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How to Set a Resolution that Sticks

ESTABLISHING NEW HABITS & ACHIEVING YOUR GOALS



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Part I: Making a Resolution



BEFORE YOU START, LET GO OF THE PAST

You want to lose weight. Learn to meditate. Get out of debt. Eat more leafy greens. Sleep 8 hours most nights. Call your mom.

But you're afraid to really try, because of all the times you've tried before and failed. I meet plenty of people who refuse to make New Year's resolutions—or refuse to make lifestyle changes that would make them happier and healthier—for this reason: resolutions can be a source of failure, and you can't fail if you don't try. It doesn't have to be this way! This eBook is your guide to changing your life for the better, once and for all.

* * * * *

We've all resolved to get to bed earlier, eat more vegetables, save more money, or stick to a diet — only to find ourselves relapsing. [Research](#) suggests that 88 percent of people have failed to stick to their resolutions to change. Frankly, that number seems low to me. Hasn't *everyone* failed to keep a resolution before? My guess is that the only people who haven't failed haven't tried.

We fail to change our habits because our human brains crave routine and resist change. But it's very discouraging to try to do things differently, only to find ourselves falling back into old patterns.

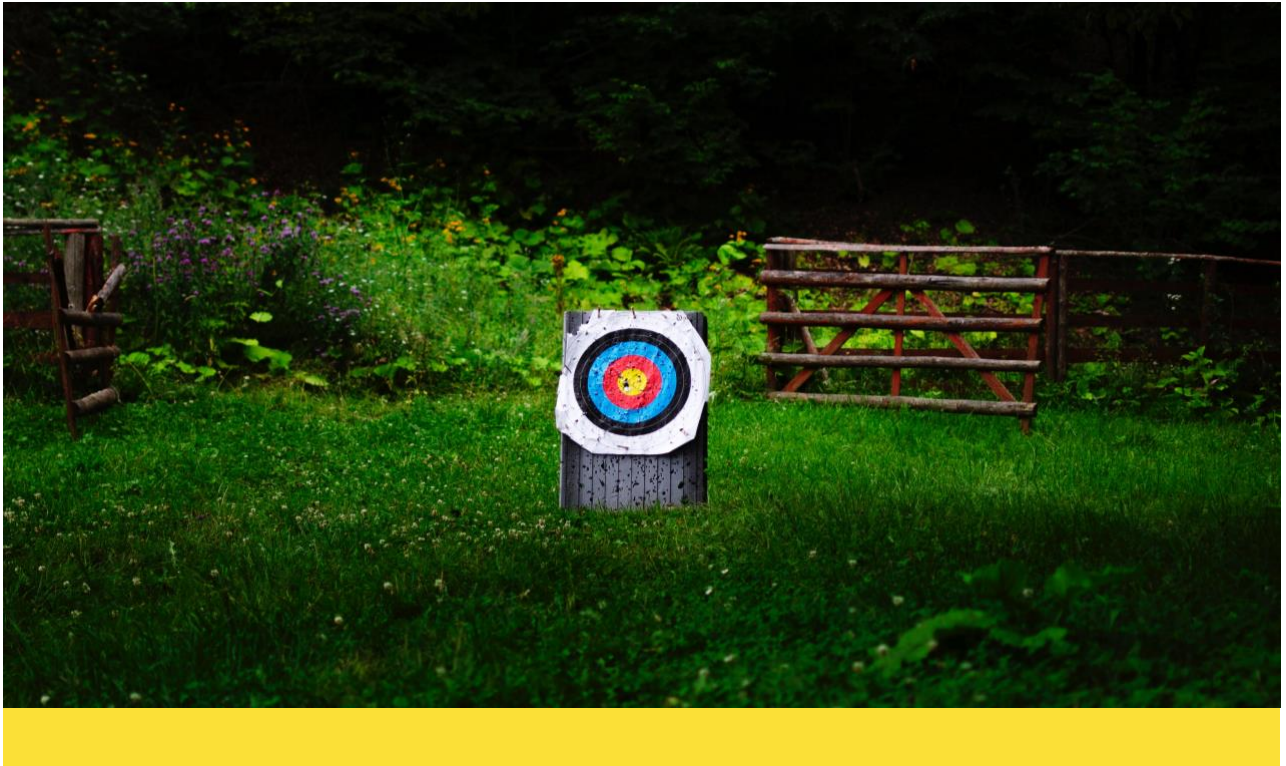
Having failed in the past is stressful, and it's even more stressful when we opt for self-flagellation in the face of our setbacks or lapses. We think that if we're really hard on ourselves, we'll be less likely to make the same mistake again, or that we'll motivate ourselves towards better performance in the future. Admitting our failings does not need to come with commensurate self-criticism, however.

Why? Because self-criticism doesn't work. It doesn't actually motivate us. Instead, self-criticism is associated with reduced motivation and diminished future improvement.

[Self-compassion](#)—being warm and supportive towards ourselves, and actively soothing ourselves—does help when we fall short of our intentions or our goals. It leads to less anxiety, less depression, and greater peace of mind—and, importantly, it makes us feel more motivated to make the improvements we need to.

Forgive Yourself

The first step to making lasting change is to forgive yourself for having failed in the past. It's okay; it's normal, even. You did the best you could with the skills you had. Take a deep breath and soothe yourself [like you might a good friend](#): Use kind, reassuring words to ease yourself out of a stress response. Remind yourself that few people are successful the first time they try to change their routines. Explain to your good-friend-self that feeling bad about your behavior will not increase your future success.



AIM FOR AN INHERENTLY REWARDING TARGET

Why do we so often fail at our attempts to change?

One reason is that we tend to set goals and pick resolutions that are inherently unrewarding. The goals we pick necessitate relentless hard work or remind us of our mortality in a way that makes us feel small instead of grateful.

The second step, therefore, is to set the right resolution, whether that's a big audacious goal, a new habit you'd like to get into, or a bad habit you'd like to break.

To begin, let's start with your desired outcome. It's okay to be a little vague here; we'll get more specific as we proceed. For example, you might want to:

- Lose weight
- Get in shape or establish an exercise habit

- Spend more time with your friends

It's important to figure out WHY you want to do this thing that you haven't been doing so far. You might have a whole laundry list of reasons for wanting to do what you want to do, and that's great. But right now, I want you to think of the single most compelling way that you'll benefit from achieving your goal.

Chances are, you've come up with a super logical reason for, say, losing weight or exercising, like that it will lower your blood pressure.

Here's the thing: even though we all like to think of ourselves as rational people, logic doesn't motivate us nearly as much as our emotions do. Why? Because we approach what feels good and avoid what feels bad.

**We approach what
feels good and
avoid what feels
bad.**

This means that we tend to stick with behavior changes for longer when we aim for something that *feels* good. Doing something because we feel like we *should* do it doesn't feel good. It feels like we're being forced. It's stressful, and stress makes us seek comfort, often in the very form of behavior that we are trying to avoid (think potato chips and Netflix binges).

So, ask yourself how, in your heart of hearts, do you want to *feel*? Identify a WHY for your resolution that will motivate you over the long haul.

Let's think this through together.

Maybe you want to lose weight, for example, and so you plan to cut baked goods out of your diet, which happen to be your favorite foods. How will that make you feel? At first, you might feel great, because you've just made a healthy decision for yourself. But if you don't cheat on your diet, you'll likely soon feel deprived. And if you do begin to cheat on your diet, you'll probably feel anxious and guilty. Both of these feeling states are unmotivating and uncomfortable, which will make it easy for you to ditch your diet.

But maybe the reason that you want to lose weight is so that you feel healthy and strong. Feeling stronger and healthier are very motivating feeling-states, which will make it much easier for you to keep your new habit.

With this in mind, rethink your goal or resolution: Restate it for yourself in terms of how you want to feel. For example:

- I forbid myself to eat [delicious] baked goods could become → "I want to feel healthy and strong."
- I have to get more sleep could become → "I want to feel well-rested and energetic."
- I should spend more time with friends could become → "I want to feel loving and connected."

Refine Your Resolution

What actions and behaviors have led you to feel what you want to feel in the past?

Maybe you tend to feel well-rested and energetic when you go to bed before 10 pm. Perhaps you tend to feel healthy and strong when you go for a hike. Maybe you feel loving and connected when you spend time one-on-one with your sister.

The important thing here is that it is something that you already have experience with; we human beings tend to be truly terrible at predicting how something will make us feel. But we do well to use our own experience to predict how we'll feel in the future.

Here's an example of how we frequently go wrong: Say I'd like to feel stronger this upcoming year. This calls for a get-in-shape habit. So, what would be a good way for me to get in shape? Let's see...I could train for a marathon! Fun! Ambitious! But before I start researching destination marathons (because why not make it a vacation, too?), I'll do well to stop myself and ask: How do I feel when I'm training for a long run? Here's my honest answer: I tend to feel burdened by the time commitment. And arthritic in my left hip. And soul-sinking dread before each run.

Can we make a pact right now that we won't set goals that are going to make us feel burdened, arthritic, and filled with dread?

On the other hand, I can think of two activities that DO make me feel stronger:

- taking long hikes with my dog and
- high-intensity exercise classes where I sweat a lot.

Your "why" for your goal needs to be a rewarding feeling that you experience when you are doing your resolution, or at the very least, immediately after you do it. A daily hike must genuinely make you feel energized, for example, if that is the feeling you are after.

From here, refine your resolution one more time. Make sure it reflects a really specific behavior, so that you know if you are succeeding or not. For example, resolve to take three hikes per week after work on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays instead of resolving to "go for more hikes."

Finally, do a little reality check. Setting unrealistic resolutions is a sure path to failure. If it's just not realistic for you to, say, leave work an hour early on Tuesdays and Thursdays so that you can do your hike, please don't make that your resolution. Or if you live in Maine and you know that it just isn't realistic to hike in a snowstorm, please go back and find another behavior that reliably makes you feel the way you want to feel.

**...we do well to use
our own
experience to
predict how we'll
feel in the future.**

Great Job!

If you are now aiming for a target that is **specific, realistic, and inherently rewarding** (because you know it is going to make you feel good) you are well on your way to successfully reaching your goals.



THE POWER OF HABITS

Habitual behaviors that automatically help you achieve your goals make better self-improvement initiatives than shooting for an ambitious outcome. For example, resolving to eat an apple every afternoon instead of a cookie can lead to more lasting weight loss over the long run than resolving to lose 10 pounds. Similarly, spending 10 minutes each weeknight before bed cleaning out a shelf or a drawer is a better approach than resolving to declutter your entire household. Sending one networking email every morning before you leave for work will be more effective than resolving to “network more.” Our outcomes are often lagging measures of our habits: What we do repeatedly adds up. Our habits lead to our achievements.

How can you make a habit out of the behavior that makes you feel the way you want to feel? For example, if eating spinach at breakfast has made you feel healthy in the past, then the habit could be eating the same breakfast every morning that includes spinach. Or if you feel loving and connected when you are with your

sister, you could get into the habit of meeting her for lunch every Monday. The idea is to get in a habit of doing this new behavior every day (or nearly every day) so that it becomes AUTOMATIC. Once something is a habit, no willpower is required!

One of my clients wanted to feel more peaceful and calmer, and two activities that had made her feel calm in the past were walking her dog in the morning and going for swims at the gym. Neither of these activities were habits for her, they were infrequent activities.

For now, pick just one activity to start with. If you have a choice between activities, choose the one that you like the best, or that you want to do the most. My client likes walking her dog best, by far. What activity or behavior will you look forward to? What feels fun? What seems easy? What could actually count as play, or even a leisure activity?

**What activity or
behavior will you
look forward to?**

I'M SERIOUS. If your resolution feels like a chore, YOU PROBABLY WON'T DO IT IN THE LONG RUN. If it is something you feel like you "should" do, but that you don't actually want to do...eventually you likely won't do it at all.

SO: I hereby grant you permission to do something fun and (probably very) easy. Many people feel like doing something that is fun and easy doesn't count, especially if it is supposed to be good for you. You want something IMPRESSIVE, right? Maybe that will make you immediately look better naked. No pain, no gain, right?

Wrong. You have a choice: Do something unpleasant and ambitious for a short period of time and then quit, it or do something that makes you feel something you want to feel for the rest of your life. I promise, the people who know about these things (like your doctor, therapist, or coach) want you to pick the habit, no matter how unambitious, that you are going to stick with. This is about hardwiring a good habit into your brain that you can build on later if you want to.

Some people, women especially, struggle with aiming for something fun and easy because it feels selfish to them. They are so used to their own needs losing out to the needs of the people and institutions around them—their kids, spouse, boss, business, etc.—that it feels wrong to do something that feels good. “This leads to a disturbing paradox,” writes Michelle Segar in *No Sweat*, “When we do not prioritize our own self-care because we are busy serving others, our energy is not replenished. Instead, we are exhausted, and our ability to be there for anyone or anything else is compromised.”

So, it isn’t at all selfish to take care of yourself in a way that is fun, that will truly replenish you, and that will make you feel happier and healthier for the rest of your lifetime. Growth and self-care are essential if you want to make a difference in the world.



THROW AMBITION OUT THE WINDOW

The most important thing that we can do when we are creating a new habit is ditch our ambition. This should not be a surprise, since I've been encouraging you to choose a habit that is fun and easy, but today, we are going to take this "strategic slacking" attitude to its limit.

If you tend towards perfectionism, I need you to fully and finally ditch your ambition to do everything impressively. If you are anything like me, this will be so much harder than you'd think. When I decide to do something, I tend to go big. For example, every time I used to start a new exercise plan, I was overly ambitious, planning to train for a half marathon instead of a 5K, planning to meet with a trainer three times a week when I had time for only one meeting a month, planning to stretch and strength train for thirty minutes a day instead of the ten minutes that is really necessary. We ambitious people are programmed to think and behave like Aesop's hare. We want our success instantly. We want our natural

ability and speed to carry the day. But in truth, we will succeed only if we think and behave like Aesop's tortoise.

If we want our habits to stick, we need to start really, really small. It is hard for us humans to make lots of behavior changes all at once. Creating a new habit or routine can take a great deal of energy and focus, and we have only so much self-control in a given day to work with.

Here's the thing: It's much better to succeed at just one small thing at a time than it is to fail at bigger things or many things at once. Almost all of us can pull off a brilliant couple of days, or even weeks.

But unless we have a really big catalyst for our change, like a very scary health diagnosis or financial upheaval or another crisis-level event that provides us with immutable (and long-term) motivation, we'll usually crash and burn soon after takeoff. We'll have a couple of good days—or even weeks—but then we'll have a bad day and skip our resolution. The next day we'll decide that the whole routine is too hard, and we'll skip it again, resolving to make revisions tomorrow. The day after that we'll hardly think of it at all. We're back at square one.

The Better Than Nothing Routine

The alternative to being super-ambitious when we create new habits is to build slowly. When I first started going for regular walks in the late afternoon, my goal was just to put the leash on the dog and walk to the end of the block. Why? I ALWAYS have time for that, because it takes less than five minutes. (Yes, I really did this a lot at first, and I still occasionally do. Usually I walk longer, but not always.) Maybe your initial goal is to just meditate for 1 minute or save \$5 per week.

Here's how unambitious I want you to be. Break your habit down into its most simple behavior, something you can do in less than 5 minutes from start to finish. Do this knowing that you are starting to carve a neural pathway in your brain that will eventually become an unshakable habit. The first few steps of establishing any new habit can be hard, though, so you need to do something really, really, really easy—something that requires so little effort that your brain doesn't put up any resistance when you start it, and you can feel successful for completing it. You

want to create a habit that doesn't depend on effort or willpower, so this first extraordinarily unambitious habit is about initiating the neural pathway and nothing else.

Once you have a routine or resolution so easy you have no excuse not to do it, this will be your “Better Than Nothing” (BTN) habit or resolution. Again, mine was to change into my walking shoes and walk the dog to the end of the block. You will be able to do your BTN routine when you are exhausted, when you have no time, when you are a little under the weather, and when you really feel like staying on the couch. This is a teeny little bit of physical activity that is better than not moving at all.

Here’s what will become of this “Better than Nothing” routine:

Every 3-4 days during this program you can expand this routine if you want to, but only if you are itching to do more, and only if the expansion feels really easy.

If at any time you feel any resistance to your BTN routine, you’ll know it isn’t yet easy enough. Start by cutting it in half in terms of time and effort. Many people need to start with something that takes less than 30 seconds—say, putting your walking shoes on and walking out the door. This sounds ridiculous, I know.

Remember, we are all about establishing the neural pathway at this stage in the game, and to do that, all we need to do is associate your anchor or trigger with something that will someday become a habit.

Even after you start expanding, you’ll need to hang on to some form of a BTN routine: something you can still do even when you aren’t feeling great, when you don’t have time, and when the unexpected happens. Every time I feed the dog in the evening, I walk him at least to the end of the block, no matter what the circumstances are.

What to Do Next

Use the ["Throw Ambition Out the Window"](#) Worksheet at the end of this eBook to strip your resolution down to something that is so ridiculously easy you could do it every day under virtually any circumstance with barely a thought.

Part II: Hardwiring Your Habit



Identify an Anchor

The next step in creating a habit is to consciously designate an anchor or trigger: something that is the same every time you want your habitual routine to be enacted. My evening walk with the dog, for example, is triggered by me leaving my office in the evening and walking into the kitchen to think about dinner, and then ultimately feeding the dog. (So, the time of day is an anchor, as is feeding the dog. After I feed the dog, I always habitually walk him.)

An anchor can be time of day, a different habitual behavior that comes right before your habit (those make good triggers)—even an emotion. For example, when you feel anxious, you may habitually pick at your nails. Or if you feel happy, you may habitually reach for your phone to take a picture. (I'm not suggesting these as good anchors or habits, mind you. Just showing how emotions are often triggers.)

A note about exercise, since so many people make resolutions about that: A general time of day is usually the best trigger, like first thing in the morning, after school, during lunchtime, or before dinner—but it can't be the only thing that anchors your habit. Once you know generally the time of day when you'd like to do your habit, try to link your activity to an existing behavior or routine.

For example, here is the existing routine I linked my new walking habit to. It's something that I was already doing before I added a walk into the picture. I leave the office in the late afternoon, walk across the backyard to my house, go into the kitchen, and call out to see whose home and who's helping with dinner. I get out the ingredients that need to be prepped for dinner, and then I feed the dog and give my family instructions for how they can help with dinner. That's right where I inserted a walk: While the dog wolfs down his food, I now change my shoes (which are right near the dog bowls) and get a leash ready. From there, I quickly head out for a walk.

If you've got a habit that you don't want to do every day, choose a trigger that occurs only when you want to do the habit. For example, "Do a thirty-minute yoga video twice a week" isn't a habit. It's a to-do item for your task list because there's no clear trigger and therefore no clear automaticity. But if you work only three days a week, you can use work as your trigger: "Do a thirty-minute yoga video every weekday as soon as I walk in the door from dropping the kids off at school."

What to Do Next

Designate a trigger (or anchor) for your habit, something that is the same every time you want to do it. Please be sure that you will be able to do your resolution or habit every single time you are exposed to your anchor.

Because I always feed the dog, I always go for a walk after he eats—even if it is only to the end of the block and back.



MAKE YOUR HABIT EVEN MORE REWARDING

We human beings may say that we are pursuing happiness, but really what we tend to pursue is reward. Anything that we might desire counts: a cashmere sweater, a pretty little cupcake, attention from a mentor, a sense of accomplishment, a positive feeling. When our brains identify a potential reward, they release dopamine, a feel-good chemical messenger. That dopamine rush motivates us toward the reward, creating a real sense of craving, wanting, or desire for the carrot that is being dangled in front of us.

Fortunately, we can make dopamine work for us rather than against us as we build our habits. To get into a good habit, you'll need a really rewarding reward. Rewards need to be immediate or, even better, built into the routine when possible.

We can do this by making the activities themselves more rewarding—more fun. This is what I did when I went from running in the evenings to walking or hiking; walking feels good while running felt punishing. Remember that at this stage of your habit building, any action is better than none. It might not be the road to the Olympics, but it's a hair closer than staying at the office responding to email. Here are three other important ways to reinforce your new habit:

Use B.J. Fogg's "Yay me!" reward: When you finish doing what you intend to do, congratulate yourself. I'm a HUGE fan of this one because it's easy and it works. Even something as small as a short mental victory dance can trigger a little hit of dopamine, enough to tell your brain to repeat whatever you just did. So when I find myself outside walking around in the fresh air, I congratulate myself. Sounds a little crazy, but it works!

Really relish the positive emotions that your new habit elicits. Be intentional about them, or "take in the good" of them, as Rick Hanson would say. For example, I tend to feel happiest on my walks when I consciously look up at the trees (rather than down at the trail, as I am inclined). When I look up at the trees, I tend to feel a warm, relaxing sense of awe spread over me. Because this habit for me is about feeling happy and calm, each time I'm out I make an effort to look up at the trees and really feel the calm and awe wash over me.

Add something to your new habit that you'll look forward to when you think about it. I supercharged my desire to get out on the trail by letting myself listen to audiobooks while I walk. For a while, because I've read about the incredible benefits of mindfulness, I felt like I "should" make myself just do a walking meditation—that I should force myself to enjoy the stillness, that I should mindfully engage with my neighbors and the nature around me rather than being lost in a book.

But then I noticed that I most wanted to get outside and walk when I had something I couldn't wait to get back to listen to...and I decided to give myself permission to do something I really enjoy. This means that I'm even more committed to my habit, because, as Michelle Segar compellingly writes, "we approach what feels good and avoid what feels bad."

What to Do Next

Build juicy rewards into your new habit using the ["Make Your Habit EVEN MORE Rewarding"](#) Worksheet.



TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

Another important aspect of successfully getting into a habit is measurement. What we measure, we improve. (Or “What gets measured, gets done.”) For example, we know that when people weigh themselves every single day, they lose more weight than if they weigh themselves just once a week. This is because measurement drives awareness of behavior. For example, if you record everything you eat in a food journal, you'll be much more aware of what you eat than if you weren't diligently noticing and recording your food intake. So much of what we do is unconscious; measurement is about

“Most people use statistics the way a drunkard uses a lamp post, more for support than illumination.”

— Mark Twain

making ourselves conscious of our bad habits while we train ourselves to unconsciously act out good habits.

In this day and age, tracking or measuring our progress is easy. It's so easy that we can sometimes get so caught up in the measurement of things that we spend more time playing with our recording devices than we do establishing our habits. Google the terms “quantified self” or “Health 2.0” or “body-hacking” and you'll find a huge amount of information about how people measure their every move. If you find these techy ways to measure your progress fun, go for it. Otherwise, a piece of paper taped to the fridge will work!

**“If you look at a thing,
the very fact of your
looking changes it...
if you think about
yourself, that very fact
changes you.”**

— Robert Penn Warren

What to Do Next

Set up a tracking system for your resolution or habit.



PRE-DECIDE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

You've done a lot already to set yourself up for success with your new habit. But the reality is still that when we are tired and don't really feel like doing our new habit, we are likely to do what is familiar or easy rather than practice a new behavior.

You can outsmart this brain booby trap three ways:

First, pre-decide as much as you possibly can (where you will go, how you will get there, what you'll bring with you). Say your new habit is to walk to work in the morning. Instead of deciding on your route in the morning right before you leave,

figure that out the night before. While you're at it, commit to the time you'll leave and the way you'll go in the morning.

Second, and this is the critical part, structure your environment to support your decision. Put your work shoes deep in your backpack and your walking shoes by the door. If you think you'll be tempted to drive, put your car keys in an inconvenient place that you won't want to venture into in the morning. (Have a dusty attic? That'd be perfect.)

Finally, make a specific plan for what you will do when challenges arise, because they will. If you wake up to find that it's raining, pre-decide that you'll wear your blue rain jacket and take that huge golf umbrella your dad left in the closet. If you wake up late, pre-decide that you'll ride your bike instead of drive.



LOOK FOR THE HABIT BEHIND THE HABIT

Sometimes there are mini-habits that act as “keystone habits”—habits that have the power to shift or dislodge our routines and create a chain reaction.

For example, a keystone habit that ensures that I perform my morning meditation is to silence my devices at 9:15 p.m. the night before. I turn my computer all the way off. I set my iPhone to go into “do not disturb” mode automatically so that I don't get any texts, calls, or alerts. I don't let myself turn on the TV, which I find too stimulating at night. This keystone habit dislodged a whole series of bad habits that I'd gotten into, both at night and in the morning.

My rule of no screen time after 9:15 p.m. opened up time for me to read more in the evening, spend more time with my husband and children and talk to my daughter who is away at school and likes to talk at night. All these things contribute to feelings of ease and happiness in my life. It also meant that I naturally started going to bed earlier, when I was tired (imagine that!) These things are all very rewarding and therefore motivating to me.

Going to bed earlier makes it easier to get out of bed in the morning, which makes my morning routine more relaxing. See how a small habit can create big change?

Lest you think that I have some sort of superhuman discipline around technology, please know that I'm not exerting a lot of willpower to do this. My computer is set to automatically go off at 9:15 p.m. My iPhone automatically goes into silent mode. My colleagues at work and my friends and family know that not only will I probably not read and respond to email at night, and they are encouraged to make fun of me if they notice that I'm breaking my own rules. So it's not that I don't ever check my email or send a text after 9:15 p.m. (Lord knows I sometimes do.) It's just that I've set myself up to follow my rule more often than not, especially when I need to get up early in the morning.

Another example: I noticed when I was getting into the habit of meditating in the morning, a key factor for my success was simply setting an alarm. This might sound really obvious, but before I engineered this habit, I would often wake up without an alarm and get through my morning fine. But changing my wake-up time every day required more energy and undermined the solidity of my key trigger. Waking up just fifteen minutes late would derail my whole morning. So, I learned (the hard way) that a keystone habit was simply setting an alarm the night before.



GATHER YOUR CABINET

As the saying goes, no man (or woman) is an island, and when we are establishing new habits, it is best not to go it alone. You don't have to be the president to need a cabinet of close advisers for advice and inspiration, so think about who you can reach out to today who will understand what you are up to and support you. I can't underscore enough how critical this is for success.

The first and most obvious reason that we need a support team is that our cabinet can help hold us accountable, acting as a bit of external willpower when our self-control falters. Most of us care what other people think of us, and when we make our intentions public in some way—even if our public is just an inner circle of close friends—our intentions have more power. Beyond that, other people can keep us on track when we are so depleted that we no longer care what other people think. When I was trying to wean myself from my diet based on sourdough bread, my husband was a huge help. When I'd ask him to order me a tuna sandwich on a sourdough roll for lunch, he'd come back with a plain tuna salad for me (and then run for cover).

Similarly, whenever I need help getting back into my morning routines after a vacation, my good friend (who is also a life coach) holds me accountable by texting me daily.

Second, there is a plethora of empirical evidence that we are herd animals, and we typically do what our peers do. (Please don't think you are the exception to this rule. While I don't doubt that you are in many ways a maverick, odds are that you also look and act a lot like your peers in many other ways.) Compelling research demonstrates that our behavior is influenced not just by our friends but by our friends' friends' friends.

Because the behavior of others is highly contagious, we do well when we hang out with people who are already in the types of habits that we are trying to establish. This means finding a running group if you want to run habitually, or simply hanging out more with people who have habits that you admire (which is fun anyway).

“The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, nor the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship; it is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when [we] discover that someone else believes in [us] and is willing to trust [us].”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson



COMFORT YOURSELF

To boost follow-through on our good intentions, we need to feel safe and secure. When we are stressed, our brain tries to rescue us by activating our dopamine systems. A dopamine rush makes temptations more tempting. Think of this as your brain pushing you toward a comfort item . . . like the snooze button instead of the morning meditation, a relaxed lunch instead of midday walk, or that easy taxi to work rather than the urban bike ride in the rain.

As Kelly McGonigal, author of *The Willpower Instinct*, writes, “Stress points us in the wrong direction, away from clear-headed wisdom toward our least-helpful

"I have so much to accomplish today that I must meditate for two hours instead of one."

— Mahatma Gandhi

instincts." When we're relaxed, we'll choose the locally grown organic apple, the earlier bedtime, the stairs instead of the elevator. And when we're stressed?

Personally, I have a weakness for tortilla chips and spicy queso.

The takeaway: Sometimes the best thing that we can do in pursuit of our new habit is to preemptively comfort ourselves in healthy ways when we start to get stressed or tired. What makes you feel safe and secure—and doesn't sabotage your goals? Perhaps you need to seek out a hug or watch a funny YouTube video. Positive emotions act as powerful brakes on our stress response.

What to Do Next

Using the [“Comfort Yourself”](#) Worksheet below, determine some healthy ways to comfort yourself.



TAKE A NAP

Today I'm going to give you permission to take a nap and not feel lazy.

Why? We are better able to establish good habits with sleep for two simple reasons.

First, even mild sleep deprivation makes our brain's alarm system overreact to stress. As noted above, more stress equals more enticing temptations and less willpower. Second, sleep deprivation impairs how our body and brain use glucose (our primary fuel), which in turn impairs the metabolic process by which cells absorb glucose so they can use it for energy. Getting seven to nine hours of sleep each night can help us muster both the energy and the self-control we need to do our exercise.

Can't get more sleep?

I know, I know, you don't have time to sleep. You're very busy and important. Or you think you are the exception to the rule—that you are a part of the 2.5 percent of people who feel rested with less than the seven-plus hours of sleep that doctors and sleep experts prescribe. Maybe you wish you could get more sleep, but you just can't find a way to put sleep above your other priorities.

Ask yourself what your other priorities are. Your health? Your happiness? Productivity and success at work? Raising happy and healthy children? Here's the truth: You will not fulfill your potential in any of these realms unless you get the sleep your body, brain, and spirit need. A mountain of research supports this claim.

If it feels totally impossible to you to get to bed earlier, try increasing your sleep by four to five minutes a night until you've adjusted your schedule enough that you are getting eight hours of shut eye. For example, it might feel totally impossible to get to bed before midnight. But surely you can hit the hay by 11:56 p.m. Add a few minutes every day for two weeks and you'll gain an hour (and all the increased productivity, creativity, and happiness that come with it). Stick to it until you're going to bed early enough to get eight hours of sleep.

**"When the going gets rough, the tough take a nap."
—Tom Hodgkinson**

My friend Jennifer Granholm, who was the governor of Michigan during the economic downturn, doesn't really like to sleep, and at one time she insisted that she didn't need more than six hours a night. Many people tell me that, like Jennifer, they do fine on less than seven hours of sleep. It is true that 2.5 percent of people are able to flourish with less sleep than the rest of us. Jennifer is an exception in so many ways that I just might concede that one of her many gifts may be that she needs less sleep. Are you a Jennifer Granholm? Here's how to tell. Let yourself get seven to nine hours of sleep for a week or two—perhaps while you are on vacation. Does your mood improve? Your productivity increase? Your self-control become formidable? You be the judge.

Epilogue: Upon reading this anecdote in *The Sweet Spot*, Jennifer confessed to me that she might not be a "Jennifer Granholm"...that she actually does do better on more sleep. So, there's that.



EXPAND (REALLY, REALLY) SLOWLY

I know, I know: Some of you are getting ants in your pants. You don't want to do your ridiculously unambitious tiny habit; you want to DO MORE. I get it.

Once you feel the pull of your unambitious habit—you feel yourself automatically heading to the treadmill or ordering a salad at lunch—take another baby step. Walk for an additional block or watch one more YouTube video from the elliptical machine. And then every few days — once you are good and antsy again, and it feels easy-peasy, add a little tiny something else to your habit. (Like walking one more block, not like walking 20 more minutes.)

Remember that if you resist the urge to be more ambitious or do more, you'll increase your odds of being successful over the long haul. And while it might feel a bit frustrating to think that, for example, after ten weeks of exercising every morning, increasing by only three minutes a week, you'll be exercising for only thirty minutes a day—probably not quite enough to lose that extra ten pounds

you've been meaning to get rid of—consider that you've gained three uber-important things:

First, you will have gotten yourself into a healthy habit! This is everything your doctor ever wanted for you.

Second, in this example, you will be getting thirty more minutes of exercise every day (several hours a week) than eleven weeks ago; this is something that your body loves you for. It is enough to give you more energy, help you sleep better, and give you a little hit of human growth hormone—all things that will make you feel younger, smarter, and more alive. So, YAY YOU!

And third, you will have shown yourself that you can get into a habit and stick with it. The sky's the limit now!

**"It does not
matter how
slowly you go as
long as you do
not stop."
— Confucius**

Part III: What to Do When Things Go Awry

You're aiming for the right target.

You've set yourself up for success.

You're expanding very slowly.

That's great!

And also: Things are going to go sideways.

(You can count on it! That's why this section is so important.)



MAKE PLANS FOR OBSTACLES

A fascinating line of research shows that the more we fantasize about achieving a challenging goal, the *less* likely we are to actually take a real-life step towards accomplishing that very goal.

So much for positive thinking and visualization practices! It turns out that day-dreaming about our success is relaxing, but it isn't energizing. We envision ourselves hopping off the couch and going for a run, and our brain reacts as if we've already gone for that run! Psychologists call this "mental attainment," and it can really thwart us as we attempt to keep our resolutions and get into good habits.

Fortunately, a related line of research shows us exactly what to do to avoid this surprising brain booby-trap. We need follow our resolution or goal setting up with something researchers call "mental contrasting." Here's how:

Step One: Identify the Obstacle Within Yourself

Take a moment to stop to imagine what will prevent you from reaching your goals or keeping your resolutions. Start by imaging the external circumstances that might thwart you—maybe you need support from a leader at work, for example, or you need your spouse to stop leaving junk food on the kitchen counter. Are those external obstacles overcomable? What will you need to do to make sure they aren't roadblocks to your success? **If needed, re-write your goal or resolution so that you feel you have a good chance at succeeding.**

Once you've narrowed or re-written your resolutions down to goals that are challenging but that you still feel pretty confident you can achieve, **identify how you will likely hold yourself back.** What is it *within you* that will predictably stand in the way? For example, maybe you're afraid to ask that leader at work for support. Or perhaps it's your tendency to shop while you are hungry, and so it is *you* that brings the junk food into the house in the first place.

Anxiety, stress, and laziness are common emotional internal obstacles. Bad habits and limiting beliefs (or incorrect assumptions) are others. What obstacles can you imagine you'll face?

Step Two: Make a Plan

What are the instrumental behaviors that you need to take to overcome the obstacles you've identified? What will you do in the face of these obstacles? Frame your plan using an IF/THEN sentence. For example:

IF it rains, THEN I will still walk the dogs, and I will use the umbrella that is in the front hall.

IF I feel anxious about asking my manager for support, THEN I will remind myself of the times when she has said that she is happy to help in the past.

IF I start to feel too overwhelmed to get started, THEN I will close all open browser windows, close all my apps, turn off my phone, and focus on one thing at a time.

This is an easy secret to success. A [great deal of research shows](#) that when people make a specific plan for what they'd like to do or change, anticipating obstacles if possible, they do better than 74 percent of people who don't make a specific plan for the same task. In other words, making a specific action plan dramatically increases the odds that you'll follow through.

People who plan for how they're going to react to different obstacles tend to be able to meet their goals more successfully. For example, research shows that recovery from hip-replacement surgery depends in large part on having patients think through obstacles to their recovery and then make a specific plan for how they will deal with those obstacles.

It's very painful to get up and move around after hip surgery, but recovery is generally much more successful if a patient actually gets up and walks around a lot. In this particular study, patients who had just undergone surgery were instructed to think about getting up and walking around afterward and then plan for the pain they would feel. So if their goal was to walk to the mailbox and back every day, they had the participants actually think, Okay, I'm going to get about halfway there and it's going to hurt like heck and I'll want to turn around.

Patients wrote down what they were going to do when they got halfway there and it hurt like heck. These patients recovered faster—they started walking twice as fast and could get in and out of a chair by themselves three times faster than people who didn't make a specific plan to deal with the pain.

In sum: It is extremely important whenever we establish a new habit that we really think through all the seemingly minor details...especially the details that tend to hang us up in the end. We need to decide what the key factors are for our success and how, specifically, we can set ourselves up to overcome any obstacles that we may face.

You can use this technique daily by (1) jotting down a problem you need to solve or something that you'd like to accomplish, (2) noting what is likely to hold you back, and (3) making an if/then plan. To make this easy for you, I've included this in my [2021 planner pages](#), which you are free to use online or to print out.

What to Do Next

Plan for obstacles using the
["Make Plans for Obstacles"](#) Worksheet.



PLAN FOR THE PEOPLE CHALLENGES

When we are trying to get into a new habit, other people can be both our greatest supporters and our greatest downfalls. People don't tend to like it when those around them change, even when we change for the better. They worry that our new behavior is going to affect them; that we are going to "move their cheese."

For example, my husband was not a fan my before-dinner walks at first, as I am the meal-preparer-in-chief in our household. It wasn't that I was forsaking my commitment to feed my family—I wasn't. But exercising before dinner does reduce our mealtime flexibility, especially when there are last minute changes to our schedule. For example, if one of the kids has a dinnertime practice that isn't on the calendar, it is unlikely that I'm going to have dinner on the table early enough for us to eat together and get to go for my walk.

To deal with this, I had to communicate clearly and calmly to my whole family my plan, and I had to ask them for their support.

Out of earshot of the kids, I firmly explained to my husband that he was hindering my success and I needed him to be a supporter, not a detractor of my new habit. I let him voice all his “better ideas.” He thought I should be able to walk the dog mid-morning when he works out (that doesn't work for me since the morning is my best writing time) or in the afternoon when my energy is flagging (nope, I'm either picking up the kids from school, or I'm at work—there's no consistent trigger). Once I listened to his ideas, he stopped trying to convince me that his routine would work for me.

Then, in a family meeting, I explained my new routine and asked for everyone's help. I asked each family member individually (e.g., “Macie, I need you to put your volunteer work on the family calendar from now on, even though you know when it is and don't need me to drive you; Fiona, I need to know when you are babysitting as soon as you know,” etc.) to make sure that I had all the activities that might affect dinnertime on the calendar at least 2 days ahead of time. This enables me to plan when to leave work and to make sure that dinner prep is underway on time while I'm out walking.

Finally, we made a plan for what to do if someone needs dinner super early (i.e., while I'm walking the dog), and I haven't planned for this. We now have a stock of burritos in the freezer, or the kids can make something for themselves out of leftovers or lunch stuff.

Throughout all of this, I emphasized the benefits of my walking the dog *for them*. Namely, I'm calmer, happier, more patient and less stressed if I've been able to do something fun for myself before dinner (which is walking the dog). This makes me much more pleasant to be around in the evening. Every single member of my family agreed with this; once I framed exercising in terms of positive emotions for others, their resistance evaporated.



FIGHT SELF-SABOTAGE

Here's a potential land mine to avoid: As you track your behavior, don't let yourself feel so good about the progress you are making that you unleash what researchers call the "licensing effect." The licensing effect occurs when we behave virtuously and then "cancel out" our good deeds by doing something naughty. When we behave in line with our goals and values—whether it's as large as exercising every day for a week or as small as using the water fountain instead of a disposable plastic water bottle—we ironically risk backsliding.

Consciously or unconsciously, we tend to feel that healthy or virtuous activities entitle us to partake in less-good activities. Smokers will smoke more, for example, when they believe they've just taken a vitamin C tablet. Similarly, philanthropists tend to give away less money after they've been reminded of their humanitarian attributes.

One study even found that after people buy eco-friendly products, they're more likely to cheat and steal!

Avoid the licensing effect by reflecting on your goals and values rather than your accomplishment. Why did you ride your bike instead of drive? What larger mission are you trying to fulfill? How will you or others benefit from the habit you are working on?

Questions like these can help us avoid self-sabotage.

Another way to avoid the licensing effect, also called “moral licensing,” is to avoid using moral terms to define our progress. Perhaps you are working on doing some yoga every day. Measure your progress by tracking the amount of time you spend or the number of poses you do rather than patting yourself on the back for being such an enlightened and calm yogini. Becoming a “better yogini” is a moral term, while tracking time spent on task is more neutral. Avoiding moral judgment can help you avoid “moral licensing.”

What to Do Next

Reflect on your goals and values rather than your accomplishments, using the ["Fight Self-Sabotage"](#) Worksheet.



BEWARE THE “WHAT THE HELL” EFFECT

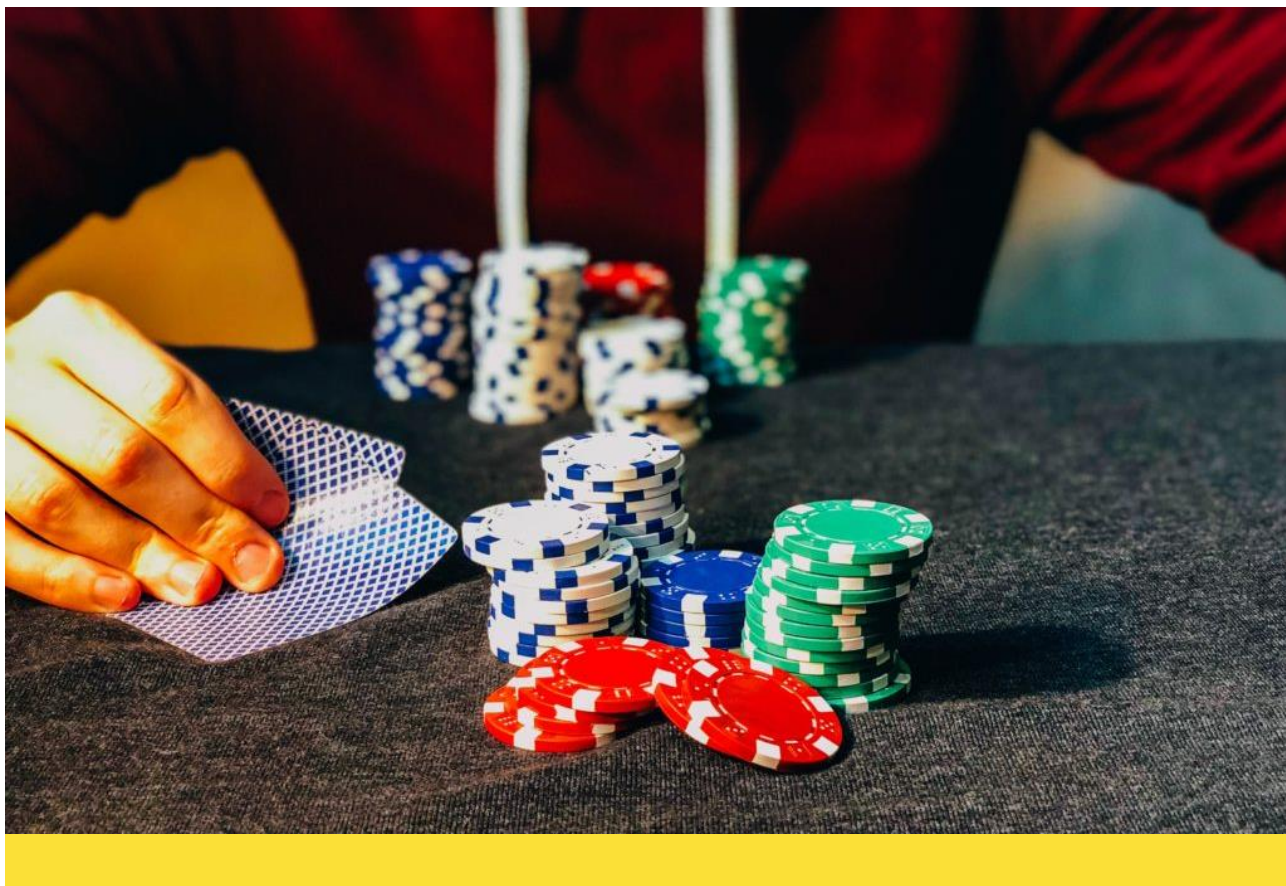
Say you've sworn off sugar, but one morning you eat a piece of pie for breakfast. You're now at risk for what researchers formally call the Abstinence Violation Effect (AVE) and jokingly call the “what the hell” effect. If you've already blown your diet today, why not go hog wild? What the hell—you can begin again tomorrow, right? Wrong. The more damage you do during your binge, the more likely you are to slip again the next day, and the less confidence you'll have in yourself that you can change.

With exercise, the “What the Hell” effect isn't quite so obvious, as all you are really abstaining from is staying on the couch (or staying at work in front of your computer, or in bed) during your workout. But you'll know the feeling. Say your boss comes in just as you are headed out the door to your favorite exercise class at

the gym. She keeps you tied up until it's too late, and you've missed the class. If you are anything like me, now you think you're off the hook for exercise today. Wrong! That's the what the hell effect sneaking up on you! Put on a fun podcast and march yourself up a few flights of stairs, or your brain will get the idea that it doesn't actually have to habitually exercise after the trigger (which in this case, was probably time of day and leaving work).

As soon as you notice a slip, try the following to avoid getting into that “what the hell” moment:

- Don't get too emotional about your slip or succumb to self-criticism. Instead, forgive yourself. Remind yourself that lapses are part of the process, and that feeling guilty or bad about your behavior will not increase your future success.
- Rededicate yourself to your new habit (now, in this instant, not tomorrow). Why did you make the resolution that you did? How do you want to feel? How will you benefit? Do a little deep breathing and calm contemplation of how you want to feel.
- Make a plan for the next time that you will face a similar challenge. What will you do differently? What have you learned from your slip? What temptation did you face that you can remove? Were you stressed or tired or hungry—and if so, how can you prevent that the next time?



REGROUP, REVISE AND DOUBLE DOWN

How's it going? If you're normal, you've had both successes and... slip-ups, of course. This may be blazingly obvious, but in order to do better tomorrow, you'll need to know what causes your trip-ups. What obstacle have you failed to see or plan for? How does your routine need tweaking? Is your trigger consistent? Does your reward need bolstering? Did you take on too much too soon? Figure it out and make a specific plan for what to do if you find yourself in a similar situation again.

“The greater the
obstacle, the
more glory
[there is] in
overcoming it.”
—Moliere

When I was first trying to squeeze a longer walk into my evening routine, I felt like I was failing more than not. For example, at first, I thought I could get away with

not leaving work a little earlier (or pushing dinner later). But after three or four days of rushing around and not actually being able to do more than my BTN workout, I realized that I either needed to prep dinner the night before or I needed to leave work a half hour earlier.

Then there were all the things that made my hike less than fun and easy: not having good raingear, not having a book to listen to, not being able to find my preferred dog leash.

For several days in a row, I didn't foresee minor obstacles that proved challenging, like not feeling warm enough, or being intercepted on the way out the door by a family member hoping for a little of my time. But after I'd encountered each obstacle once, I could make a plan for what to do the next time. It took about six weeks before I settled into my routine. It is still constantly evolving in tiny tweaks, depending on my travel and family schedules. But it is evolving, not starting and stopping in fits.

What obstacles have you failed to see or plan for?

Use the ["Regroup, Revise, and Double Down"](#) Worksheet to figure out how your routine needs tweaking.



SEE A LAPSE OR RELAPSE AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BEGIN AGAIN STRONGER

I'd venture that all of us start this process of forming a new habit from the context of having failed before, often many times. So, what do we do if we've tried this before, or if we just spent a month forming the perfect habit, only to go on vacation—or something else that disrupts our normal routine—and come back feeling like all is lost?

"A person who never
made a mistake
never tried anything
new."

— Albert Einstein

All. Is. Not. Lost. Anytime we get into a habit, or even start to get into a habit, we start to carve a neural path that we can retrace again later. So, think of each time you start a habit cycle as an upward spiral that has circled back to where it began but is now one level higher. It may feel like you are back at square one, but neurologically you aren't.

You're actually in a better place than you were before (maybe only slightly, if it is a perennial New Year's resolution that lasts only a couple of weeks, or maybe you're in a much better place, if you actually got into the habit for a while). So, if you relapse, simply begin again wherever you are, keeping in mind that you are now armed with lots of new knowledge about what worked and what didn't.

**"Our greatest glory
is not in never
failing, but in rising
up every time we
fail."**

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

In sum: Instead of seeing a lapse or a relapse as an indication that you aren't good enough to establish a habit, see it as a clue that will help you better create a good habit that will stick with you for the rest of your life—and help you become a good habit creator who can do this again and again.

What to Do Next

If you are still slowly expanding on your BTN routine in tiny turtle steps, YAY YOU!! Every 3 to 4 days, consider growing your habit in infinitesimally small steps until you reach a point when you are all the way where you want to be AND it always feels fun and gratifying in some way.

When you feel resistance, drop back to your BTN routine as often as you need to. I mean it. Your baseline BTN habit really is better than nothing, and if you expand too quickly, I can promise you that you'll eventually end up with nothing.

Have you relapsed? If so, begin again, with a less ambitious goal.



WHEN YOU'RE REALLY, REALLY STUCK

What if you've identified every predictable obstacle and you're being wildly unambitious...and you're **STILL** not doing what you intended to do? What if you find yourself sabotaging yourself at every turn?'

This is also pretty normal. It means that you've likely got what we call a "limiting belief" that is holding you back.

Let's consider the case of one of my readers:

QUESTION:

Dear Christine,

I have a habit of going to bed later than I want and then being rushed in the morning and getting to work late. For several years now, I've been wanting to get to bed earlier, but I can't seem to do it.

I have a tendency to feel pretty driven and busy during the day, and the evening feels like my only time to relax. I binge-watch Netflix, scroll through my social media and news alerts, and generally get caught doing random things on my phone until late at night. But when I think about going to bed early, I feel kind of deprived. I think I actually do need time to wind down and take a break before I go to sleep, even when I'm totally exhausted.

Thanks,

Tired and Running Late

ANSWER:

This may be blazingly obvious, but in order to do better tomorrow, you'll need to know what is causing you to go to bed later than you are intending to.

You've already identified a major obstacle to getting to bed at a reasonable hour: You don't relax during the day, and so you need time to unwind at night. This is likely more of an identity obstacle than a practical one. By that I mean that I doubt there is an actual, physical obstacle that is keeping you from unwinding earlier in the day or evening. Instead, I'm guessing that there is something that you believe (maybe about yourself, or about your success) that's holding you back.



Our beliefs really matter when it comes to our behavior. Our thoughts—about ourselves, other people, our circumstances—and the meaning we attribute to our world tend to trigger our emotions, and our emotions are often the motivation for our behavior. Our actions, when repeated, become habits.

And what we do repeatedly tends to add up to our accomplishments. Our outcomes are usually lagging measures of our habits. You're tired and running late (outcomes) because of your habit of going to bed late. Feeling deprived of rest led you to stay up late. What beliefs do you hold that keep you from taking breaks during the day? When we get back to our identity, we can see how much of what we believe about ourselves can influence our habits. For example, you mention that you are busy and driven. These are beliefs about yourself common to many ambitious people these days.

...our emotions are
often the
motivation for our
behavior.

I relate totally. Until a few years ago, every time someone would ask me how I was doing, I would always give the same answer: I am so busy. Extremely busy. Crazy busy. As such, I was always running late, white knuckling it through an over-packed day.

I wore my exhaustion like a trophy, as a sign of my strength and a mark of my character. At one point, for example, I ran a half-marathon with a fever, not wanting to disappoint my family who'd driven five hours to support me. The busier I was, the more important I felt.

I held a common limiting belief: that busyness is a marker of importance, of character, of economic security. And I believed the reverse, as well: If we aren't busy, we lack importance. We're insignificant. We're under-achieving. We're weak. Un-busy people are lazy, and they are missing out.

Part of my identity included a constellation of thoughts, beliefs, and values about busyness that triggered emotions (feelings of importance, significance), which motivated behaviors (not resting—running with a fever). Over time, staying busy all the time and never resting became a habit, and it really affected my outcomes: Eventually, my body broke down. I got sick again and again—and this forced me to rest. It also caused me to change my beliefs about myself, and my success.

Behavior that conflicts
with our identity
doesn't last.

Behavior that conflicts with our identity doesn't last. As long as I believed that my busyness was a sign of my productivity and the source of my success, even the idea of resting created a vague anxiety that I was possibly about to fail at something—or that I was about to miss an important email or opportunity.

In order to finally change, it wasn't that I had to try harder to sleep more, or that I needed more willpower or self-discipline to rest when I was tired, injured, or sick. It was that I needed to change my beliefs about myself, and about my success.

The more deeply something is tied to our identity, the harder it is to change it. By the same token, the more a new behavior is aligned with our beliefs about ourselves, the more likely it is that we'll adopt it.

Just as I had to upgrade the part of my identity that was keeping me in a continual state of busyness and exhaustion, I suspect you do, too, *Tired and Running Late*. If I were a betting woman, I'd bet that feeling busy and tired isn't contributing to your success. At all.

In fact, you can probably already see how getting enough sleep, not rushing in the morning, and getting to work on time are better bets than busyness and exhaustion. Can you take the part of your identity that feels driven during the day and upgrade that from “busy and driven” to “relaxed, focused, and productive,” or something like that?

And then dig into your beliefs about what leads to productivity and focus. I can tell you with certainty that never resting and not taking breaks throughout the day will not help you do your best work, get a lot done, or stay focused when you need to be.

Plenty of research has shown that taking breaks, even brief ones, dramatically improves our performance and productivity. When we don’t take breaks, our focus and the quality of our work usually suffers. But when we do rest throughout the day, we can work for much longer without the quality of our work, or our focus, suffering.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to take breaks throughout the day. Take a proper lunch break. Go for a short walk between meetings at work. When you get home from work, don’t immediately jump into the next activity—wind down a little. Read a book. Watch a 20-minute sitcom. Call a friend. Try taking as many breaks as you need to take so that you don’t feel deprived of rest at bedtime.

Do this as an experiment and record how much you get done and how well you do

...the more a new behavior is aligned with our beliefs about ourselves, the more likely it is that we’ll adopt it.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to take breaks throughout the day.

it. Gather evidence that you are relaxed, focused, and productive—or whatever your upgraded identity is—throughout the day. Note it if you experience greater feelings of relaxation, or more focus. Relish it if you take time to relax before it's time for bed.

Above all, enjoy the heck out of your breaks. Don't plan them, don't worry about them—just let yourself take them. All you need to do is show up, and a little added rest will work its magic on your life. And do let me know how it's going. I'm hoping, *Tired and Running Late*, that you'll soon be signing off as Relaxed, Focused, and Productive.

In some ways, the above reader needed to go back to the beginning and, at least to start, aim for a different goal. The habit she needed was to rest during the day, and to take breaks. This is the key habit behind the habit (see page 28). Even more importantly, she needed to swap out her limiting belief (“I’m too busy to rest”) for more constructive thoughts about herself (“I’m relaxed and productive enough to take breaks.”)

When we get stuck, our most important task is to hunt down our limiting beliefs, particularly those thoughts that we have about ourselves — our identity — that conflict with our new habit.

How can you turn a self-limiting thought about yourself into an encouraging one? And finally, how can you integrate your new habit with your identity? Use the worksheet below, [“Upgrading Your Identity.”](#)

Worksheets

GOALS & RESOLUTIONS BRAINSTORMING

What are some aspirational goals that you could set for yourself?

What new habit have you wanted to get into for a while now?

How can you [invest in yourself](#)?

What do you want to *feel* more of this year?

What behaviors tend to make you feel the way that you want to feel?

THROW AMBITION OUT THE WINDOW WORKSHEET

1. How can you strip your resolution or behavior down to something that is so ridiculously easy you could do it every day with barely a thought? Think about doing one push-up instead of 15, meditating for only one minute, replacing one unhealthy snack with pre-packaged carrots and hummus. Remember, this is about initiating the neural pathway in a way that doesn't create resistance—you'll be able to expand your habit later. Write out your better-than-nothing habit below.

2. Now evaluate what you've outlined for yourself. Is it ridiculously easy? Will it take no time at all to accomplish? If not, try cutting your routine in half again.

MAKE YOUR HABIT EVEN MORE REWARDING WORKSHEET

“Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and
Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do.”

—Mark Twain, via Tom Sawyer

1. What do you look forward to doing that relates to your new habit? What would make you look forward to doing it even more?
2. Can you add an element of play or additional fun to your habit? What about a positive emotion like gratitude or a sense of accomplishment?
3. What positive feelings does your resolution foster? Remember, you won't think your way into a change, but when you feel something, you'll usually be more motivated. So, outline a way here to intentionally put yourself in touch with the feelings that really motivate you.

COMFORT YOURSELF WORKSHEET

1. What rewards does your brain direct you towards when you are stressed?
2. What are more constructive rewards or treats that you can direct yourself towards? What are some healthy ways to comfort yourself?

Extra Credit: What low-level stressor can you prevent or eliminate?

MAKE PLANS FOR OBSTACLES WORKSHEET

What obstacles can you imagine you'll face? List them here.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What will you do in the face of these obstacles? Frame your plan using an IF/THEN sentence, e.g., IF it rains, THEN I will still walk, and I will use the umbrella that is in the front hall.

1. If _____, then _____

2. If _____, then _____

3. If _____, then _____

Please use another sheet of paper to go through this exercise with every obstacle you can imagine. If the obstacles are preventable, please also plan a way to prevent it in the future.

FIGHT SELF-SABOTAGE WORKSHEET

Avoid the licensing effect by reflecting on your goals and values rather than your accomplishments.

1. Why did you make the resolution you did? What does that say about your goals and values?
2. What larger mission are you fulfilling? Remember to avoid using moral terms (e.g. becoming a better, higher-achieving person) in favor of morally neutral ones (e.g. reduce stress and increase happiness). What feeling state are you after?
3. How will you and others benefit from the habit you are working on?

REGROUP, REVISE, AND DOUBLE DOWN WORKSHEET

What obstacle have you failed to see or plan for?

How does your routine need tweaking?

Is your trigger consistent? Does your reward need bolstering?

Did you take on too much too soon?

Can you prevent this obstacle in the future?

Make a specific plan for what to do if you find yourself in a similar situation again:

UPGRADING YOUR IDENTITY WORKSHEET

1. What limiting beliefs do you have about yourself that are holding you back?
Another way to think about this: What thoughts do you have that cause you to sabotage your new habit in some way?
2. How can you turn this self-limiting thought into an encouraging one? For example, “I am too busy to rest” becomes “I am productive enough to take a break.”
3. What will serve as evidence that your encouraging thought is actually true — or at least as true or truer than your limiting belief? For example, noticing when you took a break and got a lot done anyway.
4. Finally, what identity statement can you make that is aligned with your new habit? This will often bring you right back to where you started, with the feeling state you are after. For example: “I am relaxed and productive” or “I am a good prioritizer” or “I am calm and energetic.”