

Book Digest

Atomic Habits

Fundamentals: The surprising power of atomic habits

Why small habits make a big difference

We tend to think that massive success requires massive action, underestimating how **meaningful 1% improvement can be in the long run** whether they're noticeable or not in our daily lives. And it is true for the **value of good habits AND the cost of bad ones**, two to five years down the line. Our current outcomes are a reflection of our current habits, which compound either for or against us.

What progress is really like

The plateau of latent potential: before we can yield any result from a new habit, **we need to persist long enough to cross a threshold** and break through this plateau. The author takes the example of warming up an ice cube one degree at a time from 26 F to 32 F. At first, we will not notice the impact of the small incremental changes we're making and, all at once, *when* we've reached and crossed the plateau, our work will pay off... and the ice cube will suddenly melt.

Forget about goals, focus on systems instead: the goal is the result we want to achieve, our destination; systems are the processes, the maps we'll use to get there.

- Winners and losers have the same goals. Having a goal therefore cannot be the solution to success!
- Focusing on Achieving a goal will bring a temporary change, changing our system is the way to secure long term change.
- A goal first mentality keeps us stuck in an either/or mentality where we can only be happy for a fleeting moment if we achieve our goal and feel like a failure if we don't. Focusing on the system allows us to find joy and satisfaction everyday and to welcome any results we will get, not only the one we were aiming at.
- Goals are at odds with long-term progress. Once you've reached the finish line you drew for yourself, what happens next? We must find the motivation to start a new journey. However, putting our energy on refining and continually improving our process will allow us to create boundless progress and to stay motivated no matter how many milestones we've already crossed.

James Clear reminds us that when we're having trouble changing habits, the problem isn't us, it's our system; and this is where lies the power of atomic habits: "a regular practice or routine that is not only small and easy to do, but also the source of incredible power; a component of the system of compound growth".

"(...) atoms are the building blocks of molecules, atomic habits are the building blocks of results".

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Our favorite quotes for this part

"It is easy to overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making small improvements on a daily basis."

"Success is the product of daily habits - not once-in-a-lifetime transformation."

"You get what you repeat."

"Mastery requires patience."

"The task of breaking a habit is like uprooting a powerful oak within us. And the task of building a good habit is like cultivating a delicate flower one day at a time."

"Goals are good for setting directions, but systems are best for making progress."

"Fix the inputs and the outputs will fix themselves."

"This is your commitment to the process that will determine your progress."

"You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."

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Fundamentals: Habits shape our identity (and vice versa)

Three layers of behavior change: we can change our behavior by changing our:

- **Outcomes (what),**
- **Process (how),**
- **Identity (who).**

Instead of focusing on what we do, we have the option of choosing who we wish to become.

What we believe about ourselves impacts everything we do. We need to change the beliefs which underlie our behaviors for our behaviors to change. Otherwise we will not be able to sustain change. Pride is also a powerful motivator. When we're proud of what we do, we are motivated to keep doing it. When we're proud of who we are, we're motivated to keep every habit allowing us to show up for this part of our identity. The goal is not to finish one experiment, the goal is to be a researcher. The goal is not to finish residency, the goal is to become a physician. Who we believe we are will dictate positively or negatively our behavior. This is why we need to bring our non conscious beliefs about ourselves to the surface and examine them. Believing that we're terrible with excel will hinder our ability to learn how to use the software efficiently. Believing we're a good listener will help us hold space for what our partner wants to share, even when we don't agree. It is crucial for us to realize that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves will shape our behavior even when they don't serve us. We have to continuously edit our beliefs in order to expand and upgrade our identity. Our change of habits will follow.

Two step process to change identity: Identity comes from *Essentitas* and *Identidem* which means respectively *Being* and *Repeatedly*.

Our habits give us daily proof of who we appear to be. Someone who runs, who yells, who eats a lot of vegetables, who drinks coffee... The process here is to first decide who we want to be and then prove it to ourselves with small wins. Change does not have to be radical, it has to be meaningful. Changing who you believe to be will change the things you do and you change who you believe you are by changing the things you do. Finally, each good habit teaches us how to trust ourselves (and as usual... vice versa). I do pause before answering when I'm angry. I do not go to the gym on weekends. James Clear reminds us here that the good news is that we don't have to get it right 100% of the time for our new identity to take shape. Each repetition is a vote for who we want to become, and we need a majority not a consensus to win this election. He advises us to ask ourselves "who is the type of person that could get the outcome I want?" Instead of focusing on the outcome (being a caring doctor), we embody our new identity: "I'm the kind of doctor who gives each patient the time and empathy they need". And there is a feedback loop between our habits and identity. They shape each other.

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Our favorite quotes for this part

"Behind every system of actions is a system of beliefs."

"The biggest barrier to positive change at any level – individual, team, society – is identity conflict."

"Progress requires unlearning."

"Every action you take is a vote for the person you wish to become."

"If nothing changes, nothing is going to change."

"Your habits shape your identity and your identity shapes your habits."

"Quite literally, you become your habits."

"Habits do not restrict freedom. They create it."

"Building habits in the present allows you to do more of what you want in the future."

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FOUR SIMPLE STEPS TO BUILD BETTER HABITS

Our brains automate our solving processes whenever we face a problem repeatedly. James Clear quotes Jason Hreha who wrote that “habits are simply reliable solutions to recurring problems in our environment”. We will then stop analyzing the situation and start reacting instead of responding: “if this, then that”. Our brain uses what it learned in the past in order to predict what will work best now to secure our future outcomes. Once the brain has identified a valid solution, the conscious mind will not be recruited anymore to solve the problem. We default to our habitual reaction. This is why it is very important to choose and evaluate them. A common fear is that habits and routine will make life feel dull and rigid, but the right habits automate what needs to happen to make the fundamentals of life easier and allow us to keep our mental space and energy to think about what truly requires our attention and fuel our creativity.

We can build our habits easily by using the **habit loop** which relies on four elements (the basis of James Clear’s four laws!).

- **Cue:** first indication that the reward is close.
- **Craving:** a desire to change our internal state.
- **Response:** the habit! (which can be an automatic thought or action)
- **Reward:** the end goal of every habit. To satisfy or teach us.

Our brains are constantly evaluating if our actions were successful or not, based on the feelings of pleasure or disappointment they provide. This is why rewards both induce and close the feedback loop which helps us build long standing habits. All we need is to then link the reward to the cue. The first three steps allow for the habit to occur, the fourth one ensures the habit is repeated.

*We can then deduce the four laws of James Clear’s framework:
they are meant to enable the four pillars to play their respective roles!*

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

“A habit is a behavior that has been repeated enough times to become automatic.

The ultimate purpose of habits is to solve the problems of life with as little energy and effort as possible.”