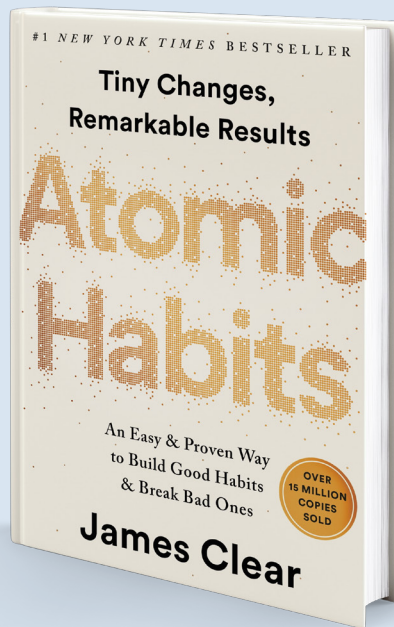


# Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



## Atomic Habits

An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones

By James Clear

James Clear is an author and speaker focused on habits, decision-making, and continuous improvement. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Time*, and *Entrepreneur*, and on CBS This Morning. His website receives millions of visitors each month, and hundreds of thousands subscribe to his popular email newsletter. He is a regular speaker at Fortune 500 Companies, and his work is used by teams in the NFL, NBA, and MLB. Through his online course, The Habits Academy, Clear has taught more than 10,000 leaders, managers, coaches, and teachers. The Habits Academy is the premier training platform for individuals and organizations that are interested in building better habits in life and work. Clear is an avid weightlifter and photographer. He lives with his wife in Columbus, Ohio. [jamesclear.com](http://jamesclear.com)

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A Book Review by Soundview

## The Power of Tiny Changes to Build Remarkable Results

How often have you started a new year with a plan to dramatically change yourself or your situation? There's a reason the purchase of gym memberships, exercise apparel, and planners spike at the beginning of the year—a faithful belief that if you can just implement (insert behavior to be changed here) for 21 days in a row, it will stick and you will be transformed. Unfortunately, of those who commit to a resolution on the first of the month, most fail by the 10th of that month.

In his latest book, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*, author James Clear explains why that approach to self-development very rarely works. It's not your fault. The fact that you struggle to change your habits is not some character flaw that is unique to you—you have lots of company. The fault lies in the system you are using. "Bad habits repeat themselves not because you don't want to change but because you have the wrong system for change," Clear writes.

## The Fundamentals

While most people approach behavior change from the perspective of deficits that need to be fixed—lose weight, exercise more, eat healthier, quit smoking, control spending—Clear is a firm believer in a different approach. Behavior change is about the realization of *potential*. Establishing that alternative perspective also serves to manage expectations. Success isn't about quitting smoking overnight, losing 20 pounds in 30 days, or learning a new language in 45 days. It's about consistent, incremental, and most importantly, positive steps towards a measurable goal.

Much of the author's knowledge has been earned through personal experience. As he shares in the beginning of the book, a high school baseball injury that left him with "a broken nose, multiple skull fractures, and two shattered eye sockets," destroyed his dreams of a professional playing career and left him with a long journey back to full physical capabilities. It was that journey and the inherent need for patience and consistent repetition that led to his interest in human behavior and the potential of compounded incremental change.

## The Aggregation of Marginal Gains

The author's choice of the term *atomic* is deliberate. Atomic denotes something that is so small it is unnoticeable, but it is also a source of immense energy. For human behavior, small changes have the potential to be transformative or toxic. Eating an unhealthy meal once in a while is manageable if the rest of your diet is healthy, but if unhealthy food choices start to dominate your food intake, the damage to your body and your long-term health can be catastrophic.

If you flip that equation and look at small positive changes, the same rule applies. The British Cycling Federation (now known as British Cycling) proved this when they hired a new performance director, Dave Brailsford, in 2003 to transform a team that was known more for its mediocrity than its track record. The team had never won a Tour de France (cycling's biggest race), and with a record of only one gold Olympic medal since 1908, there was plenty of room for improvement.

Brailsford elected to play the long game that he referred to as "the aggregation of marginal gains." In practice, this meant breaking down everything about cycling into its smallest component and rebuilding it to its maximum potential. Some were obvious—better, more aerodynamic apparel and redesigned bicycle seats for better riding comfort—but some were so extreme as to bring Brailsford's sanity into question—hiring a surgeon to show the riders how to wash their hands correctly to reduce the chance of getting sick; researching the correct combination of pillow and mattress for each rider to ensure an optimal night's sleep; painting the inside of the team truck white to help them better spot any dust that might compromise the performance of the finely tuned bikes.

Such attention to every minute detail may seem like overkill, but consider this—between 2007 and 2017, British cyclists won 178 world championships, 66 Olympic or Paralympic gold medals, and five Tour de France victories. Mediocrity was now a distant memory.

## How to Build Better Habits

Central to *Atomic Habits* is Clear's four-step model of habits—cue, craving, response, and reward. Habits are built with these four steps, which recur in the same order, every time, with every habit in "an endless feedback loop that is running and active during every moment you are alive."

Repetitive mental programming makes us automatically fall into patterns of thinking and acting. An example of this from the book is

- The Cue: You wake up.
- The Craving: You want to feel alert.
- The Response: You drink a cup of coffee.
- The Reward: You satisfy your craving to feel alert. Drinking coffee becomes associated with waking up.

One way the author describes this cycle, known as the habit loop, is, "The cue triggers a craving, which motivates a response, which provides a reward, which satisfies the craving and ultimately becomes associated with the cue."

To offer a way to design good habits and break the bad ones, Clear shares the Four Laws of Behavior Change derived from these steps. They also reveal insights about human behavior.

## The 1st Law: Make It Obvious

Key to the first law, *make it obvious*, is to be aware of your habits. You've got to recognize them before you can change them. You also need to acknowledge the cues that trigger them, so that you can respond to them in a way that works best for you.

Another piece of this first law is to figure out the details for when and where you will perform a new habit, so you increase your chances that you'll actually do it. So, if you say to yourself that you are going to run two miles every day, you need a plan for what time and where you're going to run. As Clear says, "Give your habits a time and a space to live in the world. The goal is to make the time and location so obvious that, with enough repetition, you get an urge to do the right thing at the right time, even if you can't say why."

Environment plays a role here, too. Clear suggests that to make a habit a big part of your life, you should make the cue for it a big part of your environment. So for him, for example, he'd buy apples that would get forgotten in the crisper in his refrigerator and they'd go bad. He experienced the power of obvious cues when he put the apples in a bowl in the center of his kitchen counter where he could see them. By redesigning his environment in this way, he said he began eating a few apples a day, because now they were obvious instead of out of sight.

## The 2nd Law: Make It Attractive

The modern food industry has gotten really good at combining salt, sugar, and fat in products that we find irresistible. Clear points to the overeating that this evolution has perpetuated as an example of the second law: *make it attractive*.

Junk food is often craved and used as a reward, thereby exciting the brain and encouraging us to eat more. But for this and other habits, Clear points to the deeper science, as he often does in the book, this time to a neurotransmitter called dopamine.

Habits are a dopamine-driven feedback loop, he says. Behaviors that are highly habit-forming—taking drugs, eating junk food, playing video games, browsing social media—are all associated with higher levels of dopamine. So are basic behaviors like eating food, drinking water, having sex, and interacting socially.

The author's takeaway is, "dopamine is released not only when you *experience* pleasure but also when you *anticipate* it." In fact, the anticipation of that tropical vacation you may be planning could be better than the actual experience of it. The anticipation of a reward is really what motivates action in the first place. And dopamine increases as the craving builds. In this law, we are led to the realization that the more attractive an activity is,



## You have to get a habit to stick even in a small way to feel successful.

the more likely it is to become habit-forming. In other words, we're going to keep researching those amazing vacations.

Behaviors can also be attractive. As humans, we want to belong, and because of that our earliest habits are created by imitating those around us. "Behaviors are attractive when they help us fit in," Clear points out.

It is easy to relate to his own admission: "I find that I often imitate the behavior of those around me without realizing it. In conversation, I'll automatically assume the body posture of the other person. In college, I began to talk like my roommates. When traveling to other countries, I unconsciously imitate the local accent despite reminding myself to stop."

As Clear explains, your identity can also become linked to those around you, and growth and change are no longer an individual pursuit. Examples of group identifiers are "We are musicians." or "We are cyclists." After you achieve a goal, staying part of the group helps to embed an identity and sustain behaviors.

### The 3rd Law: Make It Easy

A takeaway of the third law is you don't need to map out every feature of a new habit; you just need to practice it. Clear tells us that every time you repeat an action, you activate a neural circuit associated with that habit. Repetition is critical to encoding a new habit. As a habit is solidified by repetition, the behavior becomes more automatic. And that's good because habits are easier if there is not a lot of friction.

The idea behind *make it easy* is not just to do easy things. The idea is to make a new habit as easy as possible in order to do things that pay off in the long run.

Clear encourages starting small by using The Two-Minute Rule to make your habits as easy as possible to start. Just about any habit can be trimmed down to a two-minute version, he points out. By way of example, Clear suggests if your new habit is to read before bed each night, begin by reading just one page. Or if your goal is to walk 10,000 steps every day, start by putting your walking shoes on.

Clear calls this creating a "gateway habit" that will lead you to more productivity in time. "The point is to master the habit of showing up." A habit must be established before it can be improved. Once you master the art of showing up in these first two minutes, you can build on it in increments so that it becomes a ritual of a bigger routine. This can ultimately lead to developing the intense focus that is required to do great things.

### The 4th Law: Make It Satisfying

The thing we learn from Clear about the fourth law, *make it satis-*

*ying*, is "pleasure teaches your brain that a behavior is worth remembering and repeating." He also warns that the cost of a good habit is in the present, but the cost of a bad habit is in the future.

When you are picturing who you want to be in life, it's easy to see long-term value. Most people know that delaying gratification is the wisest choice, but it's seldom the one they go for.

The questions Clear poses are, "Why would someone smoke if they know it increases the risk of lung cancer?" "Why would someone overeat when they know it increases their risk of obesity?" The answer relates to how the brain prioritizes rewards. Overeating is appetizing in the moment and is instantly gratifying.

The thing about a good habit is that the reward is the habit itself, but it doesn't feel worthwhile until you can see the benefits, which can take time. You have to get a habit to stick even in a small way, to feel successful. When you feel successful, it is like a signal that your habit has paid off and all that hard work was worth it.

"Mastery is the process of narrowing your focus to a tiny element of success, repeating it until you have internalized the skill, and then using this habit as the foundation to advance to the next frontier of your development. Each habit unlocks the next level of performance. It's an endless cycle."

Clear advocates using reinforcement—using an immediate reward to increase the rate of a behavior. But the short-term reward has to reinforce the identity you're trying to build, not conflict with it. So if your long-term vision of yourself is being a healthy person, your short-term reward should be aligned with that. Rather than rewarding yourself with a bowl of ice cream for exercising, maybe your reward is getting a massage. As Clear points out, "Incentives can start a habit. Identity sustains a habit."

In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear stands with us as we look honestly at ourselves and see what we like and what we don't like about how we behave. He provides tools and strategies to help us build systems to develop better habits. Ultimately, he gives us what we need to fit the identity that we wish for ourselves in the long term.

With his thorough research and deep thoughtfulness about how habits work for and against us, we have only to add our commitment to never stop making improvements and to sustain the belief that small habits don't add up; they compound. Readers will learn that tiny changes they choose to make in how they live *can* lead to remarkable results. *Atomic Habits* is hopeful, honest, and transformative.

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