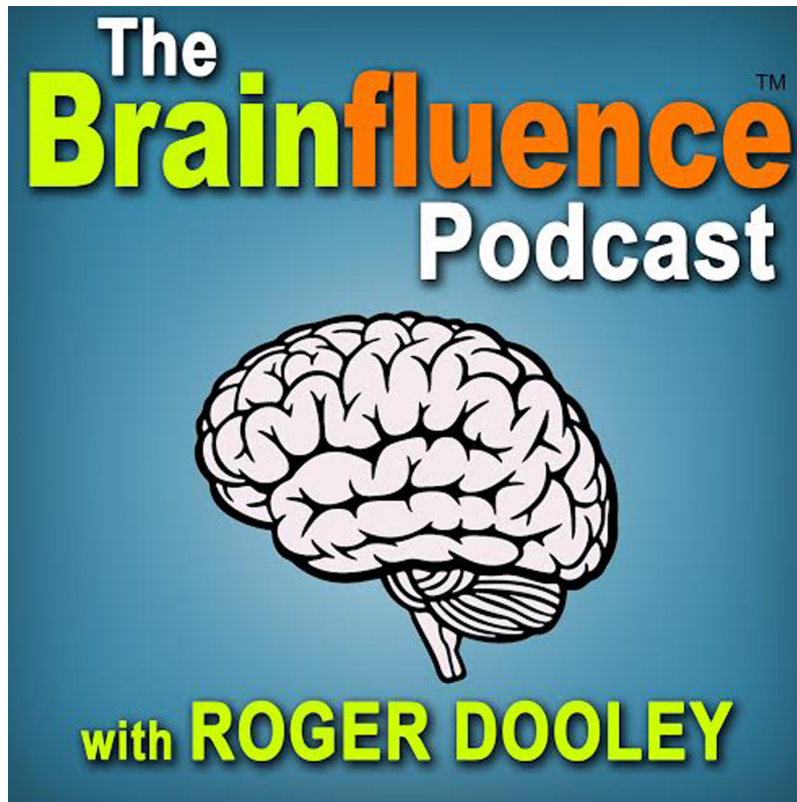


Atomic Habits with James Clear

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/james-clear-atomic-habits>



Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. I've known our guest this week since we both spoke at our mutual friend, Niriel's habit summit at Stanford a few years ago. James Clear is an author, entrepreneur and photographer. He writes about psychology, habit formation and peak performance, and is frequently published in outlets like TIME, Entrepreneur, Business Insider, Lifehacker and the Next Web. James's work has also been covered by USA Today, Forbes, Fast Company, INC, and US News. You may already be familiar with his work. His website gets a million visits per month, and his email list has hit 500,000 subscribers. James's new book is Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results. Welcome to the show, James.

James Clear: Hi Roger. Thanks so much for havin' me.

Roger Dooley: Great. So congratulations on the new book. Was being a habit expert an advantage when it came to writing a book, or did you have to battle distraction and other priorities like the rest of us?

James Clear: Yeah, well thank you. It feels great to have it done. I've said from the very beginning, I've been writing about habits for about five or six years, now. And I have never considered myself a master of the topic, and I think this makes my writing more accessible. I'm going through it just like everybody else. So I'm really ... Most of the things I write are really a reminder to myself, at some level. And

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through my own experiments with building better habits as an athlete, I played baseball through college; as a weight lifter, I do some competitive weightlifting now; and as a photographer, I've done travel photography in a little over 30 countries, now; and as a writer, as someone who's published 300 plus articles, now, at jamesclear.com.

I've kinda had a good vantage point to look at how habits are formed in a variety of different areas. And I think that's important. I don't really wanna be in my ivory tower, just kinda generating ideas on the topic. I wanna be in the thick of it. I wanna be trying it out myself and trying to build a better life for myself, then using those insights to share with others and hopefully spread some value around. So the short answer to your question is no, I struggle with it just like everybody else. But it's been fun to have to put the ideas into practice and practice what I preach.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, I'm sure your readers will be happy to know that these are actually field tested by you. Did you develop a particular writing habit that worked for you?

James Clear: Well, I have a couple different phases that my writing goes through. So the first phase is just idea generation, or tryin' to figure out what interests me, what I like to write about, what might make a good article or a good book. And so for that, I just kinda have a bank of notebook in Evernote where I catalog ideas. And there's probably 600 or 700 ideas that are in there right now, and it's just kinda anything that strikes me. Like, if there's somethin' that comes up in this conversation between us, then I'll just write a little note about it, and it'll be there for me when I

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start. And that helps a lot, because then I don't have to start from a blank slate.

But then when it comes to actually writing the article, my process is fairly similar in the beginning. I sit down each morning and then open up a document that I've already ... Where I have one of those ideas, and then try to use that to get a little momentum and get going. And my ritual is more or less the same. I wake up, take a shower, get dressed, get a glass of water, and then I open up the document and get right into it. I don't eat breakfast, I don't go for a walk or do anything else. I just try to ... I like to say my commute is ten seconds. As soon as I'm dressed, I try to get right to it. And that is really the ritual that gets me into it, and then once I get going, this is maybe just a little bit more about me, personally, but once I get a little bit of momentum on something, once I'm at least started, then I kinda get wrapped up in it, and I'll just keep going until it's finished.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I guess I've found kind of the same thing that, if you are ... Getting started can be difficult, but once you're sort of in the flow on the topic, that then it's actually hard to quit writing.

James Clear: Speaking of many habits is really similar. You can say that about running or anything else. If you're sitting on the couch thinking, "Oh, I should go for a three-mile run," then that seems intimidating, but once you've stepped out the door and started running, well, once you're a mile out, it doesn't actually take that much motivation to continue going. You're like, "I'm already out here, I'm gonna run back, too." So in a lot of ways, all the friction associated with habit, or let's say the bulk of the friction, is associated

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with the first step, with beginning. And once you've begun, it's much easier after that.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well, maybe for you. I've never really ... I don't run now, but I've never run for three miles and said, "Man, I think I'd like to run for two more. That'd be awesome." It's like, "Oh man, am I done yet?" But anyway, subtitle of Atomic Habits is Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results, and that echoes some of the other thinkers we've had on the show. Robert Cialdini coauthored the Small Big, which showed how small tweaks using behavioral science could have a big impact. Tom Peters, who was on just a few months ago wrote the Little Big Things. And I think you're all tapping into a basic truth that, doing the right small things can have an outside impact. And actually, I've seen, in your writing, the idea of 1% come up a couple of times. Probably the major way that you talk about in the book is 1% improvements. And then also, you've written about the 1% rule on your blog. Why don't you talk about these 1% issues?

James Clear: Well, the core philosophy here is that small changes compound over time. So the same way that money can accumulate through compound interest, you'll have the effects of your habits multiply over time. And it ends up generating sort of a non-linear effect. There are ... This can work, and this is true for something I talk about in the book a lot. This is true for both good and bad habits. So this effect of 1% improvements or 1% declines can either work for you or against you. And you see this in, for example, knowledge and productivity compound. So on any given day, getting one additional task done at work doesn't really count for a whole lot. But over the course of a career, that can end up being a really big difference between what you get done over your career and how

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you advance, and how a peer of relatively equal ability who doesn't get one extra thing done each day, how they advance their career.

Same thing is true for knowledge. Reading an additional book each month or each year doesn't seem like very much, but each book that you read gives you a new way to look at all the previous books you've read. It increases the surface area for you to make connections with old ideas. And it gives you a new way to reframe all the things you've previously learned. And so each one is not just one bit of knowledge, it's a new way to look at all of the knowledge. And so it ends up compounding more and more over time. But it's also true from a negative standpoint. For example, negative thoughts compound. The more that you see the world as selfish or angry or tyrannical, the more you can find evidence of people who act that way. And once you get locked into a negative thought loop like that, it just kinda spirals out of control.

So one of the core philosophies of the book, or core themes, is if these 1% changes, these small ways in how we look at the world, or how we arrange the items on our desk at work or kitchen counter at home, or the type of people that we surround ourselves with, these little adjustments can end up compounding to a very significant degree, then how do we go about designing a life that has hundreds, if not thousands of little 1% changes kind of nudging us in one direction or another?

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I know the classic example that you've talked about and I've written about is the British cycling team that was not particularly effective or successful until a new coach came in and started all these 1% improvements. Now, you can't really quantify

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some of these as being exactly 1%, but basically, he implemented lots and lots of tiny little changes that ended up, as you say, compounding so that whether it was ... Well, why don't you give some of the things that he did? You're well familiar with that topic.

James Clear: Yeah, it's kind of a fascinating story. There's this guy named Dave Brailsford came in, and British cycling had been very mediocre for 100 plus years, at that point. They had never won a Tour de France, they I think won a single gold medal back in 1908. Brailsford started making all these 1% changes. They did things like, they swapped the tires out on a bike to make them slightly lighter. Or, they had to each ride or wear these electrically heated over shorts to kinda keep their muscles warm during training. They asked each rider to wear a biofeedback sensor so they could see how they responded to the training, and then adjust the workouts appropriately. Which, mostly, are things you would expect a professional cycling team to do.

But then they did a bunch of things you wouldn't expect a professional cycling team to do. Like they hired a surgeon to come in and teach each rider how to wash their hands to reduce the chances of catching flu. They split tested different types of massage gels to see which one led to the best form of muscle recovery for each rider. They even figured out what pillow or mattress led to the best night's sleep, for each rider. And then when they were at a big competition, they would bring those on the road with them to hotels. And Brailsford said, "If we can actually do this, if we can execute on all these little 1% changes related to cycling, then I think we could win Tour de France in five years." So he ended up being wrong. They won a Tour de France in three years. And then they

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repeated again the next year. And then, after one year off, they won again two more years in a row. So they won four out of the next five Tour de Frances. At the Olympics in London in 2012, they won 60% of the gold medals available. Same thing again, in 2016, Rio.

And this idea that these little 1% changes are not just a nice bonus on top of your performance, not just a little addition that, "Hey, it'd be great if we could do that," but actually can drive a meaningful difference between mediocre performance and absolutely excellent, top of the line performance, even at the highest level of competition. That, I think is somewhat hard for our brain to conceptualize, that these choices that seem insignificant in the moment end up meaning a lot in the long run. And that's one of the core points of Atomic Habits. And then the question is, "Okay, if that is true, how do we actually utilize that in our daily lives? How can I apply that to my work? How can I apply that to parenting or my family? How can I apply that to launching a new startup or building a more engaging product?" And there are ways to do that, ways to build a system of 1% continuous improvements in all areas of life. And that's kind of the core message that I'm trying to get across, and the applications that I'm trying to share.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. And i think that even beyond the sort of physical changes that might occur from these things, that there's probably a placebo effect involved, too. And of course, placebo effects are not phony. A person who experiences less pain because of placebo effect really does experience less pain.

James Clear: Right.

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Roger Dooley: So I think that just knowing that all of these things are happening probably is a boost in and of itself, but I think that probably most of us tolerate less than ideal conditions in our work and in our life. Maybe your computer's kinda slow and it crashes every now and then. Your desk chair's really uncomfortable, and they're all these little things that you say, "Well, that's not gonna make any real difference in the work I get done." But if you add up all those little things, I really can make a difference.

James Clear: There's a famous Greek parable called the Sorites paradox. And there're a couple different variations of it. But one variation of it is ... It goes like this: If you give a person a pile of ten coins and you call them rich, you would say, "Well, no I wouldn't." You'd say, "Well, what if you add one coin?" You would say, "Well, no, they're still not rich." And you'd say, "What if you add another and another and another?" And then, the punchline is, at some point, you have to admit that one coin could make a person rich, that they were not before, but now they are. This idea that a 1% change, could that improve your life? Could a 1% change transform your life? And you probably would say, "Well, no. Probably not. Changing my desk chair to one that's slightly more comfortable would not transform the way that I work." But if you add another and another and another, it's kind of the same thing. You can't say that one coin will make a person rich, but if you keep accumulating it, they will, at some point, become wealthy. And you can't say that a 1% change will transform your team or your workplace or your productivity on any given day. But, if you stay committed to making those, then at some point, it will.

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And I kind of ... I like to equate it to ... You can imagine your life being represented by a set of scales, like the scales of justice. You know? You have 'em, they're kind on two sides, here. Each time that you add one good habit to your life, you make a small, 1% change to the positive side of the system. It's like adding a grain of sand to the positive side of the scale. Even if you are very unhappy with your life right now, you feel like your results are not what you want, you're not as productive as you want, you're unhealthy, you feel like you're out of shape, or a variety of other things, right now, the weight of that system, the scale is tipped in favor of the negative side. But if you keep making those 1% changes and adding little grains of sand, then eventually, you shift the weight of the system. And this, I think, is the punchline of Small Habits and why continuous improvements and 1% changes can make a big difference. It's not that any one change transforms things. It's that if you adopt a philosophy of continuous improvement, if you're willing to commit to that type of lifestyle and that type of ideal, if you make that a principle that you're willing to live by, then, in fact, it can make a really big difference over the long run.

Roger Dooley: You know, James, I think behavioral scientists would probably say that habits are usually a good thing. They save our brain from a lot of extra effort in having to evaluate everything from scratch every time we encounter something. So if I'm in the habit of stopping at Starbucks every morning on the way to work, I don't have to pause to evaluate all the different coffee opportunities I might have, different driving routes I might take, and maybe even alternatives to coffee, like tea or soft drinks. A habit sort of takes care of that for me. And even if maybe

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Starbucks isn't a great habit, at least it's saving some effort.

Now, you identify for steps to habit formation. What are they?

James Clear: Yeah, so first, just to reiterate a point you just made there, that's definitely true. The ultimate purpose of habits is to solve the problems that we face in life, and to do it as efficiently as possible. So your point about, while going to Starbucks may not be the healthiest possible habit, from the brain's standpoint, we prioritize immediate outcomes over delayed ones. So this is commonly called behavioral economics, time and consistency, or hyperbolic discounting, goes by a couple different names. But the point that we value immediate rewards is that we value immediate solutions to the problems that we face. So if you have a problem where you need to feel energetic each morning, and getting a coffee at Starbucks makes you feel that way, then it provides an immediate solution to the problem you're facing. And eventually, the brain learns to automate whatever solutions are repeated. And this is kind of one of the ... It sounds simple to say, but it's sort of a deep and important thing to understand, that whatever habits fill your life right now were the original way you learned to solve a problem, but they're not necessarily the optimal way to solve that problem.

So for one person, when they feel stressed, they may have learned that biting their nails relieves anxiety. For another person, they may have learned that smoking a cigarette relieves anxiety. For a third person, they may've learned that going for a run relieves anxiety. And all of those are possible solutions to that problem that you're facing, but some of them are healthier, in the long run,

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than others. And so taking a good look at your current habits and realizing the original way that I learned this is not necessarily the optimal way, allows you to ... I don't know, you don't have to judge yourself as hard. Your brain is just working to solve the things that you face. And so now it's your job to kinda reassess and try to come up with a new or more optimal solution to that problem. As you do that, you can use these four laws of behavior change to implement the new or more optimal solution in an effective way.

And so the four laws that you just asked about are: Number one, make it obvious. Number two, make it attractive. Number three, make it easy. And number four, make it satisfying. And these four laws are sort of like levers that you can pull. And when the levers are in the right positions, building good habits are easy, and when the levers are in the wrong positions, building better habits is very difficult, if not impossible. So many of the successful products that you see in the world, they optimize a couple of these different levers, if not all four. So many of the people that appear to be paragons of willpower and grit and perseverance and have this incredible ability to stick to better habits, in many cases, they're operating in an environment where those four things make it obviously, make it attractive, make it easy, make it satisfying, are working for them rather than against them.

I really believe that people have different abilities and different talents. There's a variance in the genetic code between people, but there's not as much difference as you might think between people who perform at a high level and people who don't. It's just that the people

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performing at high level often have those four things working for them rather than against them.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, you made an important point there, that I don't wanna let slip by. You talked about environment and contrasting that with motivation, because people think that, "Wow, okay if I want to get in shape," or, "If I want to accomplish some task or break a habit, I've really gotta be motivated. I've gotta have willpower." And in fact, as you're alluding to, James, often it's the environment that is way more important in determining whether you succeed or fail. Because I could have great motivation not to eat potato chips, but if there's an open bag on the counter in front of me, my motivation is probably not gonna overcome the draw of those tasty chips. But, if I don't have them in the house or maybe if they're in a sealed bag in a cupboard, I would be more likely to succeed. And that really applies to both positive habit formation and negative habit breaking. Right?

James Clear: Well, it's an important point, and it's an easy one to overlook. It's also a great example of 1% changes. B.J. Fogg, the professor at Stanford University, also a great writer and thinker about habits, he has a story about this concept he calls designing for laziness, and basically, he liked eating popcorn, enjoys popcorn, but he just didn't wanna eat as much of it, and so he took it out of his pantry, walked down the hallway and went into the garage, and then climbed up the ladder and put the popcorn on the highest shelf in the garage. And his point is, if I really want it, I can still go out and get it. It's only gonna take 60 seconds, but if I'm designing the environment for my default behavior, for my lazy action, for what I'm gonna do when it's most convenient, I'm not gonna go out and get the popcorn. It's a great example of

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this concept of increasing friction, or changing the friction in your environment. You want to reduce friction as much as possible when it's associated with good habits, so you wanna put fewer steps between you and the good habits. And you wanna put more steps, or increase friction between you and the bad habits.

So if you wish you practice guitar more, then take your guitar stand out and put it in the middle of the living room, and keep your guitar right there so that it's obvious and it's easy for you to get to it. That's leveraging the first and third laws of behavior changed I mentioned earlier, make it obvious, make it easy. But you can invert that rule, as well, and make things harder for you to get to, or reduce exposure, which is kinda what you're referencing here.

You walk into pretty much any living room in america, and where do all the couches and chairs face? They all look at the television. And so what is that room designed to get you to do? It's designed to get you to watch TV. And there are a variety of steps you could take to reduce that. You could take the television and put it inside a wall unit or some kind of cabinet so you don't see it, you have to open the doors to look at it. You could unplug the television after each use and then only plug it back in to watch TV if you can the name of the show that you wanna watch out loud, kinda reduce mindless channel surfing. You could take the remote control and remove it from the end table or the coffee table and put it inside a drawer, and put a book in its place. Again, making it less obviously, or making it invisible for you to see. If you really wanna be extreme, you could take the TV off the wall, unplug it, and put it in the closet, and then only take it out when you really wanna get it. And that sounds extreme, but you can

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see the point here, that the greater the friction is, the less likely you're gonna be to fall into that behavior.

This is true of businesses as well. If you look at pretty much any business or any product that is doing well, almost always, they find some point of friction in our lives, even if it's a point of friction that you aren't even aware of, or didn't even really think about, and they find a way to reduce it. If you take ... Just a couple years ago, people had CDs that they would put into a CD player to listen to music, and then along came Napster and Spotify and Apple Music and all these online platforms that allow you to get music. Well, then that was more convenient, more frictionless, more options for music, so people are gonna do that. But then recently, we've had these voice activated speakers like Amazon Echo or Google Home, and now you can just say, "Play country music," and it'll start playing a playlist. And that is even less friction than logging onto Spotify and selecting a playlist to play. And so that progression in pretty much all areas of business is just going to continue. How can we reduce points of friction and let you do the same thing you always wanted to do, but with even less effort than before? Environment design is kind of a way to hack that for your own life.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well pretty soon, Alexa'll be able to read your mind and decide that James is ready for some country music and just start playing it, for the ultimate in friction reduction. But yeah, you mentioned B. J. Fogg, he has created his Fogg behavior model, and it says you need motivation, ability and a trigger to make something happen. And what you were talking about there, when you say hide the remote control or put the popcorn up on a shelf in the garage, you're really addressing two of those things. You're not necessarily changing your

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motivation, but first of all, you are reducing the trigger, because you're not gonna see that right in front of you. You have to go look at it. Although you may have the trigger going that you're hungry or you're bored, so you might wanna watch TV. But by removing it from where you can see it, you're reducing the trigger effect. And then also, the ability is decreasing, it's making it more difficult. So yeah, that all makes sense, and very consistent with Fogg's model.

James Clear: I think, yeah, so that's absolutely right. And his model's great in that sense that it helps you understand when a behavior's going to occur. This is a key distinction I like to make about the four laws of behavior change. The first three make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, are about getting a behavior to occur the first time. So making it obvious means making cue obvious, having some kind of trigger. Making it attractive means having some level of motivation or desire to do it. And then making it easy is about increasing your ability, or making it as easy as possible, as frictionless as possible to do the behavior. And if those levers are in the right position, if those laws are working for you, you will do something. You're much more likely to follow through with that behavior.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

James Clear: However, you need the fourth stage, make it satisfying, to have a reason to repeat the behavior. So you can do something once, because those three things are there, but if you don't have some level of satisfaction, if you don't feel successful after performing the behavior, if you don't get a reward or feel like it solved the problem that you were facing, then you have no reason to repeat it

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again in the future. And so in that way, the ending of the behavior is a very important thing for kind of closing the habit loop and repeating it the next time around.

Roger Dooley: So what would an example of that be? In other words, say semi-unpleasant activity like working out ... I mean, some people really seem to enjoy it, but for a lot of people, it's a chore, and it's a time consuming thing that they prefer to be perhaps doing something else. The making it attractive part, I assume, would mean sort of visualizing the end goal of being healthy, being fit, being more attractive, and so on. Would that part be correct?

James Clear: So that can be one way to do it. Another way to think about it is, your energy changes throughout the day. So you'd wanna ask yourself to workout at a time when you have the energy and the space to do so. Working out is maybe not an attractive thing to do at, say, 10:30 in the morning, because you have a meeting at 11:00, and you don't have that much time left, and you're gonna be sweaty, and you wanna make sure that you look presentable for the meeting, and so on. That's kind of an extreme example, but my point is just that at different times of the day, different behaviors are attractive to us for different reasons. So making sure that you ask yourself to do it at the right time is also another key way to make it attractive.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So what would the reward phase for that look like, potentially?

James Clear: Yeah, so it's a good question. You can do things like using reinforcement to provide some kind of a reward. So the first thing I wanna say is, the key here is not to provide any reward, but to provide an immediate reward.

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The more ... And there's a variety of research that shows this. The more immediate a reward or a punishment is, the more likely we are to learn to repeat or avoid that behavior in the future.

So you could say it's something like, as soon as I finish my workout, I go and get my favorite smoothie, or something like that. Which, that could potentially work, but there are actually, I think, two other methods that are more effective in the long run.

so the first one is social norms, or becoming part of a group. The way that I like to phrase it is, join a group where the desired behavior is your normal behavior. And so, there are many people who feel like working out is a sacrifice, or a struggle. It's annoying. It requires effort and energy. But then there are also plenty of people who, it doesn't feel like a sacrifice to them. It's just normal. And if you can find a group of people that are like that, and this piece is, I think the caveat or the key to making it work, is you already have something in common with that group.

So for example, to give you a fitness example, my friend Steve Kamb runs a comp called NerdFitness. And NerdFitness is all for sort of people who love Star Wars and Batman and Spiderman, and comics, and any kind of nerdy thing, who also are interested in getting in shape. And the great thing about this is that it provides a community where you may feel out of touch when you're in the gym, you may feel like you're being judged, you may not feel comfortable. And all of those feelings, that's not feeling successful. That's not a reward. It's not satisfying. It's not a reason to repeat it. However, if you know that going to the gym means you get to talk about Star Wars with your friend, or that you get to geek out

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about the latest Marvel movie, then that is kinda satisfying. It gives you a reason to belong there, it gives you a reason to hang out with those people. And especially if you can get through sort of this little dip in the beginning, let's say for a month or two or three, and you start to build friendships there, then the immediate reward is, "I'm going to the gym 'cause I get to hang out with my friends." And that is far more powerful than just trying to come up with a reason like getting yourself a smoothie or something like that.

Because the human brain is wired to want to belong. We are tribal. Our ancestors were tribal. And so to be able to satisfy that urge is a very satisfying feeling. So that's the first option.

The second option is, the ultimate form of immediate gratification or immediate satisfaction is a confirmation of your identity. So this is something I talk about in chapter two of the book, a concept that I call identity-based habits, which is this idea that each action that you take is like a vote for the type of person that you wanna become. So if you study Spanish every Wednesday night for 20 minutes, then you are casting votes for being a studious person. And eventually, after you cast enough votes, you start to think, "Yeah, I'm the type of person that studies on time," or, "I'm the type of person that puts effort into this." As you continue to improve those skills, then you start to accumulate evidence for, "I'm the type of person that's good at Spanish." And the same thing is true for casting votes of going to the gym, or something like that.

And this also ties in with what we talked about earlier, these 1% improvements, these little habit changes, these atomic habits, as I like to call them, which is that, you

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don't need to be doing something super significant. You just need to do something that is casting a vote for that desired identity. And eventually, once you have enough evidence accumulated and you believe that you're that type of person, you have a strong reason to continue that behavior. And it feels very satisfying to be you, to maintain consistency with the type of person that you already see yourself to be. This comes back to shielding these commitment and consistency principle, which is, as you continue to provide evidence of being the type of person that doesn't miss workouts for example, well going to the gym on Wednesday feels great. Because it's like, "Yeah, this is the type of person that I am." And that, I think, is the ultimate form of behavior change. True behavior change is identity change, because once you're acting in alignment with the type of person that you believe yourself to be, you're no longer presuming behavior change. You're just being you. And that's a really powerful place to get to, and I think the best way to get there is to accumulate evidence through a bunch of 1% changes and small habits.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. That reminds me, a friend who's an author who also is quite active, exercising, running, swimming, and so on, and practically on a daily basis, he will post on Instagram, screenshots of his fitness tracker showing that he ran five miles in however many minutes and so on. And I think that ties in well with what you're saying, that it is sort of emphasizing that part of his persona, and maybe involving what you talked about before, a little bit of community too, where even vicariously, some of his friends can comment on his progress and so on. So it's really sort of a double whammy that may actually be helping him stick with his program.

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James Clear: Yeah, every time he posts that picture, he thinks, "Oh, I'm the type of person who runs." You know? Like, "I am ... " And this really is where you're trying to get to. The goal is not to write a book, the goal is to become a writer. The goal is not to run a marathon, the goal is to become a runner. And once you adopt that identity, then you have every reason in the world to continue, because that's just who you think you are.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. Jumping back to another B.J. Fogg idea, why don't you explain the concept of habit stacking? I think that's a fairly persuasive thing that, in terms of incorporating new habits into your life.

James Clear: Yeah, this is a great time to talk about it. I feel like we've covered enough ground, now, if you're still with us listening, you probably think, "Okay, yeah. 1% changes and small habits make a big difference." So then the question is, what's a good way to get started? And habit stacking is a great way to do this.

So a habit stack is sort of a special form of the implementation intention, which, there're hundreds of studies on implementation intentions and how they work and why they're effective. But, the core idea is this: You take a habit that you already have, that you're currently doing, and then you stack a new behavior on top of it. And so, as you mentioned, B.J. Fogg is kind of the one who popularized this approach. And so a simple example would be, after I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for 60 seconds. So you use your current habit, or something you already do everyday, making your cup of coffee, and then you stack your new or desired habit on top of it, so the old habit or the current habit becomes the cue for the new one.

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And once you get good, you can start to create a larger stack, like this. So you make a little chain. So it's like, after I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for 60 seconds. After I meditate for 60 seconds, I will write down the five most important things for me to do today. After I write down my five most important items, I will begin working on the first one immediately. So that little stack, that could be a morning routine. That could be the thing that you use to kinda get kick started each morning. And it's great, because it's already anchored in something you do each day, so you know that you're gonna do the first thing, making that cup of coffee. It uses the momentum of getting going and starting something small, to sorta create a set of rules for yourself to follow. That simple rule set can then become the thing that guides you and gets you moving in the right direction.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. And I can personally attest to that, because I know I've had mixed success in incorporating things like meditation or spending, say 20 minutes doing Duolingo language training into my routine, and when I have been successful, it's when I was able to attach those habits to something else. So immediately after breakfast, I would do those two things, or some other trigger point that was pretty much the same everyday. Because everyday, you wake up, you brush your teeth, maybe do some different things. I don't have breakfast immediately, I write for a while, but when I was able to associate that, those activities with another habit, it worked pretty well. But when it was, "Well, okay, I'm gonna have to remember to do this," they rarely got done. And it wasn't that I didn't want to do them, or didn't wanna make the time, often it was just because I got so busy that I forgot about them and didn't do 'em. Or, if I thought

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about 'em, it was right before I needed to make a phone call or something of that nature, and so I couldn't do it. So that really works.

James Clear: I think it helps in two ways. In one way, it ... It reinforces two kinda core points about building better habits. The first is simplicity. It forces you to choose something that you could actually do in that moment. So often, when we dream about the results that we want, we think about something really, really big. But if your cue is gonna be after I make my morning cup of coffee, by definition, the habit has to be something that you could actually do in that space, right there in your kitchen, or at that time of day when you could actually do it. So it forces you to downscale, a little bit.

And then the second thing that it does, is it provides stability. And this is something that's essential for any habit to form. You need repeated context. If your brain is always ... This is one reason why it's hard to build habits when you're traveling a lot, for your job or something. If you're always on the road and the context is always changing, then your brain has very few cues that are stable that it can remember and start to automate the process of learning that. But eventually, you are doing it in the same context every morning, walking into your kitchen becomes a cue to make the coffee, and making the coffee and being in the kitchen and the whole context itself becomes the trigger for the next thing of meditating, or whatever it is that you happen to be doing with that habit stack.

So the greater stability and the greater simplicity you have, with any given behavior, the more likely you are to

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be able to automate it, or at least do it with greater efficiency and consistency.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative) and you hit on starting small, there. That's really important, too, because when I start to do something, I say, "Okay, well I really wanna work on Spanish. So I'm gonna do have an hour of Duolingo every day." That's a harder habit to force yourself into than to starting off with five or ten minutes. And then if you can successfully incorporate that, then start extending it. In fact, you talk about the two-minute rule in the book. Sometimes just two minutes is enough. Right?

James Clear: Yeah. The core idea here is that the two-minute rule basically says no matter what habit you're trying to build, downscale it into a version that could last just two minutes or less. So do 30 minutes of yoga, becomes take out your yoga mat. Or, read one book every month becomes read one page. Or, do the laundry becomes fold one pair of socks. The idea is, and this loops back to some of the things we talked about earlier, once you get started, it's much easier to continue going. A lot of the friction is associated with the beginning of a task. And there's also a second reason to do this, to downscale, and fit it into just two minutes, which is, you can't improve something until it exists. And that's true about a habit, as well. You cannot optimize it until it's standardized. And so that idea of standardize before you optimize, I think it's incredibly important, and it's also easy to overlook. So often, we get wrapped up in the results that we want to achieve, our grand visions of success, that we're so focused on finding the perfect plan to lose weight, or the perfect plan to lift weights, or the perfect business idea to start, that we never allow ourselves to just get something as a foundation, and then improve from there.

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This idea of down scaling our habits into just two minutes helps center you and focus on, "Let me just make this the standard," and then once I'm getting my yoga mat out everyday without fail, then I can start to worry about whether I'm gonna be there for 30 minutes or not. But once I make sure that I read one page every day, then I can actually focus on whether I'm getting a book read each month. And so the key here is to make starting as easy as possible, and I think if it's longer than two minutes, it's probably too big.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, I think all of our listeners should be able to find two minutes to practice that one habit that they want to focus on, and I'm looking forward to hearing some great results from them, as they implement your ideas, James.

Let me remind our listeners that we are speaking with James Clear, author of the new book, Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results. James, how can people find you and your writing online?

James Clear: Oh, well thanks so much for havin' me. You can find all of my writing at jamesclear.com. If you'd like to check out the book itself, you can go to atomichabits.com. You'll be able to find the book as well as some additional free downloads and stuff. Yeah, thanks so much for listening.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well we will link there, and to any other resources we spoke about, on the show notes page at rogerDooley.com/podcast. And there'll be a text version of our conversation there, too.

James, thanks for being on the show.

James Clear: Thanks so much Roger. Appreciate it.

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