

# Willpower:

A Brief Guide on How to  
Master Self-Control



James Clear

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# How to Be Motivated Every Day: Lessons Learned from Twyla Tharp

Twyla Tharp was born in Indiana and was named after the local “Pig Princess” at the Annual Muncie Fair, who went by Twila.

It wasn't the prettiest of starts, but Tharp turned it into something beautiful.

She is widely regarded as one of the greatest dancers and choreographers of the modern era. She has toured across the globe performing her original work. She is credited with choreographing the first crossover ballet and she has choreographed dances for the Paris Opera Ballet, The Royal Ballet, New York City Ballet, Boston Ballet, and many others. Her work has appeared on Broadway, on television, and in films. In 1992, she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, often called the “Genius Grant”, for her creative work.

To put it simply: Twyla Tharp is prolific. The question is, how does she do it?

## The Power of Ritual

In her best-selling book, [The Creative Habit](#), Tharp discusses one of the secrets of her success:

*I begin each day of my life with a ritual; I wake up at 5:30 A.M., put on my workout clothes, my leg warmers, my sweatshirts, and my hat. I walk outside my Manhattan home, hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to the Pumping Iron gym at 91st street and First Avenue, where I workout for two hours. The ritual is not the stretching and*

*weight training I put my body through each morning at the gym; the ritual is the cab. The moment I tell the driver where to go I have completed the ritual.*

*It's a simple act, but doing it the same way each morning habitualizes it — makes it repeatable, easy to do. It reduces the chance that I would skip it or do it differently. It is one more item in my arsenal of routines, and one less thing to think about.*

Let's talk about what makes Tharp's morning ritual so important and how we can use it to master our own habits.

## The Surprising Thing About Motivation

If you have trouble sticking to good habits or fall victim to bad ones, then it can be easy to assume that you simply need to learn how to get motivated or that you don't understand how willpower works.

But here is the surprising thing about motivation: it often comes *after* starting a new behavior, not before. Getting started is a form of active inspiration that naturally produces momentum.

You have probably experienced this phenomenon before. For example, going for a run may seem overwhelming or exhausting just to think about before you begin, but if you can muster up the energy to start jogging, you'll often find that you become more motivated to finish as you go. In other words, it's easier to finish the run than it was to start it in the first place.

This is basically Newton's First Law applied to habit formation: objects in motion tend to stay in motion. And that means getting started is the hardest part.

I often find this to be true with my articles. Once I begin writing, it's much easier for me to power through and finish. However, if I'm staring at a blank page, it can seem overwhelming and taxing to take the first step.

And this, my friends, is where Twyla Tharp's morning ritual comes back into the picture.

## Rituals Are an On Ramp for Your Behavior

The power of a ritual, or what I like to call a pre-game routine, is that it provides a mindless way to initiate your behavior. It makes starting your habits easier and that means following through on a consistent basis is easier.

Habits researchers agree. Benjamin Gardner, a researcher in the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London recently published a paper in the *Health Psychology Review* that covered how we can use habits to initiate longer, more complex routines:

*A 'habitual' bicycle commuter, for example, may automatically opt to use a bicycle rather than alternative transport (so automatically enacting the first behaviour in a superordinate 'bicycle commuting' sequence, such as putting on a cycle helmet), but negotiating the journey may require higher-level cognitive input.*

In other words, getting started with a simple ritual like putting on a helmet or checking the air in the bike tires makes it easier to follow through on the bigger behavior (making the commute). If you focus on the ritual, the next step follows more automatically.

Twyla Tharp's morning routine is a perfect example of this idea in practice. Naturally, there are going to be days when she doesn't feel like getting out of bed and exercising. There are bound to be times when the thought of starting the day with a two-hour workout seems exhausting.

But her ritual of waking up and calling the taxi takes the emotion, motivation, and decision-making out of the process. Her brain doesn't need to waste any energy deciding what to do next. She doesn't have a debate with herself about what the first step should be. She simply follows the same pattern that she always does. And once the pattern is in motion, the rest of the sequence follows more easily.

The key to any good ritual is that it removes the need to make a decision: What should I do first? When should I do this? How should I do this? Most people never get moving because they can't decide how to get started. Having a ritual takes that burden off your shoulders.

## The Idea in Practice

Here are some other examples of how you can apply ritual and routine to your habits and behaviors:

- **Exercise more consistently:** Use the same warm up routine in the gym
- **Become more creative:** Follow a creative ritual before you start writing or painting or singing
- **Start each day stress free:** Create a five-minute morning meditation ritual
- **Sleep better:** Follow a "power down" routine before bed

Whatever it is, make it your own. Use your ritual as an on-ramp for the bigger behavior and habits you want to build into your life. When you master the ability to mindlessly initiate the tasks that are important to you, it's not necessary to rely on motivation and willpower to make them happen.

Where can you use a ritual or routine in your life? What behaviors do you want to do more consistently and automatically?

# How to Achieve Your Goals (This Simple Trick Makes Progress Easy)

In the last 6 months, I've experimented with a simple strategy that has improved my work and my health.

Using this one basic idea, I have made consistent progress on my goals every single week without incredible doses of willpower or remarkable motivation.

Today, I want to share how I use this strategy and how you can apply it to your own life to improve your health and your work.

## The Problem with How We Usually Set Goals

If you're anything like the typical human, then you have dreams and goals in your life. In fact, there are probably many things — large and small — that you would like to accomplish.

That's great, but there is one common mistake we often make when it comes to setting goals. (I know I've committed this error many times myself.)

The problem is this: we set a deadline, but not a schedule.

We focus on the end goal that we want to achieve and the deadline we want to do it by. We say things like, "I want to lose 20 pounds by the summer" or "I want to add 50 pounds to my bench press in the next 12 weeks."



The problem with this is that if we don't magically hit the arbitrary timeline that we set in the beginning, then we feel like a failure ... even if we are better off than we were at the start. The end result, sadly, is that we often give up if we don't reach our goal by the initial deadline.

I've mentioned this idea multiple times before. For example, in making the mistake of putting performance goals before your identity or in choosing life-changing transformations over daily lifestyle choices.

Here's the good news: there's a better way and it's simple.

## The Power of Setting a Schedule, Not a Deadline

In my experience, a better way to approach your goals is to set a schedule to operate by rather than a deadline to perform by.

Instead of giving yourself a deadline to accomplish a particular goal by (and then feeling like a failure if you don't achieve it), you should choose a goal that is important to you and then set a schedule to work towards it consistently.

That might not sound like a big shift, but it is.

## How to Achieve Your Goals: The Idea in Practice

Most of the time, I try to be a practitioner of my ideas and not just someone who shares their opinion, so allow me to explain this strategy by using two real examples from my own life.

### **Example 1: Writing**

As you know, I publish a new article every Monday and Thursday. Since my first article on November 12, 2012, I've never missed a scheduled date. Sometimes the article is shorter than expected, sometimes it's not as compelling as I had hoped, and sometimes it's not as useful as it could be ... but it gets out to the world and into your inbox.

The results of this simple schedule have been amazing. Our little community has grown, seemingly without effort. We now have over 1,100 people (welcome friends!) who are committed to living a healthy life and who are actively supporting one another. Onwards to 5,000 strong!

Related: If you're a new reader, you can find out what it's all about and join us for free here.

Imagine if I had set a deadline for myself instead, like "get 1,000 subscribers in 12 weeks." There's no way I would have written every Monday and Thursday and if I didn't reach my goal, then I would have felt like a failure.

Instead, we are slowly building one of the most incredible communities online. (By the way, thank you for all of the emails, tweets, and messages on fat loss, lifting weights, living longer, and forming better habits. Keep them coming! I'm always happy to get your questions and I'll do my best to help however I can.)

## **Example 2: Exercise**

Back in August, I decided that I wanted to do 100 pushups in a row with strict form. When I tried it the first time, I only got 36.

In the past, I might have set a deadline for myself: "Do 100 pushups by December 31st."

Instead, I decided to set a schedule for my workouts. I started doing pushup workouts every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. So far, the only workouts I've missed were on long travel days from this trip in Istanbul and this trip in San Francisco.

I have no total pushup goal for any single workout. The goal is simply to do the workout. Just like I have no goal for any single article that I write. The goal is to publish the article.

The result, of course, is that after doing 77 pushup workouts I've made a lot of progress. If you're interested, you can [see every workout here](#).

## Focus on the Practice, Not the Performance

Do you see how the two examples above are different than most goals we set for ourselves?

In both cases (writing and exercise), I made consistent progress towards my goals not by setting a deadline for my performance, but by sticking to a schedule.

Productive and successful people practice the things that are important to them on a consistent basis. The best weightlifters are in the gym at the same time every week. The best writers are sitting down at the keyboard every day. And this same principle applies to the best leaders, parents, managers, musicians, and doctors.

The strange thing is that for top performers, it's not about the performance, it's about the continual practice.

The focus is on doing the action, not on achieving X goal by a certain date.

The schedule is your friend. You can't predict when you'll have a stroke of genius and write a moving story, paint a beautiful portrait, or make an incredible picture, but the schedule can make sure that you're working when that stroke of genius happens.

You can't predict when your body feels like setting a new personal record, but the schedule can make sure that you're in the gym whether you feel like it or not.

It's about practicing the craft, not performing at a certain level. (We're talking about practice. Not a game, not a game. Practice.)

If you want to be the type of person who accomplishes things on a consistent basis, then give yourself a schedule to follow, not a deadline to race towards.

# Avoid the Second Mistake

So often, we make the mistake of believing that sticking to good habits is an all-or-nothing game. (I say “we” because I’ve been there before as well.)

- We assume that if we slip up on our diet, then we have ruined the whole thing.
- We act like missing one day of writing means we simply weren’t meant to be a writer.
- We use our lack of motivation to work out as evidence that we don’t have the willpower to make change happen.

These beliefs are incorrect. Habits are behaviors that we repeat consistently. However, they are not behaviors that we repeat perfectly. This small idea—that consistency does not require perfection—is important.

When it comes to building good habits and breaking bad habits, individual mistakes do not matter in the long-run. Instead, it is the second mistake that is far more important. Let’s talk about why this is true.

## The Second Mistake

According to [a study](#) published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, missing any single day of a particular habit has no impact on your long-term ability to stick to the habit. It doesn’t matter when it occurs, making a mistake and slipping up does not alter the long-term outcome... if you find a way to get back on track.

Furthermore, top performers in all fields make mistakes all the time. Athletes skip workouts. CEOs forget to meditate. Nutritionists eat unhealthy meals. Artists loaf around in bed all day and ignore their craft. These people are human, just like you and me. There are many points during their careers when they make a mistake, skip a session, and approach their tasks with the enthusiasm of sleep-deprived manatee.

What separates the elite performers from everyone else? Not perfection, but consistency. This is why the most important thing is not to prevent mistakes all together, but to avoid making a mistake twice in a row. Errors are part of the process, but they shouldn't become part of the pattern.

One mistake is just an outlier. Two mistakes is the beginning of a pattern. Killing this pattern before it snowballs into something bigger is one reason why learning how to get back on track quickly is an essential skill for building good habits.

## How to Get Back on Track

Here are some of my favorite strategies for getting back on track quickly and avoiding repeated mistakes.

**Put all of your energy toward starting the good behavior.** If you make a mistake or forget to practice a new habit, it can be easy to convince yourself that you need to do twice as much work to make up for it next time. This approach has never worked well for me. I find it more useful to release the focus on results and direct your energy toward getting started. Don't worry about having a fantastic performance next time. Just focus on getting back into the swing of things. I like to use The 2-Minute Rule to help me start behaviors easily.

**Set a schedule for your habits.** Many people never get around to building new habits because they are always wondering when they will be motivated to do the new habit. Take motivation out of the equation and set a schedule for your behavior. Without question, setting a publishing schedule for my writing has been the biggest win for my creative habits. Why does this work? Because of the science of implementation intentions.

**Eliminate the things that take you off track.** Some emergencies can't be avoided, but there are many daily distractions that can be eliminated. If you find yourself missing a habit, then take a moment to determine why that happened today. There is no need to judge yourself. Just examine your day with open eyes and determine what took you off course. Once you begin to discover the things that take you off course, you can eliminate them whenever possible.

Improve by subtracting. It is much easier to make the right decision if you are surrounded by better choices.

# How to Stick With Good Habits Even When Your Willpower is Gone

Most people think that building better habits or changing your actions is all about willpower or motivation. But the more I learn, the more I believe that the number one driver of better habits and behavior change is your environment.

Let me drop some science into this article and show you what I mean...

## Willpower vs. Environment

Anne Thorndike is a primary care physician at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Recently, Thorndike and her colleagues completed a six month study that was published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

This study secretly took place in the hospital cafeteria and helped thousands of people develop healthier eating habits without changing their willpower or motivation in the slightest way.

Here's what happened...

Thorndike and her team proposed that by changing the environment and the way that food was displayed in the cafeteria, they could get people to eat healthier without thinking about it. There were multiple phases of the experiment, but the portion that really interested me focused on what Thorndike refers to as “choice architecture.”



Choice architecture is just a fancy word for “changing the way the food and drinks are displayed.” But, as it turns out, it makes a big difference.

## The Impact of Choice Architecture

The researchers started by changing the choice architecture of the drinks in the cafeteria. Originally, there were three main refrigerators, all of which were filled with soda. The researchers made sure that water was added to each of those units and also placed baskets of bottled water throughout the room.

The image below depicts what the room looked like before the changes (Figure A) and after the changes (Figure B). The dark boxes indicate areas where bottled water is available.

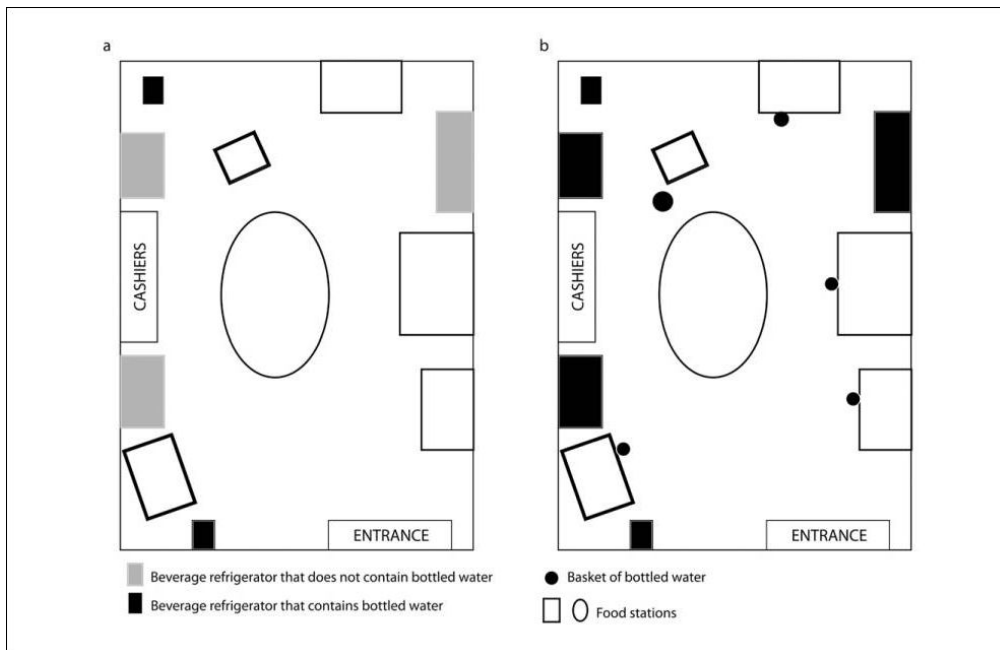


Image Source: American Journal of Public Health, April 2012.

What happened?

Over the next 3 months, the number of soda sales dropped by 11.4 percent. Meanwhile, bottled water sales increased by 25.8 percent. Similar adjustments and results were made with food options. Nobody said a word to the visitors who ate at the cafeteria. The researchers simply changed the environment and people naturally followed suit.

The usual argument for sticking to better habits is that you need more willpower, motivation, and discipline. But studies like this one showcase just how important your environment can be for guiding behavior.

Environment design becomes even more important when you understand the daily fluctuation of willpower.

## The Willpower Muscle

Decades of research have discovered that willpower is not something you have or don't have, but rather it is a resource that can be used up and restored. Like tired muscles at the end of a workout, your willpower can become depleted if you use it too much. Much of this research is explained in excellent books like [The Willpower Instinct by Kelly McGonigal](#) and [Willpower by Roy Baumeister and John Tierney](#).

A classic example can be found by looking at college students. During finals week, students use all of their willpower to study and everything else collapses as a result. People eat whatever they can find, students who haven't smoked all semester start lighting up outside the library, and many people can't even muster the strength to change out of their sweatpants. There is only so much willpower to go around.

We don't typically think about willpower and motivation as a finite resource that is impacted by all of the things we do throughout the day, but that's exactly how it works.

And this is where choice architecture and willpower come together.

## Choice Architecture in Everyday Life

When your willpower is depleted, you are even more likely to make decisions based on the environment around you. After all, if you're feeling drained, stressed, or overwhelmed then you're not going to go through a lot of effort to cook a healthy dinner or fit in a workout. You'll grab whatever is easiest.

And that means that if you take just a little bit of time today to organize your room, your office, your kitchen, and other areas, then that adjustment in choice architecture can guide you toward better choices even when your willpower is fading.

For example, in Richard Thaler's best-selling book, [Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness](#), he discusses research that reveals that items on the top shelf of supermarkets (near eye level) tend to sell more than items on lower shelves.

It's easy to apply this discovery to everyday life: simply place healthier foods in more visible spots in your refrigerator, pantry, and around the kitchen. Meanwhile, you can tuck away cookies, treats, and other unhealthy choices down on the lower shelves. This is one way to use choice architecture to make it more likely that you'll grab healthy food, even when your willpower is fading.

## To Change Your Behavior, Change Your Environment

Like the visitors in the hospital cafeteria, choice architecture can help you automatically do the right thing without worrying about willpower or motivation. If you design your environment to make the default choice a better one, then it's more likely that you'll make a good choice now and have more willpower leftover for later.

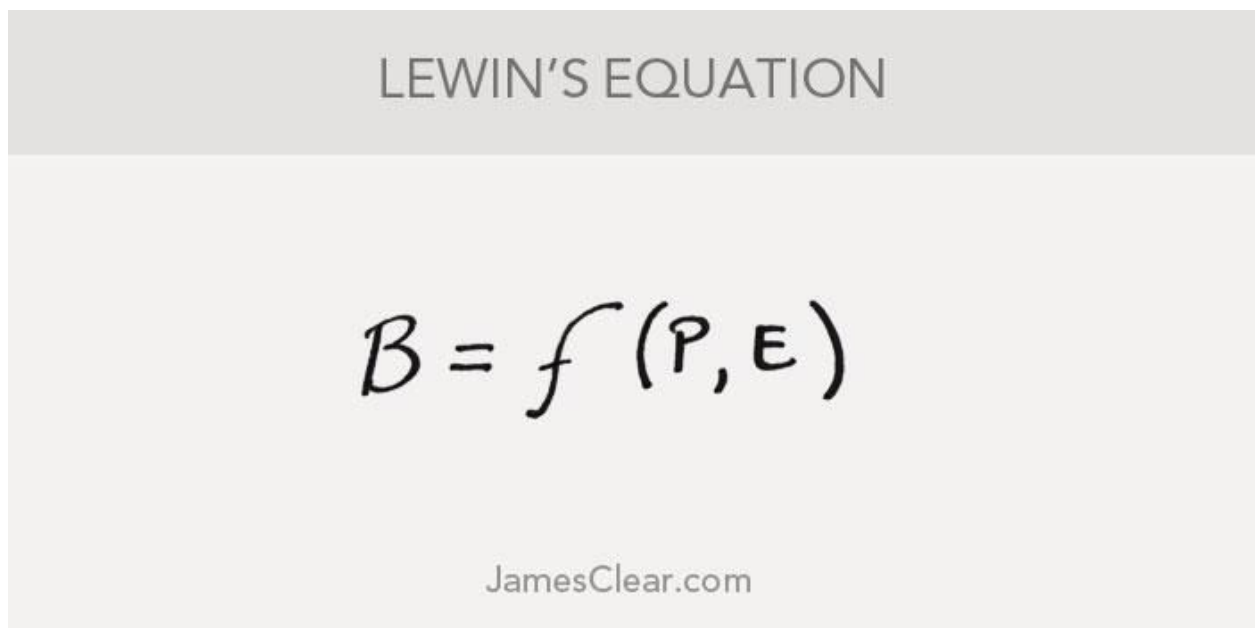
Environment design works. Talking about tiny changes like moving your healthy foods to a more visible shelf might seem insignificant, but imagine the impact of making dozens of these changes and living in an environment designed to make the good behaviors easier and the bad behaviors harder.

When you're surrounded by better choices, it's a lot easier to make a good one.

# This Simple Equation Reveals How Habits Shape Your Health, Happiness, and Wealth

In 1936, a man named Kurt Lewin wrote a simple equation that changed the way we think about habits and human behavior.

The equation makes the following statement: Behavior is a function of the Person in their Environment. [1]



LEWIN'S EQUATION

$$B = f(P, E)$$

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Known today as Lewin's Equation, this tiny expression contains most of what you need to know about building good habits, breaking bad ones, and making progress in your life.

Let's talk about what we can learn from it and how to apply these ideas to master the habits that shape your health, happiness, and wealth.

## What Drives Our Behavior?

Before Lewin's Equation became famous, most experts believed that a person's habits and actions were a result of the type of person they were, not the environment they were in at the time.

You can still find many examples of this belief today. For instance, if you struggle to stick to a diet you might say, "I just don't have any willpower." Or, if you can't seem to finish that big project like writing a book, you might say, "I'm a great starter, but a lousy finisher." These statements imply that our habits and actions are determined by some set of characteristics that we are born with; that our habits are fixed based on who we are.

Lewin, however, said something different. He said that it is not just your personal characteristics, but also your environment that drives your behavior. Your habits are highly dependent upon context. In many cases, your environment will drive your behavior even more than your personality. So, maybe you're struggling to stick to that diet because you're surrounded by bad options or unhealthy people, not because you were born with too little willpower.

Let's break down these two areas, personality and environment, and talk about how you can improve them to build good habits and break bad ones.

## The Elements of Personality

We know more about our personal characteristics today than we did when Lewin was around. Perhaps most importantly, we know that your abilities are not fixed in stone. You can improve.

The key, however, is to believe you can improve. Carol Dweck, a Stanford professor, has become well-known for her work analyzing the differences between the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. When you are using a fixed mindset, you believe that your abilities in a particular area are fixed. When you are using a growth mindset, you believe that you can improve, learn, and build upon your current abilities.

While reading Dweck's best-selling book, Mindset, I found it interesting that the same person can have a growth mindset in one area and a fixed mindset in another.

In other words, your identity and beliefs play a role in your habits and if you're looking to create a new identity, you have to cast a vote for that identity. As I have covered before, the best way to improve your abilities and skills is through deliberate practice.

## The Elements of Environment

The second factor in Lewin's Equation, environment, can often seem like something that happens to us rather than something we have control over. It can be difficult to change where you work, who you're surrounded by, and where you live. That said, there are actually quite a few strategies that you can use to adjust your environment and build better habits.

First, you can do what BJ Fogg calls "designing for laziness." Fogg wanted to reduce the amount of popcorn he ate, so he took the bag of popcorn out of his kitchen, climbed the ladder in his garage, and put the popcorn on the highest shelf. If he *really* wanted popcorn, he could always

go to the garage, get the ladder, and climb up to get it. But his default decision when he was feeling lazy would be to make a better choice. By designing his environment for laziness, Fogg made it easier to stick with healthier habits. I have mentioned a variety of other ways you can design for laziness in [this article](#).

Second, the physical space you live in and the arrangement of the things you come across can dramatically alter your behavior. For example, in his book [Nudge](#), Richard Thaler talks about how grocery store products on shelves at eye level get purchased more than those down by the floor. Researchers Eric Johnson and Daniel Goldstein [conducted a study that revealed dramatic differences in organ donation rates](#) based simply on two different types of forms that were passed out. Finally, Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston discovered that they could instantly increase the amount of water people drank and decrease the amount of soda they drank simply by rearranging the way drinks were displayed in the cafeteria. This concept, which is known as [choice architecture](#), refers to your ability to structure the physical space around you to prime good choices.

Third, we have the digital environment. There are a wide range of digital triggers that prompt our behavior. When Facebook notifies you of a new action, you're prompted to log back on. When someone emails you, you are prompted to respond. These digital triggers are simple ways of building habit-forming behaviors in online products and services. In many cases, these digital triggers become distractions that take you away from the work and habits that are actually important to you. As much as possible, I prefer to combat this distraction by [simplifying and eliminating everything that isn't necessary](#). Another option is to use a service like [Freedom](#) to reduce procrastination and distraction.



# Behavior, the Person, and the Environment

Changing your behavior and sticking to new habits can be hard. No doubt about it. Thankfully, Lewin's Equation keeps things simple.

$B = f(P,E)$ . Behavior is a function of the Person in their Environment.

Improve yourself and adjust your environment to make good habits easier and bad habits harder. If you can do those two things, sticking with better habits will be much easier.

**Thanks** to my friend Nir Eyal for telling me about Lewin's Equation, which led me down the path to this article.

# How to Stick With Good Habits Every Day by Using the “Paper Clip Strategy”

In 1993, a bank in Abbotsford, Canada hired a 23-year-old stock broker named Trent Dyrsmid.

Dyrsmid was a rookie so nobody at the firm expected too much of his performance. Moreover, Abbotsford was still a relatively small suburb back then, tucked away in the shadow of nearby Vancouver where most of the big business deals were being made. The first popular email services like AOL and Hotmail wouldn't arrive for another two or three years. Geography still played a large role in business success and Abbotsford wasn't exactly the home of blockbuster deals.

And yet, despite his disadvantages, Dyrsmid made immediate progress as a stock broker thanks to a simple and relentless habit that he used each day.

On his desk, he placed two jars. One was filled with 120 paper clips. The other was empty. This is when the habit started.

*“Every morning I would start with 120 paper clips in one jar and I would keep dialing the phone until I had moved them all to the second jar.”*

*—Trent Dyrsmid*

And that was it. 120 calls per day. One paper clip at a time.

Within 18 months, Dyrsmid's book of business grew to \$5 million in assets. By age 24, he was making \$75,000. Within a few years, outside firms began recruiting him because of his success and he landed a \$200,000 job with another company.

## Habits That Stick vs. Habits That Fail

When I asked Dyrsmid about the details of his habit, he simply said, “I would start calling at 8 a.m. every day. I never looked at stock quotes or analyst research. I also never read the newspaper for the entire time. If the news was really important, it would find me from other ways.” [2]

Trent Dyrsmid’s story is evidence of a simple truth: Success is often a result of committing to the fundamentals over and over again. [3]

Compare Trent’s results to where you and I often find ourselves. We want to be consistent with our workouts, but struggle to make it into the gym. We know we should write more Thank You notes or eat healthier meals or read more books, but can’t seem to find the motivation to get it done. We’d like to achieve our goals, but still procrastinate on them.

What makes the difference? Why do some habits stick while other fail? Why did Trent’s paper clip habit work so well and what can we learn from it?

## The Power of a Visual Cue

I believe the “Paper Clip Strategy” works particularly well because it creates a visual trigger that can help motivate you to perform a habit with more consistency.

Here are a few reasons visual cues work well for building new habits...

**Visual cues remind you to start a behavior.** We often lie to ourselves about our ability to remember to perform a new habit. (*“I’m going to start eating healthier. For real this time.”*) A

few days later, however, the motivation fades and the busyness of life begins to take over again. Hoping you will simply remember to do a new habit is usually a recipe for failure. This is why a visual stimulus, like a bin full of paper clips, can be so useful. It is much easier to stick with good habits when your environment nudges you in the right direction.

**Visual cues display your progress on a behavior.** Everyone knows consistency is an essential component of success, but few people actually measure how consistent they are in real life. The Paper Clip Strategy avoids that pitfall because it is a built-in measuring system. One look at your paper clips and you immediately have a measure of your progress. [4]

**Visual cues can have an additive effect on motivation.** As the visual evidence of your progress mounts, it is natural to become more motivated to continue the habit. The more paperclips you place in the bin, the more motivated you will become to finish the task. There are a variety of popular behavioral economics studies that refer to this as the Endowed Progress Effect, which essentially says we place more value on things once we have them. In other words, the more paper clips you move to the “Completed” bin, the more valuable completing the habit becomes to you.

**Visual cues can be used to drive short-term and long-term motivation.** The Paper Clip Strategy can provide daily motivation, but you start from scratch each day. However, another type of visual cue, like the “Don’t Break the Chain” Calendar that I described in my article on the Seinfeld Strategy can be used to showcase your consistency over longer periods of time. By stacking these two methods together, you can create a set of visual cues that motivate and measure your habits over the short-run and the long-run.

## Creating Your Own Paper Clip Strategy

There are all sorts of ways to use the paper clip habit for your own goals.

- Hoping to do 100 pushups each day? Start with 10 paper clips and move one over each time you drop down and do a set of 10 throughout the day.
- Need to send 25 sales emails every day? Start with 25 paper clips and toss one to the other side each time you press Send.
- Want to drink 8 glasses of water each day? Start with 8 paper clips and slide one over each time you finish a glass.
- Not sure if you're taking your medication three times per day? Set 3 paper clips out and flip one into the bin each time you swallow your pills.

Best of all, the entire strategy will cost you less than \$10.

1. Grab a box of standard paper clips ([here is a cheap set](#)).
2. Get two standard paper clip holders ([here you go](#)).
3. Pick your habit and start moving those bad boys from one side to the other.

Trent Dyrsmid decided that success in his field came down to one core task: making more sales calls. He discovered that mastering the fundamentals is what makes the difference.

The same is true for your goals. There is no secret sauce. There is no magic bullet. Good habits are the magic bullet.

# How to Declutter Your Mind and Unleash Your Willpower by Using “Bright-Line” Rules

*“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?”*

*—The Miranda Warning*

In the spring of 1966, a man named Ernesto Miranda was arrested in Phoenix. The police had very little to go on, but they suspected Miranda of kidnapping and raping an 18-year-old woman ten days earlier. The officers interrogated Miranda for two hours and were rewarded for their effort: Miranda admitted to the rape charge and signed a confession paper.

There was just one problem. During the interrogation, Miranda had been alone and at no point was he informed that he had the right to legal counsel.

When the case went to trial, Miranda’s written confession was used as evidence. He was quickly convicted, but his lawyer appealed because Miranda had never been informed of his rights and thus, according to his lawyer, the confession was not voluntary. The Arizona Supreme Court upheld the decision, but eventually the case made it to the United States Supreme Court.

The United States Supreme Court overturned the Miranda ruling by a vote of 5 to 4 because *“The person in custody must, prior to interrogation, be clearly informed that he has the right to remain silent, and that anything he says will be used against him in court; he must be clearly informed that he has the right to consult with a lawyer and to have the lawyer with him during interrogation, and that, if he is indigent, a lawyer will be appointed to represent him.”* [5]

The Supreme Court had just created a bright-line rule.

## The Power of Bright-Line Rules

A bright-line rule refers to a clearly defined rule or standard. It is a rule with clear interpretation and very little wiggle room. It establishes a bright line for what the rule is saying and what it is not saying.

The Miranda ruling is one example. If a police officer fails to inform a defendant in custody of their rights, then the suspect’s statements are not admissible in court. Plain and simple. Clear and bright.

Most of us, myself included, could benefit from setting brighter lines in our personal and professional lives. Consider some common examples:

- We might say that we want to check email less frequently.
- We might say that we want to drink moderately.
- We might say that we want to save more for retirement.
- We might say that we want to eat healthier.

But what do these statements really mean?

- What does it mean to check email less frequently? Are you going to “try to be better about it” and hope that works? Will you set specific days or certain times when you will be unavailable? Will you check email on weekends? Will you process email only on your computer?
- What, exactly, is moderate drinking? Is it one drink per week? Five drinks per week? Ten drinks per week? We haven’t defined it, so how will we know if we are making progress? [6]
- What does it mean to save more? More is not a number. How much is more? When will you save? Every month? Every paycheck?
- What does eating healthier look like on a daily basis? Does that mean you eat more servings of vegetables? If so, how many more? Do you want to start by eating a healthy meal once per day? Twice per day? Every meal?

It can be easy to make promises like this to yourself, but they do not create bright lines. Fuzzy statements make progress hard to measure, and the things we measure are the things we improve.

Now, do we need to measure every area of our lives? Of course not. But if something is important to you, then you should establish a bright line for it. Consider the following alternatives:

- I only process email between 11AM and 6PM.
- I enjoy a maximum of 2 drinks per night.
- I save \$500 per month for retirement.
- I eat at least two types of vegetables per day.

These statements establish bright lines. These statements make action steps precise and obvious. Vague promises will never lead to clear results.



## Using Bright Lines to Break Bad Habits

The examples I outlined above focused primarily on building new behaviors, but bright-line rules can be used just as effectively to break bad habits or eliminate old behaviors.

My friend Nir Eyal proposes a similar strategy that he calls “Progressive Extremism.” To explain the concept, Nir uses the example of being a vegetarian. If you were interested in becoming a vegetarian, you might start by saying, “I don’t eat red meat.” The goal is not to change everything at once, but to take a very clear and extreme stand in one small area. You are establishing a bright line on that topic.

Over time, you can progressively move your bright line forward and add other behaviors to the mix. (i.e. “I don’t eat red meat or fish.” And so on.)

## How Bright Lines Unleash Your Hidden Willpower

Establishing bright lines in your life can provide a huge boost in daily willpower.

Here are two reasons why:

**First, bright lines shift the conversation in your head from one of sacrifice to one of empowerment.** When you don’t have a bright line established and you choose not to do something, the tendency is to say, “Oh, I can’t do it this time.” Conversely, when you do have a bright line clearly set, your response can simply be, “No thanks, I don’t do that.” Bright lines help you avoid making just-this-once exceptions. Instead, you are following a new identity that you have created for yourself. [7]

**Second, by establishing clear decisions in your life, you conserve willpower for other important choices.** Here's the problem with trying to make daily decisions in muddy water: Without bright lines, you must decide whether a situation fits your standards every time. With bright lines, the decision is made ahead of time. Because of this, you are less likely to suffer from decision fatigue and more likely to have willpower left over for work, relationships, and other health habits.

# How to Say No, Resist Temptation, and Stick to Your Health Goals

Learning how to say no is one of the most useful skills you can develop, especially when it comes to living a healthy life.

Saying no to unnecessary commitments can give you the time you need to recover and rejuvenate. Saying no to daily distractions can give you the space you need to focus on what is important to you. And say no to frequent temptations can help you stay on track and achieve your health goals.

This, of course, begs the question: how do we avoid distraction and get past the urgencies of everyday life, so that we can actually live healthy and do the things that are really important to us?

It seems like a big task, but research is starting to show that small changes can make a significant impact. In fact, here's one change you can make right now that will make it easier for you to say no, resist temptation and stick to your health and fitness goals for the long-term.

## How to Say No: Research Reveals the Best Way

In a research study published in the Journal of Consumer Research, 120 students were split into two different groups.

The difference between these two groups was saying "I can't" compared to "I don't."

One group was told that each time they were faced with a temptation, they would tell themselves “I can’t do X.” For example, when tempted with ice cream, they would say, “I can’t eat ice cream.”

When the second group was faced with a temptation, they were told to say “I don’t do X.” For example, when tempted with ice cream, they would say, “I don’t eat ice cream.”

After repeating these phrases, each student answered a set of questions unrelated to the study. Once they finished answering their questions, the students went to hand in their answer sheet, thinking that the study was over. In reality, it was just beginning.

As each student walked out of the room and handed in their answer sheet, they were offered a complimentary treat. The student could choose between a chocolate candy bar or a granola health bar. As the student walked away, the researcher would mark their snack choice on the answer sheet.

Here’s what happened...

The students who told themselves “I can’t eat X” chose to eat the chocolate candy bar 61% of the time. Meanwhile, the students who told themselves “I don’t eat X” chose to eat the chocolate candy bars only 36% of the time. This simple change in terminology significantly improved the odds that each person would make a more healthy food choice.

But the surprises didn’t stop there...

## **How the “Right Words” Make It Easier to Say No**

The same researchers were also interested in how the words “can’t” and “don’t” affect our willingness to say no over the long-term and stick to goals when faced with repeated temptation. After all, most of us can turn down a candy bar once, but eventually we slip up.

In other words, is there a way to say no that makes it more likely that we’ll stick to healthy habits and avoid unhealthy ones?

The researchers designed a new study by getting 30 working women to sign up for a “health and wellness seminar.” All of the women were told to think of a long-term health and wellness goal that was important to them. Then, the researchers split the women into three groups of 10.

**Group 1** was told that anytime they felt tempted to lapse on their goals they should “just say no.” This group was the control group because they were given no specific strategy.

**Group 2** was told that anytime they felt tempted to lapse on their goals, they should implement the “can’t” strategy. For example, “I can’t miss my workout today.”

**Group 3** was told that anytime they felt tempted to lapse on their goals, they should implement the “don’t” strategy. For example, “I don’t miss workouts.”

For the next 10 days, each woman received an email asking to report her progress. They were specifically told, “During the 10-day window you will receive emails to remind you to use the strategy and to report instances in which it worked or did not work. If the strategy is not working for you, just drop us a line and say so and you can stop responding to the emails.”

Here’s what the results looked like 10 days later...

- Group 1 (the “just say no” group) had **3 out of 10 members** who persisted with their goals for the entire 10 days.
- Group 2 (the “can’t” group) had **1 out of 10 members** who persisted with her goal for the entire 10 days.

- Group 3 (the “don’t” group) had an incredible **8 out of 10 members** who persisted with their goals for the entire 10 days.

The words that you use not only help you to make better choices on an individual basis, but also make it easier to stay on track with your long-term goals.

## Why “I Don’t” Works Better Than “I Can’t”

Your words help to frame your sense of empowerment and control. Furthermore, the words that you use create a feedback loop in your brain that impacts your future behaviors.

For example, every time you tell yourself “I can’t”, you’re creating a feedback loop that is a reminder of your limitations. This terminology indicates that you’re forcing yourself to do something you don’t want to do.

In comparison, when you tell yourself “I don’t”, you’re creating a feedback loop that reminds you of your control and power over the situation. It’s a phrase that can propel you towards breaking your bad habits and following your good ones.

Heidi Grant Halvorson is the director of the Motivation Science Center at Columbia University. Here’s how she explains the difference between saying “I don’t” compared to “I can’t”...

*“I don’t” is experienced as a choice, so it feels empowering. It’s an affirmation of your determination and willpower. “I can’t” isn’t a choice. It’s a restriction, it’s being imposed upon you. So thinking “I can’t” undermines your sense of power and personal agency.*

In other words, the phrase “I don’t” is a psychologically empowering way to say no, while the phrase “I can’t” is a psychologically draining way to say no.

## How You Can Apply This To Your Life

*One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself.*

*—Leonardo Da Vinci*

There are situations everyday when you need to say no to something. For example, the waiter who offers you a dessert menu... or the urge to skip a workout and stay home... or the distracting call of texts, tweets, and updates when you should be focusing on something important.

Individually, our responses to these little choices seem insignificant, which is why we don’t make a big deal about telling ourselves that we “can’t” do something. But imagine the cumulative effect of choosing more empowering words on a consistent basis.

“I can’t” and “I don’t” are words that seem similar and we often interchange them for one another, but psychologically they can provide very different feedback and, ultimately, result in very different actions. They aren’t just words and phrases. They are affirmations of what you believe, reasons for why you do what you do, and reminders of where you want to go.

The ability to overcome temptation and effectively say no is critical not only to your physical health, but also to maintaining a sense of well-being and control in your mental health.

To put it simply: you can either be the victim of your words or the architect of them. Which one would you prefer?





# Why Stores Place Candy by the Checkout Counter (And Why New Habits Fail)

Selling candy bars can teach you a lot about building better habits.

Before I tell you why, let's start at the beginning.

## The Science of Candy Bars

In 1952, an economist by the name of Hawkins Stern was working at the Stanford Research Institute in Southern California where he spent his time analyzing consumer behavior. During that same year he published a little-known paper titled, “The Significance of Impulse Buying Today.”

In that paper, Stern described a phenomenon he called Suggestion Impulse Buying, which “is triggered when a shopper sees a product for the first time and visualizes a need for it.”

Suggestion Impulse Buying says that customers buy things not necessarily because they want them, but because of how they are presented to them. This simple idea—that where products are placed can influence what customers will buy—has fascinated retailers and grocery stores ever since the moment Stern put the concept into words.

## How to Sell Candy Bars

Candy sales are very seasonal. Bulk candy purchases tend to be made around Halloween and other holidays, which means during the majority of the year candy never makes it onto the grocery list. Obviously, this isn't what candy companies want since they would prefer to have sales continue throughout the year.

Because candy isn't an item you are going to seek out during most trips to the grocery store, it is placed in a highly visible place where you'll see it even if you aren't looking for it: the checkout line.

But why the checkout line? If it was just about visibility, the store could put candy right by the front door so that everyone saw it as soon as they walked inside.

The second reason candy is at the checkout line is because of a concept called decision fatigue. The basic idea is that your willpower is like a muscle. Like any muscle, it gets fatigued with use. The more decisions you ask your brain to make, the more fatigued your willpower becomes.

If you saw a box of candy bars at the front door, you would be more likely to resist grabbing one. By the time you get to the checkout counter, however, the number of choices about what to buy and what not to buy has drained your willpower enough that you give in and make the impulse purchase. This is why grocery stores place candy at the checkout counter and not the front door.

Ok, but what does a Kit Kat bar have to do with building better habits?

## 3 Ways to Change Your Habits

At a basic level, a store that wants to sell more candy wants to change human behavior. And whether you're trying to lose weight, become more productive, create art on a more consistent basis, or otherwise build a new habit, you want to change human behavior too. Let's take a look

at what the grocery store did to drive additional purchases of candy bars and talk about how those concepts apply to your life.

**First, grocery stores removed the friction that prevented a certain behavior.** They realized that people were only buying candy in bulk around the holidays, so they cut down the size of the purchase and sold candy bars one at a time.

You can do the same thing with your habits. What are the points of friction that prevent you from taking a behavior right now? Does the task seem overwhelming (like the equivalent of buying 40 pieces of candy when you only want 1 piece?), then start with a small habit. Examples include: doing 10 pushups per day rather than 50 per day, writing 1 post per week rather than 1 per day, running for 5 minutes rather than 5 miles, and so on. Starting small is valuable because objects in motion tend to stay in motion.

**Second, grocery stores created an environment that promoted the new behavior.**

Retailers recognized that unless the holidays were around the corner, people were unlikely to browse the store and seek out candy bars, so they moved the candy bars to a place where people didn't have to seek them out: the checkout line.

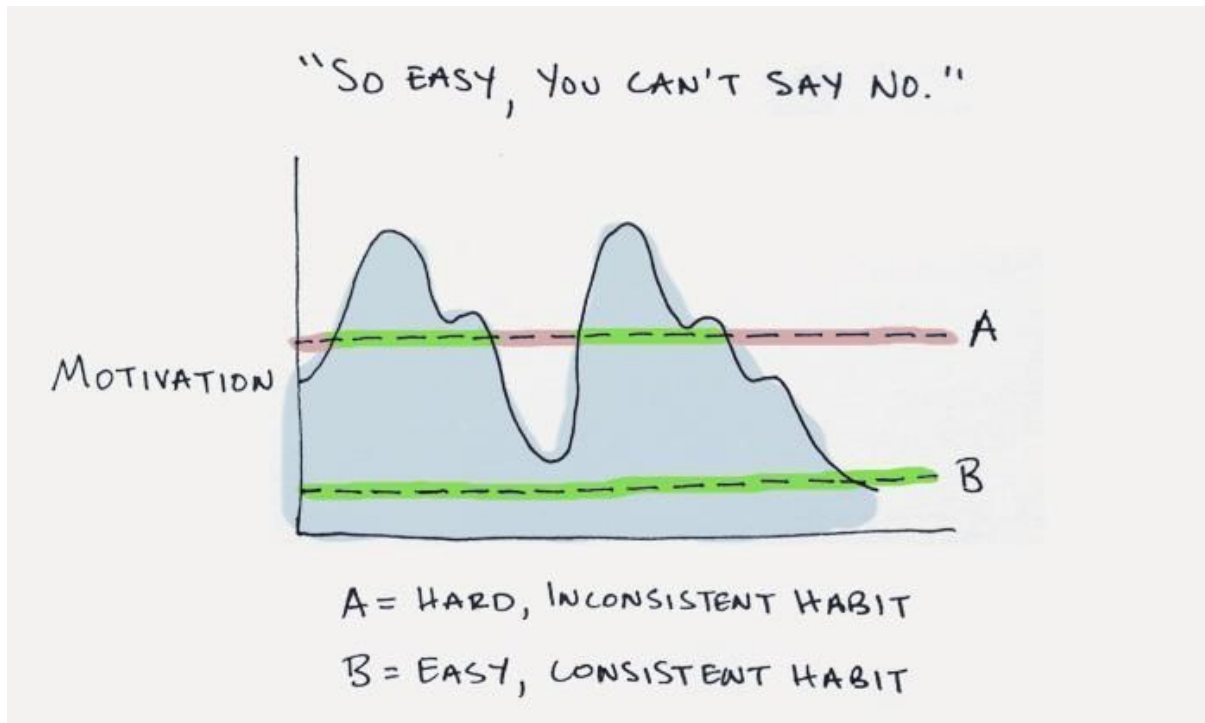
How can you change your environment, so that you don't have to seek out your new habits? How can you adjust your kitchen so that you can eat healthy without thinking? How can you shift your workspace so that digital distractions are minimized? How can you create a space that promotes the good behaviors and prevents the bad ones? Surround yourself with better choices and you'll make better choices.

**Third, grocery stores stacked the new behavior at a time when the energy was right for it.** As we've already covered, you're more likely to give in and buy the candy bar at the checkout line because decision fatigue has set in. Of course, it's not just decision fatigue that saps our willpower and motivation. There are a variety of positive and negative daily tasks that

drain your brain. Periods of intense focus, frustration, self-control, and confusion are all examples of how you can deplete your mental battery.

When it comes to building better habits, you can deal with this issue in two ways.

1. You can take active steps to reduce the areas that deplete your willpower. In the words of Kathy Sierra, you have to “manage your cognitive leaks.” This means eliminating distractions and focusing on the essential. It’s much easier to stick with good habits if you subtract the negative influences. Self-control has a cost. Every time you use it, you pay. Make sure you’re paying for the things that matter to you, not the stuff that is useless or provides marginal value to your life.
2. You can perform your habit a time when your energy is right for it. Stores ask you to buy candy bars when you are most likely to say yes. Similarly, you should ask yourself to perform new habits when you are mostly likely to succeed. Your motivation ebbs and flows throughout the day, so make sure the difficulty of your habit matches your current level of your motivation. Big habits are usually best if attempted early in the day when your motivation and willpower are high (or after a lunch break when you’ve had a chance to eat and rejuvenate).



## Your Environment Drives Your Habits

We like to think that we are in control of our behavior. If we buy a candy bar, we assume it is because we wanted a candy bar. The truth, however, is that many of the actions we take each day are simply a response to the environment we find ourselves in. We buy candy bars because the store is designed to get us to buy candy bars.

Similarly, we stick to good habits (or repeat bad habits) because the environments that we live in each day—our kitchens and bedrooms, our offices and workspaces—are designed to promote these behaviors. Change your environment and your behavior will follow.

# How Willpower Works: The Science of Decision Fatigue and How to Avoid Bad Decisions

Why do we make unhealthy and unproductive choices — even when we know we should do better?

If you ask most people, they will say that poor choices are a result of a “lack of willpower.”

But research from Columbia University is beginning to reveal that willpower doesn't quite work that way.

In fact, you may be surprised just how much small daily decisions impact the willpower you have for important choices. And most importantly, it turns out there are simple choices you can make that will help you master your willpower and make better decisions on a more consistent basis.

Here's the deal...

## Why Some Criminals Don't Get a Fair Hearing

In a research study published by the National Academy of Sciences, psychologists examined the factors that impact whether or not a judge approves a criminal for parole.

The researchers examined 1,112 judicial rulings over a 10-month period. All of the rulings were made by a parole board judge, who was determining whether or not to allow the criminal to be

released from prison on parole. (In some cases, the criminal was asking not for a release, but rather for a change in parole terms.)

Now, you might assume that the judges were influenced by factors like the type of crime committed or the particular laws that were broken.

But the researchers found exactly the opposite. The choices made by judges are impacted by all types of things that shouldn't have an effect in the courtroom. Most notably, the time of day.

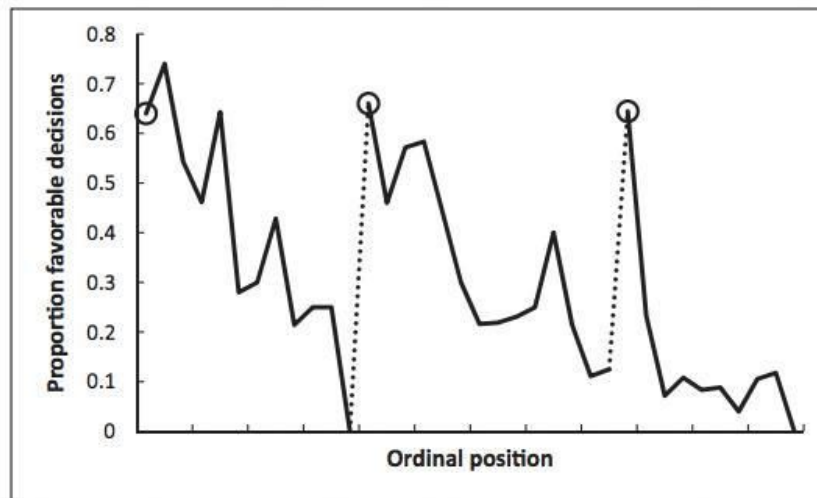
What the researchers found was that at the beginning of the day, a judge was likely to give a favorable ruling about 65 percent of the time. However, as the morning wore on and the judge became drained from making more and more decisions, the likelihood of a criminal getting a favorable ruling steadily dropped to zero.

After taking a lunch break, however, the judge would return to the courtroom refreshed and the likelihood of a favorable ruling would immediately jump back up to 65 percent. And then, as the hours moved on, the percentage of favorable rulings would fall back down to zero by the end of the day.

This trend held true for more than 1,100 cases. It didn't matter what the crime was — murder, rape, theft, embezzlement — a criminal was much more likely to get a favorable response if their parole hearing was scheduled in the morning (or immediately after a food break) than if it was scheduled near the end of a long session.

The figure below depicts the odds that a judge will make a favorable ruling based on the time of the day. The dotted lines signify food breaks taken throughout the day.

## How Decision Fatigue Impacts the Rulings Made by Parole Judges



**Fig. 1.** Proportion of rulings in favor of the prisoners by ordinal position. Circled points indicate the first decision in each of the three decision sessions; tick marks on x axis denote every third case; dotted line denotes food break. Because unequal session lengths resulted in a low number of cases for some of the later ordinal positions, the graph is based on the first 95% of the data from each session.

Source: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, vol. 108 no. 17

This graph displays the odds that a criminal will receive a favorable response from the judge based on the time of day when the hearing occurs. Notice that as time goes on, the odds of receiving a favorable response decrease. (Graphic by James Clear.)



## What's Going on Here?

As it turns out, your willpower is like a muscle. And similar to the muscles in your body, willpower can get fatigued when you use it over and over again. Every time you make a decision, it's like doing another rep in the gym. And similar to how your muscles get tired at the end of a workout, the strength of your willpower fades as you make more decisions.

Researchers often refer to this phenomenon as decision fatigue. When the judge on a parole board experiences decision fatigue, they deny more parole requests.

This makes sense. When your willpower is fading and your brain is tired of making decisions, it's easier just to say no and keep everyone locked up than it is to debate whether or not someone is trustworthy enough to leave prison. At the beginning of the day, a judge will give each case a fair shot. But as their energy starts to fade? Deny, deny, deny.

Here's why this is important for you...

## Do You Suffer From Decision Fatigue?

Decision fatigue happens every day in your life as well. If you have a particularly decision-heavy day at work, then you come home feeling drained. You might *want* to go to the gym and workout, but your brain would rather default to the easy decision: sit on the couch. That's decision fatigue.

The same thing is true if you find it hard to muster up the willpower to work on your side business at night or to cook a healthy meal for dinner.

And while decision fatigue is something that we all deal with, there are a few ways that you can organize your life and design your day to master your willpower.

## 5 Ways to Overcome Decision Fatigue

### 1. Plan daily decisions the night before.

There will always be decisions that pop up each day that you can't plan for. That's fine. It's just part of life.

But for most of us, the decisions that drain us are the ones that we make over and over and over again. Wasting precious willpower these decisions — which could be automated or planned in advance — is one reason why many people feel so drained at the end of the day.

For example, decisions like...

What am I going to wear to work? What should I eat for breakfast? Should I go to the dry cleaner before or after work? And so on.

All of those examples above, can be decided in 3 minutes or less the night before, which means you won't be wasting your willpower on those choices the next day. Taking time to plan out, simplify, and design the repeated daily decisions will give you more mental space to make the important choices each day.

### 2. Do the most important thing first.

If there was the most important court case in the world, when would you want the judge to hear it?

Based on the research above, first thing in the morning. You'd want their best attention, energy, and focus to go toward the decisions that were most important.

The same thing goes for your work and life. What's the most important thing for you right now?

Is it getting in shape? Is it building your business? Is it writing that book you have inside of you? Is it learning to eliminate stress and relax?

Whatever it is for you, put your best energy toward it. If you have to wake up 30 minutes earlier, then do that. Start your day by working on the most important thing in your life.

I've written previously about the importance of [morning routines](#) and [time management](#), this research on willpower is just another reason to work on the most important things first.

### **3. Stop making decisions. Start making commitments.**

I think advice like, "you just need to decide to do it" gets dished around too much.

Yes, of course you need to decide to do the things that are important to you, but more than that you need to schedule them into your life.

We all have things that we say are important to us.

*"I really want to scale my business."*

*"I really want to lose 40 pounds."*

*"I really want to get started on XYZ."*

Unfortunately, most of us simply hope that we'll have the willpower and motivation to make the right decisions each day.

Rather than hoping that I'll make the right choice each day, I've found much more success by scheduling the things that are important to me.

For example, my schedule for writing is Monday and Thursday. My schedule for weightlifting is Monday, Wednesday, Friday. On any given Monday, I don't have to decide whether I'm going to write. It's already on the schedule. And I'm not hoping that I'll have enough willpower to make it to the gym. It's just where I go on Mondays at 6pm.

If you sit back and hope that you'll be able to make the right decisions each day, then you will certainly fall victim to decision fatigue and a lack of willpower.

#### **4. If you have to make good decisions later in the day, then eat something first.**

It's no coincidence that the judges became better decision makers after eating. Now, if you cram french fries into your veins every day, then I doubt that you'll enjoy the same results. But taking a break to feed your brain is a wonderful way to boost willpower.

This is especially important because although it's great to do the most important thing first, it's not always possible to organize your day like that.

When you want to get better decisions from your mind, put better food into your body.

#### **5. Simplify.**

Whether you are trying to reach the highest level of performance or just want to start eating a healthy diet, the biggest frustration for most people is the feeling that you need to use willpower on an hourly basis.

Find ways to simplify your life. If something isn't important to you, eliminate it. Making decisions about unimportant things, even if you have the time to do so, isn't a benign task. It's pulling precious energy and willpower from the things that matter.

Willpower is one area of life where you can most certainly improve your output by reducing the number of inputs.

## The Bottom Line

Willpower isn't something you have or something you lack. It rises and falls. And while it's impossible to maximize your willpower for every moment of every day, it is possible to make a few changes to your day and your routine so that you can get the most of your decisions and make consistent progress on the things that are important to you.

**Hat tip to John Tierney** and [his article](#) for the New York Times, where I originally learned about decision fatigue.

# Plan For Failure: Being Consistent Is Not the Same as Being Perfect

You probably realize that consistency is important for making progress, doing better work, getting in shape, and achieving some level of success in most areas of life.

I write about the power of consistency often: why repetition is more important than perfection ([here](#)), how small gains add up to big results ([here](#)), and why falling in love with boredom is essential for mastery ([here](#)).

But once you realize the power of consistency, there is a danger that comes with this knowledge. And that danger is falling into an all-or-nothing mindset.

As usual, I don't have this all figured out, but let's talk about how to be consistent and how we can use science and research to avoid common mistakes and pitfalls.

## The All or Nothing Mindset

Once you realize that consistency is essential for success it can be easy to obsess over becoming flawlessly consistent.

For example...

- **Trying to lose weight?** It's easy to convince yourself that if you don't follow your diet perfectly, then you've failed.

- **Want to meditate each day?** Beware of focusing so much on never missing a day that you stress over sticking to your meditation schedule.
- **Looking to become a successful writer?** You can quickly brainwash yourself into thinking that successful authors write every single day without fail. (The same goes for artists and athletes of all kinds.)

In other words, it's really easy to confuse being consistent with being perfect. And that is a problem because there is no safety margin for errors, mistakes, and emergencies. (You know, the type of things that make you a normal human being.)

Cutting yourself some slack becomes even more important when we consider the science behind habit formation and continual improvement. Research shows that, regardless of the habit that you are working to build, missing a single day has no measurable impact on your long-term success. (More on that [here](#).)

In other words, it is all about average speed, not maximum speed. Daily failures are like red lights during a road trip. When you're driving a car, you'll come to a red light every now and then. But if you maintain a good average speed, you'll always make it to your destination despite the stops and delays along the way.

## The Idea in Practice

My friend [Josh Hillis](#) is a fat loss coach.

When working with clients, Josh doesn't even bother tracking their daily calories. He only looks at the calorie total at the end of each week and makes adjustments based on that.

Consider how different this strategy is from the typical nutritional approach. Josh doesn't care what you eat for any individual meal. He is not concerned if you make a mistake or binge eat once or twice. He realizes that individual meals don't matter if you maintain the right "average speed" over the course of the week.

I find this to be an empowering way to think about consistency and progress in nearly any area. It's never my intention to make a mistake, but if I do, I have given myself permission to view my progress over a longer timeline than a single day or an individual event.

## How to be Consistent: Plan For Failure

Consistency is essential for success in any area. There is no way to get around the fact that mastery requires a volume of work.

But if you want to maintain your sanity, reduce stress, and increase your odds of long-term success, then you need to plan for failure as well as focus on consistency. As I mentioned in [my Habits Workshop](#), research from Stanford professor Kelly McGonigal has shown that the number one reason why willpower fades and people fail to remain consistent with their habits and goals is that they don't have a plan for dealing with failure.

Planning to fail doesn't mean that you expect to fail, but rather than you know what you will do and how you will get back on track when things don't work out. If you're focused on being perfect, then you're caught in an all-or-nothing trap.



Meanwhile, if you realize that individual failures have little impact on your long-term success, then you can more easily rebound from failures and setbacks. Being consistent is not the same as being perfect.

# How to Stay Focused When You Get Bored Working Toward Your Goals

We all have goals and dreams, but it can be difficult to stick with them.

Each week, I hear from people who say things like, “I start with good intentions, but I can’t seem to maintain my consistency for a long period of time.”

Or, they will say, “I struggle with mental endurance. I get started but I can’t seem to follow through and stay focused for very long.”

Don’t worry. I’m just as guilty of this as anyone else.

For example, I’ll start one project, work on it for a little bit, then lose focus and try something else. And then I’ll lose focus on my new goal and try something else. And on and on. When everything is said and done, I’ve stopped and started so many times that I never really made much progress.

Maybe you have felt this way too.

This problem reminds me of a lesson I learned while working out one day...

## The Myth of Passion and Motivation

On this particular day in the gym, there was a coach visiting who had worked with thousands of athletes over his long career, including some nationally-ranked athletes and Olympians.

I had just finished my workout when I asked him, “What’s the difference between the best athletes and everyone else. What do the really successful people do that most people don’t?”

He briefly mentioned the things that you might expect. Genetics. Luck. Talent.

But then he said something I wasn’t expecting.

“At some point,” he said, “it comes down to who can handle the boredom of training every day and doing the same lifts over and over and over again.”

That piece of advice surprised me because it’s a different way of thinking about work ethic.

Most of the time people talk about getting motivated and “amped up” to work on their goals. Whether it’s business or sports or art, you will commonly hear people say things like, “it all comes down to having enough passion.”

As a result, I think many people get depressed when they lose focus or motivation because they think that successful people have some unstoppable passion and willpower that they seem to be missing. But that’s exactly the opposite of what this coach was saying.

Instead, he was saying that really successful people feel the same boredom and the same lack of motivation that everyone else feels. They don’t have some magic pill that makes them feel ready and inspired every day. But the difference is that the people who stick with their goals don’t let their emotions determine their actions. Top performers still find a way to show up, to work through the boredom, and to embrace the daily practice that is required to achieve their goals.

According to him, it’s this ability to do the work when it’s not easy that separates the top performers from everyone else. That’s the difference between professionals and amateurs.

# Working When Work Isn't Easy

Anyone can work hard when they feel motivated.

When I was an athlete, I loved going to practice the week after a big win. Who wouldn't? Your coach is happy, your teammates are pumped up, and you feel like you can beat anyone. As an entrepreneur, I love working when customers are rolling in and things are going well. Getting results has a way of propelling you forward.

But what about when you're bored? What about when the work isn't easy? What about when it feels like nobody is paying attention or you're not getting the results you want?

Are you willing to work through 10 years of silence?

It's the ability to work when work isn't easy that makes the difference.

## It's Not the Event, It's the Process

All too often, we think our goals are all about the result. We see success as an event that can be achieved and completed.

Here are some common examples...

- Many people see health as an event: *"If I just lose 20 pounds, then I'll be in shape."*
- Many people see entrepreneurship as an event: *"If we could get our business featured in the New York Times, then we'd be set."*

- Many people see art as an event: *“If I could just get my work featured in a bigger gallery, then I’d have the credibility I need.”*

Those are just a few of the many ways that we categorize success as a single event.

But if you look at the people who are consistently achieving their goals, you start to realize that it’s not the events or the results that make them different. It’s their commitment to the process. They fall in love with the daily practice, not the individual event.

What’s funny, of course, is that this focus on the process is what will allow you to enjoy the results anyway...

If you want to be a great writer, then having a best-selling book is wonderful. But the only way to reach that result is to fall in love with the process of writing.

If you want the world to know about your business, then it would be great to be featured in Forbes magazine. But the only way to reach that result is to fall in love with the process of marketing.

If you want to be in the best shape of your life, then losing 20 pounds might be necessary. But the only way to reach that result is to fall in love with the process of eating healthy and exercising consistently.

If you want to become significantly better at anything, you have to fall in love with the process of doing it. You have to fall in love with building the identity of someone who does the work, rather than merely dreaming about the results that you want.

In other words...

Fall in love with boredom. Fall in love with repetition and practice. Fall in love with the process of what you do and let the results take care of themselves.

# Sources

1. Lewin's Equation was originally published in Kurt Lewin's 1936 book, Principles of Topological Psychology.
2. I was introduced to Trent Dyrsmid through my friend Nathan Barry. The quotes in this article come from an email exchange I had with Dyrsmid on April 1st, 2015 and April 2nd, 2015.
3. Related article: "Everybody already knows that" is very different from "Everybody already does that."
4. On a related note, visual cues can also be used to provide fear-based motivation. I have heard of weight loss clients moving glass marbles from one jar to another for each pound they lose. Once you move a marble over, you definitely don't want to move it back.
5. Ernesto Miranda didn't escape prison for long. He was soon sentenced to 20 to 25 years in prison for a robbery he committed during a separate crime.
6. I want to give credit to Brian Johnson for originally developing this drinking example and for sparking my research on bright-line rules, which led to this article. Thanks Brian!
7. Related reading: How to Say No, Resist Temptation, and Stick to Your Health Goals