Tips for building strong habits

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Strong habits solve a lot of life’s problems with as little effort as possible. No daily or weekly habit will stay interesting forever, however; you will have to love boredom.

Your actions reveal how badly you want something. If you keep saying something is a priority but you never act on it, you don’t really want it. Be honest with yourself. The sacrifice of energy always comes before the reward.

You might not care if you fail, but you will care a lot more if your spirit or inner child fails. They can’t self-discipline themselves or use self-control and are relying on your cognitive abilities to set up a good system for your habits.

# Four steps to having strong habits

Habits have four steps: 1) cue, 2) craving, 3) response, and 4) reward. Make the cue obvious, make the craving attractive, make the response easy, and make the reward enjoyable.

The cue notices the reward and triggers your brain to get it. The craving is your motivation. The response is the actual habit you perform to obtain the reward, which leads to a positive feeling.

## Make the cue obvious

* Write down your current habits to become aware of them.
* Write out your implementation intentions: “I will [Behavior] at [Time] in [Location].”

Write out a plan beforehand about when and where you will implement a particular habit. Make the time and location so obvious that, with enough repetition, you get an urge to do the right thing at the right time even if you can’t say why. Being specific about what you want and how you will do it helps you avoid distractions.

* Use habit stacking: “After I [current habit], I will [new habit].”

Identify a current habit you already do each day and then stack a new behavior on top of that. Perhaps you can put them in spatial order. You can then make longer chains of habits.

* Design your environment. Make the cues of good habits obvious and visible.

## Make the craving attractive

* Use temptation bundling. Pair an action you need to do with an action you want to do.

Find a way to do the habit in a fun and alluring way, such as brushing your teeth on your back.

* Join a culture where your desired behavior is the normal behavior.

This could be a group with whom you already have something in common. Remaining part of a group after achieving a goal is crucial to maintaining your habits. It is friendship and community that embed a new identity and help behaviors last over the long run.

* Create a motivation ritual.

Do something you enjoy immediately before a hard habit. Perhaps use mindfulness to bring the “flow” feeling into your body in order to be productive. Do this visually, auditorily, and kinesthetically. Imagine a sequence of slides rapidly moving through your mind. Also, think about what it is going to feel like after you do the habit.

* Schedule something in the future related to it to lock you into good behavior.

Maybe you buy a plane ticket for next year to a place where you hope to give a presentation.

## Make the response easy

* Decrease the number of steps between you and your good habits.
* Prime your environment to make future actions easier.
* Optimize the small choices that deliver outsize impact.

Do something very small for 30 days. What it is doesn't matter. But it is important that you do it. Picking one small thing that you can commit to doing for the next 30 days in a row will make your life genuinely better in some small way. Do it solely because you said you would do it.

* Downscale your habits until you can do them in two minutes or less.
* Invest in technology and one-time purchases that lock in future behavior.
* Avoid missing twice in a row. When you miss once, highly prioritize it the next time.

Missing two days in a row but doing it for five days in a row that week is worse than doing it for four days that week but skipping a day after each one. The first mistake is never the one that ruins you. It is the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows.

The problem is not slipping up but thinking that if you can’t do it perfectly, you shouldn’t do it all. The all-or-nothing cycle of behavior change is just one pitfall that can derail your habits.

## Make the reward enjoyable

* Use reinforcement. Give yourself an immediate reward after you do your habit.
* Track your habits. Keep track of your habit streak and lengthen the chain.

Though you are having the smallest goals possible, keep a written log of how you showed up.

You could also keep a wall calendar of habit tallies. Then aim to improve your completed habit percentage by 1% a month.

You may want to have two jars of paper clips on your desk with a certain number of paper clips in one with the other jar empty. After each habit completion, put one paper clip in the second jar.

Reflect after a month or year. What has gone well so far? What hasn’t? What did I learn?

# When adding a new daily habit

If you add a habit, do it for 21 days. It will be a struggle for the first 21 days before it takes root. Willpower is a muscle; strengthen it. Or if you don’t do it every day for 21 days in a row, aim to do it 65 times. Then, after 21 days, perhaps add another new habit.

## Do it for just two minutes daily

When you start a new habit, scale down your first daily efforts to two minutes at the most. Writing a book starts with writing one sentence or one paragraph. What you want is a “gateway habit” that naturally leads you down a more productive path. The point is to master the habit of showing up. A habit must be established before it can be improved. As you master the art of showing up, the first two minutes become a ritual at the beginning of the routine. The more you ritualize the beginning of a process, the more likely it becomes that you can slip into the state of deep focus that is required to do great things.

**You must stop the effort after two minutes.**

The secret is to always stay below the point where it feels like work. This reinforces the identity you want to build. You are taking the smallest action that confirms the type of person you want to be. Then after mastering the first two minutes, advance the next week to an intermediate step and repeat the process – focusing on just the first two minutes of that and mastering that stage before moving on to the next level. Eventually you’ll end up with the habit you had hoped to build while still keeping your focus where it should be: the first two minutes of the behavior.

# Four steps to breaking a bad habit

Make the cue invisible, make the craving unattractive, make the response difficult, and make the reward unenjoyable.

* Make the cue invisible: Remove the cues of your bad habits from your environment.
* Make the craving unattractive: Reframe. Highlight the benefits of avoiding your bad habits.
* Make the response difficult: Increase the number of steps between you and your bad habits.
* Make the reward unenjoyable.

Get an accountability partner or accountability group to watch your behavior. Also, create a habit contract that includes making the costs of your bad habits public and painful. This is a verbal or written agreement in which you state your commitment to a particular habit and the punishment that will occur if you don’t follow through. Then you find one or two people to act as your accountability partners and sign off on the contract with you.

# The “7 habits of highly effective people”

1. Be proactive.
2. Begin with the end in mind.
3. First things first.
4. Think win-win.
5. Seek first to understand before being understood.
6. Synergize.
7. Sharpen the saw (your daily habits).

# Habits of a professional

* I show up every day.
* I show up no matter what. In sickness and health, I come to the factory.
* I stay on the job all day though my mind may wander.
* I am committed over the long haul.
* I know the stakes are high and real. It is for my self-actualization.
* I accept remuneration for my work. This instills the lunch-pail mentality.
* I master the technique of the job.
* I receive praise or blame in the real world.
* I incorporate myself if working on my own. I now work for the corporation, which is a separate entity from “my self” but which I am accountable to during working hours.