CHANGE YOUR HABITS

The Science of How to Build Good Habits that Stick and Break Bad Ones

MAYO OSHIN
Hi, it’s Mayo Oshin here.

I wrote this free guide to help you improve your health, performance at work and overall quality of life.

I understand that your time is very important to you. For this reason, I’ve purposely designed this guide to be short, practical, simple and straight to the point.

If you’d like to explore further reading on the ideas in this guide or review the sources of academic research highlighted, you can visit mayooshin.com or join my free newsletter at mayooshin.com/newsletter to learn how to stick to your goals over the long-term.

Finally, if you know anyone who would benefit from reading this free guide, feel free to share this document with them.

I hope the practical strategies in this guide will help you change your habits to change your life for the better.

Thank you for reading and best of luck in your future endeavours.

Cheers,

Mayo
12 Things You’ll Learn In This Guide

1. How to stick to your goals over the long-term.
2. How to overcome laziness and lack of motivation.
3. How to stop procrastinating and get things done.
4. How to break a bad habit and replace it with a good one.
5. The science of how habits work in your brain.
6. How long it actually takes to form a new habit.
8. How to make good decisions without thinking too much.
9. How to use small changes to make it easier to achieve your goals.
10. How to get back on track after falling off your goals.
11. How to find time for your new habits (even if your schedule is chaotic and busy).
12. A step-by-step process to effectively apply these in your life today.
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Why is it so hard to change our habits?

“It is never too late to become what you might have been.”

—George Eliot

Imagine what your life would look like if you could finally make the necessary changes.

A life where you make consistent progress every day to achieve your goals. A life where you are healthy, happy and fulfilled.

And yet, even though you have these dreams, positive change can be really hard.

On the other hand, it can be so easy to fall back into unhealthy, bad habits that hold you back from making progress.

These include:

- Staying up late at night
- Wasting time on Social Media
- Binge eating Junk Food
- Excessive Self-Criticism
- Overspending
- Binge Drinking
- Smoking
- Biting your nails

Slipping back into your old, bad habits can be frustrating because you believed that the bad habit was gone for good. It feels like you take one step forward and
two steps back.

If change is necessary to live a better life, why do we fail to stick to our goals every year, even though we had a New Year's Resolution?

Is it possible that we’ve been approaching change the wrong way? If so, is there an easier way that could actually help you to stick to your goals over the long-term?

In this short guide, I’d like to share a different approach that could make it easier for you to stick to your goals in the long run.

This approach is a practical combination of my academic research in Psychology and Science, alongside hard-earned wisdom from my personal experiences.

Instead of relying on motivation, willpower or goal-setting, this approach focuses on long-term progress by changing the unconscious daily decisions that create your life—habits.

Studies have shown that more than 40% of your daily decision-making processes are unconsciously driven by your habits.

Habits are the underlying driving force of either success or failure—and greatness or mediocrity. This is why they are so important for making consistent progress in your life.

I don’t have all the answers, plus there are several areas of my life that I would like to change for the better.

Regardless, I hope this guide will help you make real, long-term changes to live a better life.

Let’s get started.
The Science of How Your Habits Work in Your Brain

There’s a three step model that psychologists use to understand how habits are formed and the patterns they typically follow.

This is called the habit loop and here’s what it looks like...

**TRIGGER → ROUTINE → REWARD**

Think about the habits you currently have and you’ll see this loop set off by a trigger effect.

For example, let’s say at 2pm every day, you browse Facebook during working hours instead of being productive.

Whenever you feel stressed or lonely (trigger)— you reach for your mobile phone and log into Facebook (routine). You instantly get a rush of dopamine, stress relief and ‘sense of belonging’ by scrolling through the news feeds, likes, comments and chatting with your friends (reward).

What is really happening here is that your brain anticipates the positive benefit or reward of stress relief and a sense of belonging, whenever you are stressed out and lonely.

If you react to the same trigger and repeat the behaviour again and again, it will eventually become an automatic behaviour—a habit is now formed.

Keep this three step loop in mind as you read the rest of the material in this guide.

Now let’s look at how you can use this concept to change your habits.

**Step 1: Identify Your Trigger**

Remember that the trigger activates the habit loop or behaviour pattern.
Identifying this is the first step to changing your habits because this will deal with the habits at the source.

We spend most of our lives on autopilot, never really taking time to understand why we do what we do.

For example, let’s say you have a bad habit of drinking coffee every morning. Ask yourself, do you drink coffee because you’re tired? Or because you just happened to walk past a specific coffee shop every day? Or because it’s 9am.

Typically, Habit triggers fit into one of these five categories:

- Location
- Time
- Emotional State
- Other People
- Something Immediately before action

Whenever you are hit with that urge to eat a bar of chocolate, smoke or waste time on social media as an example, take note of the following:

a) *Where am I?* (I’m sitting at my work desk)

b) *What time is it?* (11 am)

c) *How do I feel?* (Bored, tired and agitated)

d) *Who else is around me?* (Work colleagues)

e) *What did I just do that set off my craving?* (scanned, photocopied and filed a bunch of papers)

After repeating this exercise for a week, a pattern of trigger, routine and reward should start to emerge. Particularly, you should start to notice what you are actually craving i.e stress relief, happiness, sense of belonging etc.
In my case, I noticed I would walk into the supermarket on the way home from work to buy a bag of chips typically around 7 pm to get the reward of stress relief. Once I became aware, I was in a much better place to replace this habit and stick to a healthier alternative.

**Step 2. Use existing triggers to create new ones**

One of the best ways to start a new habit is to create a trigger that will set off the new behaviour.

Remember that triggers typically fall into one of the five categories mentioned previously.

We can take this one step further to make the process of developing habits even easier. Instead of creating a new habit from scratch, why not build on top of the momentum of your current habits to create new ones?

For example, let’s say you already have the habit of sitting down on your couch to watch your favourite TV show at 8pm every day after work. You could use this trigger to set off your new healthy habit of drinking more water.

This is a great way to fit new habits into your life.

**Practice:** Here’s a useful exercise you can do right now to apply this.

Write down 10 current triggers and automatics habits you already do every day. This could be as simple as tidying your bed and praying in the morning, buying a coffee at your local coffee shop at lunchtime or watching a movie on Netflix at 8pm.

Once you have this list ready, look for different ways to pair these with the new habit you would like to form.

Here’s a useful way to structure this plan. Simply fill out the sentence below...

**After/Before [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].**

As an example in the context of the previous case of sitting down on your couch...
to watch TV after work, the plan could look something like this...

*After I sit down to watch Game Of Thrones, I will drink 2 glasses of water.*

Simply find the best times during your day when you can ‘stack’ this new habit on top of the existing one.

By riding on the momentum of your existing habits and using them as triggers, you can make the process of creating new ones easier.

**Step 3: Experiment With Rewards and Routines.**

Once you have a clearer sense of the triggers, routines and rewards for your habits, you can now experiment with the entire habit loop.

First, the reward.

It’s easy to fall into the trap of focusing on the pain and suffering of starting a new habit, especially in the early stages of changing them.

It doesn’t have to be this way, you can take action and enjoy the process at the same time.

Experiment with rewarding yourself afterwards and celebrating your progress.

- **Did you exercise today?** —Reward yourself by going to the cinema this weekend.

- **Did you write another 200 words for your project?** —Reward yourself by catching up with friends at a restaurant.

- **Did you reach out to 5 new people in your network?** —Reward yourself by going to a comedy show.

This will further reinforce the positive benefit of your new behaviour to your brain and help you stay consistent over the long term.
You could also experiment with the routines, especially if you’re trying to break bad habits.

For example, let’s say you have a bad habit of eating after midnight.

After some observation, you may have noticed that it’s not hunger driving you, but instead at midnight everyday you’re bored and looking for something to fill in time—so you get up to cook and eat.

You could do one of two things:

1. Experiment with trying out new routines that help you overcome that boredom i.e go for a walk, play an instrument, write in a journal etc.

2. Eliminate or reduce the incentives of the reward i.e create negative consequences for taking action like setting your alarm to wake up earlier the next day.

Ideally, replacing your old routines with new routines while keeping the same rewards can also be an effective strategy for breaking bad habits.

You can also write down and use an actionable plan to take action on your new routine whenever the craving comes up.

Once you’ve gone through the exercises in this chapter, we can now move onto the main course of this book to learn how to finally stick to your goals.

Before jumping into the main course, let’s quickly resolve an important question that may have crossed your mind...

*How long does it really take to build a new habit?*

Let’s discuss this now.
How Long Does it Take to Form a New Habit

“It doesn’t matter how slowly you go, as long as you do not stop.”
—Confucius

We’ve covered the science of how habits work and how to use this basic knowledge to begin to change your habits.

But now you’re probably wondering...

How long does it take to form a new habit?

Search anywhere on the internet and you will find a ridiculous amount of articles, specifically from fitness and self-help gurus, who tell you that it will only take 21 to 30 days to build a new habit.

The long-lasting myth that it takes 21 days to form a new habit originated from the book ‘Psycho-Cybernetics’ written by plastic surgeon, Dr. Maltz.

In 1960, Dr. Maltz observed that his patients took a minimum of 21 days to adjust to seeing their new face after an operation or a missing limb after amputation—he never stated this as a general matter of fact.

Decades afterwards till date, his simple 21 day observation has been extrapolated into a golden rule for habits.

If you’ve ever got frustrated because you couldn’t form a new habit in 21 days, you can now breathe a sigh of relief.

A wide range of scientific studies suggest that it can take anywhere from 18 days up to 254 days or more to build a new habit.
Particularly, the work of researcher Phillippa Lally and her team from the University College London suggests that on average it can take approximately 66 days to make a new behaviour automatic i.e. unconscious decision-making.¹

Evidently, some habits will become ‘automatic’ quicker than others i.e. drinking a glass of water daily versus exercising three times a week.

There’s more good news.

Lally’s study also observed that missing a single day did not reduce the chance of forming a new habit.

This means that you don’t have to beat yourself up or give up if you struggle with consistency because you haven’t lost much of your progress.

Just get back up and keep going.

Take That First Step

The truth is everybody is different and you are particularly unique in how you form new habits.

We haven’t even scratched the surface on some other important factors—the complexity of the new habit, your current physical environment, your self-identity and belief system and so on.

Regardless of where you are right now or how long it will take to form the new habit, remember this in the words of Philosopher, Lao Tzu:

*The Journey Of A Thousand Miles Begins With A Single Step.*

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P.S.

*Before you move on to the next chapter, I’d like you to pick one new habit you would like start. This will help you effectively use the strategies in the rest of this guide.*
The Best Way to Start Your New Habit

“Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going.”

– Jim Rohn

Here are 3 simple steps to help you start your new habit.

Step 1: Get Clear on Your Big Picture

The first step in building new habits that last is by simply taking a step back and getting clear on your big picture.

In other words, what is your long-term vision?

If for example, you would like to start writing every day, your big picture could be that you see yourself in the future as a New York Best Selling Author.

It’s important that you also get clear on why you want to achieve this goal.

Studies have shown that goals driven by intrinsic motivation (desire for internal rewards) are more likely to succeed than otherwise.²

A powerful question to ask yourself at this point is this:

Why do I want to build this new habit?

Take some time off to really think about your why behind this desire to create the new habit.

Once you’ve established your core reason, think about how you could create more ‘intrinsic’ motivators behind the habit before moving to the next step.

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Step 2: Start Small

The biggest challenge with building a new habit is that it can take up so much energy and willpower.

The worst thing you can do is dive into the deep end straight away. This is a silly mistake I’ve personally made over and over again.

For example, last year, I listened to a successful entrepreneur who mentioned during a podcast interview that he reads a book a day.

So, what did I do?

Full of excitement and enthusiasm, I made an immediate commitment to read 30 pages of a book every day.

Within a couple of days, I gave up.

Shortly after my failure, I came across the strategy of ‘Tiny Habits’ from B.J. Fogg, Researcher and Psychologist at Stanford University.

This helped me kick-start my new reading habit.

The general idea is simple—make it so easy to get started on a new habit, that it’s nearly impossible to say no.

For example, if you want to start a new reading habit, you can begin by reading just one page every day. It’s really that simple.

Once the ‘tiny habit’ goes on autopilot, you can then gradually increase the number of pages you read daily.

What is the easiest and smallest step you can take right now to start your new habit?

Write this down in preparation for the next step.
Step 3. Piggyback Off Your Current Habits

Instead of wasting a boatload of energy and time creating a new habit from scratch, you could use the momentum of your current habits to get started easily.

For example, when I first started a new habit of playing the guitar, I simply ‘stacked’ this on top of my habit of watching comedy shows on my laptop after coming home from work.

As soon as the comedy show would begin playing, I would grab my acoustic guitar and start practising. Since then, I’ve sustained the habit of regularly playing the guitar for more than four years till date. Here’s how you can use this ‘stacking’ technique to start your new habit.

Fill in the sentence below with any suitable examples you can think of:

After I [EXISTING HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].

Here are some examples:

- After I wake up, I will meditate for 2 minutes.
- After I open my laptop, I will write two paragraphs.
- After I finish a meal, I will drink two glasses of water.

This preparation and planning ahead of time will help you stick your goals over the long-term.

The best part about this is that once you build a new habit, you can then ‘stack’ another one on top of this and so on.

It’s like riding a wave, you use the momentum from your old habits to drive the creation of the new one.

Once you’ve completed these three steps, you’re ready to learn more practical strategies for long-term change.
How to Get and Stay Motivated Every Single Day.

Have you ever seen a soon to be newly-wed workout? You would think they were training for the Olympics.

Before the wedding date was set, they may have been inconsistent with their diet and exercise routine.

Now that the wedding is confirmed, their health suddenly becomes their number one priority.

These couples make sure to eat healthy and go for a run every morning. Their time and money is spent on expensive personal trainers, training programmes and health supplements.

Why are they so motivated to achieve their health goals?

According to some studies, up to 75 percent of our personal motivation to achieve our goals may be driven by the rewards we perceive to be at stake.3

These “stakes” could be the painful and negative consequences you may experience if you don’t take sufficient action.

In this case, the soon to be newlyweds will do everything they can to look and feel their best on their dream wedding day. Anything less than this is unacceptable.

These stakes are a driving force for sustaining their healthy habits.

In your own life, you may notice several examples of stakes as a driving force for your habits. For example, if you are a full-time employee, you wake up early and clock in at work several days a week for years. It doesn’t matter if you hate your job, or your boss, you show up every day because your financial stability is at stake if you get fired.

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How to create your own ‘stakes’

The best way to create a powerful ‘stake’ is to carefully select painful and immediate consequences for inaction.

If for example, you’ve been lazy about exercising regularly, you could partner with an accountability buddy or a group you pay a substantial amount of money whenever you don’t show up at the gym.

These type of consequences aren’t just limited to losing money.

You could also choose consequences from the following:

- The consequences on your family, friends and support network.
- The consequences on your profession.
- The consequences on your purpose and contribution to society.

Human tendency is to avoid painful experiences and chase pleasure instead.

By using ‘stakes’ you keep yourself accountable, stick to new habits and tap into a core driving force behind human motivation— to avoid pain at all costs.

Do you have immediate, painful consequences for failing to taking action towards your goals? If not, create yours today and use this as a reminder to make consistent progress every day.
How to Make Good Habits Automatic Even When Your Willpower is weak.

“Effective leaders have the ability to consistently move themselves and others to action because they understand the “invisible forces” that shape us.”

—Tony Robbins

We often blame our lack of motivation and willpower for the lack of progress in our lives. But, consider this for a second...

Could there be something missing from this discussion?

One of the most overlooked, yet crucial contributing factors that drive our habits and behaviour is our physical environment.

This includes but is not limited to the people, items, colours, sounds, buildings and so on, that surround us on a daily basis.

Your physical environment is one of the most powerful invisible forces that shape your entire life.

A well-designed environment will help you make better decisions without thinking too much.

Here’s how to quickly do this...

How to Design Your Environment for Success

If you want to improve your odds of success, you should seriously consider designing a physical environment that makes it easier to make good decisions.

Relying on motivation and willpower is not enough. These are useful for getting started in the short-term, but not for long-term progress.
Here are two simple steps to design an environment that makes it easier to stick to your goals over the long run...

**Step 1: Increase the number of steps required to make a bad decision.**

For example, if you easily get distracted away from your work to browse through social media feeds on your mobile phone, keep your mobile phone away from sight in a distant drawer until you’ve completed your work.

If this doesn’t work, try logging off all of your social media accounts before you start working. This way if you do fall into the temptation to check your phone, you’ll have to log on to use the social media accounts again.

This way you increase the difficulty and number of steps to make a bad decision, which also buys you more time to make a better one.

You can also use a similar strategy, if say, you want to stop overeating and avoid unhealthy food.

To make this bad habit more difficult to action, you could move the least healthy food in your house into top shelf cupboards above eye level and out of hand’s reach. *(Note: Food Stores use the same trick to get you to buy food items by placing them at eye level).*

The next time you have a food craving, the distance of about 8 feet or more will give you enough time to remind yourself of the healthier alternatives.

**Step 2: Design for laziness and mindless actions.**

Once you’ve designed the environment to increase the difficulty of making bad decisions, it’s time to design your environment to make it easier to make better decisions without thinking too much.

Here are some examples....

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If you want to eat healthy. Keep a bowl of apples bang in the middle of your kitchen. This way you’ll be more inclined to pick up an apple if you have food cravings.

You could also use smaller plates to eat your food, just like the Okinawans. A study conducted by Brian Wansink discovered that reducing the size of a plate from 12.5 inches to 10 inches, could lead to the average person serving themselves nearly 30% less food on the same plate.⁵

If you want to exercise more. Pack your gym clothes the night before bed and leave them as an obstruction to your bedroom door. On your way to work in the morning, you’ll be more inclined to pick up the gym bag and workout later in the evening.

If you want to start reading more. Move any televisions or electronics outside your bedroom and keep a selection of interesting books on your bed in plain sight. You’ll be more inclined to read that book till you sleep.

If you want to be more productive. At the end of each work day, spend 15 to 30 minutes planning out exactly what you’ll be working on the next day. Later on the next day, If things get chaotic, you’ll automatically have a plan of action to follow through on.

If you want to encourage a group to interact more. Rearrange spaces and seating in a semicircle. This way they could be more inclined to interact more with each other due to closer proximity.

Change Your Environment to Change Your Life.

Whilst motivation plays some role in helping us achieve our goals, it’s the invisible forces including our physical environment, that truly shape our behaviour and life.

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When you are surrounded by better choices, it’s much easier to make better decisions that will eventually change your life for the better.

Ultimately, you don’t have control over how motivated you will be to work tomorrow, but you do have control over your immediate environment.

Focus on what you can control and let go of what you can’t.
How One Small Habit Can Improve All Areas of Your Life

Whenever we plan a holiday, there are usually different routes to the final destination. Some routes have a longer journey time, but could also be more convenient—and vice versa.

Typically, we choose the most convenient and efficient route, that helps to make the rest of the vacation easier.

Likewise, you could also use similar ‘routes’ to make it easier to achieve your goals and transform your life.

These are “Keystone Habits”—habits that create a domino effect leading to new actions, behaviours and habits.

Instead of trying to achieve all your goals at once—leading to burnout and failure—why not create your own “keystone habits” to get more done by doing less?

Let’s discuss more on how to do this.

What are Keystone Habits?

The idea of keystone habits was first introduced in Charles Duhigg’s book, The Power of Habit.

According to Duhigg, Keystone habits are “small changes or habits that people introduce into their routines that unintentionally carry over into other aspects of their lives.”

Keystone habits create a domino effect that change every area of your life.

Let me give you some examples of keystone habits.
1. Exercise

Studies have shown that people who regularly exercise (3 or more times a week) tend to eat healthier, consume less alcohol, smoke less, be more productive at their work and sleep better than those who don’t.\(^6\)

I have personally experienced this effect time and time again.

My healthiest and most productive weeks also happen to be the same weeks where I didn’t miss a single workout. On these weeks, I have high levels of discipline and self-control to avoid procrastination, resist social media distractions and temptations to eat unhealthy foods.

Conversely, the weeks where I skip my workouts are usually my least productive.

I have a much harder time getting out of bed to do anything productive with less self-control to avoid making bad decisions.

2. Sleep

Getting a good night of sleep isn’t only for the kids.

Your quality of sleep could also have a profound impact on your productivity and happiness.

Plus, people who sleep poorly may struggle with learning, memory and decision-making.\(^7\)

3. Journaling

Keeping a personal journal could also help you improve your writing skills, reduce stress and boost your creativity.

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Plus, if you’ve recently been through an emotionally stressful experience, journaling could help you release these emotion and reduce your stress levels.⁸

These are just a few examples of keystone habits that could transform every area of your life.

**How to Identify your Keystone Habits**

There are three simple characteristics of keystone habits that set them apart from the rest:

- Keystone habits make it easier to start new habits.
- Keystone habits are small enough to avoid overwhelm and build your confidence.
- Keystone habits make positive behaviours addictive.

Identify your own keystone habits that meet these criteria and suit your lifestyle.

If you’re still struggling to think of suitable examples, here are some more...

- Making your bed in the morning
- Cleaning your room
- Praying
- Donating money to a charity every month
- Spending quality time with your friends and family
- Playing a musical instrument
- Drawing, writing or painting

These examples should help make it easier for you to identify your keystone habits.

Once you’ve chosen your keystone habits, there are several strategies that can help make it easier to stick to them over the long-term.

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These include—starting small, designing your environment for success and fitting your habits into a schedule.

**Transform your Life Using Keystone Habits**

Keystone habits hold together all the habits in your life—much like, the pillars of a bridge.

Without them, everything seems to fall apart. But, with their support, everything seems to fall into place easier and more efficiently.

Take that first step in building the pillars that support your bridge (your goals) by creating your keystone habits today.
How to Finally Stick to Your Goals Over The Long-Term.

This year will be different—or, so we thought.

We get so excited and motivated to stick to our new year’s resolutions—to exercise more, eat healthier, wake up earlier, write more, read more, spend more time with the people who matter most to us and yet...

A few months into the year the excuses start rolling in.

We lose motivation, quit and slip back into our old bad habits that we’ve tried so hard to change. It’s frustrating because our lack of consistency makes it harder to get from where we are today to where we want to be.

Why do we never stick to our goals and how can we change this?

Let me share a quick story with you to solve this puzzle.

The Hidden Force Driving Our Habits

In 1934, an alcoholic, Bill Wilson staggered into Towns Hospital, an upper Manhattan institution to get treatment for his alcoholic addiction.

Wilson had already tried to visit other rehab centres to break his bad habit of drinking two quarts of rot-gut whiskey daily—this addiction had been ruining his life for decades.

Motivation just wasn’t enough.

No matter how many times Wilson promised his wife and family that he would stop drinking, he would eventually relapse back to his old habits—nothing was working.

When Wilson returned to the Manhattan Towns Hospital, his physician—William D. Silkworth, sedated him with belladonna, a drug used to help him calm down
and go to sleep. And then he shouted....

“If there is a God, let Him show Himself. I am ready to do anything, anything!” “Suddenly,” he later noted, “the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed .... that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man.”

For the next 36 years of his life, Wilson would never have another drink of alcohol.

Instead, he dedicated his life to helping other alcoholics break their bad habits through a co-created programme that promoted transparency and a belief in God.

Today, this programme has established itself as the well-known Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)— which helps over 2 million people every year break their alcoholic addictions through its famous 12-steps in approximately 150 countries worldwide.

Even though AA primarily teaches unscientific methods, it’s had a powerful impact in transforming the lives of more than 10 million Americans over its lifetime.

When AA members were asked to reveal the secret to what finally helped them stick to their healthy habits, one word repetitively showed up—belief.

Beliefs, Actions And Destiny

“Your beliefs become your thoughts,
Your thoughts become your words,
Your words become your actions,
Your actions become your habits,
Your habits become your values,
Your values become your destiny.”
— Mahatma Gandhi
If you take a step back and listen to that voice in your head—both good and bad—you’ll notice that there’s always been a belief or self-identity driving your habits.

Here’s a quick example.

A few years ago, I spoke to a friend about her struggle to go to the gym consistently to achieve her goal of losing 10 pounds off her weight.

During our conversation, she told me how everyday she would get home from work, make excuses why she shouldn’t go to the gym (didn’t get enough sleep from the night before, stressed from work) and then eventually skip the workout.

This had gone on for months and no matter how many times she set goals, joined accountability groups, downloaded new apps or hired personal trainers—she wasn’t making any progress.

A few of her statements clearly stood out:
“People in the gym are judgemental and think they own the place”.
“I struggle to wake up in the morning to workout”
“Working out is so boring, it’s just not fun any more”
“I’m just too busy and tired to go the gym right now”

My friend had unknowingly built a strong belief system that made going to the gym boring, difficult and scary.

No matter how much she consciously tried to change her habits, her subconscious self-beliefs eventually took control and sabotaged her efforts year after year.

Over the years since then I learned something profound...

**Actions Will Never Exceed Self-Image**

If we find ourselves committing to plans and goals but never actually following through consistently—we need to honestly examine our underlying self beliefs
and change them first.

Otherwise, we’ll find ourselves slipping back to old habits once again because we never addressed the problem at the core first.

So how exactly can we create a new belief system and self-identity that will help us stick to our goals?

**Be It Until You Make It**

“You can, you should, and if you’re brave enough to start, you will.”
—Stephen King

Remember Bill Wilson and his story of breaking free of his alcohol addiction after his encounter with God?

Whether we take his story at face value or not, consider this — could it be that Bill’s experience caused such a dramatic shift in his belief system, that he broke free instantly?

In other words, Wilson’s beliefs changed from ‘I can’t stop drinking, I am an alcoholic’ to ‘I can stop drinking, I don’t drink alcohol, I am free.’

This tiny shift in his self talk caused such a significant change in his habits that he remained sober for over three decades.

To create a similar change for yourself, I’m going to introduce an idea called ‘Be It Until You Make It’.

The concept is simple. *Simply ‘BE’ the type of person who does (actions) as if you already had achieved the goal.*

Here are some examples:

**Goal: To lose weight**

Old identity: Going to the gym is so boring and I don’t have any time. I struggle to consistently lose weight.
New identity: I am the type of person who exercises consistently, eats healthy and loses weight.

Actions: Three times a week I wake up at 6 a.m to workout. Every morning I wake up and drink a glass of water. I sleep at 10 p.m every day.

**Goal: To spend more time with family and friends**

Old identity: I struggle to find any time to spend with family and friends.

New identity: I create time to spend with my family. I am the type of person who always finds time to spend with those who matter to me the most.

Action: I call my family every Sunday at 7 p.m. I hangout with my friends for brunch at a local restaurant every Saturday.

**Goal: To Write More**

Old identity: Every time I look at a blank piece of paper I struggle to get ideas of what to start writing first.
I struggle to consistently find time to finish my novel. I’m afraid of what people will think of my work.

New identity: I am the type of person who always comes up with creative ideas, shows my work to others and stays on track with my manuscript projects.

Action: Every day at 8 a.m I start writing in my drafts up till 2 p.m. Once a week I share my written work with agencies and other writers.

By taking tiny steps that reinforce your new self-identity, you can change your self beliefs and ultimately, your habits.

**Where To Go From Here**

Right now in this present moment, you can choose to behave and act out a new chosen belief system.
Instead of obsessing over the future, you can choose to focus on who you can be and what you can do right now in this moment to bring you one step closer to achieving your dreams.

You may stumble, make mistakes and even fail, but as long as you remember who you really are, you will always stand back up and keep going.

*Just be it.*
How to Get Back On Track After You Have a Slip-Up.

"BINGE EATING HURTS SO MUCH... MAYBE IF I KEEP EATING I'LL GET FEEL better ABOUT MYSELF."

"It does not matter how many times you get knocked down, but how many times you get up."

-Vince Lombardi

For whatever reason—a holiday, relationship breakup, illness, injury and so on—you may slip-up and fall behind on your diet plan, workouts and quality of your work.

When this happens, it’s easy to fall into a downward spiral of negativity because it seems like all the progress you’ve made may be ruined.

But, it doesn’t have to be this way. Slip-ups are part of the process and your success hinges on your ability to bounce back from failure and get back on track.
Here are 4 simple, effective and powerful strategies that will help you get back on track if you have a slip up with your new habits.

1. **Identify the root cause of your failure**

   “If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions.”

   —Albert Einstein

   Popular advice on how to get back on track with your life typically starts off with tactics.

   Whilst these may help you in the short-term, you’ll find that in most cases a few weeks or months later, you’ll be back to your old ways once again.

   This is simply because the root cause of ‘why’ you messed up was never identified and addressed first.

   What was your emotional state at the time of the slip-up? What thoughts were running through your mind before you fell off track? What was going on in your life when you made that mistake?

   If you do enough due diligence, you’ll discover that there are common triggers that cause you to fail.

   These include but are not limited to the following:

   - Stress from life changes and relationship issues.
   - Boredom and frustration with lack of progress.
   - Injury or illness.
   - Drastic change in environment i.e. holiday, going to a specific venue, change in home address etc.
   - Trying to do too much too quickly.
Take some time off to reflect on and identify the triggers that cause your habits to fail. You may uncover some unique strategies that work well for you.

For example, if you discover that the boredom of eating the same food every day caused you to binge eat, then you could try fitting in new healthy recipes, meal times and so on to deal with this.

As simple and obvious as this may seem, this will lay the proper foundation for the other strategies to help you get back on track and stick with your habits over the long run.

2. Create a Schedule and stick to it

“Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes... but no plans”.
—Peter Drucker

Do you have a schedule to fit in these habits in your life? If not, you should seriously consider doing so.

For example, I know that every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I will be in my local gym at 7.30 a.m. for my prepared strength training workout.

If for whatever reason, I mess up and miss my workout on Wednesday, I already have a schedule and plan in place to get back on track for the Friday workout.

Business carries on as usual because the decision-making process has already been made.

I already know exactly what, where and when I will be taking action next time.

Practice:

If you haven’t already done this, simply block and fit in your habits into your calendar.
Be very specific about what you will be doing, where it will take place and when you will be making it happen.

A pro-tip here is to build in buffer zones in your calendar to allow for potential slip-ups and failures.

Sticking to a schedule will help prevent you from beating yourself up after messing up, re-engage with and stay focused on the habit at the next opportune time.

3. Get Back to the basics

“If I waited for perfection, I would never write a word.”
—Margaret Atwood

It’s tempting to try to do too much too quickly, especially when you’re trying to get back on track quickly. But, this is usually counterproductive for making progress.
Depending on how far you’ve slipped up, you may have to get back to the bare basics and build up overtime to a sustainable routine.

Are you trying to get back on track with your diet? Instead of worrying so much about strict diets and foods to avoid, why not focus on portion sizes and tracking simple calories for now.

Are you trying to get back on track with your writing? Instead of worrying so much about finishing that in-depth article or book, why not focus on writing a few basic journal pieces for now.

Are you trying to start meditating again? Simply start off by sitting down in a quiet room, close your eyes and focus on your breath for a few minutes.

I’m sure you can think of several relatable examples in your life.

The key point here is to strip the complexity from the habit and make it as
difficult as possible to not get started consistently.

Instead of worrying about “doing it right” the first time, why not simply get started right now.

Once you get back on track and build up consistency with the habit, you can figure out how to do it better overtime.

Remember it’s easier to make changes once you’re already in motion.

4. Change your environment

Is your current environment designed for success or failure?

Your immediate environment doesn’t just include people, but also items, colours, sounds and the like, that trigger your behaviours.

As discussed previously, a well-designed environment can help you change your habits without relying too much on willpower or fickle motivation.

On the flip-side, a poorly designed environment will cause your habits to fail time and time again.

For example, keeping bags of chips and cookies around your bedroom and kitchen cupboard makes it easier for you to binge eat and snack late at night.

Ideally, we would like our environment to work to our advantage.

Here are a few examples of how to use this to get back on track with your habits...

Want to get bed earlier and sleep more? An hour before bed, turn off all electronics and have a book in hand to read till you sleep.
Want to eat more green vegetables? Use dark green plates (or darker colours in general). Research has shown that we tend to eat more portions of food types that match the colour of the plates we use.

Want to exercise more? Pack your gym clothes in a bag the night before the workout and place them right next to your bedroom door. Evidently, what works best for me may not work best for you.

I’ve personally discovered that I get much more out of my writing and workouts whenever I have my headphones plugged in with music playing.

On the off days that I don’t use this strategy, my productivity doesn’t quite reach it’s peak levels.

This is a subtle environmental change I make on a daily basis that helps me stick to my habits and make consistent progress every day.

Make the necessary changes to your environment to make it easier for you get back on track quickly.

It’s Never Too Late to Get Back on Track

“Supposing you have tried and failed again and again. You may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing we call ‘failure’ is not the falling down, but the staying down.”

—Mary Pickford

We’ve all messed up and fallen behind on our goals—yes, this includes the people you look up to and aspire to be like, they’re not superhuman either.

It’s not always easy to get back on track, but it’s possible if you make a firm commitment to do so.

Some days you'll feel like you’re making forward progress, whilst on the other
days it will seem like you’re taking two steps backwards.

No matter the case, in the grand scheme of things, if you get back on track when you mess up, grind it out and stick to the plan, you may actually end up even further ahead than you ever imagined.
How to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Things Done

We’ve covered a lot of practical strategies on how to create and stick to good habits over the long-term. Now, let’s discuss some strategies to break bad habits.

One of the most effective ways to defeat any enemy is to understand what makes them tick before attacking them.

First, let’s begin with the dreaded time-wasting bad habit that holds us back from making progress in our lives—it’s called procrastination.

Why Do We Procrastinate?

According to procrastination expert, Dr. Piers Steel, there are 4 key factors that influence your level of procrastination (Note: I am paraphrasing his words for the sake of simplicity).

- **Confidence**—Do you believe you can achieve this goal?
- **Importance**—Do you value and enjoy the process of completing this goal?
- **Distraction**—How easily distracted are you from being productive?
- **Time delay**—How far away is the deadline of this goal?

The greater the level of importance and confidence you have in completing a goal, the less likely you’ll procrastinate and vice versa.

Likewise, the more easily distracted you become and the further away from the deadline a task completion is required, the more likely you’ll procrastinate and vice versa.

In a nutshell, if you want to stop procrastinating, you need to find more ways to increase your confidence and importance for the goal and reduce the distractions and time delay till completion.

Simple enough.

Fortunately, the majority of this guide up till now is filled with several strategies...
to help you deal with each of these four factors.

For the sake of clarity, let’s quickly review these now.

1. Confidence

Confidence is simply a reflection of your self-identity.

In the previous chapters, we briefly covered the importance of changing your self-identity to stick your goals over the long-term.

The same principles apply here to stop procrastinating.

One of the most effective ways to build a confident self-identity is by proving to yourself that you are the type of person who does a specific action. These include joining peer groups that support your goals, taking small steps and so on.

Throughout this guide, we’ve also covered several strategies to start small, so no need to repeat these here again.

On a final note, perfectionism and self-criticism are also deeper psychological symptoms of lack of self-confidence.

As you change your self-identity, these symptoms will also fade away.

2. Importance

The more we value the reward of completing a task, the more motivated we are and the less likely we will procrastinate.

If you discover that you’ve been procrastinating on a particular goal or habit due to lack of value, you need to uncover ‘intrinsic’ reasons for taking action.

This strategy of defining your ‘why’ and getting clear on your big picture was also covered in earlier chapters.

Finally, if you don’t enjoy doing a particular task, you could also delegate it to someone else who is willing to do it i.e. hiring a cleaner to clean your house.
3. Distractions

There is a constant tension between your strong desire for short-term gratification and your long-term aspirations.

The best way to eliminate distractions is to reduce the benefit of short-term gratification using ‘stakes’ and to design your environment for automatic good decisions.

These strategies were also covered in previous chapters.

4. Time Delay

If you’ve ever pulled an all nighter to meet a deadline paper in University, you know how deceptive time can be.

Up till the deadline day, you procrastinate on finishing the paper because as you may say “I have enough time.”

But, the day before the deadline you stop procrastinating and get a lot of stuff done.

The best way to prevent last minute rushed work is to reduce the time delay till it’s no longer enjoyable to procrastinate.

Here are some examples..

- Create weekly mini-deadlines to follow through on your plans regularly.
- Announce your new commitment to the public.

For my writing habits, I’ve made a pre-commitment to release a practical, well researched article to my readers every Monday and Thursday without fail.

This public ‘stake’ has helped me to stop procrastinating and write more on a consistent basis.

Now that we’ve briefly touched on some strategies to stop procrastination, let’s discuss three scientifically-backed strategies to break all types of bad habits.
How to Permanently Break a Bad Habit (and Replace It With a Good One)

“All bad habits start slowly and gradually and before you know you have the habit, the habit has you.”
—Zig Ziglar

We all have some bad habits that we wish to get rid of once and for all.

Whether it’s mindless surfing on the internet late at night, smoking or overeating junk food—our lives would be so much better without them.

Bad habits are time-consuming, destructive and prevent us from achieving our goals. But, in reality it can also be a real struggle to finally break free from their firm grip on our lives.

Before we discuss further, let’s quickly talk about why breaking bad habits can be so hard.

Why is it so hard to break a bad habit?

In the previous chapters, we discussed the science of how habits work and the best way to create new habits. As a quick recap, our habits are driven by a 3-part loop in sequence:

- Trigger (the stimulus that starts the habit)
- Routine (the doing of the habit and behaviour itself)
- Reward (the benefit associated with the behaviour)

For example, let’s say you have the bad habit of eating chocolate cookies after your working hours. Your habit loop could look something like this...

- Trigger (stress from a long day of work)
- Routine (eat a chocolate cookie)
- Reward (temporary stress relief to feel better)

Each time you repeat this behaviour pattern it becomes more ingrained in your
brain until it eventually becomes automatic—a habit.

The reason why it can be so hard to break a bad habit, is because there are parts of your brain that associate your cravings with the bad habits.

Don’t give up yet, there’s still hope.

Here are the three scientifically proven strategies to break your bad habits and change your life for the better.

**How to Break a Bad Habit**

1. Use the words “I don’t” instead of “I can’t.”

Using the words “I don’t” instead of “I can’t” could actually help you to make better choices.

In a research study published in the Journal of Consumer Research, 120 students were first split into two different groups.⁹

To test their ability to resist a chosen temptation, one group was told to repeat the phrases “I can’t”, whilst the other to use the word “I don’t.”

For example, if presented with chocolate, one group would say “I can’t eat chocolate,” whilst the other group would say “I don’t eat chocolate.”

Each group was then prompted to answer some quick questions unrelated to the study.

But, when they walked out the room, they were presented with two complimentary treats—a chocolate candy bar and a healthy granola bar.

Surprisingly, the researchers found that the students who used the phrases “I can’t” chose to eat the chocolate candy bar 61% of the time.

Conversely, the students who used the word “I don’t” only chose to eat this 36%

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of the time.

Another similar study was also conducted on a different group of 30 participants split into three groups.

This time the same experiment would test the impact on the phrases on their health goals.

After 10 days of research, they found that only 1 out of 10 in the “I can’t” group were able stick to their goals.

In contrast, 8 out of 10 in the “I don’t” group were successful in meeting their goals.

Next time you catch yourself saying “I can’t [bad habit],” reframe this word and say “I don’t [bad habit]” instead.
This way you’ll give yourself a psychological edge to make a better choice.

2. Practice being aware of your triggers

According to addiction expert, Judson Brewer, regular mindfulness practice could help you break a bad habit.

Better awareness of the triggers that cause bad habits has been shown to interrupt the existing feedback loop that keeps a bad habit in place.

For example, a four-week study reported by Brewer and his research team in the Drug and Alcohol Dependence Journal, showed the positive impact of mindfulness training on breaking the bad habit of smoking.10

In this study, Brewer reported a 36% smoking quit rate compared to 15% through regular therapy.

Brewer suggests that mindfulness practice helps to weaken the link between the craving and the bad behaviour.

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**Practice:** Next time you’re hit with an urge to do the bad habit, take a step back and be aware of the sensations of the trigger in your body.

Then, record your answers to the following questions:

- Where were you when the craving showed up?
- At what point during the day does this happen?
- What is your emotional state?
- Who are you with?
- What happened before you felt this way?

Keep a short journal of your progress and take quick notes of the events that take place on the days you act on the bad habit versus the days you don’t.

This kind of awareness practice will help you to begin to take control of your actions and make better decisions over the long term.

3. **Use an “If-then” plan to replace the bad habit with a good one**

Having a goal to break a bad habit is not enough.

If you want to permanently stick to a good habit, an intentional plan of action is required.

One way to do this is to use an “if-then” plan of action.

An “if-then” strategy requires you to be as specific as possible on where and when you will take a given action.

In 1999, Peter Gollwitzer, Psychology professor at New York University, first introduced this idea to the public.

His extensive research on “implementation intentions” showed that people who use the “if-then” strategy could double the odds of achieving their goals. ¹¹

Here’s how to create your “if-then” plan.

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**Step 1:** Identify the scenario that usually triggers your bad habit. For example, your friend offers you a pizza.

**Step 2:** Specify a different response to the trigger. Ideally, this should be a good habit that would replace and prevent you from falling into the temptation. For example, you ask for a piece of fruit instead of the pizza.

**Step 3:** Combine steps 1 and 2 into an “if-then” format i.e. “If on Saturday evening my friend offers me a pizza, then I will answer: I prefer a piece of fruit instead.”

Using an “if-then” plan makes it easier to react to your cravings and replace them with a good one because of the prepared automatic response.

This may seem too simple at first, but, overtime you’ll notice how effective it can be in helping you to break a bad habit.

**The Path To Freedom**

“The secret to permanently breaking any bad habit is to love something greater than the habit.”—Bryant McGill

Honestly, you’re probably not going to break your bad habits overnight. But, you could use these three strategies to give you that extra boost of self-confidence and self-control required to change.

The process of finally breaking free from your bad habits is a little bit like learning how to ride a bicycle.

There will be some days when you’ll climb on the bicycle and ride around easily.

There will also be days when you struggle to get on the bike and keep falling over and over again.

No matter how long it takes to fail and get back up again, your patience and perseverance will soon pay off.

And then, you’ll finally be free.
The Next Step

Throughout this step-by-step guide, you’ve uncovered the best practical strategies from academic research and my personal experiments to help you stick to your goals over the long-term.

As a recap, we discussed the science of how habits work and how long it really takes to form a new habit.

After this, you learned the best ways to start a new habit that lasts.

Then, we talked about how to get and stay motivated, plus how to make good decisions automatic without relying on willpower.

Afterwards, you discovered how to use one habit to make changes to improve your life easier.

You also learnt how to stick to your goals over the long term by changing your self-identity.

In case you fall off, you now have 4 practical strategies to bounce back and get back on track after a slip-up. And finally, you learned how to use 3 science-based strategies to stop procrastinating and permanently break your bad habits for good.

You are now armed with enough practical information to help you make real positive changes in your life—to live healthy and become the best you can be at your craft.

This is the different approach to change that I proposed at the beginning of this guide.

The best way to make use of this guide is to pick one habit to focus on for a few weeks and then move on to the next shortly after.

Make sure to keep a record of your progress and take notes of any challenges or problems you encounter along the way.
Remember that self awareness can also go a long way in this process.

Even though you may find this guide useful, overnight success is not guaranteed.

Real change requires real effort and real intentional actions that may sometimes be outside your comfort zone.

Doing this alone can be really tough.

For this reason, every Monday and Thursday, I write and share free inspirational articles to a small global community of people driven to live healthier, perform better at their work and make a mark in the world.

Feel free to join us and get support to achieve your goals.

Finally, if you would like to ask me any questions, share your testimonial or have any advice on improving this guide, feel free to contact me at http://mayooshin.com

Stay hungry,

Mayo Oshin