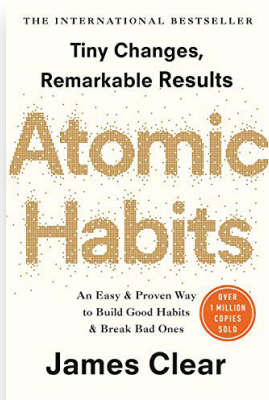


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James Clear is an author and speaker focused on continuous improvement. His website attracts millions of visitors per month and his weekly email newsletter has five hundred thousand subscribers.

Atomic Habits

THE SUMMARY

Avery 2018

Introduction

In the pages that follow, I will share a plan for building better habits—not for days or weeks, but for a lifetime. While science supports everything I’ve written, this book is not an academic research paper; it’s an operating manual. You’ll find wisdom and practical advice front and center as I explain the science of how to create and change your habits in a way that is easy to understand and apply.

Human behavior is always changing, situation to situation, moment to moment, even second to second. This book is about what *doesn’t* change. It’s about the fundamentals of human behavior, the lasting principles you can rely on year after year and the ideas that you can build a business around, build a family around and build a life around.

There is no one right way to create better habits, but this book describes an approach that will be effective regardless of where you start or what you’re trying to change. The strategies I cover will be relevant to anyone looking for a step-by-step system for improvement, whether your goals center on health, money, productivity, relationships, or all of the above. As long as human behavior is involved, this book will be your guide.

Atomic Habits

The Fundamentals

Why Tiny Changes Make a Big Difference

1. The Surprising Power of Atomic Habits

Prevailing wisdom claims that the best way to achieve what we want in life including getting into better shape, building a successful business, relaxing more and worrying less, and spending more time with friends and family is to set up specific, actionable goals.

For many years, this was how I approached my habits, too. Each one was a goal to be reached. I set goals for the grades I wanted to get in school, for the weights I wanted to lift in the gym and for the profits I wanted to earn in business. I succeeded at a few, but I failed at a lot of them. Eventually, I began to realize that my results had very little to do with the goals I set and nearly everything to do with the systems I followed.

What's the difference between systems and goals? Goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results. If you want better results, then forget about setting goals. Focus on your system instead. If you were a basketball coach and you ignored your goal to win a championship and focused only on what your team does at practice each day, would you still get results? I think you would.

2. How Your Habits Shape Your Identity (and Vice Versa)

Why is it so easy to repeat bad habits and so hard to form good ones? Few things can have a more powerful impact on your life than improving your daily habits. Yet it is likely that this time next year you'll be doing the same thing rather than doing something better.

Changing our habits is challenging for two reasons. (1) We try to change the wrong thing, and (2) we try to change our habits in the wrong way. *Outcomes* are about what you get. *Processes* are about what you do. *Identity* is about what you believe.

Many people begin the process of changing their habits by focusing on *what* they want to achieve. This leads us to outcome-based habits. The alternative is to build identity-based habits. With this approach, we start by focusing on *who* we wish to become.

Behind every system of actions is a system of beliefs. Imagine two people resisting a cigarette. When offered a smoke the first person says, "No thanks. I'm trying to quit." The second person declines by saying, "No thanks. I'm not a smoker." Behavior that is incongruent with the self will not last. The most effective way to change your habits is to focus not on what you want to achieve, but on who you wish to become.

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3. How to Build Better Habits in 4 Simple Steps

A habit is a behavior that has been repeated enough times to become automatic. The process of habit formation begins with trial and error. Whenever you encounter a new situation in life, your brain has to make a decision. *How do I respond to this?* Whenever you face a problem repeatedly, your brain begins to automate the process of solving it. Your habits are just a series of automatic solutions that solve the problems and stresses you face regularly. Habits are mental shortcuts learned from experience. The process of building a habit can be divided into four simple steps: *cue, craving, response, and reward*.

If a behavior is insufficient in any of the four stages, it will not become a habit. Eliminate the cue that predicts a reward and your habit will never start. Reduce the craving and you won't experience enough motivation to act. Make the behavior difficult and you won't be able to do it. If the reward fails to satisfy your desire, then you'll have no reason to do it again in the future. All behavior is driven by the desire to solve a problem whether to obtain something good, or to relieve pain. A simple set of rules called the Four Laws of Behavior Change can be used to build better habits.

The 1st Law: Make It Obvious

4. The Man Who Didn't Look Right

One of the most surprising insights about our habits is you don't need to be aware of the cue for a habit to begin. You can notice an opportunity and take action without dedicating conscious attention to it. This is what makes habits useful. It's also what makes them dangerous. As habits form, your actions come under the direction of your automatic and non-conscious mind. You fall into old patterns before you realize what's happening. The more you repeat these patterns, the less likely you become to question what you're doing and why you're doing it.

Before we can effectively build new habits, we need to get a handle on our current ones. This can be more challenging than it sounds because once a habit is firmly rooted in your life, it is mostly unconscious and automatic. If a habit remains mindless, you can't expect to improve it.

One of our greatest challenges in changing habits is maintaining awareness of what we are actually doing. A simple exercise you can use to become more aware of your behavior is a Habits Scorecard. To create your own, make a list of your daily habits. Once you have a full list, look at each behavior and ask yourself, "Is this a good habit, a bad habit, or a neutral habit?" The marks you give to a particular habit will depend on your situation and your goals. The process of behavior change always starts with awareness.

5. The Best Way to Start a New Habit

Researchers divided subjects into three groups. The control group was simply asked to track how

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often they exercised. The “motivation” group was asked to read material on the benefits of exercise and track their workouts. The third group was supplied with the same motivational material, but was asked to formulate a plan such as, “During the next week, I will partake in at least 20 minutes of vigorous exercise on [Day] at [Time] in [Place].”

In the first and second groups, 35% to 38% of people exercised at least once per week. (Interestingly, the motivational presentation given to the second group seemed to have no meaningful impact on behavior.) In the third group 91% of people exercised at least once a week which was more than double the normal rate.

The sentence they filled out become an *implementation intention*, a plan made beforehand about when and where to act. The two most common cues for a habit are time and location. Implementation intentions leverage both of these cues. People who make a specific plan for when and where they will perform a new habit are more likely to follow through. Many people think they lack motivation when what they really lack is clarity. Once an implementation intention has been set, you don't have to wait for inspiration to strike. Simply follow your predetermined plan.

6. Motivation is Overrated; Environment Often Matters More

Every habit is initiated by a cue, and we are more likely to notice cues that stand out. It's easy *not* to practice the guitar when it's tucked away in the closet. It's easy *not* to read the book when the bookshelf is in the corner of the guest room. It's easy *not* to take your vitamins when they are out of sight in the pantry.

If you want to make a habit a big part of your life, make the cue a big part of your environment. Put the apples in a bowl in the middle of the kitchen counter. Place your guitar on a stand in the living room. Keep water bottles in common locations around the house.

By sprinkling triggers throughout your surroundings, you increase your odds that you'll think about your habit throughout the day. Make sure your best choice is the most obvious one. Making a better decision is easy and natural when the cues for good habits are right in front of you. Environment design allows you to take back control and become the architect of your life. Be the designer of your world and not merely the consumer of it. It is easier to build new habits in a new environment because you are not fighting against old cues in your old environment.

7. The Secret to Self-Control

If you're overweight, a smoker, or an addict, you've been told your entire life that it is because you lack self-control. The idea that a little bit of discipline would solve all our problems is deeply

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embedded in our culture. Recent research, however, shows something different. When scientists analyze people who appear to have tremendous self-control, it turns out those individuals aren't all that different from those who are struggling. Instead, "disciplined" people are better at structuring their lives in a way that *does not require* heroic willpower and self-control. In other words, they spend less time in tempting situations.

The people with the best self-control are typically the ones who need to use it the least often. So, yes, perseverance, grit, and willpower are essential to success, but the way to improve these qualities is not by wishing you were a more disciplined person, but by creating a more disciplined environment.

You can break a habit, but you're unlikely to forget it. Once the mental grooves of habit have been carved into your brain, they are nearly impossible to remove entirely even if they go unused for quite a while. That means simply resisting temptation is an ineffective strategy. A more reliable approach is to cut bad habits off at the source. One of the most practical ways to eliminate a bad habit is to reduce exposure to the cue that causes it. The secret to self-control is making the cues of your good habits obvious and the cues of your bad habits invisible.

The 2nd Law: Make It Attractive

8. How to Make a Habit Irresistible

Junk food drives our reward system into a frenzy. After spending hundreds of thousands of years hunting and foraging for food in the wild, the human brain has evolved to place a high value on salt, sugar and fat. Such foods are often calorie-dense and quite rare on the savannah. When you don't know where your next meal is coming from, eating as much as possible is an excellent strategy for survival. Today, however, food is abundant—but your brain continues to crave it like it is scarce. Placing a high value on salt, sugar, and fat is no longer advantageous to our health, but the craving persists.

The more attractive an opportunity is, the more likely it is to become habit-forming. While it is not possible to transform every habit into a supernormal stimulus, we can make any habit more enticing. A neurotransmitter called dopamine stimulates craving. Every behavior that is highly habit-forming is associated with high levels of dopamine. When it comes to habits, dopamine is released not only when you *experience* pleasure, but also when you *anticipate* it. Often it is the anticipation of a reward, not the fulfillment of it that gets us to take action.

Nearly any habit can be made more attractive by "temptation bundling" which means pairing an action you *want* to do with an action you *need* to do. (An example would be watching Netflix *only* when riding your stationary bike.)

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9. The Role of Family and Friends in Shaping Your Habits

We don't choose our earliest habits, we imitate them. We follow the script handed down by our friends and family and society at large. We imitate the habits of three groups in particular: (1) the people close around us, (2) the many, (3) the powerful.

We tend to adopt habits that are praised and approved of by our culture because we have a strong desire to fit in and belong to the tribe. One study showed a person's chances of becoming obese increased by 57 percent if he or she had an obese friend. Another study found that if one person in a relationship lost weight, the partner would also slim down about one third of the time.

So join a culture where your desired behavior is the normal behavior. Surround yourself with people who have the habits you want to have yourself. Shared identity reinforces your personal identity. This is why remaining part of a group after achieving a goal is crucial to maintaining your habits. Friendship and community embed a new identity and help behaviors last over the long run.

Many of our daily habits are also imitations of people we admire. We copy the habits of highly effective people because we desire success ourselves. If a behavior can get us approval, respect and praise, we find it attractive.

10. How to Find and Fix the Causes of Your Bad Habits

Every behavior has a surface level craving and a deeper, underlying motive. A craving is just a specific manifestation of a deeper underlying motive. Your brain did not evolve with a desire to smoke cigarettes or to check Instagram or to play video games. At a deep level, you simply want to reduce uncertainty and relieve anxiety, to win social acceptance and approval, or achieve status.

Look at nearly any product that is habit-forming and you'll see that it does not create a new motivation, but rather latches onto the underlying motives of human nature. Your habits are modern-day solutions to ancient desires.

There are many different ways to address the same underlying motive. One person might learn to reduce stress by smoking a cigarette. Another person learns to ease their anxiety by going for a run. Your current habits are not necessarily the best way to solve the problems you face; they are just the methods you learned to use.

The key to finding and fixing the causes of your bad habits is to reframe the associations you have about them. You can make hard habits more attractive if you can learn to associate them with a positive experience.

The 3rd Law: Make It Easy

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11. Walk Slowly, but Never Backward

It's easy to get bogged down trying to find the optimal plan for change such as the fastest way to lose weight, the best program to build muscle, or the perfect idea for a side hustle. We are so focused on figuring out the best approach that we never get around to taking action. I refer to this as the difference between being in motion and taking action. The two ideas sound similar, but they're not the same. When you're in motion, you're planning and strategizing and learning. Those are all good things, but they don't produce a result. Action, on the other hand, is the type of behavior that will deliver an outcome.

The biggest reason we slip into motion rather than taking action is we want to delay failure. It's easy to be in motion and convince yourself that you're still making progress. When preparation becomes a form of procrastination, you need to change something.

Habit formation is the process by which a behavior becomes progressively more automatic through repetition. The more you repeat an activity, the more the structure of your brain changes to become efficient at that activity. It doesn't matter if it's been twenty-one days or three hundred days. It's the frequency that makes the difference. Your current habits have been internalized over the course of hundreds, if not thousands of repetitions. New habits require the same level of frequency.

12. The Law of Least Effort

The central idea is to create an environment where doing the right thing is as easy as possible. Much of the battle of building better habits comes down to finding ways to reduce the friction associated with our good habits and increase the friction associated with our bad ones.

There are many ways to prime your environment so it's ready for immediate use. Want to improve your diet? Chop up a ton of fruits and vegetables on weekends and pack them into containers, so you have easy access to healthy, ready-to-eat options during the week.

You can also invert this principle and prime the environment to make bad behaviors difficult. If you find yourself watching too much television, for example, then unplug it after each use. Or move the television into a closet after each use. Only plug it back in or bring it out if you can say out loud the name of the show you want to watch. This setup can create just enough friction to avoid mindless viewing.

It is remarkable how little friction is required to prevent unwanted behavior. When I hide beer in the back of the fridge where I don't see it, I drink less. Tricks are unlikely to curb a true addiction, but for

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many of us, a little bit of friction can be the difference between sticking with a good habit or sliding into a bad one. Redesign your life so the actions that matter most are also the actions that are easiest to do.

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

Habits are like the entrance ramp to a highway. They lead you down a path and before you know it, you're speeding toward the next behavior. It seems easier to continue what you're doing than to start doing something different. Each evening, there is a tiny moment—usually around 5:15 p.m.—that shapes the rest of my night. My wife walks in the door from work and either we change into our workout clothes and head to the gym or we crash onto the couch, order Indian food, and watch *The Office*. If I change clothes, I know the workout will happen.

Every day, there are a handful of moments that deliver an outsized impact. I refer to these little choices as *decisive moments*. This could be the moment you choose between driving your car or riding your bike, or between grabbing your homework or the video game controller. These choices are a fork in the road. Decisive moments set the options available to your future self. What you have for lunch is determined to an extent by the restaurant you choose. We are limited by where our habits lead us. This is why mastering our decisive moments throughout your day is so important. Each day is made up of many moments, but it is really only a few habitual choices that determine the path you take.

When you start a new habit, start small. You'll find that almost any habit can be launched in a scaled down version that takes less than two-minutes to do.

14. How to Make Good Habits Inevitable and Bad Habits Impossible

Sometimes success is less about making good habits easy and more about making bad habits hard. If you find yourself continually struggling to follow through on your plans, then you can make your bad habits more difficult by creating a *commitment device*. A commitment device is a choice you make in the present that controls your actions in the future. It is a way to lock in future behavior, bind you to good habits, and restrict you from bad ones.

I have a friend with an outlet timer on his internet timer. At 10 p.m. each night, the timer cuts the power and everyone knows it's time to go to bed. I cut calories when dining at restaurants by asking the waiter to split my meal and box half before the meal is served. You may wish to pre-pay your yoga session.

The key is to change the task such that it requires more work to get *out* of the good habit than to get started in it. The best way to break a bad habit is to make it impractical to do. Increase the friction

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until you don't even have an option to act. Often using technology to automate your habits can be the most reliable and effective way to guarantee the right behavior.

The 4th Law: Make It Satisfying

15. The Cardinal Rule of Behavior Change

Imagine you're a giraffe roaming the plains of Africa. You're making decisions every day with immediate impact. You're thinking about what to eat or where to sleep or how to avoid a predator, and you're constantly focused on the present or the very near future. You live in an immediate-return environment.

In modern society, however, we live in a *delayed-return environment*. We can work for years before our actions deliver the intended payoff. We work out so we won't be overweight next year. We put aside money now so we can retire decades from now.

After thousands of years in an immediate return environment, our brains evolved to prefer quick payoffs to long-term ones. Every habit produces multiple outcomes across time. Unfortunately, those outcomes are often misaligned. Smoking might kill you in ten years, but it reduces stress and eases your nicotine cravings *now*. Overeating is harmful in the long run but appetizing in the moment.

With our bad habits, the immediate outcome usually feels good, but the ultimate outcome feels bad. With good habits, it is the reverse. The immediate outcome is not enjoyable, but the ultimate outcome feels good. The costs of your good habits are in the present. The costs of your bad habits are in the future.

To change your behavior and get a habit to stick, you need to feel immediately successful even if it's in a small way. A habit needs to be enjoyable for it to last. What is *immediately* rewarded is repeated. What is *immediately* punished is avoided. Change is easy when it is enjoyable.

16. How to Stick with Good Habits Every Day

A habit tracker is a simple way to measure whether you did a habit. The most basic format is to get a calendar and cross off each day you stick with your routine. As time rolls by, the calendar becomes a record of your habit streak.

Habit tracking is powerful because it leverages multiple Laws of Behavior Change. It keeps you honest. It's motivating. It simultaneously makes a behavior obvious, attractive, and satisfying. Habit tracking also helps keep your eye on the ball. You're focused on the process rather than the result.

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Despite these benefits, I've left this discussion until now for the simple reason that many people resist the idea of tracking and measuring. It can feel like a burden because it forces you into *two* habits: the habit you're trying to build and the habit of tracking it. Tracking isn't for everyone, and there is no need to measure your entire life. But nearly anyone can benefit from it in some form even if it's only temporary.

No matter how consistent you are with your habits, it is inevitable that life will interrupt you at some point. Whenever this happens to me, I try to remind myself to never miss twice. Maybe I'll eat an entire pizza, but I'll follow it up with a healthy meal. I can't be perfect, but I can avoid a second lapse. Missing twice is the start of a new habit.

17. How an Accountability Partner Can Change Everything

Just as we are likely to repeat an experience when the ending is satisfying, we are also more likely to avoid an experience when the ending is painful. Pain is an effective teacher. If a failure is painful, it gets fixed. If a failure is relatively painless, it gets ignored. The more immediate and costly a mistake is, the faster you will learn from it.

We repeat bad habits because they serve us in some way, and that makes them hard to abandon. The best way I know to overcome this predicament is to increase the speed of the punishment associated with the behavior. There can't be a gap between the action and the consequences.

The more immediate the pain happens, the less likely the behavior. If you want to prevent bad habits and eliminate unhealthy behaviors, then adding an instant cost to the action is a great way to reduce their odds.

An accountability partner can create an immediate cost to inaction. We care deeply about what others think of us, and we do not want others to have a lesser opinion of us. Knowing that someone else is watching you can be a powerful motivator. This is precisely why inviting someone to help us stay accountable or signing a habit contract can work so well.

Advanced Tactics: How to Go from Being Merely Good to Being Truly Great

18. The Truth About Talent (When Genes Matter & When They Don't)

For athletes, the secret to maximizing the odds of success is to choose the right field of competition. Habits are easier to perform, and more satisfying to stick with, when they align with your natural inclinations and abilities.

People are born with different abilities. On the surface, your genes seem to be fixed, and it's no fun to talk about things you cannot control. Plus, phrases like *biological determinism* makes it sound like

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certain individuals are destined for success and others are doomed for failure. This is a shortsighted view of the influence of genes on behavior.

The strength of genetics is also their weakness. Genes cannot be easily changed, which means they provide a powerful advantage in favorable circumstances and a serious disadvantage in unfavorable circumstances. In short, genes do not determine your destiny. They do determine your areas of opportunity. The key is to direct your effort toward areas that both excite you and match your natural skills, to align your ambition with your ability.

Our habits are not solely determined by our personalities, but there is no doubt that our genes nudge in a certain direction. Our deeply rooted preferences make certain behaviors easier for some people than for others. The takeaway is that you should build habits that work for your personality.

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

The Goldilocks Rule states that humans experience peak motivation when working on tasks that are right on the edge of their current abilities. They shouldn't be too hard or too easy, but just right.

When you're starting a new habit, it's important to keep the behavior as easy as possible so you can stick with it even when conditions aren't perfect. Once a habit has been established, however, it's important to continue to advance in small ways. These little improvements and new challenges will help to keep you engaged. If you hit the Goldilocks Zone just right, you can achieve a *flow state*. A flow state is the experience of being "in the zone" and fully immersed in an activity. The core idea of the Goldilocks Rule remains. Working on challenges of just manageable difficulty seems crucial for maintaining motivation.

Improvement requires a delicate balance. You need to regularly search for challenges that push you to your edge while continuing to make enough process to stay motivated. Behaviors need to remain novel in order for them to stay attractive and satisfying. Without variety, we get bored. Boredom is perhaps the greatest villain on the quest for self-improvement. Anyone can work hard when they feel motivated. It's the ability to keep going when work isn't exciting that makes the difference.

20. The Downside of Creating Good Habits

Habits create the foundation for mastery. They are the backbone of any pursuit of excellence. However, the benefits of habits come at a cost. At first, each repetition develops fluency, speed, and skill. Then, as a habit becomes automatic, you become less sensitive to feedback. You fall into mindless repetition. It becomes easier to let mistakes slide. When you can do it "good enough" on autopilot, you stop thinking about how to do it better.

The upside of habits is that we can do things without thinking. The downside of habits is that you get used to doing things a certain way and stop paying attention to little errors. You assume you're

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getting better because you're gaining experience. In reality, you are merely reinforcing your current habits, not improving them. In fact, some research has shown that once a skill has been mastered there is usually a slight *decline* in performance over time.

To avoid slipping into the trap of complacency, we need to establish a system for reflection and review. Personally, I employ two primary modes of reflection and review.

In December, for my *Annual Review*, I ask myself (1) What went well this year? (2) What didn't go so well this year? (3) What did I learn?

Six months later, for my *Integrity Report*, I ask myself (1) What are the core values that drive my life and work? (2) How am I living and working with integrity right now? (3) How can I set a higher standard in the future?

The tighter we cling to an identity, the harder it becomes to grow beyond it.

Life is constantly changing, so we need to periodically check in to see if our old habits and beliefs are still serving us. A lack of self-awareness is poison. Reflection and review is the antidote.

Conclusion: The Secret to Results That Last

Can one tiny change transform your life? It's unlikely you would say so, but what if you made another and another and another? At some point, you will have to admit that your life was transformed by one small change. The power of atomic habits is tiny changes leading to remarkable results.

Sometimes a habit will be hard to remember and you will need to *make it obvious*. Other times you won't feel like starting and you'll need to *make it attractive*. In many cases, you may find that a habit will be too difficult and you'll need to *make it easy*. Sometimes, you won't feel like sticking with it and you'll need to *make it satisfying*.

The holy grail of habit change is not a single 1% improvement, but a thousand of them. It's a bunch of atomic habits stacking up, each one a fundamental unit of the overall system. The secret to getting results is to never stop making improvements. It's remarkable what you can build if you just don't stop.