



How to Build Habits — A 30-Day Implementation Plan

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Why Resolutions Fall Apart

Stale Popcorn

At a movie theater in suburban Los Angeles, a team of psychologists handed out tubs of popcorn. Half the audience got fresh popcorn, warm, straight from the machine. The other half got popcorn deliberately staled, left out of its packaging for a week, rubbery and odorless. Then the researchers weighed what was left in the tubs.

People who had no habit of eating popcorn at the movies behaved sensibly. They ate plenty of the fresh kind and barely touched the stale kind. But the moviegoers for whom popcorn was a fixed part of going out ate the same amount in both conditions. Taste stopped mattering. Those same people, seated later in a meeting room and asked to rate music videos, reacted to stale popcorn completely normally, which is to say they left it in the tub. One thing had changed: the room. David Neal and Wendy Wood and their colleagues published the results in 2011.

That is the whole point of this book, demonstrated with food. Behavior you repeat for a long time in the same place stops being a decision. It is triggered by the theater, the seat, the



Figure 1.1: The popcorn study shows that a habit is triggered by the surroundings rather than by a conscious decision — the same person behaves differently in a movie theater and in a meeting room.

lights going down. Not appetite, not a judgment about quality, not a resolution. And if that is true, then any plan for change resting on willingness alone is fighting the wrong opponent.

 A Habit Runs Despite Your Judgment, Not Because of It

A strong habit does not need your approval at the moment it fires. That is why a resolution formed in the evening (“starting tomorrow I’m going to run”) loses to behavior that has launched itself at seven in the morning for two years at the sight of the couch. Changing a habit means changing the trigger and the surroundings; willingness comes second.

How Much of Your Day Happens Without You

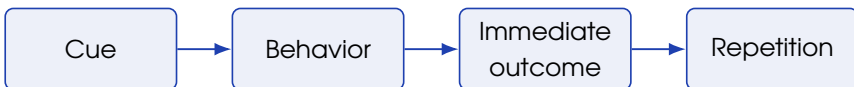
Wendy Wood, Jeffrey Quinn and Deborah Kashy did something simple and uncomfortable in 2002. They asked participants to write down every hour what they were doing, where they were and what they were thinking about. Once the diaries came in, it turned out that roughly 43% of daily actions were behaviors repeated almost every day, in the same context. What is more, while performing them, people were usually thinking about something else.

43%

of daily actions repeated almost every day in the same context

Look at it as arithmetic. If nearly half your day runs along grooves cut earlier, then changing your life through “more discipline” means trying to hand-steer something that by design drives itself. Discipline lasts a week, maybe two. Then comes a bad night’s sleep, a fight at work, a sick child, and attention returns to where it is needed. The grooves stay.

The good news sits on the same side of the equation. If grooves can be cut once, they can be cut again, just somewhere else. The mechanics are the same every time.



A cue is a signal that precedes the behavior and stays stable: a time of day, a place, a preceding action, the presence of a particular person, the sight of an object. The behavior is the action itself. The immediate outcome decides whether the brain treats the behavior as worth repeating, and what counts here is what happens within seconds, not within months. Repetition in the same arrangement does the rest.

Contextual cue

A repeatable element of a situation that precedes a behavior and over time begins to trigger it on its own. The more predictable it is, the faster the habit forms.

Notice what is missing from that list. There is no motivation, no goal, no vision of yourself a year from now. All of that can be useful while you are choosing a direction, but it is not the fuel for daily repetition. The fuel is a predictable situation and an outcome that arrives right away.

A Goal Is Not a Plan

“I want to lose eighteen pounds,” “I want to read more,” “I want to be in shape” are descriptions of a target state. They carry no information about what you are to do tomorrow at 6:40 and what has to be standing ready along the way. A goal with no situation attached stays in your head as guilt. In chapter two you will convert your goal into a single sentence with a place and a time.

Where the Twenty-One Days Came From

The number 21 comes from a 1960 book by the plastic surgeon Maxwell Maltz. Maltz noticed that his patients needed roughly three weeks to get used to a new face after surgery, and he used that observation as a metaphor for changing one's self-image. It was not habit research. It was not even research. The number went out into the world anyway, and it still sells courses today.

The measurement was finally taken by Phillippa Lally and her team at University College London and published in 2010 in “European Journal of Social Psychology.” Ninety-six volunteers each chose one behavior connected with eating, drinking or activity and performed it daily in the same context, for instance after breakfast. For twelve weeks they rated every day how far the action performed “itself.” Individual automaticity curves were built out of those daily ratings.

66

days — the median time to reach the automaticity plateau in the
Lally study

The median landed at 66 days. The spread between participants ran from 18 to 254 days. The curve was asymptotic in shape, meaning the largest gains in automaticity appeared at the start, then the gains shrank until the behavior settled at its own level. One more observation from that study is worth

remembering for the whole coming month: missing a single day did not damage the process.

Table 1.1: Two numbers describing the same phenomenon

Number	Year	Where it comes from
21 days	1960	observation of plastic surgery patients
66 days	2010	median from measuring automaticity in 96 volunteers
18–254 days	2010	the actual spread between participants

The spread matters more here than the median. Eighteen days and two hundred fifty-four are not two measurement errors around a correct value; they are the real difference between a simple and a complex behavior, and between friendly and hostile surroundings. A glass of water after waking up settles quickly. Fifty minutes of strength training after work, with the commute, the changing of clothes and a family waiting at home, settles over months. If your habit belongs to the second category, a thirty-day plan still makes sense, you just need to know what will come out of it.

Five Reasons Your Previous Attempts Died

Before you design a new attempt, it pays to take the previous ones apart. In practice almost every failed start can be assigned to one of five causes, and all five can be removed before day one.

The first is scale. A resolution is usually born at the moment of peak enthusiasm, so it describes the version of a day in which you have energy, time and quiet. That day happens twice a week. Behavior designed for your best day disappears on every average one, and average ones are the majority.

The second is the lack of a fixed anchor point. “I’ll exercise sometime during the day” means the decision to perform the action has to be made over and over, from scratch each time, competing with things that have a set hour. Behavior with no assigned place in the day loses to behavior that has one, even if it is more important.

The third is surroundings set against you. Shoes in a box in the attic, a guitar in its case behind the wardrobe, a phone charging beside the bed. Each of those arrangements adds a few seconds of friction to the behavior you want to introduce, or subtracts them from the behavior you want to reduce. The seconds look trivial, and they decide which way the evening will go.

The fourth is a reward pushed into the future. The effects of running show up after two months, the effects of learning a language after six, while fatigue and boredom arrive imme-

diately. Until you build something pleasant inside the action itself or right after it, every immediate signal works against repetition for the first few weeks.

The fifth is the all-or-nothing rule. Three missed days after two weeks of a good run are no catastrophe in the data, but in your head they can be the end of the project. Someone who quits after the first slip never reaches the part of the curve where behavior starts running itself. In the Lally study, missing one day had no measurable effect on the process. What does affect it is the decision that once the streak has broken there is no point going back.

Remember those five, because over the coming month you will dismantle them one by one. You will cut scale down in chapter two and on day one of the plan. You get your anchor point on day two. You deal with surroundings on days four and five, and again at the end of the month, because they like to drift back to their original state. You set up the reward on day nine. You replace the all-or-nothing rule with a return procedure that you write on day eight and rehearse on day twenty-four.

What Thirty Days Will Actually Give You

Thirty days is not enough for the behavior to run itself. It is enough for three things that no shortcut will buy you.

First, you will install the trigger. After a month of repetitions, a specific situation in your day begins reminding you of the

action with no alarm and no app. That is not automaticity yet; it is a finished groove that automaticity will later run along.

Second, you will collect data about yourself. You will learn what hour you actually have energy, which day of the week is your weakest link, what exactly blows up the plan, and how much time the action really takes rather than how much you imagine it takes. That information is worth more than the streak itself, because it works for every habit after this one.

Third, you will change the evidence. After a month you have real repetitions behind you, not another resolution. That changes how you treat your own declarations, which by the fourth or fifth attempt at change can be the difference between “that’s just how I am” and “I’ve done this once already.”

*Thirty days does not finish building a habit.
It finishes the stage where change requires
remembering it.*

The plan in this book is divided into three ten-day blocks, and each one does something different. Days one through ten launch the behavior in its smallest possible form and settle it at a specific point in the day. Days eleven through twenty collide it with reality, meaning a drop in motivation, a trip, an illness and the competing behaviors that already occupy your evening. Days twenty-one through thirty cut away the supports so the action holds without reminders, and they end with a decision about what comes next.

Every day has one task. Not two, not five. The task takes anywhere from a few to fifteen minutes and does not replace the habit itself; it builds around it. If on some day you do only the habit and skip the task, the plan still works. If you do only the task and skip the habit, it does not work at all.

 Before You Turn the Page

Do not start the plan tomorrow morning just because you finished this chapter tonight. Chapter two contains seven decisions that have to be made before day one, and it takes about an hour of work with a sheet of paper. That hour is cheaper than a third failed start.

This plan works best for someone with one specific behavior to introduce and an ordinary, predictable week: work at roughly fixed hours, a home with some corner of their own in it, and health that permits what they intend to do. For someone working shifts the plan works too, but the anchors then have to be built on a sequence of actions rather than on the clock, which chapter two covers.

It works less well in two situations. The first is a stretch in which your week has no repeatable structure at all: a move, the first weeks with a newborn, caring for a sick relative, a renovation, work in crisis mode. There is no stable context to pin anything to, and an attempt to introduce a habit ends as one more piece of evidence that “this never works for me.”

Put the plan off for a few weeks and come back when the day regains its shape.

The second situation is behaviors with a physiological or medical component: quitting smoking, cutting down on alcohol, changing how you eat with a chronic illness, returning to movement after an injury or surgery. The methods in this book can be a useful addition there, but they do not replace treatment, therapy or a doctor's instructions. If your case belongs to that group, set the boundaries with the person guiding you, and only then apply the days of the plan inside them.

Working with the book looks like this: you read chapter two with a sheet of paper in hand and make seven decisions, then you start day one. Each day you read one entry, perform the habit and perform the task of the day. Do not read the whole thing in advance, because the order of the tasks follows from what you observe the day before.

Before you go further, one caveat about books like this one. No plan knows your schedule, your health or your family situation. Every number in this book comes from research on groups, and you are not a group. Treat the coming days as a procedure to test on yourself, with the results written down, not as a prescription where departing from the letter means failure. The places where the procedure may be tailored I will mark explicitly.

☒ Before You Move On to Chapter Two

- ☐ List every habit you have tried to introduce in the last two years
- ☐ Next to each, note how many days it lasted and what specifically broke the streak
- ☐ Check whether any cause repeats across more than one attempt
- ☐ Note what hour of the day you had the most energy over the past week
- ☐ Hold off on deciding which habit you will introduce — you will choose it in the next chapter

Designing the Habit: Seven Decisions Before You Start

The Hour That Decides the Month

This chapter is meant to be done with a sheet of paper, not read. The seven decisions below take about an hour and close off the list of things that later wreck the plan in week three. Set aside a separate evening for them. You start day one of the plan only once the card at the end of the chapter is filled in completely.

The order matters, because each decision narrows the next. The choice of habit determines what its minimum version is. The minimum version determines what anchor makes sense. The anchor determines what has to change in your surroundings.

Decision One: One Thing

You pick one habit for thirty days. Not three, not “four little ones, since they’re easy.”

The reason is practical, not moral. For the first few weeks every new behavior eats your attention, because you have to remember it, watch the clock and get the equipment ready. There is almost always enough attention for one new thing.

For three there is enough in a week when nothing happens, and such a week comes around once a month.

The rest of your ideas go on a parking list. Write them on the same sheet, in a separate column, and leave them there until day thirty. You will come back to the list with real knowledge of what a project like this costs in your schedule, and pick the next one.

How to choose the one. Take a behavior that meets three conditions at once: it can be done daily or almost daily, it can be shortened to a two-minute version, and you can see a specific moment in your day where it could stand. A once-a-week habit can be valuable too, but over a month you will repeat it four times, so it has no chance of going automatic. Leave it for later, as an item in your calendar rather than a habit project.

 Do Not Start With a Habit That Depends on Someone Else

Running with a neighbor, reading to your child in the evening provided they are back from their grandparents, cooking together with your partner. Behaviors like that have a switch built in outside your control, and its being flipped in week two looks like your failure. For a first project take something you can do alone, in your own home, without negotiation.



Figure 2.1: Choosing one habit at a time is the foundation of an effective plan – the rest of the ideas wait on their own list.

Decision Two: The Version You Cannot Fail to Do

Write down two versions of your habit. The target version, meaning what you want to be doing six months from now, and the minimum version, meaning the smallest form that still counts.

The minimum version is not an encouragement or a soft variant for weak days. It is the unit of repetition that builds the groove over the coming month. It has to meet one condition: you must be able to perform it on the worst realistic day of the month, after a sleepless night, on a business trip, with a head cold. If, looking at your minimum version, you can

picture a day when you would not do it, it is too big. Cut it down again.

Table 2.1: Target version versus minimum version — examples

Target version	Minimum version
Running for 40 minutes	Leaving the house in running shoes and covering one block
Studying Spanish for 30 minutes	Five flashcards, timer stopped after two minutes
Strength training at home, 25 minutes	One set of squats with the mat unrolled
Writing a book, 1000 words	Opening the file and writing one paragraph
Meditating for 20 minutes	Three minutes on a kitchen chair, clock on your phone

Notice that in every row the minimum version includes the moment of crossing the threshold. Shoes on your feet, the file open, the mat unrolled. That threshold is the most expensive part of the whole action, and crossing it repeatedly is what you train for a month. The fact that once you are out in your shoes you will usually run more than one block is a pleasant side effect, not a condition for the day to count.

 The Minimum Version Is a Commitment, Not a Concession

For thirty days, “done” means performing the minimum version. Everything above it is a bonus that you do not record as the norm and do not demand of yourself the next day. A habit is built on the regularity of repetitions, not their volume.

Decision Three: The Anchor

An anchor is an action you already perform daily, after which the new habit enters. Thanks to it you do not have to remember the new behavior, because something that happens anyway will remind you of it.

A good anchor has a fixed time, a fixed place and a clear ending. Making coffee ends the moment you put the pot down. Dropping your child at preschool ends when the door closes. Getting out of the shower ends when you reach for the towel. Poor anchors are actions blurred in time, such as “after work,” “in the evening” or “once I’m done with my chores,” because none of them has an unambiguous end.

Anchor

An existing, repeatable behavior with a clear ending, after which you insert the new habit. The anchoring sentence takes the form: after *[anchor]*, immediately *[minimum version]*.

Test your anchor on hard data, not on your impression of it. Go through the last seven days and count how many times

it actually occurred. If fewer than six, look for another one. Brushing your teeth at night beats “after dinner,” because dinner happens at 6:00 p.m. or at 10:30 p.m., and sometimes it is a sandwich at your desk.

💡 A Spatial Anchor Instead of a Time-Based One

If your schedule is irregular, pin the habit to a place and an object instead of an hour. The coffee machine at the office, the threshold of your front door, the chair by the window. People working shifts usually have a fixed order of actions even though the hours move around. That order is your grid, not the clock.

Decision Four: The If-Then Plan

Now you convert your intention into a single conditional sentence. The formula looks like this: if *situation* occurs, then I will perform *behavior* in *place*. Psychologists call this an implementation intention, and it is one of the better-documented tools in the field.

In 2006 Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran gathered 94 independent tests of such plans and calculated their combined effect on goal attainment. They arrived at a *d* of 0.65, a medium-to-large effect obtained through nothing more than writing down when and where the action is to happen.

The practical scale is well illustrated by an experiment with free flu shots at a large company, described in 2011 by Katherine Milkman and her team. All employees received a mailed

reminder listing dates and locations. Some additionally received a prompt to write down a date, some to write down a date and a time. In the control group 33.1% of people got vaccinated, and among those who wrote down a day and a time the rate was 4.2 percentage points higher.

+4.2

percentage points more vaccinated after writing down a date and
a time

Four percentage points sound modest until you notice what produced them. Nobody persuaded anybody, changed any fees or added any rewards. One thing changed: the intention got a specific time. Your if-then plan does exactly the same, only thirty times in a row.

Write your sentence out by hand and hang it where the anchor occurs. Not in a note on your phone, because you open your phone in a different context and for something else.

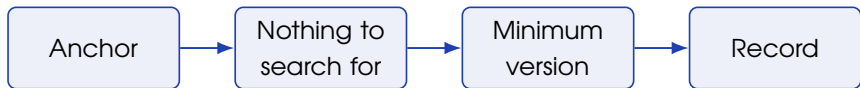
Decision Five: Friction in Both Directions

You set up your surroundings in two directions at once. You subtract steps from the new behavior, and you add steps to the behavior that should recede.

Write out your minimum version as a sequence of physical actions, from the place where you are standing after the anchor to the moment you begin. How many steps are there? Run-

ning in the morning usually means: find socks, find a shirt, check the weather, look for keys, tie your shoes. Five chances to give up. Laying the whole set out by the door the night before cuts that to one.

Now the same thing in the other direction. Behavior that competes with your habit for the same moment of the day should require a few steps more. The remote in a drawer in another room, the phone charging in the kitchen, the app removed from the home screen. The point is not to make something impossible, only to stop it being the default.



🗨 A Typical Course: Evening Reading

Imagine someone who wants to read ten pages a day. The anchor is putting the phone on the charger in the kitchen at 10:00 p.m. The minimum version is one page. Changes in the surroundings: the book lies on the pillow, the bedside lamp has a new bulb, the charger is gone from the bedroom. Through the first week the person reads seven pages on average, though they committed to one. On day twelve they come home from a party at one in the morning, read one sentence, record the repetition and go to sleep. That is correct execution of the plan, not cheating.

When the Habit Is About Stopping

A fair share of readers come to a plan like this with the opposite task. They do not want to start something, they want to stop: scrolling in bed, reaching for sweets at 4:00 p.m., smoking, opening their inbox every ten minutes. The plan works here as well, but it needs one modification at the start.

A behavior cannot be extinguished by simply resolving that it will not happen, because the cue stays in place and still demands an answer. Instead you assign a different behavior to the same situation. Rather than “I don’t eat sweets in the afternoon” you write “if at 4:00 p.m. I reach for something sweet, then I pour myself tea and step outside the building for three minutes.” The habit to be introduced is therefore a substitute action, not a prohibition, and it is the one that goes on the card.

On top of that you add friction where the old behavior begins. The pack of cookies moves from the desk drawer to the top shelf in the kitchen. The phone spends the night outside the bedroom. The inbox gets its notifications turned off and two fixed checking times. Each of those moves looks trivial, and each strips the old behavior of its default status.

The third difference concerns measurement. With a habit you are introducing, you record the repetitions. With a habit you are extinguishing, you record both the repetitions of the substitute action and the situations in which the old behavior won, along with a one-word description of the circumstances.

Those losses are the most valuable part of the record, because they show your real cues, which you usually do not know at the start. After two weeks you will know whether you reach for the phone out of boredom or after every conversation with one particular person.

The last matter concerns the scale of the problem. Addictions to nicotine, alcohol or medication have a physiological component and go beyond habit design. The plan in this book can be a helpful addition there, for instance as a way of handling triggering situations, but it does not replace treatment or contact with a doctor. If what you are cutting down on is a substance, treat the coming thirty days as part of a larger process rather than the whole of it.

Decision Six: How You Record It

The record has to be simple enough to survive a bad day. A sheet on the fridge with thirty boxes is enough. So is an app, provided it does not require logging in and does not offer you eleven other habits along the way.

Record two things: whether the minimum version was performed, and one word about what helped or got in the way. One word, not a sentence. “Rain,” “travel,” “easy,” “fever.” After two weeks a pattern emerges from those words that cannot be seen in the boxes alone, and it is the real material for the reviews on days seven, fourteen and twenty-one.

⚠ A Streak Is a Tool, Not a Result

A counter of consecutive days can help through the first two weeks and hurt in the third, when it starts dictating your choices. If you notice yourself doing the habit at 11:55 p.m. purely so as not to break the number, the counter has taken the controls. Record repetitions by week, five out of seven for instance, instead of one growing number.

Decision Seven: The Criterion for the End of the Month

Before you start, settle what you will count as success on day thirty, because after the fact the verdict always follows your mood.

A sensible criterion has two parts. The first is the number of repetitions: 22 days out of 30 means the habit works and moves into the next month with no changes to its construction. Below 15 means a design error, most often in the anchor or in the scale. The second part is the felt resistance: write down today, on a scale of 1 to 5, how much effort the mere thought of the action costs you, and write down the same thing on day thirty. A drop of two points is a better signal than a perfect streak.

A card filled in completely means that tomorrow morning you do not have to make a single decision. That is the goal of this hour of work. Anything you leave unsettled will come back to

Table 2.2: Habit card — fill it in before day one

Field	Your entry
Habit (target version)	
Minimum version	
Anchor (the action it follows)	
If-then sentence	
One friction removed	
One friction added to the competing behavior	
Where you record it	
Success criterion for day 30	
Resistance today (1–5)	

you at the worst moment, namely on the day when you will feel like quitting anyway.

What a Fully Completed Card Looks Like

Below is a typical example, so the level of detail is visible. Imagine someone working in an office from 8:30 to 5:00, with two school-age children, who wants to return to exercise after a two-year break.

The habit in its target version: twenty minutes of exercise at home, on weekdays. Minimum version: unrolling the mat

and doing one set of ten squats. Anchor: walking the younger child to school and coming back to the apartment, meaning the moment of closing the door behind them at 7:55. If-then sentence: “if on a weekday I close the door behind me after coming back from school, then I unroll the mat in the living room and do one set of squats.”

One friction removed: the mat stops living in the bedroom wardrobe and stands rolled up behind the living room door, within arm’s reach of the entrance. One friction added to the competing behavior: after coming home the phone lands on the kitchen windowsill, screen down, rather than in a pocket. Where it is recorded: a sheet with boxes on the fridge door, a pen taped up beside it. Success criterion for day thirty: twenty-two repetitions and a drop in resistance from four points to two. Resistance today: 4.

Notice a few things in this example. The anchor is a physical event with a clear ending, not a time of day. The minimum version lasts forty seconds, even though the target is twenty minutes. Friction was changed in both directions with one move of each kind, not with a general remodeling of the apartment. The success criterion contains a number of repetitions and a change in resistance, so it can be settled without debate.

Notice too what the card does not contain. There is no plan for weekends, because the person deliberately limited the habit to weekdays, when the anchor occurs. There is no weight goal and no deadline by which they are to look different. There is no list of exercises, because that will be decided after day

thirty, once it is clear that at 7:55 they really are standing on the mat.

Your card should be equally specific and equally short. If once filled in it takes more than half a sheet, you have probably planned a training program rather than a habit.

☒ Readiness for Day One

- ☐ Habit card filled in across all nine fields
- ☐ Minimum version has passed the worst-day-of-the-month test
- ☐ Anchor occurred at least six times in the last seven days
- ☐ If-then sentence written by hand and hung where the anchor happens
- ☐ Equipment prepared physically, with no searching stage
- ☐ The sheet or app for recording is in its place

What the First Ten Days Do

Over the next ten days you are not building fitness, not catching up on anything and not testing how much you can take. You are installing the groove: a specific moment of the day at which the behavior starts, and the shortest possible route from that moment to performing it.

That is why the tasks in this block deal almost entirely with the structure around the habit. The anchor, the conditional sentence, the equipment, friction, the record, the immediate outcome. The habit itself stays in its minimum version through all ten days, even if after three days you decide it is laughably small. That feeling is predictable and shows up in most people between day two and day four, usually together with the idea of doubling the dose starting tomorrow. Write the idea in the margin and come back to it on day sixteen, when you will have data on whether you can afford the raise.

Every day has one task besides the habit itself. The task takes five to fifteen minutes. If on some day you only have time for the habit, do the habit and move the task to the next day, not the other way around. The order of the tasks is not random:

each one builds on an observation from the previous one, so jumping ahead usually ends with you fixing something you have not managed to measure yet.

DAY 1

Do the Minimum Version and Nothing More

Today you do exactly what you wrote on the card as your minimum version. One page, three minutes, one set, five flashcards. When you finish, you stop, even if you have the energy and the appetite for more. Especially then.

The reason looks perverse and is purely practical. Day one sets the reference point in your head for every day that follows. If today you run five miles, then tomorrow two will look like failure, and the day after that a ten-minute outing will seem pointless. If today you run one block, tomorrow you will also run at least one block, and that is the only number you want to hold for thirty days.

There is a second benefit, less obvious. Stopping at the moment when you would want more leaves you unsated. The next day you come back to the action with some appetite left rather than with a memory of exhaustion. People who give everything in the first week come back to the behavior with a memory of sore muscles, boredom, or an evening lost to something that was meant to take fifteen minutes.

Once you are done, write down two numbers. What time you started and how many minutes the preparation took before you got going. Do not estimate from memory, glance at the



Figure 3.1: Stopping at half of what you could do – the key to building a lasting habit without burning out.

clock. Preparation almost always takes longer than people think, and it is preparation rather than the action itself that blows up the plan in a bad week. You will need both numbers on days four and five, when you set about shortening the approach.

One caveat at the start. If your habit involves physical exertion and you are coming off a long break, a chronic illness or a recent injury, set the minimum version after talking to a doctor or a physical therapist. The principle stays the same, only the point you are allowed to start from changes.

DAY 2

Pin the Habit to the Anchor

Yesterday you performed the action. Today you give it a fixed place in the day.

Take the anchor from your card and spend the whole of today observing it like an outside spectator. What time did it actually occur? How long did it last? What happens immediately after it? What interests you is the instant when one action ends and the next has not begun, because that is where the habit enters. That gap is usually short, a dozen seconds or so, and if you miss it the day closes over it like water.

Then perform the habit exactly at that point in the sequence. No putting it off “for half an hour,” because half an hour is already a different situation, with different stimuli and different availability. A thirty-minute shift sounds innocent, and in practice it means the performance depends on a decision again rather than on a situation.

If it turned out today that the anchor is unstable, replace it now, not halfway through the month. An unstable anchor is one that moves by more than an hour or did not occur at all. The remedy is usually to step back one place in your morning or evening sequence, to an earlier and more reliable action. Instead of “after breakfast” you take “after putting the mug in the sink”; instead of “after coming home from work” you take “after taking my shoes off in the hall.” The earlier the element of the day, the fewer things have had time to go differently than you assumed.

Write the new anchor on the card, crossing out the old one so that what you changed stays visible. At the end of the month that history of corrections will tell you more about your daily rhythm than any guidebook.

💡 The One-Sentence Test

Say it out loud: “after [*anchor*], immediately [*minimum version*].” If either part sounds general (“after work,” “I’ll exercise a bit”), the sentence is too weak to launch you tomorrow. Fix it so that both parts could be filmed with a camera.

DAY 3

Write the If-Then Sentence With a Time

Today you add two elements to the anchoring sentence: an approximate time and a place. What emerges is a full implementation intention, the construction that in Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran’s 2006 meta-analysis, covering 94 independent tests, produced an effect of 0.65, considered medium to large.

Your sentence should look roughly like this: “if on Wednesday at 6:45 I put my coffee mug in the sink, then I unroll the mat in the living room and do one set of squats.” Three specific elements: when, where, what. You write the sentence out by hand and hang it where the anchor occurs, not in a note on the phone you reach for in an entirely different context.

The second part of the task is the one almost everybody skips, and it accounts for most broken streaks in the first two weeks. Open your calendar for the coming week and list the days on which your sentence will not work: a trip, a shift, a dentist appointment, a parent-teacher meeting, an early train. For each such day write a separate backup sentence, with a different time or a different place. The hotel version, the office version, the train version.

Streaks are not broken by a lack of character, only by the lack of a variant for a day that does not fit the pattern. Someone with a hotel version prepared will do the habit in the hotel. Someone without one will reproduce their old evening in the hotel.

Close today's task with a check: read all the sentences in a row, backups included, and mark the one that seems least realistic to you. Tomorrow evening, while setting the stage, that is the one you will work on.

DAY 4

Set the Stage in the Evening

Today's task is done not in the morning but in the evening, and it concerns tomorrow.

Physically place everything you need tomorrow for the minimum version where the anchor will occur. Clothes and shoes by the door. The mat unrolled, not rolled up in the corner. The book on the pillow, not on the shelf. The flashcards on the table beside the coffee machine. The bottle filled and put

in the fridge. The app open on the right screen, the phone in airplane mode.

There is one goal: not a single moment of searching may appear in the morning. Every search is a chance to give up, and at six forty your brain will take any chance it is offered. In that state of affairs, “I can’t find the second sock” is reason enough to put running off until tomorrow, and tomorrow until the weekend.

Now count the moves between the end of the anchor and the start of the action. Opening the wardrobe, taking out your clothes, changing, finding your keys, tying your shoes is five moves, four of which can be done in the evening. Three moves in the morning is a good result; seven means you have work to do tomorrow evening.

Setting the stage has one more effect that you will notice only after a few days. The sight of the unrolled mat or the clothes on the chair works like a second cue, independent of the anchor. When you pass that object in the morning, the decision has already been half made yesterday, by you in better shape.

 Preparation Is Not Performance

An unrolled mat and clothes laid out give a pleasant sense that the matter is settled. It is not. In the record you mark the day only when you have performed the minimum version. Setting the stage is the task of day four and does not replace

the habit, just as buying a gym membership does not replace a workout.

DAY 5

Remove One Friction, Add One

Today you work on two lists at once.

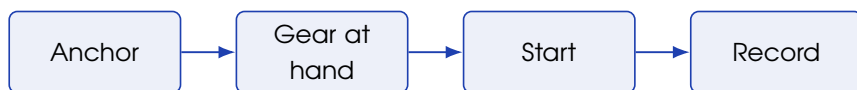
First, write out all the actions between the anchor and the start of the habit, in order, as they looked yesterday and today. Pick one that can be removed permanently, and remove it today. Not tomorrow, not at the weekend. Examples from real life: move the coffee machine closer to the flashcards, leave the charger in the kitchen, buy a second pair of headphones for your bag, save the password in a password manager, assign a permanent shelf for the equipment instead of a box in the attic, bring the bike up from the basement to the hall.

Then the second list: what competes with your habit for exactly the same moment of the day. The television, the phone, email, a second coffee, a conversation with someone at home, a game. Pick one and add three steps to it. The remote into a drawer in another room. The app removed from the home screen and logged out. The bag of chips on the top shelf, in a closed container. The console unplugged.

The size of these changes tends to be disappointing in description and surprising in effect. Thirty seconds of difference in access decides the behavior when you are tired, which

is exactly the moment your plan is being tested. Recall the moviegoers from chapter one: with a strong habit the taste of the popcorn stopped mattering; what counted was the situation and the tub within reach.

Finally, check whether your change hits someone who did not ask for it. Shared apartments have the property that the remote in a drawer is your improvement and someone else's nuisance. Tell the people you live with what the experiment is about and how long it will last.



DAY 6

Move the Habit From Memory Onto Paper

From today you keep a record, if you have not started one already. A sheet with thirty boxes, a wall calendar or a simple app. You record the performance of the minimum version and one word about the circumstances.

Where you keep the record matters. It should be visible from the place where you perform the habit, and it should fill up by hand. A sheet on the fridge door works; a note buried in a folder on your phone does not. The stroke of a pen takes a second and is the only element of your day that says outright: done.

Fill in the previous five days retroactively so you can see the whole picture. If the habit did not happen on some day, leave the box empty and add a word about why. Empty boxes are not an accusation, only data you will need tomorrow at the first review.

The record serves three functions in this plan. It shows the real state instead of your impression, because after a bad week the impression always says “this still isn’t working for me,” even when the boxes read five out of seven. It gives an immediate signal of completion. It supplies material for the reviews that close each ten-day block of this plan.

One note about tools. Habit apps can be convenient and can be a trap, once you start operating the app instead of performing the action. If your tool asks for a mood rating, a category, a tag and a photo, swap it for a sheet of paper. The record has to cost less than the habit.

DAY 7 *The First Weekly Review*

Day seven means twenty minutes at the table with your record sheet and a pen.

Answer four questions and write the answers down instead of turning them over in your head. How many days out of seven do you have done? What time did the habit actually start, day by day? Which words repeat in the circumstances column? What went wrong on the days with an empty box, at the level of situations, not character?

The last question takes discipline. “I was lazy” is not an answer, because nothing can be built on it. “I got home at 9:30, dinner at 10:00, the habit was supposed to be at 9:00” is an answer that yields a specific correction.

Then change exactly one thing. One, not three. There are usually four candidates: the anchor, if it turned out to be unstable; the hour, if the data show that the fixed time falls elsewhere; the place, if someone else in your home occupies it at that hour; the scale, if even the minimum version did not fit into the day.

The one-change-per-week rule follows from the fact that with two changes at once you will not learn which one worked. For the next seven days you do not touch the rest of the construction, even if you have ideas for three improvements. Write the ideas in the margin of the card; you will come back to them on day fourteen.

Five Out of Seven Is a Result, Not a Failure

Regularity measured in weeks defuses the tension of daily streaks. Five repetitions out of seven days sustained for a month gives twenty repetitions in the same context, and that is enough for the cue to start working. A result below three out of seven means the construction needs redesigning, not that you should try harder.

DAY 8

Write the Return Procedure

Today you prepare for the day when the habit will not happen. Such a day will come, usually in the second or third week, and it decides the fate of the whole project more than any of the successful days.

Write the return procedure as a conditional sentence, the same construction you use for the habit itself: “if I miss a day, then the next day I perform the minimum version at *[time]* in *[place]* and record in one word what happened.”

Add one rule to it: never twice in a row. One missed day means nothing in the data, as Phillippa Lally’s study showed, where skipping a single opportunity did not disturb the growth of automaticity. Two days in a row is the beginning of a new pattern, because a break settles in too.

Notice what the procedure does not contain. There is no making up for it. A double dose the next day looks fair, and in practice it turns the habit into a debt that grows after every bad week and eventually becomes a reason to stop. A missed day stays missed, and you go back to the ordinary minimum version.

Hang the return procedure next to the if-then sentence. On a bad day you do not want to be inventing anything, because that is precisely when you have nothing to invent with. You want to read instructions written by yourself in good shape.

DAY 9

Set Up a Reward That Arrives Immediately

The problem with every worthwhile habit is a mismatch in time. You pay the cost today and get the benefit in a few months. Your nervous system works on a shorter scale, so it has to be given something now.

The simplest way is to bundle the habit with something pleasant that you do only while performing it. Katherine Milkman and her team tested this idea in 2014 with 226 people: audiobooks of gripping novels were available only at the gym. Participants in the full version of the experiment went there 51% more often than the control group, though the effect weakened over time, noticeably after the Thanksgiving break.

51%

more gym visits when the audiobook was available only during workouts

That decline after the break is as instructive as the effect itself. Bundling works as long as the arrangement stays intact, and it needs rebuilding after every longer break. Note that down; you will come back to this observation in the final chapter.

Choose one thing you like today and reserve it for your habit. A particular podcast only while running. Your favorite tea only while studying. A playlist only while cleaning. There is one condition: outside the habit that thing has to be unavailable, because its whole value comes from exclusivity.

If bundling does not suit your action, set up a completion signal: the stroke of a pen through a box, ten seconds of standing with your eyes closed, a message to one person. It has to come immediately after the performance, last seconds and always be the same.

DAY 10

Check the Stability of the Context

Day ten closes the first block and checks one thing: whether your habit has one context or five.

Go through the record and add the place and time of performance next to every day. Then count how many different places and how many different time slots appeared. The ideal result at this point in the plan is one place and a slot no wider than an hour. The typical result is two places and a spread of three hours.

The more the context drifts apart, the longer automaticity will take, because the groove is built by the repeatability of the situation, not by the number of repetitions alone. That is why participants in the Lally study were to perform their behavior daily in the same context, for instance always after breakfast.

Today's task: choose one place and one time slot as binding for the next ten days, and write them on the card. If the data from the last week show that your original hour does not work, this is the right moment to move it. For the last time this month.

Finally, look at the whole block from the outside. Ten days ago you had a resolution; now you have a conditional sentence, a prepared stage, one friction removed, a sheet with boxes and a return procedure. The action itself is still small and is meant to stay that way for another week. What moves is not volume, only stability.

☒ Closing the First Ten Days

- ☐ If-then sentence and return procedure hang where the anchor happens
- ☐ Equipment has a permanent place, at most three moves between anchor and start
- ☐ One friction removed, one added to the competing behavior
- ☐ Record kept daily, with one word about the circumstances
- ☐ An immediate reward or a fixed completion signal has been running since day nine
- ☐ Place and time slot fixed for the next ten days

What the Second Ten Days Do

The first ten days took place under artificial conditions. Novelty drives things by itself, the surroundings have just been prepared, and the calendar is sometimes accidentally kind. The second ten days collide the construction with what your ordinary month actually looks like.

That is why the tasks in these ten days aim at the weak points. You will find out what happens when you do not feel like it. You will build a version for a day when everything goes wrong. You will test the habit away from home and without a reminder. For the first time this month you will also raise the bar, but only if the data allow it.

A drop in enthusiasm in this period is the rule, not a warning signal. The behavior has stopped being new and does not yet run itself, so it sits at the least rewarding point on the curve. People who get through this stretch usually do so not thanks to zeal but thanks to having variants prepared for worse days.

DAY 11

A Day Without Motivation

Today, perform the habit regardless of how you feel, and write next to the box a number from 1 to 5 describing your willingness before starting. If you happen to have landed on a day with willingness at five, write it down anyway, because in a few days that scale will start showing something interesting.

The thing is that willingness is a poor predictor of performance if the construction is good, and the only predictor if the construction is weak. People who perform the habit only when they feel like it have, after a month, a streak that resembles the weather. People whose habit starts from the situation record repetitions at ones as well.

In practice this means one thing: today you do not negotiate. The anchor occurred, so you begin. You do not check beforehand whether you feel like it, because checking itself opens a negotiation in which fatigue always has the better arguments.

Once you are done, notice one thing. Willingness measured before the start and willingness measured during are usually two different numbers. Most people note that after two minutes of the action the resistance disappears, though before starting it seemed impassable. That gap is your best argument for the bad days ahead: you do not have to feel willing beforehand, it is enough that you begin.



Figure 4.1: Doing the habit despite the absence of motivation – the moment of starting without negotiating with yourself.

Write today's pair of numbers on the card: willingness before and willingness after two minutes. You will come back to it on day twenty-one.

DAY 12 *Build the Floor Version*

The minimum version is your norm. The floor version is something smaller still, meant for a day when the norm is out of reach: a fever, twelve hours of work, a night with a sick child, a funeral.

Floor version

The smallest possible form of the habit, doable in any conditions, usually in thirty seconds. It maintains contact with

the behavior on a day when full performance is out of the question.

The examples look absurdly small, and that is the intent. Running: put your shoes on and go a hundred yards down the street. Studying: read one flashcard. Training: one set of five squats beside the bed. Writing: open the file and add one sentence. Meditation: thirty breaths counted while seated.

The floor version does one thing that skipping the day does not. It maintains the anchor-plus-behavior sequence, so the groove does not lose continuity and you are not left with the question of whether to come back tomorrow. It does not build fitness or knowledge, and it is not meant to.

Write your floor version on the card today, next to the minimum one, and set a rule for using it: at most two days a week and never two days in a row. Without that rule, after a week the floor becomes the new ceiling.

⚠ The Floor Is Not a Convenient Exit

If in a given week you reach for the floor version four times, the problem is not your discipline but the size of the minimum version or the hour you scheduled it for. Treat it as a signal to redesign at the next review, not as grounds for self-reproach.

DAY 13 *Audit the Competing Cues*

Your habit has competition at that hour, and today you will name it.

Sit down with a sheet of paper and reconstruct the last seven days in the one-hour window around your time. What are you doing then, when you are not doing the habit? What exactly is within reach at that point? Who is in the room? What is on in the background? What interests you are the repeatable elements, because they trigger alternative behaviors just as effectively as your anchor triggers the habit.

Typical findings are boring and stubborn. The phone lying screen up. A show turned on “for a minute” during dinner. A conversation with someone at home that starts exactly when you were about to leave. A work notification at 8:00 p.m. Fatigue after a meal you eat late.

Choose one element and neutralize it today, physically. The phone screen down in another room. Notifications silenced from 7:30 p.m. Dinner moved forty minutes earlier. An agreement with the person you live with that the conversation waits fifteen minutes.

Some competing cues are not objects and cannot be moved to a top shelf. A phone call from one particular person, a message from work, an argument, hunger after a late lunch, boredom at nine in the evening. For situations like that the answer is not removing the stimulus but a prepared response: “if the work phone rings at 8:00 p.m., then I call back after doing

the habit.” The conditional sentence works here exactly as it does for the habit itself, because it replaces a negotiation with a ready decision.

Do not try to disarm them all at once. One competing cue removed produces an effect you will see in the record within a week, while five changes at once turn your evening into a construction site and revert to the original state in a few days.

DAY 14 *The Second Weekly Review*

Day fourteen, two weeks of data, twenty minutes at the table. Count the repetitions in each of the two weeks separately and compare them. Three scenarios are typical. A result held or better means the construction works and you leave it alone. A drop of one or two days is the normal fading of novelty, and the answer to it is the tasks in these ten days, not a change of plan. A drop of three days or more means a specific obstacle, which you will find in the circumstances column.

Now read all the words recorded across fourteen days in one go. Usually one recurring theme emerges, for instance “late,” “tired,” “kids,” “meeting.” That theme is your main opponent this month, and it is what you focus your one permitted change on.

Look as well at the notes in the margin of the card, the ideas written down on day seven. Some of them have lost their point, because they concerned a problem that has gone away.

One, the best of them, you may implement today as precisely that one change.

Finally, write on the card the date of today's review and the numbers: repetitions in week one, repetitions in week two, average willingness before starting. Three numbers, one line. On day thirty you will have the full set and will see a direction rather than a single impression.

DAY 15

Check What You Are Actually Measuring

Day fifteen is the halfway mark and a good moment to separate two things that constantly stick together in your head: the process measure and the outcome measure.

The process measure describes your behavior: repetitions per week, the start time, resistance before beginning. It depends on you almost entirely and reacts immediately. The outcome measure describes the effect: body weight, running pace, number of words known, number of pages written. It depends on many things beyond you and reacts with a delay counted in weeks or months.

For thirty days you judge yourself by process measures alone. Write the outcome ones down today as a reference point, on a sheet of paper, and put them in a drawer without looking until day thirty. The reason is simple: across four weeks the outcome measures change so little and so chaotically that they supply mostly noise, and in this period noise ends more projects than fatigue does.

Table 4.1: Two measures of the same project

Process measure (you look at it now)	Outcome measure (you look at it later)
Repetitions per week, 5 out of 7 for instance	Time over three miles
Start time and its spread	Body weight, waist circumference
Resistance before starting on a 1–5 scale	Number of words in long-term memory
Number of days with the floor version	Number of chapters finished

The scale of that noise is often larger than it seems. Body weight can swing by two pounds within a day purely because of hydration, gut contents and the time you weigh yourself. Running pace depends on sleep, temperature and wind. The number of words remembered drops after a sleepless night, only to return two days later. Someone comparing such numbers daily gets a series of random signals, and random signals are usually interpreted to our own disadvantage.

Process measures do not have that flaw. You did it or you did not. You started at 6:45 or at 7:20. Resistance was three or five. Those numbers speak to what you actually did and react the same day, so they are fit for steering the plan, whereas the scale only becomes fit for that over a quarter.

If your habit concerns health and you have medical instructions, they of course remain in force and take precedence over this rule. The point is only about daily confrontation with a number that will not have had time to change anyway.

DAY 16 *Raise the Bar by One Step*

Today, for the first time this month, you are allowed to increase the habit. Allowed on condition that the data permit it.

The condition reads: at least five repetitions in each of the last two weeks and no more than one day with the floor version in the last week. If either condition is unmet, today's task consists of leaving everything unchanged and reading the task for day twenty-two, because that is the one that applies to your situation.

If the conditions are met, raise the action by one step, where a step means roughly half of the current minimum version. One page becomes two, three minutes become five, one set becomes two, five flashcards become eight. The new size becomes your minimum version from today, and you write it on the card.

Two things stay unchanged. The anchor and the time, because their stability is what you have been building for the past two weeks. The floor version, because it is meant to stay laughably small.

Raising the bar has one rhythm that works for most people: once every two weeks, by half, with the conditions met. At

that pace, six months from now you are at a size you would have called unrealistic at the start, and you get there without a single burst of effort.

 When the Raise Does Not Work Out

If within three days of the increase you rack up two missed days, go back to the previous size without pondering what that says about you. Returning to a size that works is a course correction, not a retreat. Plan your next attempt at raising it after two full weeks of stable performance.

DAY 17

Do the Habit Away From Home

Today you test portability. A habit that exists in one room only disappears on your first trip, and a trip will happen sooner than you think.

Today, perform the minimum version outside your usual place. At the office, in a park, at your parents' house, in a hotel, on the stairwell. If you have no reason to go out today, do it in a different room and at a different anchor from the same sequence.

While performing it, observe what falls apart. What usually falls apart are the elements you do not notice at home because they are always at hand: the mat, a particular mug, access to water, a charger, quiet, your study material. List them and pack them into a travel kit that stands ready from today.

For most habits the travel kit fits in a pocket or a small pouch. A jump rope, headphones, a notebook, a deck of flashcards, resistance bands, a bag of coffee. The point is that a trip should not require a single decision more than an ordinary day.

A separate category is doing the habit around other people. Exercising in a hotel room is easy; exercising at your parents' apartment during Sunday dinner is not, because the awkward feeling that someone is watching and will comment gets added in. The simple answer is to shorten it to the floor version and do it where nobody is: the bathroom, the stairwell, a walk around the block. The point is not to hide, only to keep an audience from deciding whether the habit happens.

Write the travel version of your if-then sentence on the card. The anchor usually has to change, because in a hotel you do not put your mug in your own sink. Proven substitutes are actions you perform everywhere: after leaving the bathroom in the morning, after setting down your suitcase, after leaving the conference room.

DAY 18

Tell One Person

Day eighteen has one task that will take you three minutes and can be unpleasant: tell one person what you are doing this month.

One person, not everyone, and not on social media. A public announcement gives an immediate portion of approval for the

declaration alone, which takes off some of the tension needed to perform. A conversation with one person works differently: someone is left who will ask next week how it is going.

Choose a person who will ask without judging. Usually it is someone who trains, studies or runs a project of their own. Be specific: what you are doing, at what time, how many days you have behind you and when the month ends. Ask for one question on an agreed day, this coming Sunday for instance.

If you have someone around you who also wants to introduce something, agree to exchange one message a day containing nothing but the number of days completed. No comments, no explanations, no photos. That form outlasts joint workouts, because it does not require synchronizing calendars.

Accountability Should Concern the Process

Arrange with the other person that they ask about the number of repetitions, not about the effects. The question “how many days this week?” concerns something you can influence today. The question “so, can you see a difference yet?” concerns something that in week four has no right to be visible yet, and it regularly ends projects.

DAY 19

Distinguish a Planned Break From a Missed Day

Not every day without the habit is a slip, and today you settle which days are not.

A planned break is a day you entered in the calendar earlier, deliberately, for a reason you knew: a recovery day after a hard workout, a family holiday, a day of travel across time zones, a medical procedure. You mark it in the box with a symbol different from a repetition and different from emptiness, a circle for instance.

The difference between a planned break and a missed day lies not in how you feel about it but in when the decision was made. Earlier, calmly, is a plan. In the moment, under the influence of fatigue, is a miss, and then you trigger the return procedure from day eight.

Go through the calendar to day thirty and mark the days that already look like planned breaks. For each of them decide: break or floor version. For most habits the floor version is better, because it maintains the sequence. For physically demanding habits a planned break is sometimes necessary, and then it is part of the training, not a departure from it.

Also settle how many planned breaks fit into a week. For a daily habit a sensible limit is one. Write that number on the card, because in the third block the temptation will appear to stretch it to three.

DAY 20

A Day Without a Reminder

Day twenty checks whether the anchor has taken the job over from the alarm.

Today, turn off every reminder connected with the habit: the alarm on your phone, the app notification, the sheet on the fridge if you use it as a prompt. Leave nothing but the natural course of the day and see whether the situation launches you by itself.

You read the result as follows. The habit performed without a reminder, at the usual time, means the contextual cue works and you can leave reminders off for good. The habit performed but several hours later means the groove is under construction: the reminders stay and you will repeat the test on day twenty-eight. The habit not performed means that for the past weeks it was the alarm working rather than the situation, and that is valuable information, not a failure. Tomorrow you go back to reminders and take a look at the anchor: it is probably too blurred or too far from the moment of performance.

Write the result on the card in one word: alone, later, none.

This test matters because reminders have a certain flaw. They work as long as they are there, and they keep the behavior under external control. A habit in the full sense of the word starts from a situation, so day twenty is the first moment worth checking where you really are along that road.

☒ Closing the Second Ten Days

- ☐ Floor version written on the card together with the rule for using it
- ☐ One competing cue neutralized physically
- ☐ Outcome measures written down and put away until day thirty
- ☐ Bar raised or deliberately left unchanged, per the condition from day sixteen
- ☐ Travel kit assembled, travel version of the if-then sentence written down
- ☐ One person knows what the project is and has an agreed day to ask
- ☐ Result of the no-reminder test written down in one word

What the Third Ten Days Do

In this block you unscrew the supports. For three weeks the behavior held thanks to a construction you built deliberately: reminders, a prepared stage, the record, an agreement with another person. Now you check how much of that can come off with the action still standing.

The second thing happening in these days is preparing for the moment when the book ends. On day thirty you do not want to be left with the question “and now what?” but with a single sheet on which you have written exactly what you are doing for the next two months.

Moods in this block can mislead in both directions. Some people have the sense that the matter is settled and start easing off two weeks early. Some have the sense that nothing has changed, because the action still takes effort. Both verdicts come from comparing feelings instead of numbers, and the numbers are there in the boxes.

DAY 21

The Third Review and the Shape of the Curve

Three weeks of data, twenty minutes, a sheet of paper and a pen.

Count the repetitions in each of the three weeks and write them side by side. Then compare two resistance-before-starting numbers: the one from day eleven and today's. Most people note a drop of one to two points here, with a stable or slightly rising number of repetitions.

That drop is exactly what Phillippa Lally measured in her study: not the number of repetitions, but how far the behavior begins performing itself. The automaticity curve is asymptotic in shape, so the largest gains appear at the start and the pace slows afterward. In other words, a fair part of the road you feel today is already behind you, and what remains will progress more slowly and less spectacularly.

18–254

days — the spread in time to reach the plateau among participants
in the Lally study

That spread is the reason you compare yourself to nobody today. The person next to you may have been introducing a glass of water after waking up; you are introducing forty minutes of exercise after work. Those two projects differ in arrival time by months, and no number on the internet will settle it for you.

Write three numbers on one line of the card today: repetitions in week three, resistance today, number of days with the floor version. On day thirty you will add the last line and see the whole picture.

DAY 22

Find Your Main Saboteur

After three weeks you already know what specifically ruins your streak, you just have usually not named it yet.

Go through all the empty boxes and the words written beside them. Group them and count. Almost always one reason accounts for half or more of all the missed days. The most common ones are: getting home after eight, evening meetings, on-call shifts, children's illnesses, weekends at relatives', business trips, evenings after training in another sport.

Now write one conditional sentence that concerns that single reason only, for instance: "if I get home after 8:30, then I do the floor version immediately after taking my shoes off, before dinner." That sentence has to be different from your main if-then sentence, because it concerns a different situation, and it has to hang in a different place, where that situation begins.

If on day sixteen you did not meet the condition for raising the bar, today's task matters more to you than anything else in this block. A low number of repetitions almost never comes from a lack of motivation spread evenly across all the days. It

usually comes from one repeatable situation that beats your plan three times a week, and that you have just located.

💡 One Situation, One Sentence, One Place

Conditional sentences work as long as there are few of them and each has its own clear cue. Three sentences are the full set: the main one, the backup after a missed day, and today's, concerning your most frequent obstacle. A fourth usually means one of the previous ones is badly written.

DAY 23

Move From the Calendar to the Context

A behavior can be triggered by two different things: by an hour in the calendar or by a situation. Today you check which of them really launches you, and you shift the weight toward the situation.

The test is simple. Recall your last seven repetitions and for each one answer: what came immediately before? If in most cases the answer is your anchor, you are where you should be. If the answer is "I looked at the clock" or "I saw a notification," the behavior is still running on external control.

The advantage of a situation over an hour shows up on atypical days. The clock on Saturday shows the same thing as on Tuesday, but your day looks different, so the hour loses meaning. The anchor moves with you, because coffee, a shower or

walking a child to school happen regardless of the day of the week.

Today's task: choose a weekend day and write a separate anchor for it, if your usual one does not occur. This is the most common hole in the whole plan, and it shows up in the data as regularly empty Saturdays or Sundays.

Check as well what happens when the anchor drops out of the day. The coffee machine is being repaired, the child is staying at grandma's, the office switches to remote work. Write down one backup anchor today, chosen from actions you perform regardless of circumstances: leaving the bathroom in the morning, setting down your keys after coming home, shutting the computer off after work. The backup anchor does not have to be as good as the main one; it only has to last a week without the sequence falling apart.

If your action depends on an hour by its nature, for instance you train at a club with fixed class times, do not fight it. Build the anchor around the preparation: packing the bag after breakfast, leaving the house after putting the phone on the charger. Then the situation launches a sequence that ends in the studio.

DAY 24

Rehearse the Return After a Slip

By today you have probably had at least one missed day. Today's task consists of looking at how your return worked then and refining the procedure before it is needed in earnest.

Take the calendar and find the first day with an empty box. Check what happened the next day. A repetition at the usual time means the procedure worked and you leave it alone. A delayed repetition or a second empty box means the procedure exists on paper but not in your day.

The most common defect is always the same: the return procedure has no cue of its own. “The next day I’ll go back to the habit” sounds like a plan and contains no moment at which something is to happen. Fix it so it begins with a situation: “if in the morning I see yesterday’s empty box, then I do the floor version within the next fifteen minutes.”

Notice that in the corrected version you return to the floor level, not to the full minimum version. The return after a slip should be the easiest thing all month, because its only job is to break the new sequence before it settles. You recover the full version a day later.

If you happen not to have had a single missed day, read the procedure out loud and picture a specific scenario in which you will use it: getting home at 11:00 p.m., a fever, a car breakdown. The point is that on such a day the procedure should be something you already know, not something you are reading for the first time.

▲ Making Up for It Turns the Habit Into Debt

A double dose after a missed day has fairness in it and nothing else. It raises the cost of returning exactly when you are weakest, and it teaches you that a break means punishment. After two such cycles people usually drop the whole project. A missed day is gone for good, and that is the cheapest solution available to you.

DAY 25

Trim the Ritual

Around every habit, after three weeks, a casing accumulates: a particular playlist, a particular mug, particular clothes, a set order of actions before the start. Part of that casing helps; part is ornament that makes the whole thing fragile.

Write out today everything you do around the habit, and for each element answer one question: will I perform the action if this is missing? The headphones are dead, the mug is in the dishwasher, the favorite shorts are in the wash, someone is asleep in the room. Elements without which the habit will not start are points of failure, and today you remove them or duplicate them.

Keep only the elements that trigger the habit itself: the anchor, the prepared equipment, the place and the record. The rest is pleasant, but it has to be replaceable.

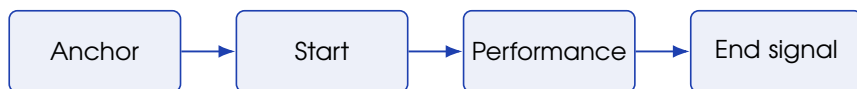
Duplicating is usually cheaper than giving up. A second pair of headphones for fifteen dollars kept in your bag, a spare



Figure 5.1: A minimal setting for exercise — a mat, a water bottle and nothing superfluous — stands for the trimmed-down ritual of a habit.

deck of flashcards in the desk drawer, a second set of workout clothes, a charging cable left at work. Each of those things removes one reason why a repetition might not happen, and it does so once and for all, with no participation from your willpower on a bad day.

While you are at it, check the preparation time. Measure today how many minutes pass between the anchor and the start. Compare it with the number you wrote down on day one. For most people that time halves over the month, and it is one of the better indicators that the construction is settling in.



DAY 26

Name the Category, Not an Affirmation

Day twenty-six concerns the way you describe yourself in connection with this action, because that description influences what you do in an unclear situation.

This is something narrower than affirmations. The sentence “I am a healthy and energetic person” contains no information about behavior. The sentence “I am someone who exercises on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings” contains a behavior, a frequency and a time, so in a contested situation it suggests a specific answer.

Write one such sentence about yourself today and base it only on what you have in the boxes. Three weeks of data is enough to write it honestly, without wishing reality into shape. If your record shows four repetitions a week, the sentence reads “four times a week,” not “every day.”

A sentence based on data has one more virtue. It does not fall apart after a single missed day, because it concerns a pattern rather than a run without exceptions. Someone who thinks of themselves as “exercising four times a week” is still themselves after a missed Tuesday and has five days left to meet the norm.

Hang that sentence where you keep the card. You will come back to it on day thirty and check whether the data still support it.

DAY 27

Prepare the Next Habit, but Do Not Start It

Your current habit will shortly become the anchor for the next one. Today you will design that, with one clear caveat: you do not start the new behavior before the end of this month, and preferably not before the end of the second.

Go back to the parking list of ideas from chapter two. Read it now, with three weeks of practice behind you, and cross out the items you no longer need. Usually fewer than half remain, which is itself valuable information about what our declarations look like.

From what is left, pick one behavior and write down three things for it: the minimum version, the anchor, which will be your current habit, and the if-then sentence. The card for the next habit should be ready and set aside.

The reason you are not launching it today is the same reason you started with one thing. Your current habit is halfway to automaticity and still needs attention for the next few weeks. Adding a second project now is the most common way to lose both.

 A Chain Is Built Link by Link

A habit that runs effortlessly is the best anchor you can have, because it has a fixed time, a fixed place and a clear ending. Sequences of three and four actions come about exactly this way: by gluing the next element onto something that already stands on its own, at intervals counted in months rather than days.

DAY 28

Audit Your Surroundings

Surroundings drift back to their original state if nobody watches them. After three weeks the charger is sometimes back in the bedroom, the remote has returned to the couch, and the mat is rolled up in the corner again.

Today, physically walk the same route you walked on days four and five. Stand where the anchor happens and count the moves to the start. Check whether the equipment lies where you put it, whether the record sheet still hangs in a visible place, and whether the competing behavior has won back its three steps.

Restore one thing that has shifted. One, not all of them, because the audit of your surroundings is meant to be a five-minute action, repeatable once a month, not a housecleaning. If on day twenty the no-reminder test came out as “later” or “none” for you, repeat it today. Eight days of difference with

a stable anchor is usually enough for the result to change. Write it on the card next to the previous one.

While you are at it, check one thing in the record: whether you are still adding one word about the circumstances, or whether only the boxes are left. The fading of that column is usually the first signal that the record has become a ritual and stopped being a measurement.

DAY 29

Write Your Own Operating Manual

Day twenty-nine is one sheet of paper that you write for yourself for the months ahead. It contains everything you have established this month, in a form you will understand six months from now.

Write on it: the minimum and floor versions, the main and weekend anchors, the three conditional sentences, the list of what has to lie ready, your main saboteur together with the answer to it, how you record things, the rule for raising the bar, and the sentence about yourself from day twenty-six.

Stick to one page. A three-page manual will not be read on the day it is needed, meaning after coming back from a two-week trip or after an illness.

Write it in the imperative, the way instructions for someone else are written. Instead of “I try to exercise in the morning” write “after closing the door, unroll the mat and do one set.” Instead of “after a break I usually come back more slowly” write “after a break longer than five days: three days of the

floor version, then one step down.” Imperative sentences are read on a bad day without interpretation, and that is exactly the point.

That sheet has one more use, less obvious. With your next habit you do not start from zero but from somebody’s proven settings, that somebody being you. You already know what hour you have energy, what step size works in your schedule, which day of the week is your weakest link and how long preparation really takes.

The most valuable product of thirty days is not the streak in the boxes, but one sheet of settings that work for you.

DAY 30

Review, Decision and a Plan for the Next Two Months

The final day. Take everything out: the habit card, the sheet with boxes, the numbers written down at the three reviews and the envelope with outcome measures that you put away on day fifteen.

Count four numbers: the total number of repetitions out of thirty days, the number of repetitions in each week separately, resistance today compared with resistance on day one, and the number of days with the floor version. Only now look into the outcome measures and compare them with the reference point, remembering that on this time scale a large part of them has not had time to move yet.

Table 5.1: What to do with the result on day thirty

Result after 30 days	Decision for the next two months
22 repetitions or more, resistance lower by at least one point	You keep the construction unchanged and raise the bar every two weeks by the rule from day sixteen
15–21 repetitions, resistance similar	You leave the size unchanged for another month and work only on the main saboteur
Fewer than 15 repetitions	You redesign: smaller minimum version, different anchor, different time, same habit
A good result, but the habit has stopped making sense to you	You close the project deliberately and write down why, before choosing the next one

The last row of that table is often the hardest and is entirely legitimate. A month of regular practice is also a way of finding out that a given action is not something you need. A deliberate closing differs from abandonment in that it leaves a written conclusion behind.

Whatever you choose, write the decision in one sentence on your operating manual, with today's date, and set a date for

the next review: thirty days from now. Automaticity matures over more than a month, and what you do on days 31–90 decides whether the behavior stays with you for good.

☒ Closing the Thirty Days

- ☐ Four numbers from thirty days counted and written on one line
- ☐ Three conditional sentences checked, corrected and hanging in their places
- ☐ Operating manual fitted onto one page
- ☐ Card for the next habit prepared and set aside until the current one settles
- ☐ Decision for the next two months written down with a date
- ☐ Date of the next review entered in the calendar

Where You Really Are After a Month

Thirty days ago you had a resolution. Today you have a behavior performed in a fixed place and at a fixed time, data about your own rhythm and a sheet of settings. What you do not have is finished automaticity.

Recall the numbers from chapter one. The median time to reach the plateau in the Lally study came out at 66 days, with a spread from 18 to 254 days. If your habit is simple and short, you may have arrived as early as week three. If it needs equipment, a commute or forty minutes, you are roughly halfway, and the second half looks different from the first: less happens, the gains are smaller and there is no novelty effect left of the kind that carried you through the first week.

That is good news, though it sounds like the opposite. The hardest stretch, the one where everything has to be remembered and everything has to be set up from scratch, is behind you. The next two months consist mainly of not breaking what already stands.

What Disarms a Habit After Day Thirty

Habits rarely die from a lack of willingness. They die when the arrangement that triggered them changes and nobody notices in time.

The first case is a longer break: illness, vacation, a two-week posting, a renovation. You come back from it not to the habit but to the empty space where it was, because in the meantime the triggering situation stopped occurring and something else took its place. Recall the experiment with audiobooks at the gym mentioned on day nine: the effect held up well as long as the arrangement stayed intact, and it weakened after the holiday break.

The second case is a change of context: a move, a new job, a new schedule, a child, a separation. The kitchen where the coffee machine stood is gone, the route to the office is gone, the hours are gone. Behavior resting on an anchor that no longer exists stops starting within a few days, even if it had half a year of regularity behind it.

The third case is the most insidious, because it looks like success. The outcome goal has been reached: you dropped the pounds you planned, passed the exam, ran the race, finished the course. The behavior then loses the justification you assigned to it and quietly drops out of the day. A month later a new round of resolutions begins.



Figure 6.1: A habit can disappear gradually and imperceptibly – like an object that stops being kept in its place.

⚠ The Drift Back Is Quiet

A habit rarely disappears in a single moment. First it shifts by an hour, then it happens more often in the floor version, then it vanishes on weekends, and after a month it turns out the last repetition was two weeks ago. The monthly review of the card exists so you can see that process while it can still be reversed with one correction.

The Return Protocol After a Longer Break

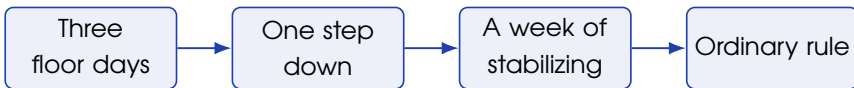
For a break longer than five days you have a separate procedure, and it differs from the one you wrote on day eight.

Start with the floor version, not with the size you left off at. Three days in a row, at the original time and in the original

place. This is only about restarting the sequence, because it is the sequence that fell apart, not your fitness or your knowledge.

Then go back to the minimum version from the stage before last, meaning one step below what you were doing before the break. You stay at that size for a week and only then apply the ordinary rule for raising the bar.

In parallel, run the audit of your surroundings from day twenty-eight, because over two weeks of absence the equipment has usually returned to its old place and the competing behaviors have won back ground.



If the break was caused by illness or injury, you settle the return to any exertion according to your doctor's instructions, and you apply the protocol above only within what you have been cleared for. The order here is unambiguous: health first, sequence second.

Windows Where Change Comes Easier

There are moments in the year when people more readily start something new, and it is not purely a matter of mood. In 2014 Hengchen Dai, Katherine Milkman and Jason Riis described a phenomenon called the fresh start effect: searches for the

word “diet,” gym visits and commitments to pursue goals all rise just after landmark points in the calendar, such as the start of a week, the start of a month, the start of a year, a birthday or the start of a semester. In our perception such points separate the previous period from the new one, along with its failed attempts.

The practical conclusion concerns planning your starts, not excusing failures. Start the next habit from your parking list on the Monday that opens a month, rather than on a random Thursday. It costs nothing and raises the odds that you start at all.

The second window works in the opposite direction and concerns changes that arrive unasked. In 2008 Bas Verplanken’s team described the habit discontinuity hypothesis: when the context changes, old behaviors lose their cues and decisions briefly return to conscious mode. In their study the link between environmental concern and how people commuted to the university was clearly visible among those who had recently moved house, and not among the rest.

A move, a change of job, a return from parental leave or a change of schedule is therefore at once a threat to the habits you have and the best moment for the ones you want. You handle both sides of the same coin with one move: in the first week after the change you sit down with the card and choose new anchors within the new shape of the day, instead of waiting for everything to sort itself out.

 The First Week in a New Place

After a move or a change of job, perform the habit in the floor version for the first seven days and treat that week as a search for an anchor. Observe which actions in the new arrangement repeat daily at a similar time. On day eight pick one of them and enter it on the card as the new anchor.

Habits Less Frequent Than Daily

The thirty-day plan assumes daily repetition, because that is how the groove forms fastest. Plenty of worthwhile behaviors, however, only make sense two or three times a week: strength training with recovery days, longer runs, weekly planning, a phone call with your parents, a review of your finances.

The construction stays the same; one thing changes: the anchor stops being a daily action and becomes a pair, a day plus an action. “On Tuesday and Thursday, after putting the keys in the hall drawer” works, because both parts are verifiable. “Twice a week” on its own does not work, because it contains no moment at which something is to begin, and it regularly lands on Sunday evening as a pang of conscience.

The second difference concerns pace. With two repetitions a week over thirty days you will gather eight or nine repetitions, roughly what someone exercising daily has after a week and a half. Automaticity will therefore take correspondingly longer, and there is nothing worrying in that. Instead of thirty days, count twelve weeks for yourself and run reviews every four.

The third difference is in the record. With a habit less frequent than daily, daily boxes leave many empty fields that distort the picture. Record repetitions by week instead: two out of two, one out of two. That form shows the real result rather than the rhythm of the calendar.

When the Habit Cannot Be Seen in the Boxes

Some behaviors have no clear beginning or end, so they cannot be recorded as done or not done. Patience with a child, listening attentively in meetings, less scrolling, a calmer tone in conversations. People try to introduce these exactly as they would running, and it usually ends in guilt with no data.

The solution is to find an observable behavior that represents what you are after, and introduce that one instead. Rather than “I’ll be more patient” you introduce “after coming home I take my shoes off, put the phone on the windowsill and ask my child about one thing from their day.” Rather than “less phone” you introduce “after dinner the phone lies on the charger in the kitchen until morning.” Both versions can be marked in a box, both have an anchor, and both measurably affect what you wanted to change.

That substitution has one more virtue. It moves the project out of the territory of character traits, where change looks like a matter of being a better person, and into the territory of behaviors, where every tool in this book works. Traits are hard to practice directly; situations and behaviors can be designed.

When to Add a Second Habit

You prepared the card for the next habit on day twenty-seven. The question is when to launch it.

A sensible condition has two parts, both verifiable in the record. The current habit holds at least five repetitions a week for four consecutive weeks. Resistance before starting, measured on a scale of 1 to 5, has dropped to two or below and has stayed there for two weeks. On top of that comes a practical condition: your calendar for the coming month contains no move, no change of job and no two-week trip.

With the conditions met, the new habit starts in its minimum version, pinned to the current one as its anchor, and for the first ten days you treat it exactly as in the first ten days of this book. The whole procedure repeats, only faster, because you already know your settings from the operating manual.

If the conditions are not met, wait. A month of delay costs little, while adding a second project to an unstable first one usually costs you both.

What You Take From This Month

It is worth gathering at the end what has been tested in practice over thirty days rather than merely read.

Behavior is triggered by a situation, not by a resolution. Chapter one opened with moviegoers eating stale popcorn in the theater and leaving that same popcorn in the meeting room.

All the rest of the plan followed from that one observation: you change the surroundings and the cues, and willingness comes later or not at all, and it is not what decides.

Step size is set for the worst day, not the best. The minimum version from chapter two and the floor version from day twelve exist so that a bad week costs you one repetition rather than the whole project.

A plan written as a conditional sentence works better than a plan kept in your head. The sentences from days three, eight and twenty-two cover three situations: an ordinary day, the day after a slip, and your most frequent obstacle.

One change a week, based on the record, gets you further than five changes at once based on an impression. The three reviews you ran on days seven, fourteen and twenty-one are the same tool you will use once a month for the coming year.

And the last thing, the easiest to overlook. A missed day is an event of no consequence until it turns into a rule. The Lally study showed that skipping a single opportunity did not disturb the growth of automaticity. What does disturb it is the decision that once the streak has broken there is no point going back.

A habit is not a reward for willpower. It is the result of repetitions in the same place and at the same time, repeated longer than it would be comfortable to admit.

What You Do Tomorrow

To finish, something concrete, so this book does not end where most guidebooks end.

Tomorrow morning, perform your habit at the usual time and mark a box on a new sheet, the one for the next thirty days. In the evening, enter one date in your calendar: a review thirty days from now, with the list of four numbers to count. Nothing beyond that.

A month from now, at that review, you will have sixty days of data and will then decide two things: whether to raise the bar, and whether to launch the card for the second habit that waits set aside. The third review will fall somewhere around day ninety, the point at which most behaviors in the Lally study had already reached their plateau.

That is the entire system once this book is over: one repetition a day, one box, one review a month, one sheet of settings. None of it is spectacular, and that is its greatest virtue, because unspectacular things can be repeated for years.

The Only Thing You Have to Remember From This Book

A habit arises from repetitions in a stable context, not from resolutions. Your task for the coming months is to protect three things: the anchor, a step size matched to your worst day, and a way of returning after a break. Everything else, motivation included, is an extra that comes and goes.

☒ The First Week After Day Thirty

- ☐ A new sheet with boxes hangs where the old one was
- ☐ The date of the review thirty days from now is in the calendar
- ☐ The one-page operating manual lies where you will find it after a break
- ☐ The return protocol after a longer break is added to the manual
- ☐ The card for the second habit is set aside until the condition from this chapter is met
- ☐ The nearest landmark point in the calendar is chosen as the start date for the next habit