Atomic Habits

Twelve ideas on building small habits that last, with a one-page summary, worksheets and a cheat sheet.

BOOK BY

James Clear



KEY IDEA 01 / 12

Small habits compound, and your system matters more than your goals

In 2003, British Cycling hired Dave Brailsford as performance director. The team had won one Olympic gold medal since 1908, and no British rider had ever won the Tour de France. Brailsford committed to a strategy of marginal gains: look for a tiny improvement in everything you do, and stack them up. Five years later, the team won 60 percent of the gold medals available at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and in 2012 Bradley Wiggins became the first Briton to take the Tour de France.

The arithmetic is simple. Improve by 1 percent every day for a year and you end up about thirty-seven times better. Slip by 1 percent every day and you fade nearly to zero. Habits work like compound interest: one choice barely registers, but a thousand of them reshape your direction.

The payoff arrives late. Picture an ice cube in a freezing room as the temperature creeps up through twenty-six, twenty-seven, all the way to thirty-one degrees. Nothing happens. At thirty-two it starts to melt. Clear calls the quiet stretch the Plateau of Latent Potential: effort is building up below the surface, and most people quit on it because they read a delayed reward as no reward.

That is also why a goal is the wrong thing to lean on. Winners and losers want the same things, so the goal can't explain who wins. A system, the daily process, is the part you control. You won't rise to the height of your goals; you'll sink to whatever your systems support.

KEY IDEA 02 / 12

Lasting change starts with who you want to become

Write a page and you have acted like a writer. Practice the violin and you have acted like a musician. Start a workout and you have acted like an athlete. Clear's point is that each action is evidence about who you are, and the evidence accumulates.

He describes change in three layers, like an onion. The outer layer is outcomes: weight lost, a book published, a title won. The middle layer is process: your routines and systems. The deepest layer is identity: your beliefs about yourself. Most goals sit on the outer layer, but lasting change sits on the inner one. Behavior that doesn't fit your self-image tends not to last.

Think of each action as a vote for the person you want to be. No single vote decides the election, and no single workout rewrites your beliefs. But the votes pile up, and so does the proof. You don't need to believe a grand statement about yourself in advance. You only need the next small action that supports it.

Treat labels that excuse behavior as revisable. If you assume you are simply a disorganized person, you may never test a better routine. Ask what an organized person would do in the next small situation, and do that. The easiest route to a new identity runs through new actions.

KEY IDEA 03 / 12

Every habit runs on the same four-step loop

In 1898, the psychologist Edward Thorndike put cats into puzzle boxes. Each box had a way out, such as a lever that opened a door, and food waiting outside. At first the cats wandered at random. Eventually one pressed the lever and escaped. After twenty to thirty trials, a cat could get out within a few seconds. The behavior had become automatic.

Clear breaks that pattern into four steps. The cue triggers your brain to start. The craving is the motivation behind it, a want for a different state. The response is the habit you perform. The reward satisfies the craving and teaches your brain to run the loop again. The first two steps are the problem phase, when you notice something needs to change. The last two are the solution phase, when you act and get the change.

Run it on a familiar habit. A phone sits beside a hard task, and that is the cue. You want relief from the task, so that is the craving. You check an app, which is the response, and get a moment of stimulation, which is the reward. Once you can name the parts, you can see where to intervene.

TWELVE IDEAS TO RETURN TO

Atomic Habits at a glance

01 Tiny gains compound. One percent better a day is about thirty-seven times better in a year. Results hide on a plateau first, and systems matter more than goals.

02 Aim at identity. Treat each action as a vote for the person you want to be.

03 Use the four-step loop. Cue, craving, response and reward drive every habit. Find the step that breaks down.

04 Plan the when and where. A written plan lifted weekly exercise to 91 percent in one study. Score your habits, then stack new ones on old ones.

05 Design your environment. Make good cues visible and bad cues hidden. One space, one use.

06 Bundle it, and join the right people. Pair a habit you need with something you want, and copy the close, the many and the powerful.

07 Start tiny. A two-minute version beats a grand plan. Less friction means more repetitions.

08 Decide in advance. Use commitment devices and one-time setups so willpower carries less of the load.

09 Add accountability. A partner or habit contract brings the cost of skipping into the present.

10 Reward right away, track honestly. Use immediate rewards and a streak, but check quality, not just the count.

11 Never miss twice. Keep a smaller version ready for hard days. One lapse is an accident, two is a new pattern.

12 Stay challenged and review. Keep difficulty just right, use deliberate practice and review on a schedule.

START WITH WHAT YOU ALREADY DO

Habits scorecard and identity

Step 1: list your day in order, from waking up to going to bed. Mark each line + for a good habit, – for a bad one, or = for a neutral one. Step 2: choose the identity you want, then note one small action that backs it up.

DAILY HABIT, IN ORDER	+ / – / =	NOTES

01 I WANT TO BECOME THE KIND OF PERSON WHO…

02 A SMALL ACTION THAT PROVES IT (A VOTE)

03 I WILL CAST THIS VOTE AT (TIME / PLACE)

FREE SAMPLE

That is the sample.

You have read three of the twelve key ideas, the one-page summary and one worksheet from the Atomic Habits guide. The full guide covers all twelve ideas, a second worksheet and a one-page cheat sheet.

Get the full Atomic Habits guide free at getafterpage.com. Next, 7 days of actions, then up to 3 membership emails. One click to stop. Key Ideas guides sit alongside the book; they don't replace it. Your first week is free. No card.