

Atomic Habits

BY JAMES CLEAR

As medical leaders, time is one of our most valuable and precious resources. Time is needed to cultivate relationships, whether it is with junior individuals like students, PAs, or medics; peers like fellow attendings or non-medical staff officers, or leaders within our own organizations or in other units across the military. We need time to design curricula, hone presentations, analyze data, and complete notes for clinical encounters. Last but not least, time is critical for caring for ourselves, taking time to recharge, maintain fitness, sleep, and pursue hobbies, interest, and family bonding outside of our vocation.

While this is obvious, often as physicians we struggle with balancing time. Much like counseling patients against unhealthy behaviors when they already know the damaging consequences of their choices (think smoking and its link to cancer), we already know that being more efficient is crucial to balancing time. Without managing our time effectively, tasks often take longer which causes less satisfaction and greater risk of burnout. So why then is it challenging, for some more than others, to maintain good habits and optimize our time? Often we view self-discipline as an innate quality, that some are just blessed with more than others. In this issue of USAFP, we will examine another theory, that self-discipline is not an innate quality but



rather a set of skills we can all develop over time.

Many times we overestimate single events as the key to success and underestimate the little things we did leading up to that moment. Doing the little things right day in and day out might seem boring or tedious, and we usually define that as having “self-discipline”.

James Clear’s book Atomic Habits explores the psychology behind habits and how we can use that knowledge to become more efficient. As he notes, a 1% increase or decrease in most things usually seems negligible. But a 1% improvement every day for a year

towards a habit or skill will yield a 37x improvement by the year’s end, and a 1% decline in the same habit or skill renders it to almost 0 by the year’s end (see figure below). Our habits are like compound interest - by working steadily toward a goal, our progress can snowball on itself to achieve something much greater than it initially appears. This can be applied in virtually any aspect of our professional or personal lives. Examples include putting consistent time in on a project, building a network of relationships in our unit, writing a curriculum, eating healthier, keeping up with CME, closing notes, or working out. As military physician

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leaders, mastering our habits can make us more effective in everything we do.

When it comes to achieving lasting positive change in our lives, it is a matter of changing the right thing. Clear's main point is that often we focus on outcomes or behaviors rather than values. Typically outcomes are what we focus on with any type of change: completing a project at a certain deadline, spending a specific amount of time with family, or getting a certain amount of sleep. Processes in our lives are the habits we have in place to help us achieve those outcomes: blocking time in our schedule to work on the project, planning trips with our family, or setting a reminder to start bedtime at the same time every evening. Identity is what we believe and value, and ultimately it is what will shape the habits we do or do not maintain: "I am prompt," "I put my family first over work," "I am someone who gets a good night's sleep."

A common problem is that we focus on changing the outcomes ("I want to lose 10 pounds") rather than the identity ("I am a physically fit person"). If the habits we identify to achieve our desired outcomes ("I work out 5 times a week") are not congruent with our identity ("I am not really someone who works out regularly"), we are much less likely to maintain those habits. Thus, by changing the paradigm to focus on redefining our identity instead of our outcomes, we are more likely to adopt our new habits for good and consequently get the outcomes we desire. Furthermore, every time we maintain a habit, it is an affirmation of that identity. As shown in the figure below, the key is to focus on building identity-based habits, rather than simple outcome-based habits. Identity-based habits are much more likely to stick.

Once we understand that identity is the most important target for change, we can apply the four laws of habits, which are tools we can use that tap into the underlying psychology of habit formation.

1. Make it obvious.

Our brains are wired to notice and prefer patterns, and this goes for associating actions with times, locations, or circumstances. Associating a desired action with a place and time makes it much more likely to stick. (E.g. place a medical journal on my keyboard if my goal is to read for 20 min when I first get to work. Over time, we associate the start of the day at the office as the time to read medical journals.)

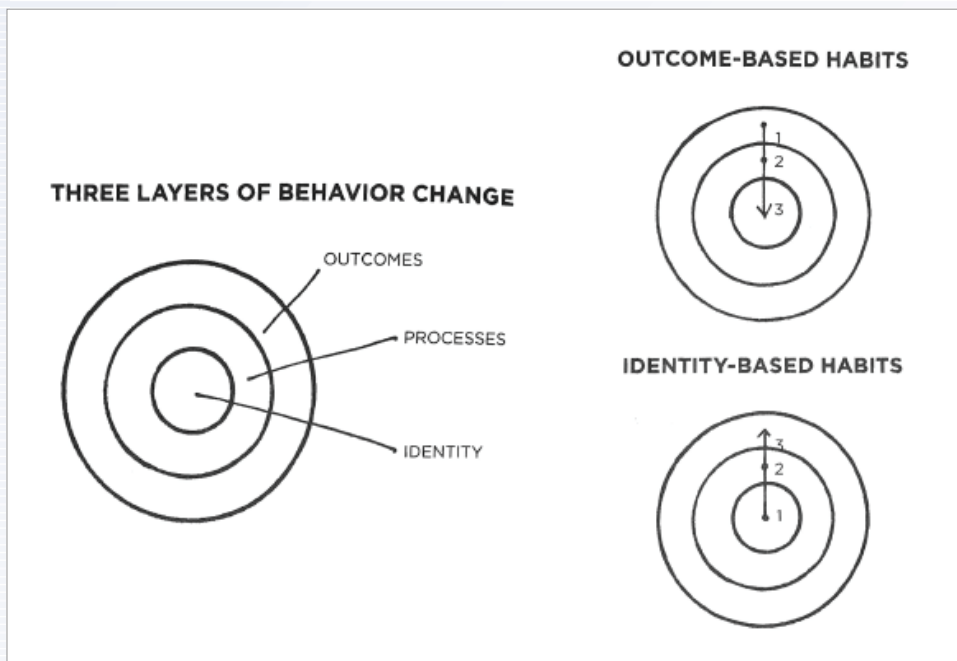
2. Make it attractive.

We evolved to want to do certain things (eat, rest, etc) and dopamine is the neurotransmitter that affirms behaviors in our brain as being good or that should be

repeated. Over time, repeatedly linking the same actions with that dopamine creates a feedback loop, and we become consciously or subconsciously motivated to continue doing it. Pairing a targeted behavior with something we already desire essentially bundles dopamine with this new habit. (E.g. if I enjoy watching a Netflix show, I bundle watching that show with completing my notes and watch it only once they are complete.) Another method is to surround ourselves in a culture that views that habit as attractive. (E.g. spend time with others who bike for fitness, if we desire to bike more often.)

3. Make it easy.

While most of us are self-driven high achievers that few would define as "lazy," it is also true that human nature is to follow the path of least resistance. Conserving energy and brain power is what we evolved to do. So regardless of



being driven, we will increase the likelihood of maintaining our new habit by making our environment conducive to it. Reducing friction, addition by subtraction, or lean six sigma - they all apply the same principle of eliminating obstacles, big or small, from the process to make it smoother and seamless. Actions like using an organizer, a checklist, or eliminating unnecessary steps can significantly improve maintaining a habit if it becomes easier to do.

4. Make it satisfying.

Again tapping into evolutionary theory, our brains seek out dopamine reward to signal that a behavior was good and to do it again. Putting a system in place to reward ourselves with a desired

behavior can allow us to make that habit more satisfying than the intrinsic satisfaction alone that we get with accomplishing it. Creating a visual aid like a daily checklist or habit tracker can help as well. Depending on the habit, publicly displaying it or having an accountability partner or group can serve both to create good habits and break bad ones.

How we spend our time as leaders is crucial to our success. How that time is spent is different for everyone, depending on personality, preference, environment, and circumstances. But regardless of those differences, by understanding our values and how they shape our behaviors, we can all develop helpful habits that help us become more effective leaders. In

addition to reading the book, visit the author's website to sign up for his weekly newsletter on tips and encouragement for developing better habits, at <https://jamesclear.com/>

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