The Learning Community AMA:

James Clear

Devon Anderson: Welcome everybody and thanks for joining us. As is customary at the first of a new year, many of us have thrust a flag into the ground, and declared that <u>this</u> is the year of big change. Now six weeks in, hopefully many of you are going strong, but if statistics carry any weight, the reality is that most of us are a little less enthusiastic about our flag waving. Today's AMA could not have come at a better time. We're thrilled to welcome James Clear, author of the instant New York Times' best-selling book Atomic Habits to give us all a welcome boost in adopting positive and permanent change into our lives.

James has said (and I love this,) "We don't rise to the level of our goals. We fall to the level of our systems." I think this book is one of the clearest guides on behavior change that's ever been written. It explains the "why" as well as the "how" in an actionable and articulate way. Thank you for being here, James.

James Clear: Absolutely, thanks for having me.

Now, as a preface, the Learning Community submitted nearly 50 questions, so there's no way we'll get to all of them in the time that we have, but James has been gracious enough to answer as many as he can, so let's go ahead and jump in. What do you say?

Sounds good.

All right. The first question comes from Johnny Miller and he says, "I absolutely love Atomic Habits," and he's been sharing it with people and he says he's fascinated by researching curiosity for the last couple of years. He loved this tweet of yours, "Curiosity is crucial. Increasingly, I feel an eagerness to learn is one of the most crucial skills in life. If you're not curious, I'm not sure if there's much others can do to help you, but if you're eager to learn, even if you aren't particularly talented, then so much is possible."

His question is two-fold:

"What are some of the reasons that you think we don't take curiosity more seriously in society and what processes or habits might help to build back up our atrophied curiosity muscles?"

Yeah, that's a good question. The first part of it, why don't we take it seriously? I don't know that people talk really about personality traits as something to take seriously that much. They're often in the background. Perhaps the answer is we tend to be a very results-oriented society, tend to be outcome focused. You can see this just when you at like the news for example, things are always outcomes, a Broadway show becomes a hit or a book becomes a best-seller or an earthquake happened.

The news story is about the result. It's not about like, "Two tectonic plates have been grinding on each other for another year." That's not a story. It's only a story once the earthquake happens. It's not a story that like, "An author showed up at the computer today and wrote for another hour." You're never going to see a news story about that. It's only once the book comes out. I think similarly curiosity and other personality traits, perseverance, grit, things like that are in the background the same they're part of the process, the same way that sitting down and writing for an hour is part of the process.

Because of that, people just don't talk about it that much because it's not event related. That's the answer to the first part, but the second part I think is the more meaningful part of the question. What can we do to build up curiosity and foster that? I thought a little bit about this and I think that part of the answer is that it's definitely genetic.

There just is some kind of wiring as to how open you are to experience that might be it's one of the big five personality traits, openness to experience and people who are high on that spectrum may exhibit more curiosity naturally.

Similarly, another one of the big five is the spectrum between introversion and extroversion. Perhaps some level on there indicates an interesting curiosity based on circumstance, but even if the big five don't measure curiosity perfectly.

I think there's probably some kind of genetic wiring that's influencing it, but that doesn't mean that you can't influence it or you can't improve it. I think the more interesting answer to this question is what can do you to like stoke the flame of curiosity? As far as I've been able to tell and from all the research I read, the best way to do this is to keep somebody on the edge of their ability.

In the book, in Atomic Habits, I talked about the Goldilocks Rule which is the idea that humans experience peak levels of motivation when working on tasks of just manageable difficulty, so not too hard, not easy, just right. If you do that, what would usually happens is you tend to be more engaged, you tend to be more curious, you tend to be more interested in what is going to come up next.

You can see this on many different levels. If you are a student, then giving students say you're in second grade and you're trying to teach kids how to read, keeping them right on the cusp of their reading level maintains their curiosity and interest and passion for reading.

If you give them a book that's an eighth grade reading level, well now that's too hard and they're failing all the time, so that's not really that fun. Give them something that's way below their reading level, well now it's easy and they know all the words, so that's not interesting either. That's true for education. It's also true for athletics. The one example I give for the Goldilocks Rule is imagine you're a tennis player. If you are playing against somebody who's a professional like Roger Federer or Serena Williams, well that might be cool at first, but it's not very fun after a while because you'll lose every point.

Similarly, if you play tennis against a three-year-old, well it might be cute, but it's not very fun if you're trying to do it seriously because you'll win every point. It's really about staying on the cusp of your ability that I think maintains curiosity and interest over time. You can see why this is challenging because situations are always changing and your skills are changing as you develop them, so you kind of have to continually be nudging the frontier of your challenge out more and more as time goes on.

I think that's probably the best method we have for stoking the flame of curiosity and increasing that. Anyway, those are just a couple of ideas to toy with there.

That's a great answer. Ben asks, "Thanks for writing Atomic Habits. It's an outstanding read, entertaining and immediately actionable. The specificity of advice is really helpful. Your book should be the gold standard for the subject of developing habits. Do you have any recommendations for introducing the four laws of behavior change and their opposites to younger teenagers?"

Oh, well, thank you so much. I'm glad you enjoyed the book. Applying these ideas to kids … First of all I wrote an appendix from the book that is How to Apply The Ideas in Atomic Habits to Parenting and anybody in the forum is welcome to download that. You can just get it at atomichabits.com/parenting I believe is the link. Let me know if that doesn't work. Anyway, you can download that appendix there. That has some more ideas, but just briefly, there are a couple of things that you can do. First is you can utilize what I guess we could call the kindergarten model of organization.

If you're walking to a kindergarten classroom, you'll notice that the environment is designed in a very specific way. Environment design is a concept that I talked about in Atomic Habits, a strategy for making habits easier to build, making it more likely that you're going to do the right thing and avoid the distracting or the end productive behavior. It works really well when you're trying to structure environments that benefits your kids. If you go into that kindergarten classroom, you'll see that the environment is oriented in a very specific way.

For example, if your student is in the blue reading group, then they put their books in the blue bin and they sit at the blue table or they have a blue chair. If they get a star, they get blue stars, things like that. There's like a cohesiveness across the physical or the visual environment that helps reinforce where things go. "Oh, my book is in the blue bin because I'm in the blue group." That kind of specificity is really nice.

Another example that I saw is that there was a kindergarten classroom that wanted students to put toys back in a very specific way, like certain toys go in this bin, other toys go in the shelf and so on.

They organized the classroom exactly how it supposed to look and then they took a picture of the shelf, printed it out and put it right above the shelf on the wall and then said, "When you put your toys back, it should look like this." You have very clear visual alignment between what it should be and so on.

As a side note, this also works for adults. The CrossFit gym that I used to work out at did the same thing for the boxes that were on the side of the gym, so they wanted the boxes to be stacked in a very specific way and so they've took a picture of it and said, "This is what boxes should look like when they're put back at the end of the workout."

Anyway, that type of visual clarity increases the odds that people are going to follow through. That's one thing you can do. That works both for little kids and for teenagers and so on, but I think there's also a deeper area to focus on here which is the social environment. I think pretty much any parent can tell when your kids are little, they are like these masters of imitation where you got a two-year-old and you cuss around them once and then all of a sudden like they're imitating you despite your desires. That's true. All humans, regardless of age, are masters of imitation, and early on, we imitate the authority figures around us.

Kids tend to imitate their parents, but as time goes on, they continue imitating, but kids imitate their parents less and less and they imitate their peers more and more. As a parent, one of the biggest levers that you can pull when it comes to behavior change and the influence of the social environment is something I talk about in chapters nine and 10, sort of in the second law of behavior change in the book. If you're looking to utilize those ideas to build better habits in your teenagers and in your older kids, then the social avenue is often the most effective long-term way to do that.

Now, you can't influence, you can't tell them, a lot of times parents will try but it often doesn't work, who to hang out with or what exactly to do or what kids to listen to or which peer they should pay attention to and so on. However, you do have sort of an indirect influence on those things. You choose what city you live in, what schools they go to, what extracurricular they are part of, and all of those things sort of set a default environment for the type of kids that they're surrounded by.

What you find is habits are often very attractive if they allow you to fit in with your tribe. This is true not just for kids but for parents too, right?

Like you move into a new house and you walk outside on Tuesday night and you see all your parents have their recycling bins out in the street. You're like, "Oh, I guess we needed to sign up for recycling. That's what people like us do in this neighborhood." You sign up and perform the habit of recycling every week because it helps you fit in with your neighbors.

The same thing is true for teenagers. Habits, good habits even, are often very attractive when their other friends are doing them too, right? I think about swimming as an example. I played a variety of sports growing up. I swam for seven years, and man, every kid on the swimming team had a high GPA and so it's like, "Well, if you hang out with those kids …"

Another sport that's very stereotypically intelligent like that is cross country. All the swimmers and runners at both my high school and college, they all got good grades. If you want your kids to have good study habits, why don't you insert them into some of those sports?

What you find is there's kind of we naturally have this status hierarchy going on and if all their friends are studying and getting good grades, it's like, "Well, I kind of want to fit in to. I want to prove that I belong." There's this natural pull of the tribe, and in that way, perhaps the best method that parents have for influencing the long-term habits of their kids is by placing them in environments where those habits are things that their peers are going to be doing as well.

Amazing! Awesome answer! Next question, I'm going to botch his name, last name is McNicholas. I'll have an easier time with that. He says, "Hi, James. Congrats on the book and thanks for taking the time to do an AMA. The self-improvement industry has seen a lot of growth over the last few years and many excellent authors and bloggers have emerged who offer like yourself excellent content.

Given the high volume of content and high quality of content in this industry, did you approach it in any particular way in order to rise at the top and set yourself apart from the masses?" Then the second part, "Was this challenge of any immediate concern to you at the outset?"

Yeah, that's a good question. There are a couple of things I think to consider here. First, the final question, was this a concern at the outset? It's kind of a question like, are you concerned with entering a crowded market? Are you concerned about the level of competition? I think looking back on it now, my general answer to that is usually no. Usually, a lot of competition or a big market, a crowded market is an indication that there is good opportunity there, that there are a lot of people willing to pay, a lot of people who are interested in that topic, things like that.

I will say this is a very business-related side note, but one thing to consider there if you're going up against an incumbent that has really strong network effects or really strong some form of power in that environment that really prevents you from making a move there, for individual content creators, I don't usually think this is much of an issue, but you can imagine, say you wanted to start like a television streaming service. Well, Netflix has like uniquely powerful things that you're not going to have access to, [inaudible 00:14:38] network effects and so on.

There's a pretty good book called [The Seven Powers](#) about strategy that people might be interested in reading and that may help you determine like what are these ... Same thing like if you want to start a new social network, like, "Oh, man. It's a really uphill battle," because you have to face Facebook and Instagram and so on. Anyway, that's a very business-related side note.

I don't think that's usually an issue for content creators which is the focus of this question and it wasn't much of an immediate concern to me. It was more of an indication of interest and opportunity which I think is good.

You're correct though that there's a high volume of content and quality throughout the industry and I think it's worth noting. I've been doing this for about six years now, writing about habits and behavior change and performance and so on.

The environment has changed a lot in those six years. If I was starting again from scratch today, I don't know that I would do it exactly the same way that I did six years ago. That's something that's worth keeping in mind anytime you think about emulating someone successful. Imagine you're 16-year-old and you're like, "Oh, man. What does Lebron eat everybody? What is his recovery program? How does he approach basketball?"

You think, "Okay, well if this is Lebron's diet, then I should follow this too," but the truth is Lebron has been playing in the league for 15+ years. He's gotten an old body. He might actually be trying to lose a little bit of weight, so he's easier on his joints whereas you're 16, you should be focused on like bulking up and building and getting strong and as explosive as possible. In many cases, the strategies that successful people follow now are not the things that they did to get to where they are. You need to be careful about not confusing those two things.

Bringing this back to your question and back to my situation, I focus almost exclusively on building an email list. I think that that is still the number one strategy to follow, but when I started, the web was more what I would call like a hub and spoke model. You could make one piece of content. You could write one article and then you could kind of spread it out or share it or syndicate it across multiple areas. You could maybe syndicate it on another blog or you could post a short version to Twitter. You could share it on Instagram. You could just read it and share it to podcast.

You could make a little image of the title and post that on Pinterest and you kind of have this like, "Let's make one piece of content and then let's spread it out all over the place on these different spokes, but then we drive everybody back to our website."

I think one of the significant things that's changed over the last five year or so is that the web has become more platform centric, so now there's more people who are like, "I just use Instagram and podcast, but I don't use Twitter and I don't read blogs," or there are people who are like, "I'm just Twitter and I'm just something other thing but not YouTube and so on."

My point is people are finding the platforms that they like the most and they're kind of living within that little silo more. That's true for the audience, but it's also true for content creators, so the thing that I think is significantly different now than when I started is that you should probably pick one or two platforms where you really want to be amazing and then just focus on being great there. You can just be a YouTuber. That can be all you do, you don't have a website, you don't have Twitter, you don't have anything and you can have 10 million subscribers.

The thing that kind of goes hand and hand with this is that if you want to stick out on anyone of these platforms, you sort of need to be in the top 1% of YouTubers or the top 1% of Instagramers. It's really hard to have an article you write and then spread it on six different places and hope that, "Oh, I'll just be good at all of those because the competition is so high in each platform." I think there's a question about a strategic question. Which area does your content fit best in? I have a friend. She's a calligrapher. She does hand lettering. She's great and she gets almost all of her business from Instagram.

That is her number one platform. It does even better for her than her email list. When she sells out her workshops, it's Instagram that drives the sales. For me, I still haven't quite figured out how to use Instagram right for my brand because I'm mostly ideas, similar to like [Shane 00:19:16], it's very text base, so Twitter works better way for me than Instagram does. It's just the way that that platform is built. It's built to share text and ideas better than visual stuff which is what Instagram is for. Figuring out the platform that is most relevant to your content I think is an important question to ask early on.

Then the final thing I will say about that is that I didn't have any particular strategy that I think set me apart from most people, at least nothing that didn't involve like hard work and habits. The thing that probably made the biggest difference was I wrote a new article every Monday and Thursday and I did that for the first three years. That doesn't sound like very much, but when you turn around three years later there aren't actually that many people who show up and write a hundred articles a year for three years. There just aren't many of them. Most of you will get excited for two months and then they stop posting.

I knew that if I did that, if I wrote one or two articles a week, then I would have eight or nine at the end of each month, and if I tried my best each time, then two or three of those would be good. I didn't know which two or three it would be, but I knew that if I showed up in a best way eight or nine times then they would be there. Once you have some good content, every marketing strategy is easier. A lot of it is really about figuring out the frequency at which you can show up at a high quality. I don't think it has to be twice a week.

There's nothing magical about that. It could be three times, it could be four times, it could be once, it could be twice a month. It doesn't matter, just some pace that you can stick to and deliver at a really high rate and then sticking to that over the long run I think would make a big difference. If you could combine those strategies, pick a rate that you can stick to, and find the platform that is most relevant for your style and your content, I think that will set you up well for success.

You mentioned in the book that progress sparks motivation, keeps you motivated. In your situation, was there a moment that you thought, "Okay, I'm really doing this. This is really working," or was that your goal from the beginning to grow –

Yeah, that's a big question. Early on, I would get maybe, I can specifically remember as like the first or second month that I was writing and I got one email about the article that I wrote the week book that said, "Hey, I really enjoyed this," and that one email was enough to get me to show up again the next week.

Having some feedback I think is crucial and this was actually one of the things I struggled with the most when I was working on Atomic Habits is that I went from writing articles and sending them out and getting feedback like within an hour to writing book chapters and nobody was reading them and that lack of feedback, I didn't realize how much I wanted it until I didn't have it.

I don't need like a thousand people to be reading something, but once I got an editor, that just made a big difference. I needed to hear from somebody. Am I on the right track here? Is this going forward? Signals of progress I think are a really big thing and they play a role in the book too.

In this case, we're talking about social feedback, but you can have strategies like a habit tracker where you just like cross off an X, "Okay, I wrote my article today," or my dad likes to swim for example. Every time he goes to pool and swims, he puts a little X on the calendar and then at the end of month, he adds them all up.

That little calendar that he keeps by the kitchen table, that's just a visual signal of progress that he is moving forward. Even if he didn't feel like the swim was that good that day, he's got proof, "Hey, I showed up again." Little signals of progress like that I think are really meaningful for me.

Visual representation of it, that's great!

Yeah.

Dave asks, "Who has been your greatest influence as you've pursued your research on habits and why?"

Great question. I can't pin it on one person because of two things. One, I try to map the industry as best as I could when I wrote the book. I tried to read literally everything I could find and then two, I like to refer to myself as idea agnostic. What I mean by that is I don't care what field an idea comes from. A lot of habit books are very psychology focused and I certainly have plenty of psychology in the book, but I drew from neuroscience and biology, from sociology and anthropology, from philosophy, from a bunch of different verticals that are not normally covered in habits folks.

All of those influenced my thoughts a meaningful way. I actually think some of the more interesting ideas, some of the more interesting chapters in the book were not from a psychology field originally, so that helped a lot. There's one chapter. I think it's Chapter 18 on the influence of genes and habits and I haven't seen any other habit book cover that topic and you're not going to find any of them in the psychology literature about habits, but I feel like there's a lot of fruitful discussion and that's kind of like an interesting area where there's more to be discovered. That's one example.

Of course, I mentioned these people in the acknowledgements and elsewhere in the book as well. The common names that people are going to think of when they think of habits are Charles Duhigg, BJ Fogg, Nir Eyal, if you go back long enough and some student of the industry, William James and so certainly those people played a significant role in the structure of what I write about. Duhigg was influential. I have four stages, but he has three, so that kind of looped there. His model of cue routine reward is based heavily on behavioral psychology and BF Skinner which in 1930s kind of rephrased this stimulus response reward. There's an influence there.

The way that I laid out my four stages visually, that was influenced by Nir. His habit loop is kind of similar like grid, different steps in each but the way he visualized it, I thought it was good. BJ Fogg, he's popular for tiny habits. Obviously, one element of Atomic Habits is that kind of idea, it's small as well, but I think the most meaningful area that he had or example that he had that I really latched on to is what I call habit stacking. He calls it, what does he call it, a tiny habits recipe? Anchoring, is what he calls it. Anchoring a habit on a previous one, but anyway point being a very broad range of people influenced the book.

You can see there's like 300+ citations at the back of it, but those people are probably worth mentioning by name because of the other folks that people think about when they think about habits.

Excellent. Pablo asks, "What you say are the main metaskills one needs to acquire in order to get better at learning new habits?" Then he clarifies, he says, "I'm thinking about something relatively actionable, something like perseverance would be too big."

Yeah, I like those questions. I think this is good way to think about what else you need to be doing beside the habit itself. You've got basic habits like, "Okay, I want to meditate for a minute," or "I want to play guitar every Wednesday," or whatever, but I think the metaskills, I think there are three that come to mind that I think are really meaningful.

The first one is measurement. We've talked about it a little bit already. We've talked about some visual examples like putting an X on the calendar or things like that, but some kind of measurement is really helpful for raising self-awareness, just for knowing like," How often have I actually showed up?" Like, "How much am I really doing this habit?

For example for me, I just spent the last week I was traveling abroad and I didn't work out while I was there and that came on the heels of a family trip or I was hanging out with family members for a couple of days. Now, if I think about it, if I'm like, "Have I done a good job with my workout habit? Well, generally yeah, I feel like I've been fairly consistent," but if I look at my tracker, "Man, I haven't lifted in 10 days now." I think that kind of stuff slips by us a lot. There are like little windows of time that where we think we're acting better than we are. Measurement is a really useful metaskill for that.

Sometimes it can be things like a habit tracker, but many cases, measurement can be automated. Sometimes, you might even be surprised what you're measuring without thinking about it. Your calendar can be a measurement tool for how many days you travel each month. You don't think about it as like a way to measure a travel, but if you put this trip on there, then you already have that data ready. All you have to do is go back and count it. Same thing with other things like Fitbit or an Apple Watch or whatever, like people think about health tracking, it's already tracking how many steps you take and things like that.

Measurement whether it's manual or automated is a good metahabit. Another metaskill that is really helpful for habits is reflection and review. Reflection and review I think can take a couple of different forms. I talked about this later in the book. I talked about it near the end. One of the reasons I leave it toward the end is I want to help people focus on building habits first and then they have to come to secondary habit as, "Let me review the habit that I'm building." You kind of have to build two things which is a negative or a downside of it, but it can be really meaningful in the long run.

The review process, this can be as simple as taking some notes after a training session. I gave some examples of athletes who do that. After each training session, they write down what they did and so on.

If you're really competitive, if you're at very elite levels, then you'll notice that a lot of athletes or teams will also take notes on what their competitors have done, so they kind of review their performances.

There is a story in the book about these chess players, this family of female chess players who they not only took notes on all their own matches, but they kept a record of every match their competitors played. No surprise if they become grandmasters. This level of obsession leads you to a different level of performance.

Process of review like that can be very helpful because it helps you identify weak points, identify habits that you should building that you're not or identify ... Man, sometimes people get so focused on building a habit that they don't ask if the habit is serving them in the way that they were hoping. They just keep repeating the same thing again and again, but they don't actually get the result that they want. Review is a really important process for that. Again, I gave more examples of that later in the book where I talked about like my annual review or my integrity report. It's kind of like things that I do each year to come back to that.

Anyway I think the links for those if you want to look at those reports, jamesclear.com/integrity and jamesclear.com/annualdashreview, I believe are the links to those reports. That's the second one. The first one is measurement. The second one is review. The third one I would say is reflection.

Now, you've got the measurement. Now you have the review, you have the report. Spend some time reflecting on that and thinking carefully about it. Does it align with the long-term outcome that you want, the goals that you want? Does it align with the identity you want to build, the type of person that you want to become, your values that you say are important to you?

That type of thought, it's kind of like they think about what they want and they think about the strategy that they're performing. They're like, "Did I binge eat today or did I follow my diet?" It's like a very granular level of thought. It's like "How do I feel in this moment?" but reflection is more of like, "Let me see the whole mountain range rather than each peak and valley. Let me think about what this looks like in a broad span of time."

I think one of the meaningful things that reflection can do and why it's so helpful for habits is that habits tend to compound over time and that process of stepping back or stepping outside and above yourself and reflecting on the overall scope of things helps you see that compound curve that is very hard to see when you're in the moment.

The difference between a habit that's 1% better or 1% worse on any given day doesn't really feel like a whole lot. It's very easy to feel like it doesn't matter that much. It's only when you step back and reflect that you can kind of see the long-term trajectory that you're on. Those three metaskills I think are very helpful.

Gary says, "I've been reading your book and trying to apply techniques to describe to form new habits. It works, but I find it difficult to form several new habits in parallel. You have to keep focused all the time even if you make it attractive and easy." His question is this, "How long does it normally take for habit to become automatic and would you advise to focus on forming one new habit before tackling another?"

Yeah, this is a very common question. My preference is to focus on one habit at a time, integrate that into your life, organize your life around it, make it the standard and then move on to the next one. You'll see different opinions.

There are some other experts who talk about building two or three or four habits at once, and if you make them small enough, you're kind of, I don't know, training yourself get better at building habits, that kind of idea, but I tend to think that you should focus on one thing at a time. One reason I say that is that often people think they're building one habit, but actually there's like much more baked into it.

For example, let's say you want to build the habit of going to the gym. Well, that is just one habit, but there is not just one thing that is involved there. Okay, you want to go to the gym. Well, which gym are you going to go to? Are you going to go on your way to work or on your way home from work? Are you going to go to a gym that's on the route to your commute, you already know where it is or do you have to drive out of your way? Are you going to work out by yourself or are you going to have a workout partner?

Do you need to have your gym clothes ready before you go to work so you have something to change into or are you going to stop beforehand? Do you need to have a water bottle and fill it up or do they have a water fountain at the gym?

All of those little details, those are actually little habits in themselves, like prepping my water bottle and getting it ready or getting in the habit of packing my gym the night before or getting in the habit of taking a different route to work so that I pass the gym on the way. You kind of have to build a lot of small habits even when you're focused on just one thing a lot of the time and that stuff sounds minor, but man, in the beginning, when you go to the gym for the first time and you feel like it's kind of a hassle and you feel uncomfortable there and you think people are judging and you don't know quite what to do, well, something small like, "Oh, I always forget to fill up my water bottle and they don't have a water fountain at the gym," that's enough to derail you for a lot of people.

That's enough to get people to quit. I think focusing on just one thing and kind of ironing up those little logistical details can be very helpful for getting a habit to stick in the long run. The second part of the question, how long does it take for habit to become automatic? This is one of the most common questions I get and I understand why you're asking it. We want to know how long until it's easier, how long until it feels normal. The answer is it depends and the range is quite wide. There was one study that showed that on average it took about 66 days to build a habit. You'll see that number kind of getting thrown around, 66 days.

Even within that study, the range was quite wide for an easy habit like drinking a glass of water at lunch, it was maybe three weeks. For something more difficult like going for a run after work every day, it was seven or eight months. It can vary a lot, but I think really there's kind of an implicit assumption behind that question which is how long until this is easy? How long until I don't have to work on it that hard anymore? I think the honest answer to how long to build a habit is forever because if you stop doing it, it's no longer a habit. I think that having that little mindset shift helps you see that habits are not a finish line to be crossed.

They're a lifestyle to be lived, and so if you embrace that idea, you're looking to build small habits that are sustainable than can be a part of your normal lifestyle and that I think helps you focus on and understand why it's important for habits to be tiny enough that you can do them with ease, tiny enough that they can be sustainable for the long run. That doesn't make the work easier, but it does help you maybe conceptualize like what we're actually doing here. It's not a race that you're going to run for 30 days and then it will be done and it will be easy. It's a lifestyle that you're going to live and a process you're going to commit to for the long run.

Perfect! Niko says, "The biggest challenge I find about incorporating new habits in my life is the lack of discipline and tracking/keeping them which I have decided is correlated to my levels of energy and will power, fatigue at any given point in time. Does this mean that morning habits have a better success rate than evening habits given energy and will power levels are typically higher in the morning after a healthy normal amount of sleep?" Then he has a second part of his question, he says, "Should I first conquer morning habits before moving into later day habits? How do you do that if you cannot be waking up every day at 5am?" There's a lot to unpack there.

Yeah, there's a lot to unpack here. I totally hear you first of all. I think this is just a good point which is that life is made up of time. The amount of time that you have is what it means to have that is your life, but each unit of time is not equal in the sense of how much energy you have to give to that moment. Life is made up of time, but it is capitalized with energy and so I think you need to think about, "When are the moments throughout each day when I have the energy to do the habits that I want?" In many cases, it is in the morning but not for everybody and not all the time.

You could have a goal of building a meditation habit each morning, but your four-year-old doesn't care, and if they're running around in like 7:00 a.m. it's like you're just trying to get on play frozen for the 17th time and just like get breakfasts done, then that's not a good time. You don't have the energy to do that meditation habit then, so you need to find a different time of the day to insert that.

The question really is not only do I have the hour available for this? Do I have the moment available for this? Also do I have the energy with that hour? How can I find a way to kind of overlap that then diagram of, "I have the time to do it and I have the energy to do it"?

That's kind of the first thing and there are some practical ways to do that. One is you can just keep an energy journal. You don't have to do it forever, just do it for like a week and then just set an alarm on your phone and each hour, when it goes off, you just write down one sentence, "How am I feeling right now?" You do that for five days and then look back and see if you can see any pattern. From like 9:00 to 11:00 a.m., do you typically feel pretty good or from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. do you typically feel lethargic? What are the patterns there? Once you see, then maybe you'll have a better idea of where to insert things and how you can structure days so that the energy is working for you.

Now, there is an interesting question here, should I conquer morning habits first before moving on to later ones? I do think generally speaking, yes, most people tend to have more energy in the morning after sleeping well, and also perhaps just as relevant, most people tend to have more control of the early hours in their day than the later hours. Now, this is not always true because sometimes we sabotage ourselves. For example, let's say you use your phone as an alarm. Well, you wake up. You turn off your alarm and then you tap on Instagram and you start scrolling or you open up Gmail and you start looking at your messages.

Literally, you haven't taken a step yet, you're not even out of bed and you're already getting stressed and anxious about what's coming up or what's happening during the day or in the case of email, you may already be thinking about the things that other people sent you and how you need to respond to somebody else's agenda rather than your own. Sometimes there's a little bit of environment restructuring that's really helpful here. Go on Amazon. Buy a regular alarm clock for $10 and then start charging your phone in the kitchen or in the bathroom or somewhere else.

When you wake up in the morning, turn off the alarm clock, go take a shower and start the first hour of your day working on your agenda rather than somebody else's. I am in the fortunate position where I'm my boss, so I have a little bit more freedom here.

One thing that I've done that really helps is I try to keep my phone in another room until lunch each day. It's not through a whole day. It's not through all the time, but from eight to noon, whenever I can manage it, it gives me a chunk of three or four hours where I can just work on the most important thing rather than what everybody else is pinging me with.

That kind of restructuring helps you capitalize on those moments when you have the energy, but it was just being taking away from you by other distractions. Waking up at 5am, that's a whole another ball of wax that we can talk about at some other time, but I think that if you can manage to do some of that recalibrating then you'll find that you do have the energy and you do have the time. You just needed a couple of strategic tweaks to get access to it.

Jmag asks, he says, "Thanks for your time and greetings from Columbia. What are the most Atomic Habits that you have found for yourself?"

Most of the important habits, obviously this is going to be a very personal answer and depending on your goals and your lifestyle, but I do think broadly speaking there are some habits that help pretty much anybody or anyone kind of in this kind of community are interested in this kind of ideas and I would categorize them as habits of energy and habits of focus. Habits of energy are things like, "How can I perform these habits to make sure I can show up as my best self each day?" For me, the big ones are getting eight hours of sleep each night and exercising and going to the gym.

I'm sure there are plenty of habits nutritionally that I could get dialed in more, but those are still work in progress for me, but those two, "Do I exercise four days a week and do I sleep eight hours or more at night?" Those are the two like big habits of energy that make sure I'm in a good position. Then there are habits of focus and these are things that you strategically do to help you maintain your attention on the tasks that matter most. One of them is leaving my phone in another room until lunch each day, just a little habit, but it helps to make sure that I have the focus and don't get distracted from things taking off course.

Another one might be using a website blocker like [Freedom](#) or [Distraction-Free for YouTube](#) which is a Chrome plug-in that blocks the sidebar in YouTube so you don't see related videos or another Chrome extension, [Facebook News Feed Eradicator](#) which blocks the news feed so you don't see things to click on there. By having those little habits or systems set up, it helps maintain my attention on what matters. I think those are some of the most important ones that I feel personally.

Question two, "How to deal with time, daily tasks, family, another sorts of commitment that could become an interruption at the time of building a habit?"

Yeah, it's tough. I think the best suggestion I can offer here because we all have responsibilities like that that weave their way into our lives. The rest of life, it's not organized perfectly for your goals, but this is why and this has been shown in a variety of studies, it is often easier to build a habit in a new environment. Sometimes these studies recommend what in my opinion are ridiculous things like, "Start building a new habit when you're on vacation," which is like, well that's fine but in two weeks you're back at home, so like you need a better long-term strategy than that, but the kernel of truth to take away from that is that when you're in a new environment, you are not pulled by all of your previous habits.

In a way a habit is a relationship between the environment or the context that you're in and your brain, and when you come in to the same context or experience the same type of situation again and again, your brain learns how to respond to that and eventually responds on autopilot. For example, let's take putting your shoe on. When you put your shoe on your foot and get in the habit of tying your shoe, the shoe does not look the same every single time. Sometimes, it's a different shoe. Sometimes, the shoe laces are different in color. Sometimes, you're in a different room and there's a different colored floor beneath your foot, but every time the context is similar enough that your brain recognizes, "Hey, this is when I go into that shoe tying habit."

Well, the same thing is true for other areas in your environment and other parts of your life. If you get in the habit of say watching Netflix at 7:00 p.m. when you get home from work and your living room does not always look exactly the same. Sometimes, the blanket is on the couch. Sometimes, it's folded up in the corner. Sometimes, it's not, but generally speaking your brain recognizes that context, "Oh, it's 7:00 p.m. I'm in my living room. It's time to turn on Netflix." Well, if you try to build a new habit, if you say, "I'm going to get in the habit of reading every night instead of watching TV," you walk into your living room, you sit on the couch and you open a book, but you sort of have this like behavioral bias toward Netflix.

It's like this is what your brain has learned to do in this context. You might not even think about it. You don't really notice it consciously, but your brain has learned that this is what this environment at this time –

You watch TV while you're sitting here.

Right. If you can pick a new environment or new space to do that in, then you're not fighting the old pull that's taking you under your old habits. You're not fighting the old context. There are a couple of ways to do this. One way is let's say you want to build a journaling habit and rather than fighting your old habit of being on the couch and trying to do it there, you could say, "After I leave work, I will go to this coffee shop on the corner that I don't normally go to, this new place and it becomes the journaling coffee shop. Then, when I leave work, I walk in, I turn off my phone and I journal for 10 minutes and that's what happens in this space."

Now, suddenly, this coffee shop that didn't have previously have any meaning for you, didn't previously have any association with it, now it becomes the place where you journal. It's easier for your brain to kind of get into that habit there. You can do same thing with a different room in your house or something like that. For some people, I'll hear from readers, they'll say, "You don't get like I live in New York. My apartment is the size of a phone booth. I don't have a space like that," but you can do that even by let's say you buy like a new chair and you put it in the corner of the room and that chair becomes the reading chair and you want to build a habit of reading and the only thing you do in that chair is you read books.

Even in a small way like that, that can help you kind of wire in that new habit or behavior. Those are some ways of overcoming those other commitments or other things that are you pulling you into your old habits is give yourself a new space for that habit to live.

While you were talking it made me think, do you find that people sometimes discount that type of advice because of its simplicity? Like when you mentioned putting your phone in the other room, you're like, "That's so simple but so effective."

Yeah, they probably do. It's not just other people like I probably discount it as well sometimes, but I think there are a few things that are true here. The first is ideas don't have to be complex to be accurate. A lot of time, the more complex something is the less useful it actually is. One of the reasons I love reading people like Richard Feynman or Stephen Hawking is that they're working on some of the most complex topics of all time, the origin of the universe, like the state of the very advanced physics, and yet, they're able to explain it to somebody as if they're talking to like a fourth grader.

I think that that simplicity of explanation actually indicates a deeper understanding of the principles, not a more shallow understanding. The clarity with which you communicate I think is required really for me to prove that you actually understand what you're talking about, but the second thing is sometimes I think we discount how much convenience drives our behavior. In the case of a phone example, if I have my phone next to me and it's on desk right beside me, I'm like everybody else. I'll check it every three minutes. I'll check it just because it's there, but if I leave my phone in another room, I have a home office, so it's only 40 seconds away. It's just down the stairs in another room, but I never go down to get it, which is always so interesting to me because I'm like, "Well, did I want it or not?"

Because like in one sense, I didn't want it because I was checking it a hundred times when it was right next to me, but in another sense, I never really wanted it in any deep way because I didn't work 40 seconds to get it.

I think that what you find is that modern society is filled with these examples of convenience like that where so many things are so frictionless that we find ourselves sliding into them, opening up Instagram again, ordering a meal on Uber Eats, checking our phone, turning on the television and watching Netflix. These things require such low levels of energy and effort that we do them whenever we have like the slightest wind to perform them but not because we actually want to do them in a deeper sense.

If you can restructure the environment just a little bit to add some more friction to that what you find and what I find with myself is I leave my phone in another room and it's like, "Oh, I wrote that article." Like I knew I kind of wanted to write. To me, it sort of like reveals … I actually didn't want to do the hard thing. I did want to do meaningful thing, but I was so surrounded by convenient options that I never got around to letting myself sit with it for like 10 seconds and decide, "Okay, I'm going to put the hard work in now."

I think it's sort of like the difference between junk food and eating healthy. You need to remove the mental candy from your environment, the convenient sugary option for your brain, and when you do that, you find, "Oh, I did actually want to eat the salad. I just needed to be not surrounded by Skittles when I was thinking about having the next meal.

I had a Skittle dispenser in my office once and that was a bad idea. I was totally surprised how I could eat a whole container of Skittles in a single afternoon.

Oh, yeah. There's a remarkable performance inside of you waiting to see how many you can slam.

I don't know if this question is too similar to one we've already asked, but Javier says, "What would be an easy behavior that 14-year-olds can adapt to be aware of and reduce time spent with digital distractions?" I think this is a big thing that a lot of parents worry about, how much their kids are on screens and things of that nature.

Sure, yeah. It's a good question. I think there are a couple of different levels here that you can take when trying to address this. The first is his question is more about self-awareness. "Can I just become aware of how much time spending on it?" Little automatic trackers like Rescue Time if you're on your computer or Screen Time if you have an iPhone or things like that. They can give you that update of how much time am I spending on these things each week. That can be informative just to get kind of an idea of your baseline, how many hours a week do I spend on Twitter, Instagram or whatever.

I find that for me because I've used all those things, and then after I get the first couple of reports, I kind of get bored with them. It's like, "Oh, well, I guess that's what I do," but it didn't really like change my behavior very meaningfully. I find instead if I wanted to change what I'm doing then increasing friction or using a software solution that reduces the usefulness of the app is more helpful. Let me give you an example of both. Increasing friction for the desktop, I mentioned like Freedom or Distraction-Free YouTube or things like that. That helps make it more difficult for me to get to that website, so that I'm going to use it less.

On the phone, I started doing a couple of different things. One thing I did was I would log out of Instagram or Facebook or whatever after each use and so just having to type in my log-in credentials each time, it adds an extra 20 seconds or something and it's not much, but it's enough for me to be like, "Okay, do I actually want to use it right now or am I just mindlessly pulling it up?" Then after a little while, I thought well, even that isn't enough, so I started deleting the app after each use. I would browse Instagram, log out and then delete it from my phone. Now, I got to wait 60 seconds to download it again, especially if I've got to go to the app store and get.

It sounds funny because you're not moving at all. You're just tapping your phone still, but it's enough friction to be like, "I don't actually care. I'm just opening this because I don't know what to do." That all can help a little bit for addition friction as well, but then the other thing that you can do is reduce the usefulness of each one. Facebook News Feed Eradicator is a good example of that. I've had Facebook News Feed Eradicator installed for about two years now, and over the last six months or so, I basically had stopped using Facebook because it doesn't really have any value for me anymore because there's any news feed on it, so I never see anything.

I log in and the only thing in there is my profile, but I can still post updates and stuff, but I don't really do that. Because suddenly it's not useful, you brain learns, "Oh, there isn't really a reward to this habit of checking Facebook." It takes a while, but if you can reduce or remove the reward of the behavior, well then all of a sudden you don't have a reason to fall into it in the first place. There's a deeper conversation that you need to have with yourself about all of these which is, "What is it for? What am I really trying to do? What am I really trying to accomplish? What is important for me in my life?"

If you get ruthless about it and were very essential about it, you realize a lot of time that, "These things are interesting, but they don't pay a deep meaningful core role in my life. If that's the case, then let me just find a way to reduce it or eliminate it."

Awesome! All right, Brad says, "I'm still reading the end of book, so apologies if this is covered already, but do you feel there is an upper limit on habit stacking? My morning routine is already so stacked, I feel like I might reach habit fatigue if I had anything else." He says, "Nighttime is similar. Any thoughts around this?"

Yeah, that's a good question. I do think there's an upper limit on habit stacking. I tend to do two or three things and then that's about it. The stereotypical habit stack would be something like, "I know that I make a morning cup of coffee and so let me use that as the initiator for my stack and I want to build the habit of meditating so I can say, 'After I make my morning cup of coffee, I would meditate for 60 seconds.'" Now you got this little stack. If you're good at it, then you can sort of build what sounds like kind of what Brad has, you can sort of build a little morning routine around it.

You can say, "After I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for 60 seconds. After I meditate for 60 seconds, I will write my to-do list for the day. After I write my to-do list for the day, I will choose the most important item on that list and begin working on it immediately or something like that." You've got three or four little steps there that kind of initiate the beginning of your morning routine, but that's about as long as I would make it. The good thing is you don't need to make them much longer than two or three. You just kind of need to find new points of entry for the next habit stack.

Let's say maybe that's the little morning routine you do when you're at home. Then you start your commute and you get to the office and then when you get to the office, you have another one. My wife for example, she has a morning routine where she gets to the office and she walks into the office and she sets her purse down and hangs her coat up. After she hangs her coat up, she fills up her water bottle, so that she's got water next to her desk for the rest of the day. After she fills her water bottle up, she checks the emails that came in from the rest of the department overnight or whatever.

Just that little routine of, "Hanging up my purse and jacket, getting my water and opening up email," that's going to start a little productivity routine to start the day once she gets to the office. You can use sort of any change in environment or something like that to initiate the next stack. I think it's probably more useful to break those stacks down into smaller chunks like that and kind of interspersed them throughout your day.

Allen says, "What are your favorite examples and environmental cues to promote mindfulness?" He says he still gets side tracked despite removing all notifications and noise-canceling headphones. "How do you stay on track with habits while traveling?"

First of all I should say I don't consider myself an expert on mindfulness. It's a habit that I have only built intermittently. Personally speaking, I'm much more dialed in with writing and exercise habits, things like that whereas mindfulness and nutrition are probably two that I've like done occasionally but haven't committed to them in a long-term consistency. I might not be the best person to answer this question, but with that said, I think it sounds like he's removed notifications, but that's just in the digital environment. You also have a lot of distractions in the physical environment.

Let's take for example I don't know that this is something that Allen's struggling with, but let's just use this as an example. Say television, a lot of people feel like they watch too much TV or it pulls them off track from they've lost two hours and now they're not mindfully thinking about what they really want to be focused on, but if you walk in to pretty much any living room in America, where do all the couches and chairs face?

They all face the TV. What does that room design to get you to do? There are variety of steps you can take there. You could like take the TV and put it inside a wall unit or a cabinet, so you're less likely to see it.

You could increase the friction of performing that task. You could unplug the TV after each use and then only plug it back in if you can say the name of the show that you want to watch. You have this kind of little rule where it prevents you from surfing and just finding something to watch.

If you want to be really extreme, of course, you can take the TV off the wall, put it in the closet and only set it up if you want to watch something bad enough to set it up again. I had one reader who she and her husband they watch a lot of sporting events, and eventually, they're like, "Man, we're spending so much time in this," they just decided to get rid of TV and their new measure was, "If we don't care enough about this game to drive down the road 15 minutes and watch it at the sports bar, then we don't actually want to watch it." Of course, that's a more extreme answer, but the point is that you can choose where you want to live on that spectrum.

A lot of people live in the most convenient, most frictionless side of that spectrum. TV is out. It's visible. Remote control is right there. They can turn it on whenever they want. Maybe walking yourself down a little bit further helps reduce some of those distractions and the last thing I'll say on this is just I don't know if TV is the issue that Allen is facing, but that example can be applied to almost any other distraction that you're facing. Try to increase the friction in the environment so that the good habits are more obvious and more available and more visible and reduce the visibility and obviousness of the less attractive options, the more distracting objects.

Let's see. This reader has a handful of questions, so let me pick one here. He says, "How do you decide when to move on to the next phase of habit shaping? When is a phase habitual enough to build on?" Then he says, "How long do you recommend tracking one before moving on to another? Do you ever stop tracking a habit?"

These are good questions. Okay, habit shaping, just to get everybody on the same page is when you scale a habit down and focus on the first chunk of it that could lead you to your ultimate goal. Let's say that you want to run a marathon. If you're going to scale it down, you could say, "All right, running a marathon is very hard. Running a 10k is hard. Running a mile is maybe moderate. Walking 10,000 steps is fairly easy and walking for one minute is like incredibly super easy." You start the habit shaping process of, "Let me just walk for one minute. Ultimately I want to run a marathon, but let me start there."

Of course, in order to actually get to running a marathon, you need to scale up at some point or what I call habit graduation. You need to graduate from one level to the next. I think that first of all sometimes very early on especially the first couple of weeks is easy to be super motivated, really excited about it because it's new. In that case, I think that you probably want to try to curtail your tendency to bite off more than you can chew and just master the art of showing up, just make sure that you're getting in there each day and doing it. In the beginning, it's like more important to focus on frequency than intensity.

"Am I becoming the type of person that puts my shoes on and walks for a minute every day even if that's not going to get me to run a marathon? I just want to be the person that shows up everybody," but once you've done that for a few weeks, then you start to think about this kind of graduation aspect and I think one measure, it's not quantitative, it's more qualitative, but we talked about it earlier with curiosity is, "Does this level bore me know? Is it so easy that it's not actually interesting anymore?" It's like, "All right, I've walked for a minute. I've done this for five weeks. Okay, I get it."

Then it's like, "Okay, well now, maybe now you can try walking a thousand steps or half a mile," or whatever that next level is that is easy enough that you know you're going to be able to do it, but interesting enough that you still want to actually show up. Then you're going to do that. Now, you walk a mile every day. You do that for a couple of weeks and then you're like, "All right, I kind of get it. Now, it's time to move on to the next level there." You're still employing that Goldilocks Rule, trying to stay on the cusp of your ability and then graduate to the next level.

You mentioned as you were talking, "Am I the type of person that does this or that?" Could you talk maybe for a minute about identity-based versus outcome-based goals? I think that was one of the most powerful ideas of yours and the idea of casting a vote for the type of person you want to become I think is so powerful.

Yeah, this is I think maybe the only unique idea that I have in the book in the sense that like I came up with it rather than researching in somewhere. I'm partial to it just because I like it for that reason, but of course, there are many people that have talked to about similar concepts, like "Let your values drive your behavior," things like that, but I like to focus on identity and the way that I would phrase it is that a lot of the time when people think about the goals they want to achieve, they've taken outcome-based approach, "I want to lose 40 pounds in the next six months," or "I want to earn six figures this year," or "I want to," whatever the outcome is, very results oriented.

Usually they start with that outcome, "All right, I want to lose 40 pounds," and then they come up with a plan. "Okay, in order to lose 40 pounds, I need to go to the gym four days a week. I need to follow this diet." Typically, the conversation stops there and the implicit assumption is, "Whenever I do this, whenever I get this outcome, then I'll be the kind of person I want to be." The identity will come naturally it's like a side effect. I think it's actually more powerful and more useful even to invert that process. "Rather than thinking about the outcome, let's focus on who do I want to be. Like I want to be the type of person who doesn't miss workouts," or "I want to be the type of person that writes every day."

I say this in the book like the goal is not to run a marathon. The goal is to become a runner. The goal is not to play a musical piece. The goal is to become a musician. The goal is not to write a book. It's to be a writer. It's actually the identity that we're ultimately looking to build. If you do that, if you start with the identity rather than the outcome, then there's sort of a natural line of questioning that comes, that flows from that that helps you build habits and I think in easier fashion. If the question is not, "How do I lose 40 pounds in six months?" but instead is, "How do I become the type of person who doesn't miss workouts?" it really changes the strategy that you take.

If you ask yourself, "How do I lose 40 pounds in six months?" then you start saying, "All right, well maybe I need to go on a radical juice cleanse or maybe I need to do some crazy diet or maybe I need to do P90X or INSANITY or sign up for CrossFit or do something super intense thing." You do that for a few weeks and then you get injured or you get sick or you get tired or you burn out, but if instead you focus on identity-based habits rather outcome-based habits and you say, "How do I become the type of person who doesn't miss workouts?" Well now, it's like, "Well, maybe I just need to do five pushups each day or maybe I need to go to the gym and workout for five minutes."

I had a reader who ended up losing 100 pounds and one of the first things that he did was he went to the gym, but he wasn't allowed to stay for longer than five minutes. He would get in the car, drive to the gym, get out, do half an exercise, get back in the car and drive home. It sounds ridiculous to people. It sounds silly because this clearly is not going to be thing that gets the results, but what you realize is that he was becoming the type of person that went to the gym four days a week. He was becoming the type of person that showed up every day. He was building the identity.

Once he did that, then he turned around six weeks later and he was like, "I come here all the time. Maybe I should stay longer? Maybe I should figure out what kind of program to do? Maybe I should get a personal trainer?" but usually people do it in the reverse order. They spend hours researching the best workout program or they go pay for an expensive personal trainer or whatever without becoming the type of person who shows up first even if it's only for five minutes, even if it's only in a small way.

I think that this ultimately comes back to what I feel is a real crucial aspect of building better habits which is a habit must be established before it can be improved. It has to become the normal in your life before you can worry about optimizing it and expanding it from there. This whole concept of building identity-based habits I think gets the core of that. The question to ask is not, "How can I get this results?" It's, "How can cast a vote for the type of person that I want to become? How can I show up in a small way and build another little bit of evidence, add a little bit of proof to this pile that this is the kind of person I am?"

When I have readers do things like write one sentence or meditate for one minute or drive to the gym and work out for five minutes, those are all little votes. They don't transform their body overnight. They don't lead to a best-selling book overnight. They don't radically reduce stress instantly, but they do reinforce being a certain type of person, and ultimately, I think that counts for more in the long run because the person who looks at themselves in that way and internalizes that identity is more likely going to be the person that actually sticks to it for good.

Love it. I think that's a great place to end. I know that you have a hard stop here. Your answers were amazing and very thoughtful. I appreciate it and thanks for spending this time with us, James.

Yeah, wonderful. Thanks so much for having me and happy to do it. I hope people find it useful.

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