

Book Digest

Atomic Habits

4th law: Make it SATISFYING

The case for delayed gratification

As it relates to our habits' implementation, the problem is not knowledge; it's consistency. And **we are a lot more likely to repeat a behavior when the experience is satisfying!** That's logical. Pleasure is one of our brain's favorite teachers: **if the behavior comes with pleasure, the behavior is worth repeating. Conversely, when there is no pleasure involved, our motivation sinks very low.** James Clear sums it up this way: "What is rewarded is repeated. What is punished is avoided." For better or for worse, this is the law we've based our educational system on for a reason.

So, the first three laws taught us how to increase our odds of performing our desired behavior today (make it obvious, attractive and easy!) and this fourth law explains how to increase our odds of repeating it: make it satisfying.

And even more importantly, make it satisfying **IMMEDIATELY.**

Our brains developed in an immediate return environment, where our entire existence was focused on the here, the now, and the very near future. We now live in a delayed-return environment, where it can take years before we bear the fruits of our labor. This is a case where evolution did not get a chance to catch up with our new situation. Indeed, it was merely 500 years ago that we shifted as a society in the way we build our daily lives. When we lived in the wild, it made sense for us to place a high value on instant gratification; there was no need to plan for the distant future. As a result, **our brains tend to favor quick payoffs over long term ones.** It's a phenomenon called "time inconsistency" leading us to favor the present over the future. It usually serves us well but not when we want to build daily habits to support our long term goals! Indeed the consequences of bad habits are delayed but their rewards immediate...and the benefits of good habits tend to be delayed while their strenuous components are immediately obvious.

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Because our brains prioritize the present moment, relying only on good intentions to shape our future is not the safest bet.

We can **train ourselves to delay gratification, but only if we work with our human nature** and *not against it*. This is where adding a little of immediate pleasure can strengthen our good habits and adding a little pain can help us get rid of the unwanted ones.

Feeling successful, even in a small way, is the best way to make a habit stick. And we should focus especially on the ending of our daily activity, because it is what we tend to remember the most! The idea of reinforcement through an immediate reward then comes naturally. Indeed, it makes the ending of the habit satisfying.

A word of caution, **we need to choose our rewards in a way which further supports the new identity we're trying to build and not as a direct conflict!** The goal is to align our short term pleasure with our long term vision. Candy is not the best way to reward ourselves for exercising if our goal is a healthier way of living.

Thankfully, doing the habit itself will soon bring out some intrinsic reward (more energy, a better mood...); it will make us feel good just because it will feel like honoring a part of who we are. But **before our new found identity can sustain our identity, we need the motivation to build the habit** in the first place, which is why a habit needs to be enjoyable for it to last.

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Our favorite quotes for this part

"The costs of your good habits are in the present.
The costs of your bad habits are in the future."

"As a more general rule, the more immediate pleasure you get from an action,
the more strongly you should question whether it aligns
with your long term goals."

"Let's update the Cardinal Rule of Behavior Change:
What is immediately rewarded is repeated.
What is immediately punished is avoided."

"The more a habit becomes a part of your life,
the less you need outside encouragement to follow through."

"Incentives can start a habit. Identity sustains a habit."

"Change is easy when it's enjoyable."

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Habit tracking

A habit tracker is a simple way to measure whether we did our habit or not. Benjamin Franklin apparently tracked his progress every evening on thirteen personal virtues by which he wanted to live. Our goal is **to build momentum by never breaking the streak. Habit tracking allows us to make our behavior simultaneously obvious, attractive AND SATISFYING.** It also can offer, depending on the chosen media, a series of **visual cues**, which will feel very rewarding. And on top of it all, **habit tracking keeps us HONEST.**

Progress is the most effective form of motivation. A habit tracker makes progress **quantifiable.** It's a visual proof of how far we've come, and it feels very good to watch our results grow. It helps endure the unavoidable setback...and it **focuses us on the process** instead of the results!

In summary, habit tracking helps us in three powerful ways: it **reminds** us to act, **motivates** us to keep going, and **rewards** us after each step. *We ARE becoming who we have decided to become, there's tangible proof in front of us.*

If it feels too daunting, that's okay: James Clear reminds us that tracking is not for everyone. Yet to do so even if only temporarily in the beginning, can benefit most of us. And it's even better if measurements can be automated (ex: The Health app tracks your steps on your iphone whether you want it or not and most banks track our spending habits in one way or another).

Finally, **timing matters too**: tracking is even more rewarding if it's done right after habit completion.

Our favorite quotes for this part

"The mere act of tracking a behavior can spark the urge to change it."

"It's always interesting to see
how you've **ACTUALLY** been spending your time."

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Habit Pitfalls

Habit RECOVERY

We can't be perfect, no one can (sigh...). But we can avoid a second lapse!

We are bound to make at least one mistake and to have one day on which we cannot perform our desired habit. However there's no reason to let it send us in a spiral of repeated missteps on our way to success. **The goal shouldn't be to avoid any failure, it should be to rebound quickly.**

All-or-nothing cycles are a trap. This is why it is so valuable to show up even for one minute on our bad days. It helps us maintain the compounding effect and not let losses make us lose our stamina. Sometimes the goal is to improve on our projects, sometimes the goal is only to reaffirm that our goal is still here.

In the end the best rule of thumb here is: **You might have to miss one day; but NEVER MISS TWICE.**

The DARK SIDE of habit tracking

Another pitfall to be mindful of is *our tendency to mistake the measurement with the purpose behind it*. For instance when our goal is to get meaningful work done, we can misguidedly end up focusing on putting in long hours, no matter how productive they are!

Measurement is useful if it adds context to the larger picture, not if we let it consume us. Our culture trained us to focus almost exclusively on numbers and **it's easy to forget that measurable factors are not the only factors that exist.** But not being able to measure something doesn't mean that something is not important. We all know how dangerous it is to measure how many patients a physician sees every day instead of the quality of care. You can't objectively quantify kindness and attention and yet they matter more to each of our patients than the length of our patient list.

We need to make sure we're measuring the right thing...remembering that it's a reflection of our goal, not our goal! Acknowledge that some progress can't be measured and that's okay: it's progress anyway.

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Habit Pitfalls

Our favorite quotes for this part

“The first mistake is never the one that ruins you.”

“Missing once is an accident.
Missing twice is the start of a new habit.”

“The problem is not slipping up;
the problem is thinking that you can’t do something perfectly,
you shouldn’t at all.”

“We optimize for what we measure.
When we choose the wrong measurement, we get the wrong behavior.”

“In our data-driven world,
we tend to overvalue numbers
and undervalue anything ephemeral, soft, and difficult to quantify.”

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The habit contract

As usual, the author reminds us that **what helps us build good habits can be reverse engineered to unroot our less healthy ones**. And we all know that the more costly a mistake is, the faster we learn from it and not to repeat it! Especially if the negative consequence hits us immediately after our undesired behavior occurs.

We need to remember that whether we're aware of the secondary benefit or not, **we repeat our bad habits because they serve us in some way**. This is why they're so hard to abandon. **A quick punishment (as long as it fits the crime and our goal which is to help ourselves help ourselves...not self-torture)**, especially if it's a tangible, concrete, and immediate consequence of our behavior, **will help us shift gears** a lot faster!

This is why James Clear recommends **creating a habit contract**. A true to form in-writing signed contract stating what will happen to us if we don't meet our daily goals. We thereby **enroll an accountability partner** (as in a compassionate and loving friend - once again, relying on our enemies would lead us into shame and not towards self-empowerment) who gets something from us if we don't show up.

It's a powerful way to add a little social cost to our undesired behavior and a great change inducer! Knowing that we're being watched is a powerful motivation to act in alignment with our values.

To create a new habit:

- Cue: MAKE IT OBVIOUS
- Craving: MAKE IT ATTRACTIVE
- Response: MAKE IT EASY
- Reward: MAKE IT SATISFYING

To break an old habit:

- Cue: MAKE IT INVISIBLE
- Craving: MAKE IT UNATTRACTIVE
- Response: MAKE IT DIFFICULT
- Reward: MAKE IT UNSATISFYING