

Atomic Habits Summary

By James Clear

What are some good habits that you'd like to build into your life? And, do you have any bad habits that are restricting you, or limiting your full potential?

Atomic Habits shows us how to harness our mindset to use habits to our advantage – we often fail to break bad habits, not because we don't want to, but because we don't have the *tools*. Seemingly insignificant changes create a compound effect, that increases new habits to make positive lasting change.

So, what are some of the ways that habits can improve our daily lives? Well, it's all about consistency. For example: if you were to read two pages of a book today, you probably wouldn't feel any wiser. If you were to adjust your behavior by reading a chapter every day for a month, you might find yourself having completed a few books, and feeling highly-accomplished. On the other hand, eating a chocolate bar today, won't expand your waistline. However, if you eat sugary treats every single day for an entire month, you'll probably find yourself needing to adjust your belt buckle. These examples show us how the compound effects of a small daily habit, can create a lasting and meaningful change.

We'll briefly explore what James Clear has to teach us about habits, how we can develop them, and the methods for harnessing their full power. We generally underestimate the significance of minor improvements or indulgences, and *Atomic Habits* covers the latest science behind what drives our behavior.

The Big Impact of Small Change

Did you know that you can reduce crime significantly, just by adding streetlights to a dark neighborhood? Meaningful impacts are often the result of just one small change.

For example; Dr. Anne Thorndike wanted to improve her patients' dietary habits, without requiring them to make conscious decisions. All she did was re-design her hospital's food court. Next to the main cashpoints, she replaced unhealthy soda drinks with bottles of water in the fridges. Within three months, soda sales dropped by 11%, while water sales shot up by 25%. All because the soda was less visible. In this case, replacing the cue of seeing soda, with seeing water, positively changed her hospital patients' behavior.

Removing a trigger can be equally transformative. In his book, *The Power of Habit*, author Charles Duhigg reports an incident in Iraq. The military needed to end riots in an Iraqi town, so they made one change. They simply removed all food vendors from the town square. This seemingly insignificant change disrupted the entire riot. People started to get hungry later in the day, so they moved to their homes to get food. The rioter's need for food, replaced their movement towards violence. Again, this demonstrates how simple changes can make a big difference.

We're all led to believe that we need to perform radical actions, if we want radical improvement and transformation. James Clear shows how small habits can be enough to drive transformative change. However, to harness the power of habits, we need to understand them first.

Habits Are the Things We Do Daily, Without

Much Thought

Atomic Habits examines how habitual behavior shapes our lives. Although we think that most of our daily behavior relies on decision-making, roughly 45% of what we do, is actually based on habit. So, this means that we spend nearly half of our lives on autopilot. Habits automate repetitive daily tasks by tapping into our subconscious. The benefit of subconscious automation is that habits can free up our brainpower for unique and creative processes.

However, just because habits may make life more automated, doesn't mean they're always beneficial. Take smoking as an example. Smokers often use a cigarette to relieve anxiety or stress. The behavior of using cigarettes, as a coping mechanism, shows us how short term solutions can have a detrimental effect on long term health.

So, bad habits may offer short term gains, but good habits seldom reveal their benefits to us immediately. This can be tricky if you generally seek instant gratification. However, the goal is to understand, and then to revise, your habitual behavior. Let's explore how habits are formed by looking at the science.

Entrenching Habits Through a 4-Step Execution Process

The author describes the 4-step process as follows: first comes a cue, then a craving, then a response, and finally a reward.

Cues are something that we notice. They're pieces of information that

suggest that there may be a reward waiting for us. Cravings are linked to our desire for rewards. Responses are what we do to get these rewards. Finally, the rewards themselves, are the pleasurable feelings that we get. The reward completes the 4-step cycle.

But, the question is, when does this process create an entrenched habit? To answer this, we can look at toddlers. We've all seen toddlers repeatedly throwing a toy on the floor to provoke a laugh. The more you laugh, the more they throw. They enjoy the attention. So, they do it again and again. The human brain is wired to repeat the behaviors that bring instantly gratifying results.

Coffee lovers understand this all too well. Their cue is waking up in the morning. Their craving is wanting to feel awake. The response is stumbling to the kitchen to make coffee. Finally, their reward is sipping on the coffee. They entrench a habit through sufficient repetition, and their habits start identifying them as a morning coffee person.

Our brains are also hardwired to dislike delays and hassles. If you had to complete a crossword puzzle to turn on your coffee machine, your coffee ritual might be less habitual. James Clear calls this "task friction." The concept is that when friction is low, habits are easy, and when friction is high, habits are difficult. The trick is to create an environment where doing the right thing is as easy as possible.

So, now that we understand the process behind habit formation, let's look at how we make use of this process for self-improvement.

The 4 Bricks That Help Cement Good Habits

Building good habits means building a solid foundation. Simple changes to your surroundings can support good habits, and break the bad ones. James Clear emphasizes that our environment shapes what we do. There are 4 tricks to making good habits stick. You need to make them obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying.

Imagine that you want to get better at playing guitar. First, you need to make the habit cue obvious. Put your guitar in a place where you'll see it, and where it's easily accessible. That way, you'll tend to play it more.

Maybe, you want to read more. Each morning, when you make your bed, make sure that you put your book on top of your pillow. This action will make it more likely that you'll read some pages before you go to sleep.

Do you want to get more hours of sleep per night? Make sleep feel attractive. The more attractive or appealing an environment is, the more time you'll want to spend there. So, make an effort to create a bedroom that's cozy and calm for yourself - a place in which you'll want to spend more time.

Do you want to eat better? Make it easy. Start by reducing "task friction." This friction is anything that adds time or hassle. For example, bulk-cook your healthy meals, or pre-chop your veggies so that you have a convenient grab and go snack. Lastly, make it satisfying. Don't eat carrot sticks, if carrots aren't your thing. Rather, find healthy snacks that you enjoy. The more you enjoy doing something, the more likely you are to stick with it.

For bad habits, we'll flip all these ideas around - doing the opposite. The idea is to make them invisible, unattractive, more difficult, and ultimately,

unsatisfying. So, place junk food out of sight. Only allow yourself to smoke outside in the cold. Make your TV harder to watch by taking the batteries out of the remote control.

Ultimately, you want to make your bad habits as unsatisfying as possible. However, change is never easy. Building a house, that becomes a home for good habits, takes some work.

Unfortunately, good habits are harder to build, because their rewards aren't as immediately gratifying to you as they are for bad habits. It's likely that when you start to develop a good habit, such as learning a new language or upskilling yourself, you'll feel frustrated in the beginning. The goal of sticking to good habits is trusting in their trajectory. It's about playing the long game! However, to build good habits, we need effective strategies to up our game.

The First Strategies for Building Good Habits Are; Start and Stack

It may sound cliched, but you must focus on the start, and not the finish line. When we dream of big changes, often, our excitement or enthusiasm takes over. We end up trying to do too much, too soon. This early enthusiasm often leads to disappointment. We don't get our desired results quickly enough, and we lose interest.

If you don't focus only on the start, the task may feel daunting to you. Often, we're overwhelmed by projects or goals that seem to be too big. The magnitude of some tasks can hinder our ability to start the process because they feel impossible.

Here is where the two-minute rule comes in. James Clear advises us, that when starting a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to initiate. To apply this rule, focus on small starting steps, and not on the end result.

For example, change your focus from being a marathon runner, to just putting on your running shoes. From finishing a book, to just reading three pages. From completing laundry, to just folding socks.

You can also stack a new habit, on top of a habit that's already in place. This approach gives you the power of momentum to get going. Once you're in the habit of putting on your running shoes every day, then get into the habit of going for a run.

Do you want to start a daily meditation practice? Tie this habit to your trusty morning coffee ritual. Turn on the kettle, and use this as the cue to sit silently for a few minutes. However, as we know, starting something, and sticking to something, are two completely different things.

To Make Habits Stick: Get Specific, Synchronize, and Keep Score

How do we create good healthy habits when daily life, and our lack of motivation, both get in the way? For most of us, exercise isn't what we

crave after a tiring workday.

This was certainly the case for Ronan, an electrical engineering student. Ronan knew that he should be exercising more. He used his engineering skills to design a program to synchronize his stationary bike to his laptop. This ingenious solution meant that Netflix would only play when Ronan cycled at a certain speed. If he slowed down, Netflix would pause, and he'd need to cycle faster to finish the episode that he was watching. Synchronizing something you crave, with something you dread, can give you that motivational push to keep pedaling. The difficulty though, is that it's often our clarity, and not our motivation, that's holding us back.

A study of voters in the United States, found that the phrasing of questions matter. Citizens who were asked; "At what time will you vote?" and "How will you get to the voting station?" were more likely to actually turn out to vote, than those who researchers just asked if they were going to vote.

So, it's clear that the power of specifics matters. If you want to make a change, you need to think about when, where, and how. Rather than telling yourself that you want to get more sleep, set a specific goal, like telling yourself that you'll be ready for bed by 9:30 pm every single night.

To stick to our habits, we also need to build in rewards. Here is where the scoreboard strategy comes in. The scoreboard strategy is a way of building up chains of behaviors, to stick to a given task for some time. The comedian Jerry Seinfeld, used this strategy to build up his comedic repertoire. Jerry would mark a big X on his calendar for every day that he came up with a joke. His goal wasn't about coming up with the best joke; it was simply not to break the chain, and to make sure that he kept building on his material.

The scoreboard strategy is a very simple, yet effective way of ensuring that you stick to a task. As with Jerry, you can also utilize a habit tracker. With a habit tracker, you can easily score your habits, and have fun building the chain and measuring your progress. These tiny changes in behavior obviously won't transform your life overnight. However, if you turn these small changes into a habit chain, then you'll probably change your life for the better.

In Conclusion

The key message from Atomic Habits is that, self-improvement is all about a series of small yet significant changes. If you're the type of person who is overwhelmed and cautious about committing to big lifestyle changes, then Atomic Habits offers you some useful strategies. Change can be an intimidating journey. However, as with all journeys, it takes preparation, and a bit of self-awareness. We all know that change doesn't happen in a vacuum, but, if real transformative change is what you're after, then you need to start somewhere. This book's message isn't to rush towards the finish line, but to make a series of small but meaningful steps that will lead you to lasting change.

So, if you're prepared to put in the work, invest in yourself, trust in the

trajectory, and believe in the compound power of your daily habits, then you may find that small changes will make a significant impact.