



Episode 229: How to Use Atomic Habits to Change Your Life

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to "The Wellness Mama Podcast." I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com, and this episode is going to be all about habits and how they can change your life. I am here with James Clear who is the author and speaker focused on habits, decision making, and continuous improvement. He is kind of a big deal, he speaks to and educates Fortune 500 companies. And his work is used by teams in the NFL, the NBA, and Major League Baseball which is, of course, my favorite sport.

And through his online course, The Habits Academy, he's taught more than 10,000 leaders, managers, coaches, and teachers. And his newest work, a book, "Atomic Habits," is helping thousands of people reshape and improve their lives. And I can't wait to jump in, so James, welcome and thanks for being here.

James: Oh, thank you so much. It's great to talk to you.

Katie: Well, I think to start, I would love if you could walk us through some of the reasons why habits are so important. I know that many of us have habits, both conscious and unconscious habits, but explain to us why they're so important.

James: Sure. Well, there is kind of two answers to this question. So the first is that habits just help you solve the problems that you face throughout life. So as you go through life, you face a variety of situations. Some of them are large, some of them are small, but take something you do each day, like tying your shoes, for example. When you put your shoe on and it's untied, in a sense, that's a problem, and your brain has to figure out how to solve that. And if you need to think carefully about it every single time, like imagine if you never got better at tying your shoes, so the very first time you did it, it took a lot of effort and you had to think carefully about how to make the loops and how to tie them into each other and so on, you're focusing your full attention and concentration on that.

And if it was like that every time, you wouldn't be able to do very much during life. You might still be able to survive and get through it but you would just only be going from one problem to the next and you would be very limited. But because your brain has this ability to develop greater fluency and accuracy and skill as you practice things to more or less do them quicker and better and almost on autopilot, to build habits, that is, you have the ability to solve problems or to come up with solutions without having to focus your conscious attention and energy on them.

And so now you can tie your shoe while holding a conversation or thinking about your to-do list for the day and so on. And that's kind of the purpose of habits is that they allow you to apply solutions to repeated or recurring problems that you face, and whatever the context, it's the same, like looking at a shoe untied on your foot, you can kind of pull out that script, that cognitive mental shortcut, and apply that and you can do it without thinking. And so that's kind of the first purpose of habits and the first reason that they're important.

The second reason that they're important is less about the immediate impact, like tying your shoe or unplugging the toaster after each use or something like that, and more about the delayed or long-term impact that they have. And so this is where I like to refer to habits as the compound interest of self-improvement. And the reason I use that phrase is that the same way that money multiplies through compound interest, the effects of your habits multiply as you repeat them over time. So, you know, early on if you're saving for retirement, you don't really see a whole lot. You're kind of socking money away but the curve is basically flat, you kind of feel like you're stuck on this plateau. It's only 10 or 20 or 30 years later that you kind of get to this hockey stick portion of the curve where, you know, your accumulation in savings goes up significantly.

And this is a hallmark of any compounding process which is the greatest returns are delayed. And habits are not exactly like that but the process of building habits is very similar to that in the sense that the difference between making a choice that's 1% better or 1% worse, slightly good versus slightly bad, on any given day is pretty insignificant. Like, the difference between studying Spanish for an hour today or not studying at all is basically nothing, you know, like, you haven't learned the language either way. And the difference between eating a burger and fries for lunch or eating a salad, again, is basically nothing. Your body looks basically the same in the mirror at the end of the night, the scale hasn't really changed. But if you repeat those habits for 2 or 5 or 10 years, then you get to very different results.

And so habits are crucial, because you can make these choices that are 1% better or 1% worse, but you end up in a very different place in the long run. And so in a sense, time magnifies whatever you feed it. If you feed it good habits and get 1% better each day, then time becomes your ally, and if you feed it bad habits and get 1%

worse each day, then time becomes your enemy. And one of the purposes of writing "Atomic Habits" and kind of what I hoped to achieve with the book was to give people a framework and a simple system that they could use so that you can make sure habits are compounding for you rather than against you.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. And I want to go deeper on that because I feel like for a lot of us, at least speaking for myself, we have a lot of habits that we've probably never really evaluated whether they're good, bad, or completely indifferent. So take us through that system a little bit, how do you get people to work through...are habits beneficial, are they not, and how to even identify those?

James: Yeah that's a good question. So, first of all, from a high level, all habits serve you in some way, even the bad ones, they provide something for you. But a good way to distinguish between what is a good habit or a bad habit, what is a productive habit or an unproductive habit is by the ultimate outcome that it provides and not the immediate way that it serves you. So, for example, you can think of pretty much every behavior is producing multiple outcomes across time, like the immediate outcome of eating a cookie, for example, is pretty favorable. It's sweet, sugary, it's tasty, you enjoy it, but the ultimate outcome if you repeat that habit for weeks or months or years might be unfavorable or unhealthy.

For good habits, in many cases, it's the reverse, like the immediate outcome of going to the gym is that it requires some effort, energy, a little bit of sacrifice, you sweat, you have to work hard, but the ultimate outcome if you repeat that for weeks or months or years is favorable. And so a lot of the battle of building good habits and breaking bad ones is about figuring out how to take those long-term consequences of your bad habits and pull those into the present moment, so you feel a little bit of the pain right now, and the long-term rewards or benefits of your good habits and pull those into the present moment, so it feels good right now and you have a reason to repeat it. So that's just about the distinguishing between, like, what is a good habit, what is a bad habit, what do we even mean when we say that.

Now, as you mentioned, many people are not aware of their habits to start with. Like, we're...this is kind of a hallmark of habits, you know, once a habit is formed, you can do it more or less without thinking and because you can do something or apply a solution on autopilot, you aren't even really aware of it half the time. And this is why I recommend using what I call the Habits Scorecard just kind of as a first step or a simple, like, way to start to get a handle on what your habits are and whether they're benefiting you or not.

So Habits Scorecard is pretty simple. You start at the beginning of your day, and just write down, in as much granularity and detail as you can, each behavior that you perform and then you assign a plus sign to it if it's a positive habit and a minus sign if it's negative or just an equal sign if you think it's, like, fairly neutral. So, for example, you might say, "I wake up, I turn off my alarm, I check my phone, I get out of bed, I make the bed, I go to the bathroom, take a shower, get on the scale, brush my teeth, get dressed," so on. And you go, like, all the way through your day as detailed as you can.

And once you have that list, you kind of are suddenly aware of all these things that you're doing that often you just don't even think about. And then if you look at that list and you say, "Okay, you know, I wake up, that's fine, that's positive or neutral. I turn off my alarm, that's fine. I check Instagram. Should I be checking

Instagram before I get out of bed? Well, probably not." Like, that might be a negative habit. Then you get out, you make your bed, that's positive and so on, you go through your day. And the point of this exercise is not really to change anything right away, it's not to judge yourself or your faults or to, like, praise yourself for your good habits. It's really just to get a handle on where you actually are, to become aware of what's actually going on, on a day-to-day basis.

And once you've done that, you know, this is a fairly simple exercise, you could certainly do it in a half hour or less, maybe even 10 minutes or less depending on how detailed you wanted to get. But those 10 minutes are pretty well spent, because now suddenly you have, like, an honest conversation with yourself about, "What am I doing each day and are those things benefiting me?" And then once you know that, you have a lot of choices on where to go and how to shape and improve your habits.

Katie: That makes sense. And I wanna call out that elephant in the room and how do you address it early on because there is this perception that you can never truly break a bad habit or that that's a very difficult thing to do, and then there is a million theories of how long that takes and if it's even, you know, long-term possible, so let's go through that a little bit right now. Is it possible actually to break a bad habit?

James: Well, so the short answer is yes. It's not easy and different strategies have different levels of effectiveness. So, first of all, and this is kind of a side note and I don't want to get trapped on this path too much. But there is a variety of interesting research that's happening in the medical community right now that's actually, like, rewiring the brain so the bad habits are kind of like actually eliminated on a neurological level. So some of those are pharmaceutical drugs that are being used, typically with drug addicts, that can help reverse some of the cravings that people have.

And then other ones are what's called TMS which is like a magnetic resonance machine where you basically put this magnet over the patient's brain and effectively turn on the neurons that are in, like, decision making portions of the brain that are responsible for resisting temptation. And suddenly many people who have had depression or addiction or a variety of bad habits feel like this flip has been switched or this switch has been flipped, and they're able to turn their bad habits off.

So that's very early stages, it's definitely not a magical, like, panacea, but it will be interesting to see where that goes over the next 10 years. Now, for the rest of us, whether you're, for most people who are just dealing with a bad habit, there are a variety of ways to think about this and to resolve it. So, I like to break habits into four stages, cue, which is like the trigger that prompts you to do the behavior, the craving which is the prediction that comes afterward. So the craving is usually what we think about when we think about bad habits like, "I'm craving a donut," or, "I crave a cigarette," or so on, but all behaviors actually are preceded by some kind of craving or prediction. Then there is the response which is the actual behavior itself, and then finally there is the reward or the benefit that you get for performing the behavior.

And when it comes to breaking a bad habit, I think the most effective places to focus are the first stage and the third stage. So the first stage is the cue, so you wanna reduce exposure to the cues that prompt your bad habits. So, for example, if you're trying to lose weight and stick to a diet, then don't follow a bunch of, like, you

know, unhealthy food blogs on Instagram. You're being triggered, you know, to eat sweets all the time. If you want to spend less money on electronics, then don't follow YouTubers who do, like, unboxing videos or the latest tech review blog. Same thing, you're kind of being prompted to do the thing you're trying to resist.

Common examples like don't keep sweets in the house, or if you feel like you watch too much television or spend too much time on Netflix, then just look at the, like, living room. Where do all the couches and chairs face? They all face the TV. And so you could put your television inside, like, a wall unit or a cabinet and, you know, have it behind doors so you're less likely to see it. But the point of all those examples is to reduce exposure to the cue that prompts a bad habit.

Then the second option that you have is to increase the friction associated with the habit. This is that third step about the response and the more difficult it becomes, the more friction there is associated with the behavior, the more likely you are to avoid it. So, for example, if you are smoking and there is a pack of cigarettes on the table and you're trying to quit, well, that's gonna be really hard because it's very low friction with cigarettes right there. Whereas if you're in a cabin and there are no cigarettes around and the closest one is 30 miles away at a gas station, like, there is a lot of friction there and it might be easier to sit with that craving and let it pass. So those two options, increasing friction and reducing exposure, are two of the most effective ways to break a bad habit.

Katie: That makes perfect sense, and it's a good segue, you touched on it a little bit. But leading into my next question, which is just how important is our environment when it comes to habits, because that almost goes back to even the age-old question with kids of nature versus nurture and how much is built in and how much is dictated by our environment. But from an adult perspective, when we're trying to change our habits, how much does the environment really come into play?

James: Yeah, it's a huge factor. So I like to divide the environment into two sections. So the first is the physical environment, so, like, the things that are on your kitchen counter at home or in your living room or on your desk at work, and the social environment, so the people that surround you and the people you hang out with. And I'll talk about the physical environment first and if you'd like to talk more about social, we can come back to that. But I gave the example of, like, a living room and, you know, all the couches and chairs facing the television, so that physical environment is shaping the habit of watching TV.

Now, this can work for you as well as against you. So, for example, when I wanted to build the habit of flossing, I realized that I brush my teeth twice a day but I wasn't flossing consistently. And when I looked at that habit and tried to figure out what the issue was, I realized one of the problems is that the floss was hidden away in a drawer, in the bathroom, and I just wouldn't see it. And so I bought a little bowl and I put it right next to my toothbrush and then I put the floss in the bowl, and now whenever I brush my teeth, I put the toothbrush down, pick the floss up, floss right away. Now I do it twice a day, I don't even think about it. And I, basically the only thing I needed to do to build that habit was to change the environment so that the cue of my good habit was more obvious, it was right there.

Same thing when I wanted to eat more fruit, we used to buy apples and put them in the crisper in the bottom of the fridge. And they would be tucked down there, and I would forget they were in there and they would go bad after, like, two weeks and then I would have to throw them away and be annoyed, wasting food, wasting money and so on. So, again, I just bought, like, a display bowl and put them right in the middle of the counter and then have the apples there, and now I'll eat them in two days or three days and they're, you know, gone right away. And that, again, was just, that habit was mostly just a change in what was obvious or available, what was visible in the environment. So this is one of the key ways that physical environment can shape your habits is by making it obvious what to do and where to do it.

The second thing that I'll add to this that can be an important caveat for building good habits is your current habits, over time, they become tied to a particular context. And so, for example, for one person coming into the context of their living room and their couch, the couch might be the place where they sit down and read for an hour each night. For another person, the couch might be a place where they sit down and watch their favorite TV show and eat a bowl of ice cream. And the habits become tied to that context overall.

And so if you try to insert a new behavior into the same context, for example, if you try to say, "All right, you know, I've been watching too much TV and eating ice cream, so instead I'm going to try to journal for 20 minutes each night, and I'll do that on my couch." Well, you go in there and you sit down and there is kind of this, like, subtle non-conscious pull back toward the habit that's associated with that context. You know, you find yourself turning on the TV even though you're like, "Man, I really wanted to journal, I was hoping I would be able to do that habit instead."

And what happens is that you're basically trying to overcome your associations with that context, and for this reason it's often easier to start a new habit in a new environment, one that you don't have current associations built in already. So, if you want to start that journaling habit of journaling for 20 minutes, it might be more effective to, say, pick a coffee shop that is outside your office that you don't usually go to. And so you finish work, you go into the coffee shop, and your new routine becomes, "As soon as I walk in the door, I turn off my phone and then I sit down at a table and I journal for 20 minutes." And that pattern, that routine becomes the thing that happens there, this becomes, like, the journaling coffee shop.

And, you know, of course, if you can't do it with, like, a shop or something like that or if you don't have an entirely different room where you can perform the new habit, you can still do it with, like, what I would call an activity zone, you know, like you could buy a chair and put it in the corner, and that chair becomes the journaling chair and it's the only thing you do in that chair. But my point here, the overall point is that your environment, one, shapes your behavior by prompting you to do certain things, and two, over time, that context becomes associated with certain habits. And so it's often easier to build a new habit in a new context rather than trying to overpower the associations that you already have with your current context. And if you employ those two strategies, then you often find that your physical environment can kind of nudge you in the right direction.

Katie: That makes sense. And another thing I'd love for you to kind of put to rest is the great debate on how long does it actually take to form a habit. Because I know I've read at least probably six different theories online of how long it truly takes to create a habit, so what's your take on that?

James: Yeah. So this is one of the most common questions that I get. You'll see all kinds of things, right, you'll see 21 days, 30 days, 66 days. There was one study that showed that, on average, it took about 66 days to build a habit. Even within that study, the range was quite wide. So something simple like drinking a glass of water at lunch each day would take, you know, a couple weeks, something really complicated like going for a run after work every day might take seven or eight months, but the range was very wide.

Now, as a general rule, thinking, "Oh, this is gonna take me a few months to build a habit," that's fine, I think. You know, like, you should be not focused on, "Oh, let me just do this for 21 days and I'll be done." But there is kind of a larger problem with that question which is the implicit assumption behind the question, "How long does it take to build a habit?" is, "Well, how long until I can stop working?" or, "How long until it's easier?," or, "How long until I don't have to try anymore?" And the honest answer to that question is forever, because if you stop working on a habit, if you stop doing it, it's no longer a habit. And so I think we need a shift from seeing this as like, "Habits are not a like a finish line to cross, habits are a lifestyle to be lived." And if you view it as a lifestyle, then you start to see the reason to pick a 1% change or a small improvement, something you can actually stick with in the long run.

Because you're really looking for something that's sustainable and that can be reliably done day in and day out for the rest of your life or for as long as you want to do it. So that's the first piece, the second answer to that question, though, is that there really isn't anything about time passing that makes a habit stick. What makes a habit stick is the number of times that you've done it, you know, like you could do, 30 days could pass and you could do a habit once, a behavior once or you could do it 1,000 times. And, you know, think about the habit of pulling out your smartphone. How many days did it take you to build that habit? Probably not that many. I mean, the average adult pulls their smartphone out over 150 times a day.

So if you're doing something that many times, if you're performing that many repetitions, then you often find that the habit sticks much faster. And that, I think, is another lesson or another deeper insight about how habits work and what's important, which is that it's not really about the time, it's more about putting in your reps. And once you realize that, you can maybe release a little bit of the tension or a little bit of the worry about, "Oh, you know, like have I done this for 30 days?" or something like that, and stop worrying about the time that has elapsed and start focusing more on the work that has been done, and on, "How can I put my reps in today?" Because if you put your reps in today and you show up tomorrow and you do the same, before you know it, you will have a habit that's been formed.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. And I'm curious of your work with all of these people over time. If there are patterns that have emerged or that you've seen for the most impactful habit and how to identify those or does it really vary from person to person, and if so, how can someone identify what their most impactful habit changes will be?

James: Yeah, that's a really good question. So, of course, as you would expect, it does differ between, person to person, but I think there are still some lessons we can draw on the whole. So, sometimes these habits that are, like, the highest value or the highest leverage are referred to as keystone habits. And one way to think about it is, it's kind of like the one or two habits that pull the rest of your life in line. So for me, personally,

weight lifting is a great example, you know, like I go to the gym and I work out and, yes, I get the benefits of exercise. But it also goes, like, all of these secondary things, you know, it improves my health, it helps me sleep better at night because I'm tired from the workout, which means I wake up the next day and I have better energy and focus. I get kind of this post-workout high for about an hour or two where I'm, like, very focused and can pay attention well to whatever the next task is.

I tend to eat better when I work out which is interesting because, like, you could say, "Well, you work out, maybe you could just, like, let it slip a little bit," but it ends up making me think like, "Oh, I don't want to waste it." And so I end up eating healthier. And at no point was I trying to build better sleep habits or nutrition habits or focus habits or energy habits, but all of those things kind of like came as a natural side effect of this one keystone habit of working out. Some other common keystone habits that you'll hear people talk about, for performers, whether it's athletes or comedians or musicians, visualization is a common keystone habit. They know if they visualize how the performance is gonna go, then they find that they kinda get off on the right foot and things get started better.

Meditation is a common keystone habit that a lot of CEOs and executives will talk about. If they get their 10 minutes of meditation in, in the morning, then the rest of their day kinda seems to go more to plan or they can handle the problems that are... For a lot of creatives, like writers and so on, going for a daily walk is often cited as a keystone habit where, you know, if they get outside and get moving a little bit, then the creative juices kind of get flowing or they clarify their ideas. I think there is also just something in general to, like, if you're stuck on a project or a problem, then changing the context, you know, so, like, you're sitting in front of your computer for four hours and you don't seem to be making any progress, but then you step outside and go for a walk for 15 minutes and suddenly the answer comes to you.

So, anyway, going for a walk is a common keystone habit and then another one that you'll hear people mention a lot is paying off their debt or getting their budgeting and finances under control. Sometimes you'll see people pay debt off and then, like, all of a sudden, they start going to the gym and stuff, too, and there is just kind of this, like, ripple effect from one area of their life to the next. So, those are a variety of common keystone habits that you'll see people talk about.

I think for how to figure that out for yourself and determine, like, "What is the highest value habit for me to focus on?" You can simply ask yourself like, "What do I do when things go well?" You know, "When I have a day that feels effective, that feels like I'm at my best, what am I usually doing on that day?" And you'll often be able to come up with, like, three or four things, and all of those might not be the answer but that gives you a short list to start with. And maybe you just pick one of those and try to focus on making that a habit and doing it each day, and see what happens. And then if that doesn't seem to do the trick, you know, the next month, you could pick a different one from that list and focus on that. But pretty soon, within maybe three or four months, you'll have a decent idea of, like, what the one or two levers are for you that, "Man, when I do this, things, like, really fall in line," and I think that that's a good way to think about it.

I've also, though, developed a list of some common habits that I feel like just have a very high rate of return in life, and so I'll just list those off real quick. So, one of them is sleeping for eight hours each day, lifting weights at least three times a week or we could just say exercising three times a week. Going for a walk each day,

saving at least 10% of your income, reading every day, drinking more of water and less of everything else and then leaving your phone in another room while you work. And those, like, seven ideas, I don't think all of them work for everybody, but if you can do some of those, you'll find that they really do pay off in the years and decades that follow.

Katie: I love all of those, and to speak a little bit to the idea of the little habits making such a big difference, I've said this before so many times on the podcast, but I truly believe that women and moms are the busiest people on the planet, especially working moms, but any mom. And so I feel like we especially can benefit from systems or anything that allows us to take some of that mental stress off. Because what I notice with moms especially is there's so much on our mind at all times that we're constantly juggling, so even if we are handling everything so often, we feel stressed all the time.

And in my own life, I can now say I'm not at all stressed most days, but it's because I've put systems in place and I've basically created good habits according to, like the way you've talked about, I've created habits that have let me not have to worry about things when it's not their time to be worried about, and I know this was a long process for me and so I'm wondering for those who are trying to implement these habits and trying to work through this, if you can give some tips on staying motivated, because that seems to be the friction point. Like, it's easy to want to jump in and start to create new habits but the motivation to stay, to stick with it until that habit is actually formed can be really tough. So do you have any insider tips there?

James: Oh, yeah. It's a great question. It can be really hard. So there are two ways to think about this. So the first is, and I cover this in, I've got a whole section on it in "Atomic Habits" for what I call the 4th law of behavior change, which is, "Make it satisfying." And this is just from a biological standpoint and then I'll break it down into practical action steps. So biologically speaking, your brain wants to repeat things that feel good, that provide some type of satisfaction or enjoyment. So it's kinda like whenever the ending of a habit or a behavior or an experience is positive, it's like this little signal to your brain that says, "Hey, this felt good, you should do this again next time." And the key aspect there is it's really about the speed with which you feel satisfied.

So, for example, products are kind of a great example of this, like, common one is toothpaste. There is no reason that toothpaste has to taste minty, it doesn't make the toothpaste, like, more effective at cleaning your teeth, it could just be a paste or something. But the mint flavor makes it more satisfying, more enjoyable, for you to brush your teeth and use that. And because it provides this immediate satisfaction, you're more likely to show up and use it again.

More common example, a couple years ago, BMW added this little feature to some of their cars where if you pressed on the accelerator, it would actually pump additional engine growl or engine noise into the speakers of the car. So it, like, sounded more satisfying, like you are accelerating more. Sounded more like a race car, I guess. And so the point there are those examples are ways of making an experience more immediately satisfying, and because it's more immediately satisfying, you want to repeat it again. All right, so that's how the process works in your brain for getting a habit to stick, for getting you to remain consistent. So how do we translate that into daily actions or habits?

Well, a lot of the time, the habits that we're looking to perform are what I would call kind of habits of avoidance, like don't drink alcohol for 30 days or don't spend money on Amazon, or go out to eat less and cook more meals at home. And the hard part about a lot of those habits is that when you're framing it in that way, you're only thinking about resisting something like not spending money or not going out to eat, or not drinking. And it's inherently difficult for habits like that to feel satisfying, because it feels like all you're doing is resisting temptation. So I think a more effective way to get habits to stick in the long run is to kinda flip that on its head and focus on a way to make it immediately satisfying in the moment.

So, for example, one of my readers, he and his wife wanted to eat out less and cook meals at home more. And so what they did was they opened up a savings account and they labeled it "Trip to Europe," and then whenever they didn't go out to eat at a restaurant and stayed home to cook dinner instead, they would transfer \$50 over to that account. So they still didn't get the satisfaction of going out to eat right away, but they were able to get the immediate satisfaction of seeing the savings account grow, and at the end of the year, they put the money toward their trip or whatever. And that's a good example of a way to add a little bit of immediate satisfaction to something that would otherwise feel like you're resisting. And, again, when a behavior's immediately satisfying, you have a reason to repeat it again in the future.

So that's the first answer is trying to find a way to make it immediately satisfying in the moment. And also I should just say oftentimes schools and teachers and kindergarten classrooms and so on will do this type of thing all the time, right, like any time the child does their, like, daily reading, they get, like, a reading star put on the chart or something like that. And those rewards like that, whether they're stars on a chart or tokens or coins that go into an account or seeing an actual savings account increase when you transfer the money over, those are all just ways of having, like, an immediate measurement that provides a little bit of satisfaction in the moment. So that's one way to keep yourself motivated in the long run, and I have a bunch of other examples about that in the book.

The second thing, though, to consider is that as a habit becomes formed, as it gets built, we come to expect the outcome, we become used to it, it becomes normal. And when it's normal, we're more likely to get bored and less likely to stay engaged and stay focused on the task. And this is where you can implement what I call the Goldilocks Rule. So, the Goldilocks Rule is this idea that humans experience peak levels of motivation, they stay motivated and stay sustained on a habit when they are working on tasks of just manageable difficulty, so not too hard, not too easy, just right, that's the Goldilocks principle.

As an example, imagine that you're playing tennis. If you play tennis against, like, a professional like Serena Williams or Roger Federer or somebody like that, it's gonna get boring pretty quick because you're gonna lose every point. On the other side, if you play tennis against, like, a three-year-old, it might be cute for a second but if you're actually trying to, like, play a real match, it's gonna be boring really quick because you're gonna win every point. But if you play against somebody who is your peer, who is your equal, you win a few points, they win a few points, you have a chance to win the match but only if you really try, that's, like, the most motivating level because it's right on the edge of your ability.

And what you find with many habits is that people fall into one of two traps. Either they start and they start doing the same thing and they never advance, so then it becomes so easy that they get bored with it and then

they just give up, and it just, like, fades away because it's boring. Or, they advance too quickly, so, like, going to the gym is a classic example, you, like, go, you add maybe five pounds each time and then you turn around, like, eight weeks later and it's too hard and you feel frustrated because you're no longer making progress and so on. And they go up too quickly and so then it gets boring because it feels like they're just failing every time.

But what you want to do is try to live on that little razor's edge, on that perimeter of your ability. And if you're able to do that, where you're winning, like, at least 50% of the time, maybe even a little bit more than that, that's enough for you to stay motivated, and then you're still being challenged the other half of the time and you have to stay focused. So scientists have quantified this and they've found that it's about maybe 4% to 5% beyond your current ability.

Now, in daily life, it's really hard to know, you know, "Am I meditating 4% harder than I was yesterday?" or, "Am I writing 4% better than I was yesterday?" It's challenging to know that, but I think, still, it's like a guiding principle or this idea of, "Okay, you know, I've been doing this habit for a little while, how do I advance just a touch, right, just a little bit more than what I was before so that I'm being challenged still and have a reason to stay engaged and stay focused?" And I think if you can combine those two answers, the Goldilocks Rule and staying on the perimeter of your ability, and make it satisfying and finding ways to be satisfied immediately from the habit, then you've got two powerful strategies for making a habit stick and making it last in the long run.

Katie: Yeah, that's super helpful. And I think the other side of that is, especially anyone who's tried to change a habit regarding food but really anything, is that there seems to be a point at which a lot of people kind of fall off the wagon and have to get back on. So are there any particularly actionable tips for getting back on a habit if you've let it lapse?

James: Yeah. My favorite strategy for this is, what I call, "Never miss twice." So, you know, I've been guilty of this just like everybody else. All habit streaks come to an end at some point, you know, you, like, start a diet and you do it for five days and then on the sixth day, your friends want to go to happy hour or you binge eat a pizza or something. And usually, for whatever reason, we have this tendency where we kind of fall into this all or nothing mindset, you know, it's like, and then the negative self-talk starts. It's like, "Oh, see, I knew I was going to screw it up, I knew I wasn't meant to stick to this diet," or, "I must not have, you know, what it takes to be cut out for this," or whatever.

And instead, I like to remind myself, "Just never miss twice." Now, I wish I hadn't been jade or I wish I hadn't, you know, like skipped the meal and gone to that happy hour or whatever. But let me pour all my attention, energy, and focus into making sure the next meal is a healthy one, or for me, it often happens as a writer. For the first three years that I wrote on jamesclear.com, I would write a new article every Monday and Thursday. And, you know, if I missed on Monday, well, I wish that hadn't happened, but how do I pour all my attention into making sure I don't miss on Thursday? Never miss twice.

And I think if you can employ that strategy, then you start to internalize something that's important to realize in the long run, which is it's almost never the first mistake that ruins you, it's, like, the spiral of repeated

mistakes that follows. And if you can avoid that spiral, if you can get back on track as quick as possible, then you'll find that you start a new habit streak and in the long run, that error or that slip-up was just a blip on the radar, it doesn't really even mean anything. But the real key is embracing that idea of "Never miss twice" and get back on track quickly.

Katie: Yeah. I think that's such a great tip and because, you're right, it tends to go the other way. People are like, "Oh, well, I already messed up so I'm just gonna keep doing this until next Monday," or until, you know, the first of the month or until some future point in which they're gonna get back on track which only makes it then harder and harder and harder.

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Katie: Also, you brought up a good point in the book, and I'd love for you to go deeper on this, about talent versus habits, and I would love if you could kind of elaborate on that and how much is it really talent and genes versus our effort and our habit?

James: Yeah. So I haven't seen many people talk about this yet, but I think it's a really important area and I'll also be interested to see how it advances over the next, in the coming years and decades, because, and there's a lot for us to learn in this as well. So a lot of the time, people don't like to talk about genes, because they naturally think genes are fixed and you start to hear words like biological determinism or, "Oh, if it's all

pre-determined, then, like, why try anyway, why bother?" But that's not actually, I think, the message that we should take away from this.

So first of all, it's impossible, you cannot have genes that are outside of an environment, so the genes and the environment are always co-interacting. And the usefulness of a particular set of genes is determined by the environment that it's in or by the challenges that it faces. So, for example, if you're seven feet tall, that's a very useful set of genes if you are on a basketball court and you want to dunk a basketball, but it's not very helpful at all if you're on a balance beam and you want to do a cartwheel or gymnastics. And so in a sense, the set of genes of being seven feet tall, the usefulness of them is highly determined by what environment or context you're in.

And this is, like, fairly obvious to us when we talk about physical characteristics, but it's also true of psychological ones and of, like, our personality, for example. So I cover this again in more detail in the book, but the most robust measure of personality thus far is what's called the Big Five, and it maps personality onto five different spectrums. And so the most common one that most people are familiar with as one of the spectrums is introversion on one side and extroversion on the other, and there are other ones like conscientiousness or agreeableness and so on.

But where you fall on that spectrum has been linked to your genes, so there is some genetic underpinning for these personality traits. And whatever set of personality traits that you have may influence which habits you find more attractive or interesting. For example, someone who is high in agreeableness is the kind of person that is warm and considerate and kind. And you might imagine if somebody has genes that predispose them to being warm and considerate and kind, then they might find it easier to build the habit of, like, writing thank you notes, for example, or to build the habit of, like, getting friends together to hang out on the weekend or something like that. And someone who's low in that particular category or spectrum might struggle with some of those habits.

So in that sense, understanding yourself at a more genetic level might help you realize which habits you're primed for and which ones you might need more help with. But the second thing that it does is that it can help inform your strategy. In other words, it can tell you where you might need to apply more effort or which strategy might be more useful for you based on what comes naturally and what doesn't. So, for example, if someone is, like, low on conscientiousness, then they tend to be less orderly or less organized.

Well, if you're the type of person who isn't very orderly and organized, then you're probably less likely to, like, just remember to do it or to make a to-do list or something like that. And you might benefit more from some of the environment design strategies which I talk about in Chapters 6 and 12, and we talked a little bit more about it during this conversation as well. Because being in an environment that reminds you to do it, or being in an environment that nudges you in a particular direction is helpful if you have that kind of personality where you're more prone to be spontaneous or chaotic or just kind of, like, doing stuff, you know, on a whim. And so having a structured environment could be more helpful for you because you're less likely to just remember to do it.

So there are a variety of ideas there, and I haven't really been able to tease out all of them but I think there is definitely some insight there in, like, understanding yourself and your personality and what genes are predisposing you toward. But your genes don't predetermine what you can accomplish or what you're gonna do. They simply determine your areas of opportunity, you know, like which...basically how high your ceiling is in a particular area. Now, whether you capitalize on that is determined by how much work you put in and, you know, what you're spending your time on.

So the punchline of that section is that genes do not tell us not to work hard, that it's just all pre-determined and there's no reason to try. Instead they tell us where to work hard. They don't eliminate the need for strategy, they inform our strategy. And by understanding yourself at a deeper level, you can more accurately determine how to approach your habits and which ones to focus on.

Katie: I love that. And I think another point that you make so well in the book is, like you mentioned in the beginning, the value of those little tiny changes that add up over time. Because I think the temptation can often be, especially around New Year's or any time, but the idea of, "I'm gonna make these massive changes, and I'm gonna stick to them all at once and my whole life is gonna be different." And you make a really compelling case for, actually, that you're more likely to make those changes if they're small and consistent versus these massive changes all at once. So can you speak to that, like give people kind of some insight there on how small can a change be and still be a very useful long-term habit?

James: Well, so I like to recommend people employ what I call the two-minute rule, and the two-minute rule is basically, it just says take whatever habit you're trying to build and scale it down to just the first two minutes. So, "Read 30 books a year," becomes, "Read one page," or, "Do yoga four days a week," becomes, "Take out your yoga mat," or, "Go for a run," becomes, "Put on your running shoes." And this sounds, like, kind of silly to people sometimes, because they're like, "Well, you know, I know the real goal is to actually run each day, it's not to put on my running shoes, so, like, why would I bother doing that?"

But if you feel that way, then I would encourage you to actually limit yourself to just the first two minutes. And my favorite story of this, I have a reader who ended up losing over 100 pounds, and the way that he did it or one of the things that he did was he went to the gym each day but he didn't allow himself to stay for longer than five minutes. So he would drive to the gym, get out, do, like, half an exercise, get back in his car, drive home. And it sounds silly to people at first, but what you realize after you think about it a little bit more is that he was mastering the art of showing up. And this is a crucial, fundamental thing that all habits have to go through for you to actually get to where you want to go, for you to achieve this, whatever this big ambitious thing is that you ultimately want to get to.

The core lesson is that a habit must be established before it can be improved. If you don't master the art of showing up, then you don't actually have anything to optimize. And so by being the type of person who went to the gym for five minutes each day, he turned around six weeks later and was like, you know, "I'm coming here all the time, I kind of feel like staying a little bit longer." Which, of course, is exactly the opposite of how most people feel when they try to change their habits, they usually are something, like, they get super motivated, they do some really intense workout program, they go for 45 minutes to an hour, they are

sweating like crazy, and they do this for eight days and then they burn out, and then they turn around three months later and they're like "Oh, I need to get in shape."

But by taking it from the complete opposite side of the spectrum, by mastering the art of showing up, by scaling it down to just the first two minutes or less, you can become the type of person who does that each day or who shows up each day. And once you're the type of person who shows up, then you have a lot of options for improving. And so I think that that's like a much more useful way to focus on making changes is, "How can I master the art of showing up and be the type of person who is there every day? And once I'm the type of person who's there, even if it's only for two minutes, then I can become the type of person who does it better."

Katie: I love that. I think that's such good context. And for some listening, I definitely would recommend the book and that will be linked in the show notes. I know it's available everywhere books are sold, but for someone who's listening and realizing some of these patterns in their own life and wanting to make changes in their habits, can you recommend a good starting point? I mean, obviously, reading the book, but beyond that, where would you recommend that they take that first baby step?

James: Yeah, that's a good question. So I think, we talked a little bit about keystone habits and figuring out, like, which area is kind of the highest level one for you or the area that might make the biggest difference in other areas of life kind of ripple out. So I think if I was gonna recommend a way to start, I would say, first of all, just pick one habit. Secondly, think a little bit about what those keystone habits might be, like what are the areas where things go well for you and they kind of ripple into others, and just pick one of those. And then the third thing would be to utilize this idea of the two-minute rule and scale it down to something really easy that you can show up with each day.

And then once you have that, so, say it's like, "I've decided that actually it's the habit of reading, and I'm just gonna read one page," then you just try to do that and develop that kind of identity and do that for the first, say, four weeks or six weeks or eight weeks, become the type of person who shows up and does that every day. And once you reinforce that identity, then you can update and expand and improve from there.

And this comes back to one of the central ideas that's in the book which is you want to develop the identity that you're ultimately looking to achieve and not necessarily the result. Often we're so focused on the results like, you know, "I want to lose 30 pounds in the next six months," or, "I wanna double my income," or, "I want to meditate for 20 minutes a day." And there is nothing wrong with those results but the real thing that you're looking to do is to develop a new identity, you know, the goal is not to, like, go to the gym, the goal is to become someone who works out each day. The goal is not to run a marathon, the goal is to become a runner. The goal is not to meditate for 20 minutes, the goal is to become a meditator.

And so once you adopt that identity of, "I'm the type of person who doesn't miss workouts," or, "I'm the type of person who meditates each day, even if it's only for 60 seconds," then you're in a much more powerful place. Because in a sense, true behavior change is an identity change. You're not even really trying to pursue behavior change anymore, you're just acting in alignment with the type of person that you already believe

that you are. And I think that the way to do that is what I just recommended, scale it down to just two minutes, focus on that keystone habit, master the art of showing up, do something easy, make a 1% change, but do it more consistently than you ever have.

Katie: I love that, I think that's incredibly profound. And I know a previous podcast guest, Jim Kwik, made that point a little bit differently but he said, "If we realized truly the power of our subconscious, we would never tell ourselves anything that we didn't want to be true." And I think you make a great point about how to do that in an active way, how to reframe your identity and to become that person versus just focusing on a goal that is external, actually shifting your internal focus. And I think that makes total sense of when we really would see profound changes, and when we're able to shift our perception of ourself and the standards to which we hold ourselves and how we view ourselves. So I love that, I love that. I think that's such an amazing point that you just made.

James: Oh, thank you. Yeah, I think it's crucial for the process of long-term change. Ultimately, what you're looking to do is reinforce your desired identity to become the type of person you want to be rather than to achieve any individual result.

Katie: Absolutely. And I can't believe we've already almost flown through our entire hour together, but a question that's a little bit unrelated that I love to ask somewhat selfishly at the end is, if there is a book or a book, besides your own obviously, that's really made a profound impact on your life? I'm an avid reader so I'm always looking for new ideas.

James: Sure. So I'll give you three, actually. So the first one is called "Manual for Living" by Epictetus, it's one of those stoic philosophers and one of those ancient texts. It's pretty short, you can read it in, like, an hour, it's very accessible and easy to read. It's not gonna be the type of things that you've never heard, like it's, you know, things like focus on what is within your control, not what is outside of your control. But there are lessons that have stood the test of time for 2,000 years, and we all need to be reminded of them every now and then, so it's a good way to spend an hour. So that's called "Manual for Living" by Epictetus.

The second one is called "The Lessons of History" by Will and Ariel Durant, and so they were a husband/wife combo. And they were historians, and they spent, like, 60 years, their entire career writing this incredibly long compendium, this, like, encyclopedic 12-volume series of everything that had happened throughout history, like all the major events. And after they finished with this huge massive project, they wrote a little 100-page book called "The Lessons of History" that talks about the overarching and recurring themes throughout history, kinda like the pieces of human nature that arise again and again and seem to be standard across time even, you know, across centuries even. And so as someone who's very interested in habits and human behavior, I think that's a cool little insight into how we operate and ideas that tend to last.

And then the third and final one, I believe it's called "Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son." And I think it was written in the early 1900s, maybe 1910s, 1920s. And it's just a series of letters that this entrepreneur, this father wrote to his younger son who was in college when they started and then, like, throughout the early years of his career. And they're just interesting lessons about business and some life

lessons in there as well, and you can tell that it's dated in some of the language and some of the things that it says. But there are also a lot of, like, interesting insights in there as well. So I think those three, "Manual for Living," "Lessons of History," and "Lessons from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son" are all interesting books that a lot of people haven't checked out.

Katie: I love it. I'm adding all of those to my reading list now and for anyone who wants to continue learning from you, of course, I recommend getting the book, but where else can they find you online and where can they jump in?

James: Yeah, thank you. So if you'd like to just check out more of my work, you can go to jamesclear.com. Click on "Articles," I have them organized by topic and category, so you poke around a little bit and see what interests you. And then if you like to check out the book, it's called "Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones," and you can find it at atomichabits.com. And also on that page, there are some bonus materials, so there is like a guide on how to apply the ideas to parenting, a guide on how to apply the ideas in the book to business. I have a tracker template for tracking your habits and a couple other things as well. And, anyway, all of that is at atomichabits.com.

Katie: Awesome. I'll make sure that link's in the show notes as well. But, James, thanks so much for your time today. I really did love your book and I'm so grateful you took time to be here with us today.

James: Oh, wonderful. Thank you so much, I really enjoyed it.

Katie: And thanks to all of you for listening, and I hope you'll join me again on the next episode of "The Wellness Mama Podcast."

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