

ATOMIC HABITS

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

JAMES CLEAR



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The Big “So What”



To achieve greater success in any field, we must break bad habits and build good ones. In this book, James Clear draws on insights from cognitive and behavioral sciences to provide a powerful step-by-step plan that can help you to create better habits in any area of life.

Atomic Habits: The Power of 1% Gains



? Why Atomic Habits Matter

⚙️ Atomic habits are tiny routines and behaviors that build on one another to multiply outcomes over time. We tend to prioritize big breakthroughs over tiny improvements. However, it's those small daily decisions and actions that really matter.

- If you improve by 1% a day, you don't just become 365% (or 3.7x) better in 1 year. Because of the compounding effect, you actually become 37x better. The reverse is also true if you slide by 1% per day. Thus, regardless of where you are now, your habits define your trajectory and future outcomes (for better or worse).
- For more than 100 years since 1908, British Cycling had nominal international success. In 2003, Dave Brailsford became its Performance Director. He transformed the team's results through a program of 1% changes—from redesigning bike/racing suits to experimenting with massage gels and mattresses/pillows for sleep-improvement. The British team won 60% of all available gold medals at the 2008 Beijing

KEY QUOTES

“With the same habits, you'll end up with the same results. But with better habits, anything is possible.”

“Changes that seem small and unimportant...will compound into remarkable results if you're willing to stick with them.”

“Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement.”

“Success is the product of daily habits—not once-in-a-lifetime transformations.”

Olympics, then went on to set 9 Olympic records and 7 world records at the 2012 London games. From 2007-2017, they won 178 world championships and 66 Olympic/Paralympic gold medals, achieving one of the most successful runs in cycling history. All these came from incremental 1% changes.



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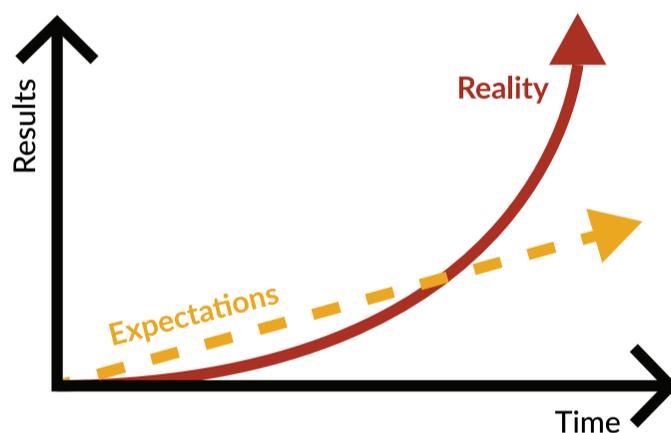
Tapping on the Compound Effect

Habits are hard to change partially because they take a long time to deliver visible results. For example, you won't become a millionaire after saving money for 6 months and you'll still be out of shape after going to the gym for 3 days. Often, we make a few changes, fail to see results and quickly slide back into our old routines.



For maximum positive compounding, you must stick to your daily actions and habits long enough to cross the Plateau of Latent Potential.

- An ice cube sitting on a table looks the same as the temperature rises from 25 to 31 degrees Fahrenheit. But at 32 degrees, you suddenly see visible signs of the ice melting. Likewise, bamboo can shoot up 90 feet in 6 weeks after quietly developing roots underground for 5 years.



- It's the same with good habits: you may not see results for some time, then one day you suddenly start to see exponential growth. The key is to keep going until you reach that tipping point.

KEY QUOTES

"Once your habits are established, they seem to stick around forever - especially the unwanted ones."

"We expect progress to be linear and quick. In reality it can take months or years to realize the value of our previous work."

"It's a hallmark of any compounding process: the most powerful outcomes are delayed."



Effecting Behaviour Change at 3 Levels

There are 3 key levels of change: Outcome, Process and Identity. While all 3 are important, the best way to change your habits is from the inside out, i.e. focus on the person you wish to become rather than the outcomes you want to achieve.



 Focusing on outcomes or goals alone (e.g. target weight, grades or business profits) won't guarantee success and may even create problems.

- Goals can reduce happiness because if we don't reach the target, we'll think that we've failed even if we've made a lot of progress.
- When we achieve our goals, we tend to relax and break our good habits, creating a "yo-yo effect" that hurts long-term progress.
- When we focus on outcomes, we also tend to address the symptoms instead of the causes. For example, you can clean up a messy room, but it'll become messy again quickly if you don't change your habits.

 Long-term change must be sustained at the systems level. With the right systems in place, the results will take of themselves. Specifically, habits are formed and reinforced via a constant feedback loop: Cue → Craving → Response → Reward. The key to habits transformation is to create a system that consistently improves this feedback loop (elaborated in the next section).

 The most powerful source of habitual change is at the identity level.

- Your identity and habits reinforce each other. Your sense of identity shapes what you do, which in turn reinforces how you see yourself. Someone who's rejecting a cigarette as a goal may say, "No thanks I'm trying to quit" while someone who's rejecting it as part of his identity may say, "No thanks I'm not a smoker."



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KEY QUOTES

"Fix the inputs and outputs will fix themselves."

"Building habits in the present allows you to do more of what you want in the future."

"It's not about any single accomplishment. It is about the cycle of endless refinement and continuous improvement."

"Your habits shape your identity, and your identity shapes your habits."



- You may start a habit due to short-term motivation, but you'll only stick to it if it becomes a part of who you are. Don't just read a book or have a reading routine; *become* a reader. Don't just run a marathon or work out regularly; *become* a runner. To fulfill your potential, keep expanding and elevating your identity. Change your habits (*what you do*) to shape your identity (*who you are*).

The Habit Loop: 4-Steps to Building Better Habits

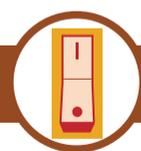


 Habits are mental shortcuts to help us solve problems, i.e. to get something we want or avoid something we don't want. Specifically, there are 4 parts to habits-formation: The *cue* (e.g. phone buzzing when a message comes in) sparks a *craving* (e.g. the desire to know what's in the message), which triggers a *response* (e.g. you grab the phone and read the message), which brings a *reward* (e.g. you know what's in the message). Over time, the brain links the cue with the reward, so you automatically reach for the phone once it buzzes. The loop is complete and the habit is formed.



 Using the habit loop, Clear presents 4 simple laws to build good habits and break bad ones.

Building Good Habits	Breaking Bad Habits
1. Make it obvious	1. Make it invisible
2. Make it attractive	2. Make it unattractive
3. Make it easy	3. Make it hard
4. Make it satisfying	4. Make it unsatisfying



Law #1: Make the Cue More Visible

Habits become automatic when our brains pick up cues and predict certain rewards without conscious thought. To start a new habit, make your cues more obvious.

KEY QUOTES

"Becoming the best version of yourself requires you to continuously edit your beliefs, and to upgrade and expand your identity."

"Without the first three steps, a behavior will not occur. Without all four, a behavior will not be repeated."

"Behaviors followed by satisfying consequences tend to be repeated and those that produce unpleasant consequences are less likely to be repeated."
—Edward Thorndike

"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."
— Carl Jung



KEY QUOTES

"Habit stacking allows you to create a set of simple rules that guide your future behavior."

"Environment is the invisible hand that shapes human behavior."

"A stable environment where everything has a place and a purpose is an environment where habits can easily form."

 To change your habits, you must first become aware of them. Use a habits scorecard to list down all your daily behaviors, from the time you wake up till the time you go to bed. Mark each habit as positive, negative, or neutral based on whether it helps you to become the person you aspire to be.

 Use the 2 most common cues—time and location—to implement your goals. Explicitly state your intention to act using this formula: "I will [do this] at [this time] in [this location]". For example, "I will meditate for 10 mins daily at 6am in the study".

 Stack your habits by tying a desired habit to an existing habit using this formula: "After [an existing habit], I will [do this new habit]". For example, "after I finish my tea each morning, I will meditate for 10 min".

- You can stack multiple habits, e.g. after finishing your tea, you'll meditate for 10 min, after which you'll plan your daily tasks, after which you'll start doing the top task. This creates a chain of habits that you're more likely to sustain.
- It's vital to choose the right cue as the trigger. It should be (i) something that you do without fail, (ii) has the same frequency as the new habit you're trying to build, and (iii) is very specific (e.g. when you step out of bed or brush your teeth).

 Design your environment to shape your behavior. Our environment influences our behaviors more than our willpower/motivation, e.g. shoppers tend to buy items that are placed at eye level and within easy reach.

- To create a habit, redesign your work/home to (i) make the cues for the desired habits more visible and (ii) make the cues for bad habits invisible. For example, if you want to encourage your employees to drink more water, hide the soda in the fridge and place water everywhere in the office and café.
- Consider your relationship with the objects in your environment, e.g. if the couch is your spot for relaxing while watching TV, it'll be hard to start a work-related habit there. Link your habits to the environment and have unique locations for different habits (e.g. work, relaxation, relationships).

 Once a habit is formed, it's hard to forget. Once you're exposed to the cue, you tend to fall into the habit. Hence, the best way to break a bad habit is not through self-control, but by removing temptation. Reduce your exposure to the cues that trigger those bad habits, e.g. if your phone is distracting you from work, put it in a different room.



Law #2: Make the Habit Attractive

We take action only when we expect it to produce a reward. The more rewarding the action, the more we'll repeat it, until it becomes a habit that we do automatically or subconsciously. Thus, to form good habits, we need to make them more attractive.



Dopamine is a hormone and neurotransmitter which affects our motivation levels. When dopamine levels rise, we feel more motivated to take action.

- Human beings are programmed to respond to certain inbuilt motives e.g. conserving energy, getting food/water, feeling loved/connected/accepted, reproduce etc. A craving is merely an expression of such underlying motives; the goal is never in the action itself, but to change an inner state. People smoke to relieve stress, and spend hours on social media to feel connected.
- Dopamine is released not only when we experience pleasure, but also when we *expect* it. Habits are so powerful because the cue is enough to trigger an anticipation of a reward and hence motivate you to act. If you're addicted to smoking or gambling, you'll experience a spike in dopamine levels *before* you even light that cigarette or place your bet, which prompts you to take action.



Temptation bundling increases a habit's attractiveness by pairing an action we *need* to do with one that we *want* to do. For example, only allow yourself to watch reality TV (what you *want* to do) when you're working out at the gym (what you *need* to do). Alternatively, you can combine temptation bundling with habit stacking, e.g. you'll watch 30 min of reality TV (the habit you *want*) after 30 mins of gym workout (the habit you *need*).



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KEY QUOTES

"This is the secret to self-control. Make the cues of your good habits obvious and the cues of your bad habits invisible."

"We need to make our habits attractive because it is the expectation of a rewarding experience that motivates us to act in the first place."

"When you binge-eat or light up or browse social media, what you really want is not a potato chip or a cigarette or a bunch of likes. What you really want is to feel different."

"It is the anticipation of a reward—not the fulfillment of it—that gets us to take action."



Our behaviors are strongly influenced by our community. Every human being has an innate need to belong and we tend to imitate the habits of 3 groups of people:

- People close to us (e.g. family, friends, colleagues). Habits that're common in our culture will seem more attractive and achievable.
- The masses. We'd rather change our habits to fit in with our tribe or the masses, than challenge them by doing something different.
- Those with power and status. We copy the behaviors of successful people in hope of gaining approval and respect.

To build better habits, join a culture where your desired behavior is the norm. It'd be even better if you share something in common with that group, e.g. an interest in reading or fitness. When you develop a shared identity ("We're readers" or "We're runners"), it reinforces your personal identity to facilitate long-term change.



In short, the key to building a good habit is to create the belief that an action is worth repeating. Associate good habits with positive feelings instead of negatives, e.g. saving money means financial freedom (not sacrifices), exercising means better health/fitness (not exhaustion). Or, do something enjoyable and motivating before tackling a difficult habit.



On the other hand, if you want to break a bad habit, play up the negatives and bad feelings to make the habit unattractive.



Law #3: Make the Steps Easy

The more you practice something, the better you become at it and the easier it seems. The best way to build a habit is to practice it, and the best way to start practicing is to make it easy.



We tend to spend so much time and energy trying to figure out the best way to do something that we never get around to taking action, i.e. we end up with analysis paralysis. Thinking, researching and planning may *feel* like progress, but real learning and progress comes from actively *doing* something.



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KEY QUOTES

"Surround yourself with people who have the habits you want to have yourself. You'll rise together."

"Habits are all about associations."

"Habit formation is the process by which a behavior becomes progressively more automatic through repetition."

"If you want to master a habit, the key is to start with repetition, not perfection."



The law of least effort says that we're programmed to conserve energy and will gravitate toward options that're the least effortful.

- When you first try something, it requires a lot of effort. Over time, it becomes easier and eventually automatic.
- Habit formation depends more on the frequency with which you perform the action than how much time has passed. To master a habit, you need to repeat it so many times that it becomes automatic, i.e. you've built both muscle memory and brain memory to make the behavior effortless.



Design your tasks and environment to reduce friction, i.e. make the actions as easy to do as possible.

- The less energy required by a habit, the more likely it'll occur. You're much more likely to start and continue 1 push-up a day (which requires almost no effort) than to do 100 push-ups per day (which requires massive effort).
- Fit the desired habits into the existing flow of your life, e.g. you're more likely to go to a gym that's located on the way to office than one that requires a big detour.
- You can also automate or set up your environment to reduce friction for future action, e.g. lay out your workout clothes at night to make it easier to start your morning exercises.



In any day, there're a few decisive moments that shape the trajectory of your actions/habits. For example, whether you decide to bike or drive to work affects your commute/activities for the day; whether you change to your workout clothes or pajamas decide what you do thereafter. Master those key moments.



Use the "2-minute rule" to develop mini habits that lead to bigger ones.

- Identify a simple, 2-minute version of your desired habit. To run a marathon, the mini habit could be to change into your workout clothes. To master the piano, the first step could be to play the piano for 2 minutes a day.



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KEY QUOTES

"Trying to pump up your motivation to stick with a hard habit is like trying to force water through a bent hose."

"Redesign your life so the actions that matter most are also the actions that are easiest to do."

"Each day is made up of many moments, but it is really a few habitual choices that determine the path you take."

"The feeling of success is a signal that your habit paid off and that the work was worth the effort."



KEY QUOTES

“The greater the friction, the less likely the habit.”

“The best way to break a bad habit is to make it impractical to do. Increase the friction until you don’t even have the option to act.”

“Pleasure teaches your brain that a behavior is worth remembering and repeating.”

“We all want better lives for our future selves. However, when the moment of decision arrives, instant gratification usually wins.”

- You must establish a habit before you improve it. Use the 2-minute rule to get into the habit of showing up and to nurture your desired identity. Once you’ve mastered the 2-minute habit (i.e. consistently changing into your workout clothes), you can progressively move on to subsequent phases, e.g. walk for 10 minutes → walk 10,000 steps → run 5km → run a marathon.

 **Do the reverse for bad habits**, e.g. unplug the TV and remove the batteries from the remote control so it’s hard to watch TV.

- You can use a “commitment device” e.g. buying food in small packs so it’s inconvenient to overeat, or leaving your wallet at home to reduce spending.
- Ideally, take one-time actions that make the bad habits almost impossible, e.g. replace all your big plates with small ones so you’ll eat less, or set up an automatic bank transfer for your savings plan.



Law #4: Create Instant Satisfaction

Laws #1-3 motivate you to take action once. Law #4 closes the habit loop to decide if you’ll *repeat* the action. Basically, actions that deliver instant rewards will be repeated; those that deliver instant punishments will be avoided.

 Logically, most of us know the value of delayed gratification. Yet, our brain naturally seeks instant gratification—it attaches a higher value to a definite reward *now* over a possible reward in the *future*.

- Bad habits (e.g. smoking, over-eating, unsafe sex) persist because the immediate outcomes feel good, whereas good habits are hard to form because the immediate outcomes feel bad (e.g. giving up chocolate for a salad).
- Businesses play on this need for instant gratification. The minty flavors in toothpaste are added not to make your teeth cleaner, but to make your mouth *feel* clean and fresh, thus giving you a satisfying experience when you brush your teeth.



Use this tendency to your advantage by giving yourself an immediate reward whenever (i) you complete a good habit or (ii) avoid a bad habit. For example, when you pass on a milkshake, transfer \$5 to your account for holiday savings. In short, ensure the desired action ends off with a satisfying experience that's aligned with your desired identity.



To motivate yourself to take action daily, use a habit tracker.

- Make your progress more visible and satisfying, e.g. mark on a calendar each time you complete your desired habits. This (i) acts as a visual cue to trigger repeat action, (ii) creates satisfaction each time you complete the habit, and (iii) shows the progress you've made.
- Don't break the chain of continuity. Never miss twice, as that's the start of a bad habit. It's much better to do 5 push-ups on a bad day (instead of your usual 20) than to miss it altogether.



To break bad habits, make them instantly unsatisfying or painful. Write a habit contract (a verbal/written commitment to a habit and how you'll be punished if you violate them) and get a partner who'll hold you accountable to it. Since we want others to like and respect us, this will add a social cost to make our habit failures more painful.



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KEY QUOTES

"The mere act of tracking a behavior can spark the urge to change it."

"The first mistake is never the one that ruins you. It is the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows."

"Knowing that someone is watching is a powerful motivator."

Becoming Exceptional



Align Habits with Talents, Interests and Context



We're all born with different genes and abilities. These don't predetermine our successes/failures, but they do influence what we're most suited to do. For example, people with longer bodies tend to be better swimmers than runners; someone who's very tall may have an advantage in basketball but not in gymnastics.



When you align your habits with your natural abilities and your environmental context, you'll improve much faster. On the other hand, when you try to build habits that go against your

"Genes do not determine your destiny. They determine your areas of opportunity."

"Habits are easier to perform, and more satisfying to stick with, when they align with your natural inclinations and abilities."

personality, interests and abilities, you'll struggle. So, if you prefer rock-climbing to running, then build exercise habits around the former.

 **Explore various options** and gradually narrow down to the areas that fit your natural strengths and inclinations. Tasks that fit your strengths are likely to (i) be enjoyable for you but not others, (ii) get you in flow (i.e. you're so immersed in it you lose track of time), (iii) give you higher-than-average returns, and (iv) feel natural and energizing for you. When you specialize in your areas of strengths, it'll be hard for others to compete with you.



Stay Motivated

 How do some people stick to their habits when others give up? **The Goldilocks Rule** says that our motivation peaks when we work on tasks that're just at the edge of our abilities, i.e. they're not too difficult nor too easy.

- If you play tennis with a young child, you'll get bored. If you played against Serena Williams or Roger Federer, you'll feel demotivated since it's too challenging.
- It's a delicate balance between (i) constantly challenging yourself and (ii) making enough small improvements to stay motivated. Make it easy at the start (Law #3), then push yourself progressively to the next level, scoring a few wins along the way so you can see the progress and feel inspired to repeat the cycle.

 **Act in spite of boredom.** Everyone experiences boredom and a lack of motivation; the difference between people who succeed and those who fail is this—successful people keep working in spite of it.

- Mastery takes practice, but repetitive practice can become boring. When we're bored, we abandon old strategies (which are still working) to try new but unproven strategies, thus jeopardizing our own success.
- Slot machines and video games are so habit-forming because they provide a constant stream of novelty and surprises.



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KEY QUOTES

"The human brain loves a challenge, but only if it is within an optimal zone of difficulty."

"Professionals stick to the schedule; amateurs let life get in the way."

"The only way to become excellent is to be endlessly fascinated by doing the same thing over and over. You have to fall in love with boredom."



Use variable rewards to keep your routines fresh—vary the type and pace of your rewards to maximum dopamine levels, memory trigger/recall, and speed up habit formation. A good mix of successes and failures also keeps complacency at bay.



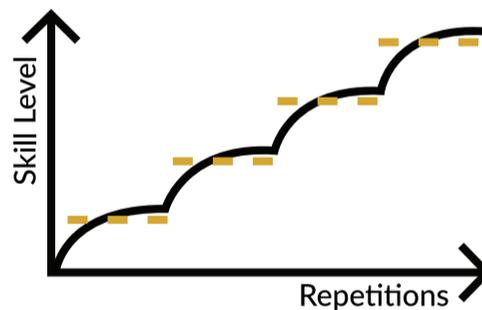
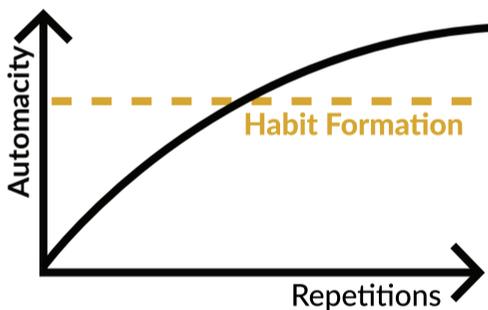
Manage the Downside of Good Habits



Habits can be a double-edged sword. Once you master something, you can do it automatically without thinking, but you also stop trying to improve it consciously. In fact, research shows that once we've mastered a skill, our performance tends to slide over time.



To attain mastery, we must combine habits with deliberate practice. Zoom in on the smallest success ingredient, practice it until you've internalized the skill, then build the next ingredient upon this foundation. For 18 years, comedian Steve Martin worked on gradual improvements to his routine. Each week, he focused on adding 1-2 minutes of new material, then practicing, experimenting and refining his approach to achieve his eventual level of mastery.



Establish a system of review and reflection, so you know if you're improving, plateauing, or declining.

- Elite athletes make daily records of their workouts, training performance, diet and rest. Comedian Chris Rock tests new material with small audiences, makes notes on which jokes work (or don't), and selects only the best lines for his show.
- Do regular reviews (say, quarterly or annually) to honestly assess if you should upgrade your habits, take on new challenges, or redirect your focus/efforts. You can evaluate your progress in terms of:

(i) Your habits/activities, e.g. what went well, what didn't go well and what you've learned.

KEY QUOTES

"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 new habit as the foundation to advance to the next frontier of your development."

"Habits create the foundation for mastery."

*"Sustaining an effort is the most important thing for any enterprise. The way to be successful is to learn how to do things right, then do them the same way every time."
—NBA coach, Pat Riley*



- (ii) Your self-identity, i.e. whether you're becoming the person you wish to become. Evaluate the core values driving your life/work, whether you've been living with integrity and how you could set higher standards for yourself.



Initially, a desired identity can help us to build a habit. However, your identity can also restrain your growth.

- Pride associated with an identity can prevent us from facing our shortcomings, e.g. a teacher may stick with tried-and-tested teaching methods instead of trying new approaches, or a surgeon may dismiss ideas from younger colleagues.
- When you identify too much with 1 aspect of your life, it could bring an identity crisis when that thing is removed, e.g. when a vegan changes his diet, when a soldier leaves military service, or when an entrepreneur sells his business.
- The solution: Don't allow any single aspect of your desired identity to define who you are, so you can redefine yourself when your circumstances change. Keep reviewing your performance and habits to develop self-awareness and ensure your habits continue to serve you.

Conclusion



- The holy grail of habit change is not a single 1% improvement, but a thousand of them. Initially, small habitual improvements may not deliver a noticeable difference. However, if you keep layering small changes on top of each another, the results add up and you'll eventually reach a tipping point where it's much easier to stick with your good habits. Whatever your goals and circumstances, so long as you commit to building 1 atomic habit at a time, you will achieve extraordinary results.
- The book also includes other details such as (i) Clear's personal journey/experience with atomic habits and (ii) many true stories of people (from artists to business leaders) who achieved mastery and success using atomic habits.

KEY QUOTES

"When you cling too tightly to one identity, you become brittle. Lose that one thing and you lose yourself."

"A lack of self-awareness is poison. Reflection and review is the antidote."

"Success is not a goal to reach or a finish line to cross. It is a system to improve, an endless process to refine."

For more details, including additional tips on how to apply Atomic Habits to areas like business and parenting, please visit <https://jamesclear.com/>.



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About the Author

James Clear is an American author, entrepreneur, and photographer. His work has appeared in the New York Times, Time, and Entrepreneur, and on CBS This Morning, and is taught in colleges around the world. Clear is also the creator of The Habits Academy, a training platform for organizations and individuals that are interested in building better habits in life and work.



KEY QUOTES

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