

PERSONAL *TRANSFORMATION*

MASTERY



- Master your brain
- Overcome fear
- Build confidence
- Get motivated

- Know your life purpose
- Develop a healthier you
- Build good habits
- Get focused

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GUIDE 6:

HOW TO DEVELOP POWERFUL HABITS

We humans are creatures of habit. We have evolved over thousands of years to like routine, to like predictability and to become ingrained in a certain series of events.

Most of us therefore have a routine that we pretty much follow every single day. Maybe you start your day by waking up, making breakfast, having a shower, getting dressed and then watching the news for 10 minutes with a cup of coffee before running for the bus.

You probably have a similar routine in the evening, which might involve doing a 10 minute shop at your local grocers, making dinner, watching some TV, having a shower and then reading a book in bed. You probably go to bed at roughly the same time every day.

This is no coincidence. This comes down to the entire way we are hardwired. The way our brains work and the way our biology operates.

Repeating the same actions or thoughts over and over again essentially means that we are repeatedly using the same neuronal pathways and causing the same connections to light up and fire. As we do this, those connections become 'myelinated'. That means that they are insulated by myelin sheaths, thereby becoming stronger and stronger. If you repeat one action followed

by another often enough, then often they will become so ingrained as to become automatic and beyond our conscious control.

This was demonstrated perfectly by the psychologist Ivan Pavlov who managed to condition dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell.

This is also why severely brain damaged individuals who can't remember their own name might still be able to play incredible piano concertos. Some can do this despite even not knowing that they can play the piano! The simple fact is that the motor neurons are *hardwired* over years of practice. The groove has been greased over and over again to leave a final impression.

As for our biology, this is based entirely around rhythms and patterns. The sun rises at a certain time and this triggers the release of cortisol and nitric oxide. These neurotransmitters trigger a cascade of activity throughout the brain which makes us more awake and active. Then we eat and this slows us down slightly again and gets us ready for work.

After 4pm, our lunch settles in and we start to become slower and more sluggish thanks to a dose of melatonin and serotonin. By the time the sun starts to go down, we are producing more melatonin and the build up of adenosine in our brain is making it harder and harder to think.

If you get up at a different time, if the sun rises at a different time, or if you eat a bigger meal, then this can throw that whole routine out of whack and as a result you'll feel out of sorts. This is what causes jet lag and it's why one solution to jet lag involves altering your meal timings.

In short, the more we repeat the same behavior over and over, the harder it is for us to change that behavior.

If the behavior in question involves smoking, then this is bad news. But if the behavior involves going to the gym, then it's *great* news. I have been working out at least four days a week ever since I was 13 years old (I'm 30 this year). That means that I've been doing something consistently for 17 years. As you might expect, I now find it almost impossible to stop. I love working out, it's a part of who I am and it's no effort for me to go to the gym.

In other words, harnessing the power of habit can be a powerful tool in helping you to get whatever you want from life: whether that's a better body or a richer bank account.

The question is how you go about forming those habits...

HOW TO CREATE NEW HABITS

The 30 Day Rule

Often you will read that the best way to create a new habit is to repeat that action for thirty days. If you can do that, then eventually you will have ingrained the behavior deeply enough that you won't be able to stop.

Is this true? Thirty days would theoretically be long enough for you to rehearse an action long enough for it to become ingrained at least somewhat, but that 'magic number' is actually very much arbitrary. There is no reason that doing something for thirty days should be any better than doing something for 29 days or 31 days.

What this idea does have going for it is anecdotal evidence: according to research, this indeed seems to be accurate and if you can stick to a new behavior for that long, you'll at least be on the right track.

This makes it a little easier setting out too. If you know that you have to exercise first thing in the morning for thirty days only, then

that can be easier to stomach than thinking you have to do it permanently.

Micro Habits

Struggling to floss your teeth every day, even just for those 30 days? Then in that case, you might want to try using something called ‘micro habits’. The idea of a micro habit is essentially to hack the 30 day trial by finding a way to stick to your habit for that long much easier and then extrapolating the results.

To explain, a micro habit means breaking down your new intended habit into something that is extremely easy and simple to stick to. So, for example, your goal might now be to floss just *one* tooth and to floss a different tooth each night. This is a two second job so there should be no difficulty in sticking to it.

But as with a ‘full sized’ habit, you should find that this micro habit becomes deeply ingrained after a while and that eventually you find it easy to stick to. Now all you have to do is to extend that habit so that you’re flossing all your teeth!

A more realistic version of this might be if you wanted to write a novel, in which case you could aim to write just *one line* per night. Likewise, if you wanted to get into shape, then you could aim to do just 20 press ups every day.

This works best if what you're doing is still useful in its own right. If you only ever did 20 press ups, then you would still notice some improvement for example. Likewise, one sentence per night would still *eventually* lead to an entire book!

Try to avoid a scenario where you might look at your micro habit and feel that it is 'pointless' so you can just ignore it.

The great thing about micro habits is that right from the start, you are going to find you sometimes end up doing more. For instance, if you have set the goal of doing 20 press ups, you'll often find that you end up doing a whole workout any way – the hardest part is just getting started!

What's most important though is that you have the *option* to default to the micro habit. The important thing is that you are keeping this as a part of your routine – not so much that the habit itself (for now!).

Context

Another tip for creating a new habit is to try attaching it to your old habits and your surroundings.

In other words, if you want to create a habit of flossing your teeth, then a good option is to attach this onto a habit you already stick to: such as brushing your teeth!

Likewise, if you want to get into the habit of ironing your shirts, pick a specific point in the day for it to come *after* – such as making your morning tea.

This works because it connects the new behavior to old ones inside your brain. You have a network of neurons that fires whenever you make your morning tea. Now, when that network of neurons fire, they should also cause the new network – the ironing shirts network – to light up. The two are connected.

This also works on a practical level: you need to find a convenient time for your new habit to take place and you need to find a convenient time and place in which to do it. And you need to know that said time and place is always going to be convenient. You need to *always* be able to workout at this time, in this place.

I wanted to take up meditation a while back for example as a regular part of my routine. I struggled at first because there always seemed to be more important things to be doing and I could never find the right opportunity. So, what I did was to attach my meditation session to my workout session. I already worked out 4-5 times a week, so all I did was to say that straight after a workout, I would meditate for just 5 (yes 5!) minutes. That's a micro habit that would never take up too much time and I'd always be in the right place to practice it (the gym).

Keeping your environment and your surroundings consistent is also important as all the things in your periphery can help to encourage your habit. This is why when trying to *break* a habit, the advice is always to change your surroundings immediately. If you're trying to give up alcohol for instance, or drugs, one of the first things you're told to do is to stop hanging out in the same places and with the same people. These have become associated with the habit – these are now 'triggers'.

But if it's a *good* habit, then triggers are a good thing!

The Power of Routine

One action is a habit but if you string these together, then you have a routine.

I touched recently on the practical aspect of stringing habits together and knowing where you will be and what time it will be when you do that thing. This is incredibly important for accomplishing goals and if you can build a routine for yourself that contains *multiple* good habits, then you'll find that you massively enhance your likelihood of success in all areas.

For example, if you are going to start a new training program then you must know precisely when you will workout and where you will work out. And you should 'hang' this new habit off of your existing routine and actions.

If you simply say you are going to train 'five days a week' then this is not good enough: you'll find yourself putting it off, forgetting or feeling too tired.

Instead then, find a slot in your routine where you can always make space. For me, the best time to train is after I've dropped my wife at the station in the car. I do this every morning and the gym is right next door. All I need to do is walk over in my gym kit and then get started before driving home!

The fact that I'm already travelling means that there is no extra time taken up by the journey. And I don't wash until I get home, so I'm not washing more (which also takes time) either.

Likewise, if you want to stick to a healthy diet, then you need to identify when you are going to make the food and how you are going to eat it. I did this by finding a local salad bar I could go to on my lunch break. I knew it would always be there, it would always be cheap and I could keep it consistent.

Creating a routine is a *powerful* way to accomplish your goals then.

BUT don't forget that the value in life comes from mixing things up and trying new things. Don't let yourself move backwards, or you will start to atrophy and stop growing. Habits help you get to

where you're going, but don't forget to enjoy the view along the way.