

How to Build Healthy Habits that Stick and Break Bad Ones.

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Did you know that around [40%](#) of our daily actions are actually habits? Despite habits being such a big part of our lives, many of us don't actually spend much effort to optimize them. But we should. The importance of habits cannot be understated.

F.M. Alexander said,

"People do not decide their futures, they decide their habits and their habits decide their futures."

James Clear, author of [Atomic Habits](#), says,

"The quality of our lives depends on the quality of our habits."

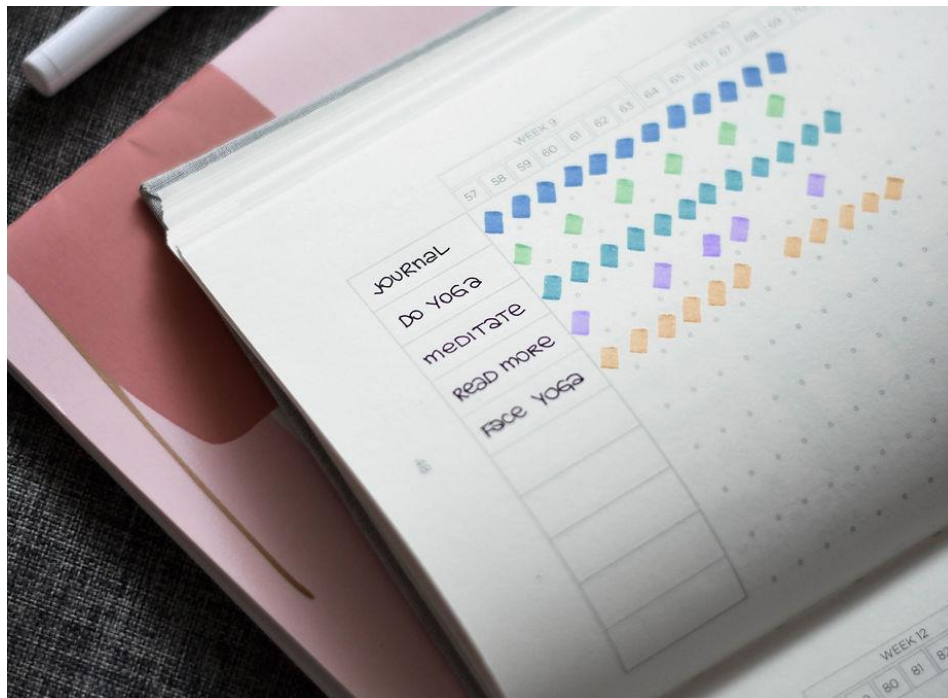


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Can you think of a healthy habit you want to start? Or perhaps a bad habit you want to break? Have you tried changing your habits before but it's just too hard? No worries, this article will teach you what you need to know to feel empowered to optimize your habits.

Part 1: How to Build a New Habit

First, let's talk about adding a new habit to your life. If you can't think of any new habits you want to add to your life, consider this list of common new years resolutions that people have:

- Start exercising
- Start eating more vegetables and fruits
- Start meditating
- Start reading
- Start saving money
- Start spending more time with loved ones

Note that this list is goals, not habits. To turn any of these goals into habits, we need to add a frequency and time duration to each. For example, we can say "exercise for 10 minutes every day."

Alright, hopefully you have a habit in mind that you want to build. That thought is a seed. We need to give that seed the proper nurture and care for it to grow and thrive.



[Image Source](#)

If you want a habit to stick, there are 8 important things to take care of:

1. Make it convenient so it's not a hassle
2. At the beginning, make it quick so you can't say no
3. After a while, make it just a little bit challenging so it's not boring
4. Have a memorable cue and use pairing
5. Savor the good feeling
6. Get a streak going

7. Get accountability
8. Optimize your environment

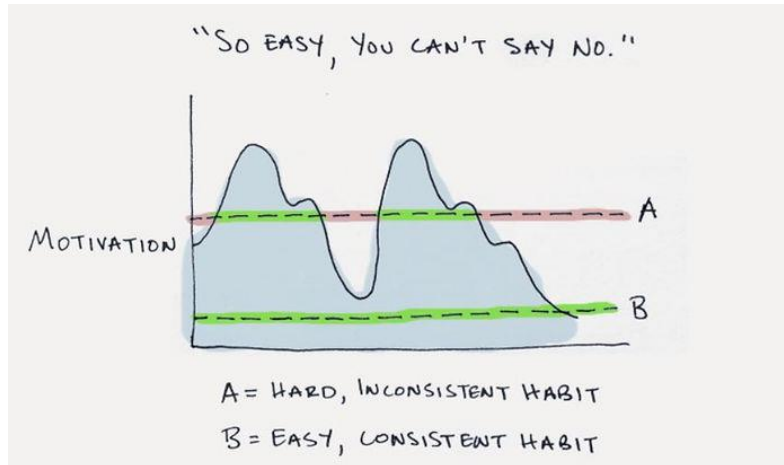
1.1 Make it convenient so it's not a hassle

In our modern society, most people live busy lives, and it's hard to find time to start a new habit. Habit experts all agree that convenience is one of the most important things to starting a new habit.

Let's use exercise as an example. Even though people sign up for a gym membership, the obstacle of having to change into gym clothes, going to the gym, then showering afterwards...it's just too inconvenient! If we want to start the habit of exercising, we're much better off doing some exercises at home, doing some simple exercises that don't require changing into gym clothes. I heard an example of someone putting a yoga mat right next to her bed so that when she wakes up in the morning, she literally rolls out of bed onto her yoga mat and starts doing some yoga. It's hard to get more convenient than that! Another example is eating more fruits and vegetables. Some people feel like washing, cutting, and cooking fruits and vegetables is a big hassle. If that's the case, buying pre-cut fruits and vegetables that can be eaten right away is a great solution. Furthermore, keep these fruit and vegetable platters on the kitchen counter in clear sight rather than at the back of the fridge. That way, it's convenient for you to eat some whenever you want, and you don't need to go through the hassle of reaching into the back of your fridge to get them. If you want to start saving money, you could get your bank to set up automatic transfers from your checking account to your savings account, or set up monthly deposits into a certain investment.

1.2 At the beginning, make it quick and easy so you can't say no

One of the big reasons we don't stick to a habit is because we start off too big. We might have high motivation at the beginning, but over the long-term, our motivation will vary due to certain days being more tiring than others. That's why new habits need to start small. Habit researcher BJ Fogg literally named his book [*Tiny Habits*](#), saying, *"The essence of Tiny Habits is to take a behavior you want, make it tiny, find where it fits naturally in your life, and nurture its growth."*



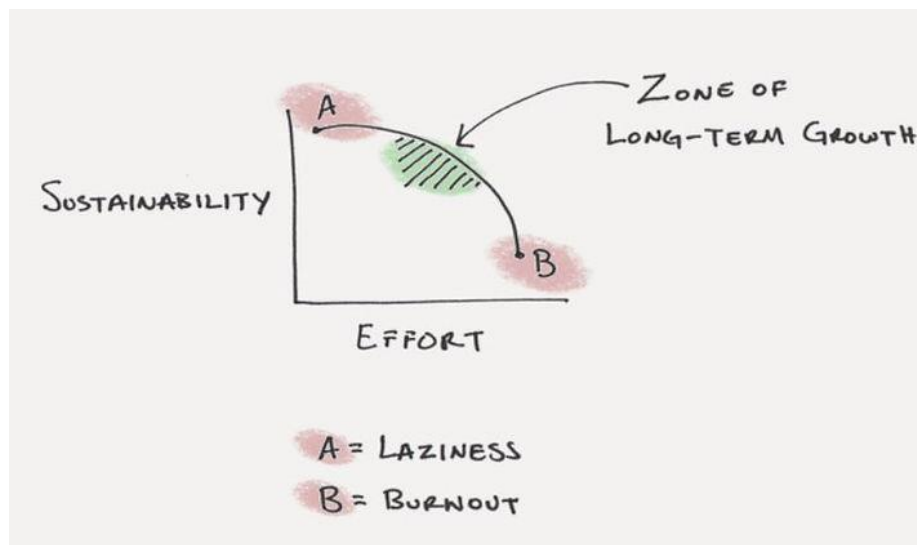
[Image Source](#)

For example, when I wanted to start exercising, I felt like going to the gym for 3 hours a week was too time consuming. Later, I found this [5-minute kitchen workout](#) from Dr. Rangan Chaterjee, and then I told myself to exercise for just 5 minutes a day. No matter how busy I was, I can't really say I'm so busy that I don't have 5 minutes. That helped me get the habit started.

If you want to start reading (or some other habit), you could start by just reading for 5-10 minutes a day, or whatever you feel is so small that you can't say no to.

1.3 After a while, make it a little bit challenging so it's not boring

In order for us to enjoy something and to feel like we're improving, we need to set the difficulty level to be just a little bit challenging. If it's too easy, we'll get bored. If it's too hard, we'll get discouraged.



[Image Source](#)

For example, I started exercising by doing at least 10 push-ups every day. Over the period of a month, I added more and more push-ups, until I felt like I was doing too many push-ups and it was getting boring. Then I decided to try one-handed push-ups. It was an exciting and fun challenge that took me another month to get good at. But if I had started with one-handed push ups, I probably would have quit after day 2.

For eating more fruits and vegetables, don't feel like you need to go from eating 10% fruits and vegetables to 50% fruits and vegetables immediately. Big changes are often not sustainable because they just feel like too much of a shock. Make small, gradual, and natural increases. The exception to his rule would be if something drastic happened in your life that calls for a drastic change, such as finding out you got some major disease. But for most of us, small incremental changes are best.

1.4 Have a memorable cue and use pairing

In order to remember to do your new habit, you need to have a **cue**, which is something that reminds you to do the habit. The more memorable the cue, the more likely you'll remember to do your habit.

For example, I put a dumbbell on my bathroom floor to remind myself to do some curls and push-ups before leaving the bathroom. I also put some fruit right on the kitchen counter so that whenever I pass by, I see the fruit and remember that I need to eat one today. To start my journaling habit, I put a journal and pen right on my bedside table.

Pairing means tagging the new habit you want onto an already existing habit that you already have. You could do that new habit before, during, or right after the existing habit. For example, I started exercising by telling myself I need to do 5 minutes of exercise before I eat lunch. I also started meditating by telling myself to do 20 minutes of meditation right after waking up. I heard an example of someone counting gratitudes while waiting for the kettle to boil in the morning to prepare her morning tea/coffee.

Dr. Chaterjee and his wife agreed that in the morning, from when they're making tea to until they finished drinking their tea, they would chat with each other and not be distracted by anything else. It only takes about 5 minutes or so, but he said it's had a huge positive impact on their relationship.

1.5 Savor the good feeling

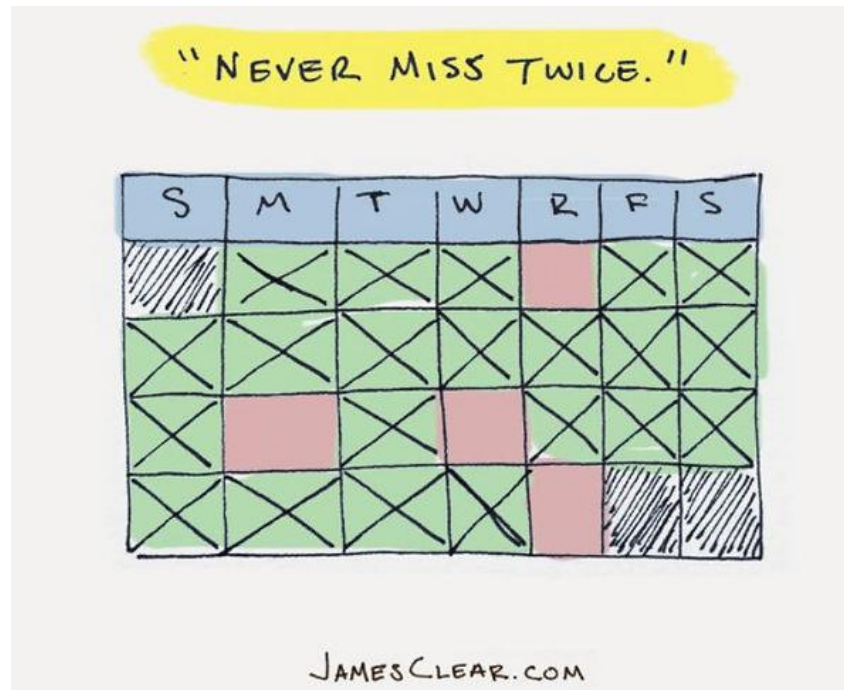
It's very important that habits help us feel good afterwards, and that we savor that good feeling. The memory of that good feeling is what will make the habit stronger and long lasting. When we start a new habit, we should consciously look for positive changes.

For example, I noticed that after a week of doing push ups, I was able to go from 20 to 30. I savored the good feeling of making progress. After a week of doing one-handed push ups, I was able to go from 0 to 3. Again, I savored that good feeling. After eating more variety of fruits and vegetables for a while, I noticed my skin got better. By putting in effort to notice

these changes and then savoring the good feeling, that got me excited and naturally wanted to keep going.

1.6 Get a streak going

The feeling of making progress is very satisfying, and it also builds our self-confidence as someone who is able to persevere. You can make a habit chart, or journal about your habit completion.



[Image Source](#)

For example, I spent a few minutes a night journaling about my day every night, and I simply added "exercised" into my journal. When I noticed a big improvement in my ability, I'd also journal it down to savor the feeling.

You may have heard the common saying that it takes 21 days to form a new habit. But [research](#) from University College London shows it actually takes on average 66 days for a new behavior to become automatic.

While two months may seem like a long time, there's some good news too. Firstly, it just re-emphasizes the need to make a new habit really convenient and quick. Second, if you haven't found yourself doing the new habit automatically after 21 days yet, you don't have to worry. It's supposed to take longer. Third, the researchers found that making a mistake once or twice doesn't impact the long-term habit formation as long as we get back on track quickly. In other words, it's okay if you miss a day, just reflect on why you missed that day and then get back on track the next day.

1.7 Get accountability

Accountability means having someone we report our progress to or someone who does the habit with us. For example, you might get a personal trainer who's waiting for you at the gym. Or you might join a book club that discusses a chapter every week. Since humans naturally are social creatures who care about the opinions of other humans, accountability can help us stick to a habit. Personally, I have a meditation buddy with whom I chat with once a week about how our meditation sessions went over the past week.

Accountability doesn't even have to be human. A habit streak tracker is a form of accountability too. I remember doing a [21-day no complaint challenge](#), and from the beginning I knew I wanted to write a blog [article](#) on it to share with my friends, so that was a form of accountability too.

1.8 Optimize your environment

Humans are heavily influenced by our environment. In this context, environment includes our physical and mental environment, as well as the people we surround ourselves with. Let's take the example of eating healthier. For the physical environment, we should eliminate junk food from the house and replace them with healthy snacks. That way, treating ourselves to junk snacks isn't even an option anymore. For our mental environment, we should eliminate reading about delicious junk food or unfollow people on social media who post delicious junk food. Instead, we can follow people who post delicious healthy food. For the people we surround ourselves with, we should avoid people (to the degree that we can) who eat unhealthily and spend more time with people who eat healthily. In fact, [research](#) shows that if your close friend becomes obese, the likelihood of you becoming obese increases by 57%! Surrounding ourselves with helpful people and environment cannot be overlooked.

Part 2: How to Break a Bad Habit

Now that we've talked about building a new habit, the next topic that we probably all need help with is breaking existing bad habits. If you can't think of a bad habit you want to break, you can consider these common new year's resolutions:

- Eat less junk food
- Drink less alcohol
- Watch less TV
- Quit smoking
- Play less video games

Where as good habits are like flowers that we want in our garden, bad habits are like weeds that we don't want. Furthermore, just like how weeds tend to stubborn and persistent in their growth, bad habits tend to be deeply ingrained because we've been

doing them for so long. Therefore, it's important to treat ourselves with patience and kindness when facing a bad habit.



[Image Source](#)

Jay Shetty, author of [Think Like a Monk](#), gives an excellent 7-step process for changing bad habits:

1. Acknowledge that the bad habit served you well at one point
2. Understand your motivation and move up the motivation ladder
3. Know every single trigger
4. Remove the triggers that you can
5. Create if-then rules for the triggers you cannot remove
6. Have someone you can call if you're about to fail
7. Replace lower tastes with higher tastes

Let's go through these steps with examples.

Step 1: Acknowledge that the bad habit served you well at one point

When we realize a bad habit is hurting us, we might try to push it away with a lot of force. But that pushing away is still a form of attachment; our hand is still on it. Hating something and liking something are both a form of attachment; they are two sides of the same coin. If we can acknowledge that this behavior was useful for me at one point in the past, but it no longer serves me now, then we can gently open our palms and let it go.



For example, I used to play a lot of video games. I used to feel bad about wasting so much time in the past on video games. But that negative emotion is still a form of attachment, and attachment makes us unhappy and stressed. When I am stressed, I am more likely to do bad habits like playing video games.

After hearing Jay's advice, I realized that video games served me well when I had a lot of free time and didn't know any better ways to use my time. Now that I know better, I should let go of that past habit just like letting go of my old clothes that are too small for me now. It is a natural and relieving feeling, not a forceful feeling.

Step 2: Understand your motivation and move up the motivation ladder

If we want to stay motivated to changing a habit, we must do it out of our own free choice. We must not feel like we are forcing ourselves to do something we don't want to do. If we feel forced, then we will be unhappy and not continue.

For example, let's say you want to replace junk food with healthy food. You don't need to think of it as "*I need to stop eating junk food,*" or "*I can't eat junk food anymore.*" That just feels like you're restricting yourself, which will make you feel unhappy, and then when you're unhappy you'll eat more junk food. Instead, frame it as, "*I choose to live a healthy lifestyle so that I can set a good example for my family and grow old to see my grandchildren and not be a sick burden to my family.*"

In his book [Think Like a Monk](#), Jay explains that we are motivated by four motivations: fear, desire, duty, and love. Fear is the lowest, love is the highest. It is hard for us to jump from fear to love, so we need to move up the ladder one step at a time.

The Motivation Ladder



Love — being motivated by helping and caring for others



Duty — being motivated by gratitude, responsibility, and doing the right thing



Desire — being driven by personal gratification through wealth, success, and pleasure

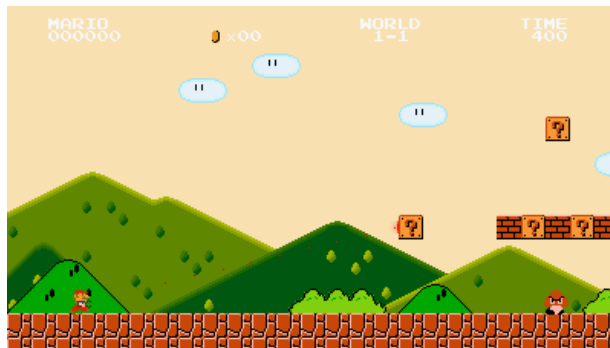


Fear — being driven by negative things like sickness, poverty, and death

Jay gives the example of himself trying to eat healthier. He loves fried foods. But he learned how harmful fried foods are. That gave him fear. Then he desired visible results, so that motivated him to keep eat healthier. Then he thought about his duty to his family to be healthy. Then he thought about how much he loves his family and his body and how eating healthy is a way to show them love.

Step 3: Know every single trigger.

Jay gives the analogy of playing Mario. The first few times you play, you lose because you get caught by traps. As you keep trying, you take note of every single trap along the way to your goal. Then you can finally succeed by avoiding or dodging all the traps. The same is true for our bad habits. We all have triggers for our bad habits. We need to write down every single one.



For example, Jay realized a common trigger for him was getting hungry at the studio. Then he would just eat whatever unhealthy snacks were available. For me, I often played video games as a way to take a break after doing some work.

A very common trigger for bad habits is stress. I remember in the past, whenever I got really stressed, I just wanted to go play some video games for a while. It was a way for me to distract myself temporarily and forget about my worries. The problem is, afterwards, I still have to deal with my problems, and the procrastination often made them worse. Therefore, if we have bad habits, it's highly possible that there's some major stress in our lives that we're suppressing, and we need to [improve our stress management abilities](#) and respond in healthy ways.

Step 4: Remove the triggers that you can

For example, Jay and his wife changed the snack drawer in their home to only have healthy snacks. That way whenever he wanted a snack, it was impossible for him to eat anything unhealthy. Jay also gave the example of a friend who was trying to quit pornography, and that person blocked all the websites on his computer and phone, making it nearly impossible for him to commit the bad behavior.

Step 5: Create if-then rules for triggers that you cannot remove

For example, Jay decided to carry about a packet of dried dates and nuts. If he gets hungry at the studio, he would eat that healthy snack instead of anything unhealthy available at the studio.

Step 6: Have someone you can call if you're about to fail

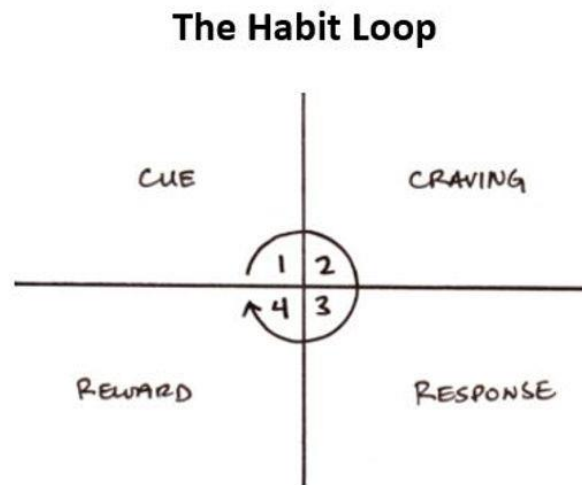
This one is really interesting and useful. Essentially, calling that person helps to break our habit cycle. They can intervene and remind us of our goal and why we want to quit that bad habit. The fact that they gave us a pep talk will also motivate us to not disappoint them.



Step 7: Replace lower tastes with higher tastes

I really like the phrasing of this. If we simply try to remove a bad habit but don't replace it with something better, we probably won't succeed. But when we see our bad habit as a low taste, and we see a healthier habit as a higher taste, we will naturally prefer the higher taste.

In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear explains that habits are actually a four-step loop: cue, craving, response, reward.



For example, I used to crave sweets like candy and chocolate. My triggers (cues) include getting hungry between meals or getting stressed. My old response was to eat unhealthy snacks (lower taste). The reward is I feel pleasure and not hungry anymore.

Then I change the response from unhealthy snacks to healthy snacks like sweet dates and nuts. At first, these health snacks didn't give me the same pleasure high (reward) as unhealthy snacks, but over time, I've come to prefer and enjoy the healthier snacks more. I became accustomed to the higher tastes and don't have any desire to return to the lower tastes.

To give another example, playing video games is a low taste, and the reward is stress relief. Reading literature is a higher taste. Although at first it doesn't seem as enjoyable as playing video games, after I got accustomed to the new taste, I like it a lot better than the lower taste. Now, I would rather read and write over play video games. I have learned to seek meaningful joy (higher taste) over mindless entertainment (lower taste).

Now that we've learned about starting new habits and replacing old ones, let's talk about some other useful tips for habit change.

Part 3: Other Tips for Habit Change

In her book [*Better Than Before*](#), Gretchen Rubin explains 21 different tips for habit change. Many of them have been covered by this article already, but here are some of her other tips that I found to be highly useful:

1. Clean Slate
2. Lightning Bolts
3. Clarity
4. Safeguards
5. Abstainer vs. Moderator
6. The Four Tendencies

3.1 Clean Slate

When we get a fresh start in life, it's often easier to let go of past habits and start new ones. Examples include a new year, a new school year, a new season, a birthday, a new job, a new relationship, or a new home. Take advantage of these new beginnings to start healthy habits and replace unhealthy ones.



3.2 Lightning Bolts

Lightning bolts refer to when we encounter some new idea or information that suddenly makes it easy to change a habit. It's rare, but if it does happen, we should use it to our advantage.

For example, some people become vegan overnight after watching a certain documentary that really moved them (again, rare, but possible). In one of the Doctor in The House episodes, the family was able to suddenly switch their entire diet from junk food into healthier food because they found out the mother got Type 2 Diabetes, which she had been fearing for a long time. Personally, when I was sick with a skin illness, and then I found out dairy and eggs is likely related to it, it was easy for me to give them up even though I really enjoyed dairy and eggs prior.

3.3 Clarity

The more clear we are on why we want to do a habit, the more motivated we will be to do. For example, if you just say you want to lose weight, that is not very clear. But if you say you want to lose 10 pounds in 2 months because you want to feel more energetic throughout the day and fit in some old clothes, then your motivation is much more clear.



We also need to be clear about what exactly we should do. For example, don't just say I will exercise more. Be specific about what exercise, when, and how often. For example, I heard B.J. Fogg, author of *Tiny Habits*, say that he created a habit where after he pees, he would do at least 2 push-ups. If he felt like doing more, he could, but he would do at least 2. That was extremely clear and specific.

3.4 Safeguards

Safeguards are about anticipating what might make you go off track and then creating an **IF-THEN rule** to prevent yourself from going off-track. We talked about this in part 2 about changing bad habits, but this point is so important that it deserved to be stated again.

For example, let's say you want to avoid junk food and eat healthier. You need to anticipate what might make you eat junk food. What if while hanging out with your friends, you pass by a café with lots of sweet snacks and drinks? You can create an IF-THEN rule "*IF I end up at a café, THEN I will order a green tea instead of a sugary drink, and I will order their fruit platter instead of their sugary baked goods.*" Then if the situation actually arises, you won't be caught off guard.

Another example, "*IF I am so busy that I forgot to do my 5 minutes of exercise today, THEN I will do 10 push-ups when I go write in my journal before bed.*" Fortunately, this never happened to me, which shows that I did a good job setting up the habit.

3.5 Abstainer versus Moderator

When facing strong temptations, it's easier for **Abstainers** to just abstain all together; it's very hard for them to indulge in moderation. On the other hand, **Moderators** do better if they can indulge just a little bit; it's very hard for them to abstain completely.

For example, when it comes to eating less junk snacks, an Abstainer would do better to just not eat any chocolate at all. Ever. If they eat a little piece of chocolate, they end up eating the entire chocolate bar. On the other hand, Moderators do better if they can eat a little piece of chocolate once in a while; they won't feel the need to eat the whole bar. It's useful to know which one you are.

3.6 The Four Tendencies

In her book, *The Four Tendencies*, Gretchen Rubin explains that there are four personalities according to how people respond to outer expectations (from other people) and inner expectations (from yourself).

- **Upholders** — readily meet outer and inner expectations
- **Questioners** — readily meet inner expectations only
- **Obligers** — readily meet outer expectations only
- **Rebels** — resists outer and inner expectations

Each personality forms habits differently.

- **Upholders** form habits quite easily.
- **Questioners** must be very clear on why they want to do the habit, otherwise it won't stick.
- **Obligers** must have outer accountability, such as someone they're reporting to, someone to do the habit with, or someone they're setting a role model for.

If it's only themselves that want to do something, they most likely won't succeed.

- **Rebels** hate the idea of self-restriction, so the habit needs to align with their authentic self-expression. For example, rather than exercising because they "should" exercise, they would do it because it aligns with their identity of who they want to be.

The Four Tendencies is one of the most useful things I've ever learned, and I summarize it in depth in this [article](#).

Conclusion

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

— Will Durant



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In modern society, we are all busy people with limited time and energy, working hard to improve our lives. When it comes to where we can spend our energy, optimizing our habits is one of those few things that could really make a drastic difference in our life. Most of us probably tried changing our habits in the past, but it didn't stick because we didn't do it well. Hopefully, from this article, you now realize why your past efforts didn't work and what you can do differently this time to improve your habits!