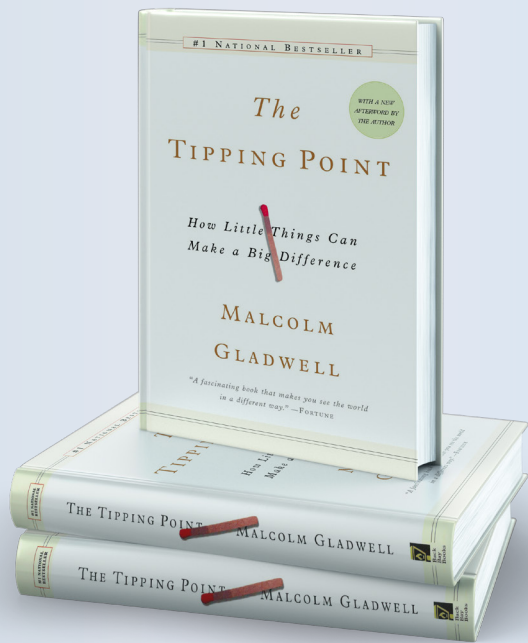


# BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



## The Tipping Point

by Malcolm Gladwell

Malcolm Gladwell is the author of five New York Times bestsellers: *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, *Outliers*, *What the Dog Saw*, and *David and Goliath*. He is also the co-founder of Pushkin Industries, an audio content company that produces the podcasts Revisionist History, which reconsiders things both overlooked and misunderstood, and Broken Record, where he, Rick Rubin, and Bruce Headlam interview musicians across a wide range of genres. Gladwell has been included in the Time 100 Most Influential People list and touted as one of Foreign Policy's Top Global Thinkers.

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## Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

*The Tipping Point* was Malcolm Gladwell's breakout debut. First published in 2000, the book explains how trends in behavior, marketing, or business have a "magic moment" when they rapidly spread, like a viral epidemic. He calls this moment "the tipping point." The book sparked its own epidemic of sorts, changing the way businesses market their products or services and how people spread ideas throughout society. The premise of the book is simple. "Ideas and products, messages, and behaviors spread just like viruses do."

A trend in the fashion world can become contagious in the same way as a decline in crime rates, despite the fact that those two examples seem to have very little in common. Viral trends always share a fundamental "underlying pattern." Despite the type of trend, be it in business or social behavior or something else, all viral trends with a tipping point are a result of "contagious behavior." A relatively small number of people in a small setting begin behaving in a different way. Somehow, those humble beginnings spread to a large amount of people in a much larger area. These changes are not the result of a slow, steady build up. Small changes among small groups of people lead to widespread, dramatic effects in a very quick amount of time. He names that dramatic moment when "everything can change all at once" as the Tipping Point.

## The Three Rules of Epidemics

In order to understand why some ideas or products or behaviors have a tipping point and become epidemics and others don't, we need to understand the three rules of epidemics. Knowing this can allow the intentional "start and control" of positive epidemics within the spheres of education, business, and policymaking. Gladwell says that there are three "agents of change" that impact whether or not a trend is tipped. They have to do with the people who are "transmitting" the agent, the nature of the "infectious agent itself," and the "environment in which the agent is operating." He refers to these three ingredients as the "Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context."

Whether or not a trend tips depends largely on the people who push it. In this context, not all people are created equally.



A fashion trend can tip, for example, when just a few influential personalities are seen wearing the fashion choice and become enthusiastic about it. With trend tipping, the small minority of people make the biggest difference in how widely the trend spreads.

Whether or not a trend tips also depends largely on how “sticky” the message becomes. We are met with a barrage of communications and messages all day long. Some stick with us and others don’t. Trends that tip have a stickiness that makes them stay with us. Contagious messages can become more memorable with “relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information that can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes.”

Finally, epidemics are environmentally influenced. Seasonal differences impact how widespread flu infections become, for example. Environmental conditions can also impact how popular a particular fashion choice or behavioral choice becomes. Human beings are “more sensitive to their environment than they may seem.” The deciding factor in a trend tripping is sometimes a result of the tiniest detail about the environmental conditions.

The three rules laid out by Gladwell help us make meaning of these behavioral, cultural, and marketing epidemics. Gladwell applies these rules to fascinating real life examples in the remainder of the book.

## The Law of the Few

To explain the Law of the Few, Gladwell points to the most famous example of a word-of-mouth epidemic in our nation: Paul Revere’s midnight ride. Based on something a young stable boy overheard a British officer say, Paul Revere became convinced that British troops would be moving in on Colonial militia stores. Revere decided to warn surrounding communities and raise awareness with the local militia so they could organize and meet the British invasion. Revere’s famous “midnight ride” began when he jumped on his horse and covered thirteen miles in just two hours. He “knocked on doors and spread the word” urging those who he warned to carry the message further. Soon, alarms were sounding over an ever-increasing distance as locals began beating drums, ringing church bells, and riding out themselves to share the news. By five a.m., the news had reached a distance of over forty miles from Boston.

When British soldiers arrived in Lexington the next morning, they were “utterly astonished” to find a large and organized Colonial resistance. The American Revolution had begun. What is left out of the commonly told version of this story is that there was another man, William Dawes, who rode out with the same urgent message. He covered as much ground as Paul Revere and communicated the same idea. However, the locals from the area he covered did not ride out to meet the British. Why did Revere’s role end up being memorable and successful where Dawes resulted in him being left out of the history books? Gladwell says it is because of the Law of the Few. Revere’s role was so critical because he possessed a “rare set of social gifts.” Some people have the power to drastically influence a situation and

make it tip. Revere had that special gift and a connectedness with those around him that made his message result in a tip.

## The Stickiness Factor

In the late 1960’s, a television producer named Joan Ganz Cooney began a mission to start an educational epidemic. Her goal was to spread the virus of literacy throughout underserved impoverished communities, giving three and four year olds the foundational learning needed to start elementary school on a strong footing. Her audacious idea was called Sesame Street and its wild success is a perfect example of what Gladwell calls the Stickiness Factor. Harvard University psychologist Gerald Lesser joined Cooney as a co-founder. He expressed reluctance at accepting television as an effective medium for delivering education. He wondered if the lessons would fall flat not being designed to meet a particular child’s interests or personality. He said, “You try to find the kid’s strengths, so you can play into them. You try to understand the kid’s weaknesses, so you can avoid them... Television has no potential, no power to do that.” Television lacks the qualities of interactivity and individual engagement. Could a “talking box” really help children build literacy skills?

Sesame Street has been “subject to more academic scrutiny than any television show in history.” Over and over again, it has “been proved to increase the reading and learning skills of its viewers.” The creators behind Sesame Street did things differently than other children’s shows had done in the past. They “aimed higher and tried harder.” They made calculated, but critical changes to how their material was presented to the preschooler audience. Those changes overcame the weaknesses inherent to using television as an educational teaching tool. Sesame Street found a way to “make television sticky.” The content of a particular message matters. Sesame Street’s stickiness was not accidental. It was engineered thoughtfully and deliberately. The results were profoundly memorable and had the power to effect change.

## The Power of Context

We don’t usually think of crime waves or declines in the same context as a viral product trend or message. Crime isn’t a singular thing one can point to like a style of shoes or political slogan. The word crime is used “to describe an almost impossibly varied and complicated set of behaviors.” To become a criminal is to commit an act that puts yourself in great risk of serious consequence. Criminals are considered to be bad people who have a combination of undesirable traits. This does not seem like the kind of behavior that could become contagious. Nonetheless, New York City went from being “a city in the grip of one of the worst crime epidemics in history” in the 1980’s to one of the safest cities in the country in the 1990’s. How did that happen?

Gladwell says that the Power of Context explains what happened in New York City. This principle of epidemics is more complicated than the other two. The “lesson of the Power of Context is that we are more than just sensitive to changes in context. We’re exquisitely sensitive to them. And the kinds of contextual changes that are capable of tipping an epidemic are very different than we might ordinarily expect.” Gladwell uses



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the crime wave trend in New York as an example. Violent crime decreased across the United States in the 1990’s, which were the result of some basic factors. The crack cocaine trade began to decline and thus the violent crimes associated with dealers and gangs also declined. The economy was booming so more people had legitimate jobs and were not forced into crime as a means of supporting themselves. The population was aging so there were fewer people in the dominant criminal age bracket out in society committing crimes. These are straightforward causes and effects. The reasons behind the dramatic decline of violent crime in New York City is more complicated.

Crime in New York City started taking a major nosedive at a time when the economy was not improving. Crack cocaine becoming less popular and available had some impact but cannot explain such a drastic decline. Finally, NYC was actually getting younger, not older, so age of the population was not a factor. Besides, Gladwell points out, those factors would cause a gradual decline, not a sharp turn around. The “decline was anything but gradual.” There was something else at play in “reversing New York’s crime epidemic. The “Broken Windows” theory is one of the most interesting possibilities as the “something else.”

Criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling put forth the Broken Windows theory. They asserted that “crime is the inevitable result of disorder.” If someone breaks a window and that window is left unrepaired, it is an open invitation for further window breaking. People assume that no one is watching and no one cares. A signal that “anything goes” is sent into the community and before long, more serious crimes will be rampant. Gladwell points out that the Broken Windows theory is “an epidemic theory of crime.” In the same way that other trends are contagious, crime waves can spread from a single broken window that is not repaired. Like the graffiti that covered every inch of the subway cars in New York, the “impetus to engage in a certain kind of behavior is not coming from a certain kind of person but from a feature of the environment.”

The city hired a new subway director, David Gunn, who was to oversee a “multibillion-dollar rebuilding of the subway system. Kelling was brought on as a consultant and he and Gunn urged the transit authority to put the Broken Windows theory into practice. Instead of broken windows, the physical catalyst to crime within the subway system was graffiti. There was strong resistance, with advocates pushing for a focus on bigger issues like crime and schedule reliability, but Gunn and Kelling pressed on. A highly structured, deadline-driven cleaning system was set up to address every train on every line.

A rule was established that once a subway car was “reclaimed” it “should never be allowed to be vandalized again.” The sys-

tem was fanatical. If a car came into a station with new graffiti, it was cleaned during the changeover or taken out of circulation. Subway cars with graffiti that had not yet been cleaned could never be mixed with cars that were already free of graffiti. The point was to send a very clear message to the vandals. The graffiti would never see the light of day.

The city went on to address other seemingly small problems, like fare beating. “An estimated 170,000 people a day were entering the system without paying a token.” It had a snowball effect. People who would normally pay jumped in and skipped the fare because they saw others getting away with it. The head of transit police tackled fare beating with ferocity. Mobile booking stations were set up and plain-clothed cops worked at the subway entrances. People caught fare skipping were handcuffed and lined up together in a public display of the crack down. They focused on the “smallest infractions” that were the root of the bigger problems. Small crimes on the streets were addressed just as they had been underground in the subway system. Quickly, overall crime rates in the city began plummeting. A Tipping Point had been reached by addressing “the smallest details of the immediate environment.”

“These three characteristics—one, contagiousness; two, the fact that little causes can have big effects; and three, that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment—are the same three principles that define how measles moves through a grade-school classroom or the flu attacks every year.” We have seen these same principles play out with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tipping Point is filled with fascinating observations and real life examples of unexpected consequences. Minor adjustments can lead to massive changes. With the right messenger, a sticky message delivered in the right environment can make trends tip and become outright epidemics. From what shoes will be hot next season to how early literacy will be impacted by subtle changes in policy, the Tipping Point helps readers see the not so obvious roots of sweeping and dramatic shifts.

Gladwell’s groundbreaking hit opens the mind to viewing the world in a whole new light.