becomes “Tie my running shoes.” The point is a gateway habit that leads you down a better path. You have to master the habit of showing up before you can improve it. As Clear puts it, you have to standardize before you can optimize. For skeptics, he offers a stricter version: do it for two minutes and then actually stop. One reader lost over one hundred pounds by going to the gym every day but allowing himself only five minutes, until he naturally started staying longer. Greg McKeown built a journaling habit by always writing less than he wanted to, echoing Hemingway’s advice to stop when you are going good.

Once the two-minute version sticks, you can use habit shaping to scale up, mastering one small step before moving to the next. To become an early riser, you might start by being home by 10 p.m., then have devices off by 10 p.m., then be in bed by 10 p.m., and eventually wake at 6 a.m. To go vegan, you might first cut out animals with four legs, then two legs, then no legs. Big goals shrink too: “I want to live a long and healthy life” becomes “I need to change into my workout clothes.”

How to Make Good Habits Inevitable and Bad Habits Impossible

In 1830, Victor Hugo faced an impossible deadline for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* after a year of putting it off. So he locked away all his clothes except a large shawl, leaving himself no way to go out. He finished two weeks early. This is a commitment device, a choice made now that controls your behavior later. Examples include buying food in single packages, adding yourself to a casino's banned list or, like Clear's friend Nir Eyal, using an outlet timer that cuts power to the internet router at 10 p.m. The idea is to make getting out of a good habit harder than getting started. This is the inversion of the third law: make it difficult.

Automation goes even further. In the mid-1800s, Ohio store owner John Henry Patterson discovered his employees were stealing. He bought two of James Ritty's Incorruptible Cashier machines, the first cash registers, for fifty dollars each. They locked cash and receipts away after each sale, and theft disappeared. Within six months his business went from losing money to earning \$5,000 in profit. Patterson bought the rights to the invention and founded the National Cash Register Company. The best way to break a bad habit is to make it impractical.

Clear lists onetime actions that lock in good habits for years: buy a water filter, use smaller plates, get blackout curtains, remove the TV from the bedroom, turn off notifications, delete social media apps, buy good shoes, set up automatic savings and bill pay. If the average person did even half of these, he argues, they would be living a better life a year later without thinking about habits at all. Technology helps most with behaviors that happen too rarely to become habits, like rebalancing an investment portfolio. He quotes Alfred North Whitehead: civilization advances by extending the number of operations we can perform without thinking about them.

Technology can also automate bad habits. Streaming services autoplay the next episode, food delivery answers the faintest hunger and social media fills every bored moment. The average person spends over two hours a day on social media, about six hundred hours a year. While writing this book, Clear had his assistant reset his social media passwords every Monday and send them back on Friday. Within a week he realized he did not need social media nearly as often as he had been checking it. Once the bad habit became impossible, he found the motivation for meaningful work. The goal is an environment of inevitability, where good habits are practically guaranteed.

The Cardinal Rule of Behavior Change

In the late 1990s, public health worker Stephen Luby went to the slums of Karachi, Pakistan, where over 60 percent of residents lived in squatter settlements and nearly a third of children were malnourished. His team found people already knew handwashing mattered. The problem was consistency. Working with Procter & Gamble, they handed out Safeguard, a premium soap that foamed easily and smelled great, so washing became pleasant. Diarrhea fell 52 percent, pneumonia 48 percent and impetigo 35 percent. Six years later, over 95 percent of households still kept handwashing stations, even though they had received no free soap for more than five years.

Businesses use the same principle. Wrigley became the largest chewing gum company in the world after adding flavors like Spearmint and Juicy Fruit. Toothpaste makers add flavors that do not clean better but make your mouth feel clean. This leads to the cardinal rule of behavior change: what is rewarded is repeated, and what is punished is avoided. The first three laws make a behavior more likely to happen this time. The fourth law, make it satisfying, makes it more likely to happen again.

The challenge is that we live in a delayed-return environment. On the savannah, choices had immediate consequences. Today, a workout may take a year to pay off and savings may take decades. The human brain evolved over about two hundred thousand years for immediate returns, and only in the last five hundred years or so has society shifted, so we carry old hardware into a modern world. Economists call this time inconsistency: we value the present more than the future. Bad habits reward us now and cost us later, while good habits work the other way. The rule becomes: what is immediately rewarded is repeated, and what is immediately punished is avoided. People who are better at delaying gratification tend to have higher SAT scores, lower rates of obesity and substance abuse and better social skills.

The trick is to make good habits feel successful right away, even in a small way. Early on, good habits are mostly sacrifice, so an immediate reward keeps you going while the long-term rewards build up. Endings matter most, because we tend to remember how an experience ends. Clear recommends reinforcement: use an immediate reward to make a behavior satisfying when you finish. Add a little immediate pleasure to habits that pay off in the long run and a little immediate pain to those that do not.

How to Stick with Good Habits Every Day

In 1993, Trent Dyrsmid was a twenty-three-year-old stockbroker in Abbotsford, Canada. Each morning he put two jars on his desk, one holding 120 paper clips and one empty. After every sales call, he moved a clip from one jar to the other. Within eighteen months he brought in \$5 million for his firm, and by twenty-four he was earning \$75,000 a year. The paper clip strategy works because it makes progress visible. Benjamin Franklin tracked thirteen virtues in a booklet from age twenty, and Jerry Seinfeld's advice to comedians is to write jokes every day and never break the chain.

A habit tracker satisfies several laws at once. It is obvious, because a streak of marks reminds you to act and keeps you honest; in one study of over 1,600 people, those who kept a daily food log lost twice as much weight. It is attractive, because progress is motivating and you do not want to break the streak. And it is satisfying, because crossing something off feels good and keeps you focused on the process. To make tracking easier, automate measurement where you can, track only your most important habits and record each one right after you do it: after [current habit], I will [track my habit].

Habits will break down sometimes, so Clear offers a simple rule: never miss twice. Missing once is an accident. Missing twice is the start of a new habit. The first mistake rarely ruins you; the spiral that follows does. Showing up on bad days matters because losses hurt more than gains help. Start with \$100, gain 50 percent and you have \$150, but lose just 33 percent and you are back to \$100. He quotes Charlie Munger: the first rule of compounding is never to interrupt it unnecessarily. A five-minute workout may not make you fitter, but it keeps your identity intact.

Finally, be careful what you measure. A restaurant that tracks only daily revenue learns little about its food; how many people finish their meals would say more. Goodhart's Law warns that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure. People fixated on the number on a scale may turn to crash diets. Just because something can be measured does not make it important, and just because something cannot be measured does not make it unimportant. Measurement should guide you, not consume you.

How an Accountability Partner Can Change Everything

During the Cold War, Harvard negotiation expert Roger Fisher proposed a way to make nuclear war harder. Put the launch codes in a capsule next to the heart of a volunteer who follows the President everywhere carrying a butcher knife. To launch, the President would first have to kill an innocent person with his own hands. Pentagon officials objected that this might keep the President from ever pushing the button. The idea shows that pain is an effective teacher. If a failure is painful, it gets fixed. If it is painless, it gets ignored.

This is the inversion of the fourth law: make it unsatisfying. The threat of bad reviews pushes plumbers to do good work, and late fees get bills paid on time. The key is that there can be no gap between the action and its consequences. Punishments also need to match the strength of the behavior and be reliably enforced. Consequences that are local, concrete and immediate change behavior far more than those that are vague and delayed. Laws work this way too. When New York passed the first seat belt law in 1984, only 14 percent of Americans regularly buckled up. By 2016, 88 percent did.

Clear's practical tool is the habit contract, a written or verbal agreement that states your commitment and the penalty for breaking it, signed by one or two accountability partners. Bryan Harris, an entrepreneur from Nashville, wanted to lose weight after his son was born. He wrote a contract with his wife and his trainer that set a goal of 200 pounds at 10 percent body fat, a phased plan and daily habits of logging his food and weighing himself. The penalties included dressing in formal clothes every workday, paying his trainer \$200 for a missed food log and wearing an Alabama hat, the rival of his beloved Auburn, if he skipped sprints. Harris said the signatures were essential. It worked, and he lost the weight.

Even without a formal contract, knowing someone is watching adds an immediate cost to skipping. Comedian Margaret Cho does a song a day challenge with a friend. Entrepreneur Thomas Frank set up an automatic tweet that posts if he fails to wake at 5:55 a.m., calling himself lazy and offering \$5 to anyone who replies. We care deeply about how others see us, which is exactly why accountability partners and habit contracts work so well.

The Truth About Talent (When Genes Matter and When They Don't)

Michael Phelps is six foot four. Hicham El Guerrouj, the Moroccan middle-distance champion, is five foot nine. Yet they wear the same inseam length, because Phelps has short legs and a long torso, ideal for swimming, while El Guerrouj has long legs and a short upper body, ideal for running. If they switched sports, neither would succeed. Phelps weighed about 40 percent more than El Guerrouj at his peak. The lesson is that the secret to maximizing your odds of success is choosing the right field of competition. Clear stresses that genes do not determine your destiny; they determine your areas of opportunity. He quotes physician Gabor Maté: genes can predispose, but they do not predetermine.

Genes influence personality, and behavioral geneticist Robert Plomin says scientists can no longer find a trait that genes do not affect. Clear describes the Big Five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Babies who turn toward loud noises tend to become extroverts, agreeable people tend to have higher levels of oxytocin and neuroticism is linked to a sensitive amygdala. The takeaway is to build habits that suit your personality rather than the ones everyone recommends. Choose the exercise you enjoy and read what fascinates you. Someone low in conscientiousness can lean more heavily on environment design.

To find where the odds favor you, Clear describes the explore/exploit trade-off. Start with a period of exploration, then focus on the best option you find while still experimenting a little. A healthy balance is working on your best strategy 80 to 90 percent of the time and exploring the rest, much like Google's practice of giving employees 20 percent of their time for their own projects, which produced AdWords and Gmail. Explore more early in your career and exploit more when facing a deadline.

He offers four questions to guide the search. What feels like fun to me but work to others? What makes me lose track of time? Where do I get greater returns than the average person? Clear noticed his email list grew faster than his peers' lists. And what comes naturally to me? The work that hurts you less than it hurts others is the work you were made for. Clear admits some of this comes down to luck, since Phelps and El Guerrouj were born with abilities society rewards, but the right habits in the right field tilt the odds your way.

The Goldilocks Rule: How to Stay Motivated in Life and Work

Steve Martin started at age ten selling guidebooks at Disneyland, then moved to the magic shop, where he fell in love with performing. He spent years doing short sets in empty Los Angeles clubs, slowly stretching his act from a minute or two to five, then ten, then twenty minutes by age nineteen. In his own words, he spent ten years learning, four years refining and four years as a wild success. At his peak he toured 85 cities in 90 days and sold 45,000 tickets for three shows in New York. Each year he added only a minute or two of new material while keeping the jokes that worked, enough wins to stay motivated and enough mistakes to keep improving.

This is the Goldilocks Rule: people are most motivated when working on tasks right at the edge of their abilities, not too hard and not too easy. Playing tennis against a four-year-old is boring, and playing Serena Williams is demoralizing, but playing an equal holds your full attention. The Yerkes-Dodson law places peak performance between boredom and anxiety, and researchers suggest flow happens when a task is about 4 percent beyond your current ability. Variable rewards, like those in slot machines, peak at about a 50/50 split between success and failure, though they amplify existing cravings rather than creating new ones.

The bigger threat to success, Clear argues, is not failure but boredom. An elite weightlifting coach who had trained Olympians told him the difference between the best athletes and everyone else is who can handle the boredom of doing the same lifts over and over. Successful people feel the same lack of motivation as everyone else. They show up anyway. Once habits become routine, we crave novelty and jump between workouts, diets and business ideas. Clear cites Machiavelli's observation that people want change so much that those doing well wish for it as much as those doing badly.

Professionals stick to the schedule while amateurs let life get in the way. Clear says he has never regretted finishing a workout, publishing an article on schedule or showing up on a day he wanted to relax. Anyone can work hard when they feel motivated. Mastery requires falling in love with boredom.

The Downside of Creating Good Habits

Habits have a hidden cost. Once a behavior becomes automatic, you stop paying close attention to it and stop getting better. Research shows that once a skill is mastered, performance often slips slightly over time. For brushing your teeth, that is fine. For anyone chasing elite performance, it is not. Clear's formula is: habits plus deliberate practice equals mastery. Mastery is a cycle of narrowing in on a small element, repeating it until it becomes automatic and then using that habit as the base for the next challenge.

The answer to complacency is a system of reflection and review. After a talented Los Angeles Lakers team started the 1985 to 1986 season 29 and 5 but failed to reach the Finals, coach Pat Riley created the Career Best Effort program. He tracked each player's stats back to high school and asked every player to improve by at least 1 percent over the season. The score credited unsung plays like diving for loose balls. Solid players scored in the 600s, stars above 800 and Magic Johnson often topped 1,000. Eight months later the Lakers won the championship, and the next year they became the first team in twenty years to win back-to-back titles.

Others review their work too. Marathoner Eliud Kipchoge takes notes after every practice, swimmer Katie Ledecky records wellness scores and sleep and Chris Rock tests hundreds of jokes in small clubs with a notepad on stage. Clear does an Annual Review each December, asking what went well, what did not and what he learned, and an Integrity Report each summer about his core values and whether he is living by them. Reviewing daily is like looking in a mirror from an inch away. Never reviewing is like never looking at all. Periodic reflection is like standing at a normal distance.

Identity can also become a trap. The pride that once helped you grow can make you deny your weak spots, like the veteran manager committed to his way or the band stuck after a great first album. Clear quotes Paul Graham's advice to keep your identity small. If one role defines you entirely, losing it means losing yourself. Clear felt this when his baseball career ended, and he notes that military veterans and former entrepreneurs describe similar crises. Holding your identity more loosely lets you adapt when life changes.

Conclusion: The Secret to Results That Last

Clear closes with the Sorites Paradox, an ancient Greek puzzle. Can one coin make a person rich? Ten coins will not, but if you keep adding one at a time, at some point you must admit the person is rich. The same is true of habits. One tiny change will not transform your life, but if you keep making another and another, eventually you must admit your life was transformed by small changes. The holy grail is not a single 1 percent improvement but a thousand of them.

Early on, small improvements seem to disappear under the weight of your existing system. One minute of meditation or one page of reading will not feel like much. But each change is like a grain of sand added to one side of a scale. If you keep going, you reach a tipping point where good habits feel easier because the system is now working for you. Every top performer in the book, from Olympic champions to comedians, progressed the same way: through tiny, sustainable, unrelenting improvements. Success is not a finish line. It is a system to improve.

Clear recaps the four laws as a toolkit. When a habit is hard to remember, make it obvious. When you do not feel like starting, make it attractive. When it is too difficult, make it easy. When you do not feel like sticking with it, make it satisfying. Push good habits toward the obvious, attractive, easy and satisfying end of the spectrum, and push bad habits toward invisible, unattractive, hard and unsatisfying. There is no permanent solution; you keep cycling through the laws to find the next bottleneck.

The secret to results that last is never to stop making improvements. Think of the business you can build if you do not stop working, the body if you do not stop training, the knowledge if you do not stop learning and the friendships if you do not stop caring. Small habits do not add up. They compound.

About James Clear

James Clear is a writer and speaker focused on habits, decision making and continuous improvement. His interest in habits grew out of a serious injury in high school, when a baseball bat struck him in the face and left him in a medically induced coma. Years of slow recovery followed, and he was later cut from his high school varsity team.

At Denison University, Clear rebuilt his life through small, consistent habits. He became a starting pitcher and team captain, was named to the ESPN Academic All-America Team and received the President's Medal, the university's highest academic honor. He has said he never played professionally, and he presents his story as one of reaching his potential rather than achieving legendary success.

Clear began publishing articles at jamesclear.com in November 2012, writing every Monday and Thursday. His audience grew to hundreds of thousands of newsletter subscribers, and his site now draws millions of visitors each month. His work has appeared in the New York Times, Time and Entrepreneur and on CBS This Morning, and it is taught in colleges around the world. He also created The Habits Academy, a training platform for organizations and individuals who want to build better habits.

Atomic Habits, published in 2018 by Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House, is his first book and became a number one New York Times bestseller. Clear credits thinkers such as Charles Duhigg, Nir Eyal, BJ Fogg and Leo Babauta as influences, and he thanks his wife, Kristy, for playing every role from editor to therapist while he wrote it.

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