

How-to Guide: Building a Productive Habit

"We first make our habits, and then our habits make us" - John Dryden

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Pick One (and only one)

If you build more than one habit at a time you'll quit the hard and boring habits, and focus on the fun and sexy habits. You'll go from habit to habit without fully developing any one habit. Instead, focus on one productive habit that you'll want a year from now, just as much as you want today. Knowing that you'll want a habit a year from now helps you forget about all other habits.

"People do not decide their futures, they decide their habits and their habits decide their futures." - F. M. Alexander

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Scale back the Minimum Daily Requirement

Motivation fluctuates from day-to-day, hour-to-hour. Therefore, relying on motivation to execute a new habit is a bad strategy. To execute a habit consistently, scale the desired habit back to a tiny behavior that requires little motivation to initiate. Ex: Building the habit of writing 2000 words a day, starts by writing 50 words a day. The less overwhelming a habit is, the more likely it will stick.

"We don't rise to the level of our expectations, we fall to the level of our training." - Archilochos

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Write down the Explicit Behavior

According to research, writing down 'when' and 'where' you will take action increases your odds of taking action by a factor of three. Therefore, before taking on a new habit, write out the following behavior statement and provide specific details in the bracketed sections: "Everyday, at/after [TIME or EXISTING HABIT], I will go to [LOCATION] and start [INITIAL ACTION]."

"I sit at my typewriter every morning at 8 AM in case something happens." - Flannery O'Connor

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Don't miss 2 in a row

Failing to execute a daily habit one day, reduces the odds of retaining that habit by 5%. Failing to execute a habit 2 days in a row, reduces the odds of retaining that habit by 55%! Miss more than 2 days and you can kiss your new habit goodbye. Therefore, never miss doing the minimum daily requirement for 2 days in a row. If you miss one day, make it a priority for the next day.

"Be boring and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work" - Gustave Flaubert

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Set the Stakes

According to Stickk.com, people who set goals with money on the line are twice as likely to reach their goal. To increase your odds of successfully building a habit, tell a friend exactly what you'll give up if you fail to do the daily minimum requirement more than two days in a row (money, or an experience you're looking forward to). Put it in writing to increase your accountability.

"Success is nothing more than a few simple disciplines, practiced every day." - Jim Rohn

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Don't Trust it (yet)

Never trust a habit until it feels automatic to initiate. According to research it takes an average of 66 days for a new behavior to become automatic. Until you can execute a habit without thinking about it and it feels weird not to do it (like not brushing your teeth in the morning), maintain the tiny minimum daily requirement and avoid focusing on any other habits.

"I fear not the man who has practiced 10 000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10 000 times." - Bruce Lee

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When automatic: Promote

When a habit feels automatic we can raise the daily minimum requirement. Reading 1 page a day turns in 5, then 10, then 20, etc. Increase the requirement each week until you hit your target.