

# **Willpower & Habit Hacks:**

36 Science-Backed Hacks To Help You Live More Effectively

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**HACKTHATHABIT**

# Introduction

*"On Monday, I'm cutting out sugar."*

*"This week I'm getting up at 6 to go to the gym before work every day."*

*"I'll start tomorrow..."*

How many times have you promised you'd do something...only to give up halfway (or not even start)?

We start with great intentions:

- You're going to get abs for summer...so you'll work out every day.
- You're going to look after your teeth...so next month you'll start flossing.
- You're going to lose weight...so you're going to stop snacking right before bed.

Then after a couple of weeks (or days) of doing this...**you stop.**

Your alarm goes off at 6 for the gym, and you go back to sleep. You pop open your favorite salty chips. You get distracted meditating as it feels like a waste of time, so you stop doing it.

There's a reason we stop. Because the WAY we try to change is (usually) wrong.

I used to think that mindset *was* the battle, that all I needed was more grit and willpower, that I could do anything if I put my mind to it...but that's a losing game (for most of us, #Goggins)

The truth is that mindset is important, but not sufficient. Willpower is necessary, but not all we need. We expect a *lot* from our willpower. The just-do-it-mentality is not your friend. Because it's only there for you sometimes, and it's volatile as hell.

We need a strategy that can help us day...  
after day...  
after day...  
*reliably.*

# Enter: **Habits.**

Habits are the way for you to create the life you want. A life where all the behaviors and actions you know you should do come easily and effortlessly (getting there is the difficult part, but we've got ya covered!).

We've curated **36 science-based hacks** that can help you turn your best intentions into actual behaviors (and eventually effortless habits).

Some are quick 2-minute changes. Others require more effort and planning. But all of them can help you in one way or another.

You'll discover how to...

- Be more productive in your work
- Meditate regularly without thinking about it
- Exercise automatically (without the dread)

Imagine waking up just after dawn feeling fully rested. It's quiet. The only sound comes from a pigeon cooing just outside your window.

You have 90 minutes to yourself. This is *your* spacetime.

Your spacetime to do exactly as you wish.

What do you do?

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# Who am I?

I'm Chris Greene, founder of **HACKTHATHABIT** where we help you live more effectively.

For the past 5 years, I've helped thousands of people live more effectively using behavioral design, habits, and neuroscience. I've used others' findings from books, podcasts, and research papers on all things behavior to create (and update) a framework for living simply and deliberately. (It's called The Economy of Behavior Control, validated by the world's leading researcher on willpower, Dr. Roy F. Baumeister. More on this later.)

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## Contents:

### Part 1: What are habits?

#### [Take me to Part 1]

- [What are they?](#)
- [How do they work?](#)
- [Habit Stacking](#)
- [Planning](#)

### Part 2: 8 strategies to create a habit hacking environment

#### [Take me to Part 2]

- [Sleep](#)
- [Naps](#)
- [Relaxation](#)
- [Heart Rate Variability \(HRV\)](#)
- [Food](#)
- [TV](#)
- [Breathing](#)
- [Context](#)

## Part 3: 5 ways your emotions improve your self-discipline

### [Take me to Part 3]

- [YouTube](#)
- [Gratitude](#)
- [Pride](#)
- [Silver Lining](#)
- [Surfing the Urge](#)

## Part 4: 10 mental hacks to form new habits

### [Take me to Part 4]

- [Planning - 5 Strategies](#)
  - [Batching](#)
  - [Accountability](#)
  - [Deciding Up The Decision Delta](#)
  - [Temporal Discounting](#)
  - [The Zeigarnik Effect](#)
  - [Reframing](#)
  - [How to Handle Cravings](#)
  - [How To Set Upper Limits](#)
  - [10 Ways to Beat Procrastination](#)
-

# Part 1: What are habits?

*“Chains of habit are too light to be felt until they are too heavy to be broken.” – Warren Buffett*

It’s such common knowledge that we should have good habits that sometimes we forget to question *why*...or *what* they even are. We generally don’t notice habits until:

- They stop, (for whatever reason). For example, you go on holiday and get out of the habit of waking up at 6:30am every day.
- You’re working towards a new goal, like losing weight.
- Days or weeks go by and you realize you haven’t done what you set out to (because habits are sneaky).

So, why are habits worth paying attention to?

I didn’t pay attention to habits for years because I’d always assumed that my mindset was what needed changing, that I was mentally weak or didn’t have enough willpower.

But it wasn’t until I really started to research human behavior and learned why we do what we do that it became clear: habits are the key to **RELIABLE**, consistent behavior. Willpower is not the issue. Your habits are. And the sooner you understand the relationship between willpower and habits, the better off you’re going to be.

See, habits are the foundation to building the life you want. And there are examples of this all around us.

We all know people who work out every day, do their tasks right away, and seemingly manage to juggle ten projects at once. They look fantastic, have a sparkling social life, *and* spend time with family.

I used to think those people were a different breed, cut from a different cloth, god-like, and that I didn’t have the work ethic for that.

Then, I learned their secret. **Supportive habits.**

Habits don’t require willpower to be performed or maintained. For example:

- If you make exercising a habit, you will waste less willpower motivating yourself to go to the gym and/or feeling guilty for not going. You'll simply go without thinking.
- If you make healthy eating a habit, losing or maintaining weight feels easier because it requires less willpower to do—less mental effort. No more mental struggle over what you should eat: you know exactly what to eat, how much, and when. You eat healthily on autopilot, no longer craving a chocolate bar—or how to [surf the urge](#) if you do get that craving.
- If you make being productive a habit, you will storm through tasks. It becomes natural to complete projects and tick off goals.

Habits are the tool to build the life you want. So the real question is: **how exactly do you want to live your life?**

## What are habits?

A bit more on the science, if you're not interested, [skip straight to the strategies](#)

Simply put, habits can be thought of as automatic, unconscious behaviors we exhibit when we're "on autopilot."

Behaviors repeated so many times they've become hardwired into our neural circuitry, making them the path of least resistance and so our default option<sup>1</sup>.

If we're deliberate about how we create them, habits help us behave as we intend to.

And because they are automatic and require no willpower to do (just to be *created*), they stick—even when we're tired or mentally drained. Habits are lifesavers when we're at our worst.

Habits also have momentum, so unless they're deliberately replaced, they will remain more or less the same for long periods of time. For example:

- Brushing your teeth before you go to bed
- Brushing your teeth too hard

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<sup>1</sup> Neal, David T., Wendy Wood, and Jeffrey M. Quinn. "Habits—A Repeat Performance." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15, no. 4 (2006): 198–202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2006.00435.x>

- The way you shower
- Flossing
- Smoking
- Nail-biting
- Playing with your hair
- Watching TV after work
- Checking social media
- Constantly checking your email/slack
- Exercising before work
- Gratitude journaling
- Daily stretching
- Self talk
- Whether or not you'll talk to the store clerk
- And so the automatic, unconscious behaviors go...

## How do habits work?

Habits work in a simple loop: Cue → Routine → Reward.

According to Charles Duhigg, author of [The Power of Habit](#), the habit loop is a process that goes like this (formatting is mine)<sup>2</sup>:

- “First, there is a **cue**, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use.”
- “Then there is the **routine**, which can be physical or mental or emotional.”
- “Finally, there is a **reward**, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future.”

Let's **DuhIG** into this more:

- **Cue**: Also known as the trigger or reminder. It can be emotional, physical, environmental, internal...whatever kicks our brain into specific habit programs.
- **Routine**: This is the habit, the automatic behavior that is set in motion by the cue.
- **Reward**: In its most basic sense, this happens in the form of a dopamine release in your brain. Even bad habits serve you in some way. Smoking calms you down.

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<sup>2</sup> Duhigg, Charles. [The Power of Habit](#): Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014, page 39.



Overeating eases anxiety. Binge drinking helps you forget. Mostly, they reduce the *craving*<sup>\*3</sup> that is created by the cue.

For example:

- You receive an aggressive email from a client that makes you stressed (cue)
- You automatically look for something sugary (routine)
- Eating the sugar gives you a boost of dopamine and you feel better (reward)

## Habit stacking<sup>4</sup>

Habit stacking, also known as “habit chaining”, is when you create a string of habits to create a routine.

Simply put, the “cue” for one habit is the completion of another. For example, the cue for my stretching is the finishing of my morning smoothie.

Habit stacking works because you take advantage of habits you already have and add in new ones. The goal is to remove the newly formed habit from your cognitive load, ie: you don’t think about it. It gives you a simple set of rules that guide future behavior.

We often overestimate the amount of willpower to create or replace a habit, which usually stops us from starting in the first place. It’s hard for us to imagine something becoming *easier*—requiring less willpower to do—because we use our current ability to forecast the difficulty. Habit stacking makes it easier to do. It’s a fantastic way to build new habits and make behavior changes stick.

### Here’s how to stack your habits:

Identify a current habit you have, then add your new behavior before or after it. The habit stacking formula is:

*Right after I finish [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT]<sup>5</sup>.*

For example:

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<sup>3</sup> “Craving” is an extra step James Clear added to the Habit Loop—he’s the habit expert who authored [Atomic Habits](#) and is someone worth checking out. Also, hat tip to him for being the first [blog](#) I devoured on habits).

<sup>4</sup> This method was created by BJ Fogg as part of his [Tiny Habits program](#).

<sup>5</sup> James Clear. “Habit Stacking”. <https://jamesclear.com/habit-stacking>

- After I shower in the morning, I will drink a large glass of water. After I drink a large glass of water, I will floss my teeth. After I floss, I will brush my teeth.
- After I get into bed Sunday evening, I will tell my partner one thing I love about them. After that, I will turn off the lights. After that I will fall asleep.
- After I work out, I will stretch for 10 minutes. After I stretch, I will shower. After I shower, I will weigh myself.

When and where you try to stack on a new habit makes a huge difference. 7AM on a Tuesday with three kids running around before school might not be the best time. 8AM on a Sunday when everyone is still asleep...this could be the perfect time to add in listening to a conversational Spanish podcast on the way to your local cafe for your habitual coffee.

## Changing habits: create a specific plan

When you create and write down a specific plan that includes *when* and *where* you intend to start a new habit, you're much more likely to follow through with it<sup>6 7</sup>.

It's important to know (and deliberately create) the cues that trigger your habits. Simple, obvious, and visual cues work best. (If you want more on this, take our free course on habits [here](#).)

A target habit of doing 10 pushups after you've finished work sounds like a good cue, but isn't clear: what is the sign you've finished work?

Now compare that with: "I will do 10 pushups right after I close my laptop when I'm done working".

When creating a plan to develop a new habit, the more specific you can be the better. Including rewards.

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<sup>6</sup> Milne, Sarah, Sheina Orbell and Paschal Sheeran. "Combining Motivational and Volitional Interventions to Promote Exercise Participation: Protection Motivation Theory and Implementation Intentions." *British Journal of Health Psychology* 7 (2002): 163–184. [10.1348/135910702169420](https://doi.org/10.1348/135910702169420).

<sup>7</sup> Locke, Edwin and Gary Latham. "Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation: A 35-Year Odyssey." *American Psychologist* 57, no. 9 (2002): 705–717. [10.1037//0003-066x.57.9.705](https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.57.9.705).

Rewards spark dopamine in your brain. When you associate starting a new habit with the pleasure from a reward, you're more likely to do it again in the future<sup>8</sup>.

An example of a reward is self-praise. Karen Pryor, author of [\*Don't Shoot the Dog!: The New Art of Teaching and Training\*](#), found praise positively affects performance and motivates us to continue trying. She discovered the power of positive reinforcement when she revolutionized animal training by pioneering force-free training methods working with dolphins in the 1960s.

When we create a positive reinforcer, such as self-praise, it “tends to increase the probability that the act will occur again”<sup>9</sup>. Here's a simplified explanation: dopamine = good. Release dopamine with positive self-talk *during* and *immediately after* completing your behavior.

Find out for yourself what happens when you start to praise yourself for doing something new or different, like going to the gym before work. Consciously congratulate yourself for getting there and working out. The new habit (working out) becomes associated with happiness (from self-praise). You're more likely to stick to it and continue.

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<sup>8</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. [\*The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It\*](#). New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Pryor, K. [\*Don't Shoot the Dog!: The New Art of Teaching and Training\*](#). New York: Bantam USA; 2Rev Ed edition, 1999). Page 5.

# Part 2: 8 strategies to create a habit hacking environment

[\[Take me back to Contents\]](#)

*“Self-control will be most effective if you take good basic care of your body, starting with diet and sleep”. – “[Willpower](#)” by Roy F Baumeister and John Tierney*

**Quick note:** sleeping & eating are the two primary ways we “work” in the Economy of Behavior Control (EBC), that we mentioned in the beginning of this guide. Simply put, “working” in the EBC is how we replenish, or *earn*, our currency (blood sugar / willpower). If you want to learn more about the EBC, **watch our 15-min explanation on YouTube**.

Our online and offline environment plays a huge role in helping us make or break habits. Setting your surroundings up for success makes it a lot easier turning your intentions into behavior.

**Here are 8 strategies you can use to create an environment that supports you.**

## 1. Get enough sleep

Have you noticed when you’re tired, the next day feels like trudging through mud? Ev-er-y ac-tion is slow-er. And hard-er. And you make more mistakes.

Maybe you stayed up late watching Netflix or getting lost on Instagram. Or maybe you went to bed early, but then tossed and turned all night, not getting a wink.

1 in 3 adults doesn’t get enough sleep<sup>10</sup>. We don’t take sleep seriously enough and are willingly burning the candle at both ends. This is bad news for our willpower and self-control on the whole.

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<sup>10</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *1 in 3 adults don’t get enough sleep*. 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2016/p0215-enough-sleep.html>

When we don't get enough sleep, our body and brain have trouble processing and using glucose—which is their main form of energy<sup>11 12</sup> (and our currency in the EBC). Even just one night of poor sleep means cells find it hard to absorb glucose from the bloodstream.

Think of this like your car patching up holes in its gas tank when you sleep... if you don't sleep, the usage of fuel won't be as efficient.

It's why you feel exhausted. You don't have the energy. You aren't getting the glucose you need. And when the brain doesn't feel like it has plentiful resources, it becomes even *lazier* (nod to Dr. Daniel Kahneman).

It's also the reason you crave sugar and coffee when tired. You're satiating the urge to have more glucose, but it doesn't work. When sleep-deprived, our brain and body can't use glucose effectively. And, sugar is especially deceptive here because we think, "*Oh, glucose! Sugar! Boom!*" But simple sugars, like we typically overwhelm our coffee with, cause a short-term spike and crash in our blood sugar, which just compounds the issue of self-control.

Our willpower goes out the window.



Willpower is a finite resource<sup>13</sup>. You can 'run out' of it at the end of a long day. And we don't even realize how often we're exercising willpower. For instance, an average person makes 227 food choices in a day<sup>14</sup>. That's 227 decisions impacting your willpower. And that's just for food! Think about all of the other decisions you make on a daily basis that probably aren't that important to you.

**Hint:** this creates an opportunity for us to "save" in the EBC. Again, **YouTube**. Or, if you want the full process already curated and actionable steps to follow, take our paid course, [Life's Simplest Strategy \(\\$99\)](#).

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<sup>11</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. [The Willpower Instinct](#): How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It. New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Baumeister, Roy F., and John Tierney. [Willpower](#): Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Van Edwards, Vanessa. "Increase Your Willpower With These 10 Scientific Strategies." *Science of People*. <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/willpower/>

When we're sleep-deprived, there is a slowdown in activity in an area of our brain called the anterior cingulate cortex<sup>15</sup>. It's the area that monitors conflict and is crucial for self-control. The brain cells start to fire more slowly. They are exhausted. So our limited pool of mental resources is even smaller to start.

It's part of the reason we run out of willpower quickly when we're tired. It makes you more vulnerable to doing things that you'd prefer not to (and it's the reason why we go back to old behavior patterns).

Setting up an environment that supports you getting as much sleep as you need is possibly one of the biggest habit hacks there is.

A good night's sleep recharges our willpower circuits. Our brain cells wake up full of beans. We're ready and primed to take in as much glucose as we can.

Structure your life so you have enough time to sleep. Sleep deprivation can lead to several nasty effects<sup>16</sup>, with only one being a lack of willpower.

**TLDR:** when you're tired, sleep!

Struggling to get the 8 hours you need? Try this:

- Set a "bedtime" timer on your phone to remind you to put it down.
- At a set time every day, say 9PM, put your phone far away from you. Or, even better, in a different room. (Get an alarm clock to wake you up instead.)
- Set incentives to reward yourself. If you get into bed early enough to have 8 hours of sleep (including the time needed to fall asleep), then you get to have your favorite breakfast. If you don't...then it's dry toast.

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<sup>15</sup> O'Connor, Richard. *Rewire: Change Your Brain to Break Bad Habits, Overcome Addictions, Conquer Self-Destructive Behavior*. New York: Penguin Random House US, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Orzeł-Gryglewska, J. Consequences of sleep deprivation. *International Journal of Occupational Medicine and Environmental Health*, 23, no. 1 (2010): 95–114. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10001-010-0004-9>

## 2. The power of naps

Naps are not just for the kids. Power naps can reduce stress, improve your mood, and restore focus. They are the solution to a lack of glucose because of not getting enough sleep. Feeling sleep-deprived? Take a nap.

Daniel H. Pink, author of [When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing](#), found the best time for a nap is about 7 hours after waking. According to him, the steps to a perfect nap are<sup>17</sup>:

1. Create a quiet environment. Turn off notifications. Shut the door.
2. Down a cup of coffee. Yup, I had to reread that too. Pink calls the perfect nap a “nappuccino”: you drink coffee, nap, then wake up raring to go.
3. Set a timer for 25 minutes, then nap (caffeine takes roughly 25 minutes to start working). It’s the best amount of time to boost your alertness and mental capacity, without feeling sleepy. When you wake up, the effects of the nappuccino begin as the caffeine starts to kick in.

If you’re struggling to focus and feel you’re about to slip into old unwanted habits, take advantage of the nap hack. A “nappuccino” can leave you feeling productive and motivated to hit your goals.

## 3. Learn how to relax

Relaxing is a skill you can learn. And probably should learn: it’s a great hack to boost your productivity habits. When you’re relaxed, you are less likely to impulsively react to a trigger.

Pausing to respond rather than react is all that’s needed to make a conscious choice, rather than act on autopilot. It means you’re more likely to do the behavior you’d planned to do (for example, meditating) rather than doing the behavior that feels good right now (such as eating all that ice cream in the freezer...I see ya).

Our brains are constantly active. We jump from task to task without thinking.

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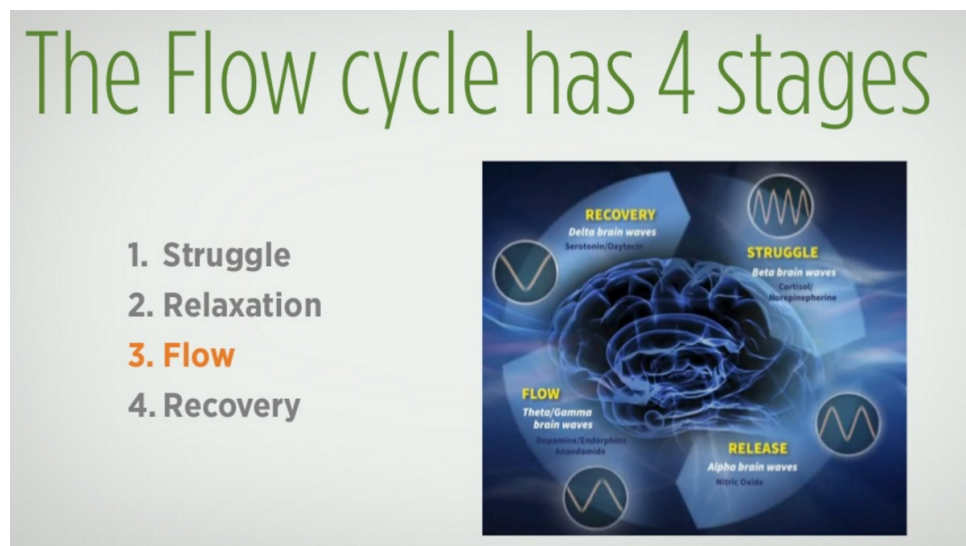
<sup>17</sup> Pink, Daniel H. "5 Secrets to Taking The Perfect Nap". *Dan Pink*.  
<https://www.danpink.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/nappuccino.pdf>

Learning how to relax gives your brain a break from planning the future or over-analyzing the past. You come back into the present moment and can simply just be.

Dr. Kelly McGonigal, author of [The Willpower Instinct](#), has an effective strategy to relax and boost willpower:

- Lie down on your back and slightly lift your legs. Put a pillow under your knees.
- Close your eyes. Start to slow down your breathing. Take deep breaths into your belly.
- Spend about 5-10 minutes in this position. Just breathe.

Being relaxed reduces the chances of procrastinating<sup>18</sup>. It's an important stage in the process that allows for a flow state (a state of mind when you become fully immersed and involved in an activity), as seen in the image below<sup>19</sup>.



## 4. Increase your Heart Rate Variability (HRV)

Increasing your Heart Rate Variability (HRV) is an easy hack to harness reserves of willpower<sup>20</sup>. In about 2 minutes, you can significantly increase your self-control during a stressful time—especially if your willpower is low from a lack of sleep.

<sup>18</sup> Vishton, Peter M. "Outsmart Yourself: Brain-Based Strategies to a Better You". Lecture 2.

<https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/outsmart-yourself-brain-based-strategies-to-a-better-you>

<sup>19</sup> A flow powerpoint from Steven Kotler and the Flow Genome Project you can find here:

<https://vdocument.in/the-rise-of-superman-17-flow-triggers.html>

<sup>20</sup> Alan Howard / JW3 Speaker Series. "WATCH: Josh Waitzkin, Adam Robinson and Dr. Leah Lagos in Conversation – AH / JW3 Speaker Series." YouTube video, 1:17:24. November 01, 2017.

<https://youtu.be/otaORrHcwP0?t=2588>



HRV is a measure of the variation in time between each heartbeat. It's a little-known concept that provides insight into how stressed or calm we are feeling.

And it's one of the best ways to predict who will resist temptation...and who will give in<sup>21</sup>.

The higher your HRV, the better<sup>22</sup>. A high HRV means you're in a relaxed state. You're less likely to make impulsive decisions. You're able to resist temptation.

A high HRV also helps you ignore distractions, delay gratification, and deal with stressful situations. You're more likely to continue working on challenging tasks, even if you initially fail or receive negative feedback. It's the ultimate willpower hack.

And the easiest way to increase your HRV?

Consciously alter your breathing by taking **rhythmic, smooth, and heart-focused breaths**.

When you're next in a stressful situation, like just before you're about to make an important call, take 2 minutes to follow these steps:

1. Start by finding your breathing **rhythm** (this is the rhythmic part of the breath). Every person's rhythm is different so it doesn't matter what it is so long as it's constant. Breathe normally and the next time you inhale, count how long it takes. Count how long you exhale. It might take you a couple of cycles to find a rhythm.
2. We now want to make these breaths **smooth**. A smooth breath has an equal amount of air flowing in and out of your lungs on each count. For example, it would look something like this if it takes four counts to breathe in:
  - Count 1: 25% of inhaling
  - Count 2: 25% of inhaling
  - Count 3: 25% of inhaling
  - Count 4: 25% of inhaling

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<sup>21</sup> Maier SU, Hare TA. "Higher Heart-Rate Variability Is Associated with Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex Activity and Increased Resistance to Temptation in Dietary Self-Control Challenges". *Journal of Neuroscience* 37, no. 2 (2017): 446-455. doi: [10.1523/JNEUROSCI.2815-16.2016](https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.2815-16.2016)

<sup>22</sup> Alan Howard / JW3 Speaker Series. "WATCH: Josh Waitzkin, Adam Robinson and Dr. Leah Lagos in Conversation – AH / JW3 Speaker Series." YouTube video, 1:17:24. November 01, 2017. <https://youtu.be/otaORrHcwP0?t=2588>

You don't want to overdo it on a particular count, like inhaling 50% of the breath on count 1. If you're finding you're taking a big gulp of air, see if you can readjust.

3. Finally, focus your attention on your **heart**. When breathing, put your attention on your chest. Our heart is more powerful than our brain in terms of electrical output, so this helps you get "out of your head."

So the perfect breath to increase your HRV (and therefore your self-control) has a fixed rhythm, with smooth and even breaths, while you pay attention to your heart.

Doing this sends a lot of power from your heart to your brain. And in just a couple of minutes, your HRV increases, giving you enhanced willpower and self-control.

## 5. You are what you eat

Eating the right food that gives you lasting energy makes it easier to form habits. You have a bigger pool of willpower to draw on during the day.

The most important part about food concerning willpower is its "glycemic index" (GI). It's how quickly sugar enters your brain cells. A higher GI creates a sugar rush

After a sugar rush, you're left short on glucose—and therefore self-control<sup>23 24</sup>. You start to crave comfort food. Sweets, donuts, and chocolate become harder to resist, especially in the evening when our willpower is lowest.

(For those of us who cannot resist late-night snacking, I have a fix for you: brush your teeth early in the evening when you're still full from dinner. Of course, you're still able to snack if you *really* wanted to, but because brushing your teeth is such an ingrained habit, your mind unconsciously tells you not to eat anymore. You just don't want to go through the effort of brushing your teeth again).

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<sup>23</sup> Baumeister, Roy F., and John Tierney. [\*Willpower: Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength\*](#). New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. [\*The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It\*](#). New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

In comparison, food that has a low GI enters your cells slowly<sup>25</sup>. It gives you longer-lasting energy and sustained self-control. Eating these foods regularly to maintain blood sugar levels helps refuel any depleted willpower stores consistently.

Eating a low GI diet is a habit hack. It includes the following foods (among others):

- Lean proteins, like plain Greek yogurt, beans, lentils, and white meat
- Nuts, like peanuts and cashews
- High-fiber grains and cereals
- Most fruit and vegetables, including apples, grapes, carrots, and onions
- Cheese and milk

Essentially it's food that hasn't changed too much from its natural state and isn't full of added sugar, fat, and chemicals.

## 6. Watching TV

Are you surprised to see this here? I was too. Yet research has found that watching TV can boost our willpower and increase our drive to keep building good habits<sup>26</sup>.

Jim Rohn said that you become the average of the five people you surround yourself with. What this expression misses is this is true offline *and* online. When watching a TV show or movie about someone pursuing their goal, you start to “catch” their self-control<sup>27</sup>.

It's because of “mirror neurons.” These are motor cells activated by the sight of movement and the meanings we form from it<sup>28</sup>. We're all interested in other people and can experience emotions second-hand through storytelling<sup>29</sup>. So by watching someone on TV do the action or behavior you want to do, you feel more motivated to do it too. You start to mirror what they are doing.

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<sup>25</sup> Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, "Carbohydrates and Blood Sugar." Accessed 19 June, 2021. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/carbohydrates/carbohydrates-and-blood-sugar/>

<sup>26</sup> Kelly McGonigal Ph.D. "Five Temptations That Actually Boost Your Willpower." Accessed 13 June, 2021. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-science-willpower/201204/five-temptations-actually-boost-your-willpower>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Keysers, Christian and Valeria Gazzola. "Social Neuroscience: Mirror Neurons Recorded in Humans." *Current Biology*. 20, no 8 (2010): R353-R354. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2010.03.013>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

(Side note: When I moved to Toronto I had to reestablish my morning routine. In order to expedite the habit-learning process of a new environment, I recorded my morning routine in a POV—point of view—style and watched it on fast forward a bunch of times. Give this a try if you're game! It's a super cool experiment I'd love to get some more people to try.)

It also goes the other way. If you're watching a show featuring bad decisions and huge lapses of judgment, you can "catch" that too...so, be careful what you watch.

Treat this as a strategic indulgence. It's easy to say, "Chris from **HACKTHATHABIT** said that TV was good for creating new habits", when we both know that watching 13 episodes in a row of *Arrested Development* is not the *best* use of your time.

## 7. The importance of breathing

When you're in a state of heightened emotions and can't think straight, it feels impossible to work towards the behavior you want. After a stressful day at the office, most of us just want to veg out in front of Netflix rather than spend time working on our side hustle.

Breathing is something that can move you from a place of high emotion to focused calm. And there's a 2-minute fix you can do, even in the middle of a meeting:

Slowing your breathing down is the easiest (and quickest) way to immediately boost willpower. Specifically to 4 to 6 breaths per minute. Within 2 minutes of doing this, you will have shifted into a state of self-control<sup>30</sup> (doing it for longer is even better).

The prefrontal cortex in the brain (the area responsible for decision-making) activates from slow breathing, which also slows down your heart rate (meaning an increased HRV). A combination of an activated prefrontal cortex and an increased HRV shifts you from a state of stress to being in control. You are back in the driving seat.

Keen to take this a step further?

Train your brain to boost your willpower. Our brain can adapt, master new skills, and focus on what we want. We can take advantage of this neuroplasticity.

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<sup>30</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. [\*The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It\*](#). New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

Dr. Kelly McGonigal found changing our physiology by breathing slowly and deliberately moves us into a state of self-control.<sup>31</sup>

She recommends starting by finding out how many breaths you take in one minute. Breathe normally and time yourself to figure this out. For a lot of people, this looks somewhere between 12-18 breaths at a resting state. Her idea is to slow your breathing down to 4-6 breaths per minute.

Now, set a timer for two minutes.

Put your feet flat on the floor (sitting or standing). Begin to slow the breath down. Try not to hold your breath (this increases stress).

Take a deep breath in. Now breathe out.

Everyone breathes differently, but Dr. Kelly McGonigal's structure for 6 breaths per minute may be helpful to start with:

- Breathe in for 4 slow counts
- Allow your body to soften as you slowly and naturally release the breath
- Now focus on breathing out for 6 slow counts
- Pause for as long as feels natural, before breathing in again for 4 counts
- Repeat for two minutes

When you inhale, silently say in your mind: "inhale."

When you breathe out, say in your mind: "exhale."

Dr Kelly McGonigal continues in her book, [\*The Willpower Instinct\*](#): Notice your body moving with your breath. If you feel comfortable, close your eyes. If not, soften your gaze and focus on a static spot in front of you.

There's a temptation to fidget to relieve any excess energy we have. If this is you, see if you can notice the urge, label it (My left leg wants to move), and not follow the impulse.

This simple act of staying still is a big part of willpower training. You're learning not to automatically follow every single impulse from your brain and body.

"When you notice your mind wandering (and it will), just bring it back to the breath"<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Again, and again, and again.

Notice that your mind is desperate to do anything but focus on the breath. That's fine. It's what meditation is all about. A series of micro-trainings to bring you back to a single point of focus.

"After a few breaths, drop the labels "inhale/exhale." Try focusing on just the feeling of breathing.

Your mind might wander a bit more without the labeling. Just as before, when you notice yourself thinking about something else, bring your attention back to the breath. If you need help focusing, say "inhale" and "exhale" for a few rounds."<sup>33</sup>

When the timer goes off, keep going (if you can).

This training is most effective when you do it regularly. And the long-term effects are phenomenal:

- You'll be able to focus on a task without getting distracted.
- You'll be able to notice a craving for chocolate without acting.
- You'll be able to feel less stressed in just five minutes and use that energy to solve the problem instead of worrying about it.

Start small, with just five minutes a day. People who meditate regularly become willpower machines. It can turn into something powerful.

## 8. Your physical environment

Creating an environment that supports the behaviors you want to do is a fantastic habit hack. It's easier to eat healthy when your kitchen is full of fresh food, and you know in advance what meals you'll eat that week. The goal set on January 1st to buy less takeout and lose weight feels achievable.

Setting reminders maintains this momentum. For example:

- Want to go for a run before work? Put your gym clothes next to your bed.
- Need to start flossing your teeth? Put a post-it note on your mirror reminding you.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

- Keen to cut down sugar? Don't keep it in the house.

This is an example of choice architecture<sup>34</sup>. You can influence choices by organizing the context surrounding them to your advantage. So:

- If you don't want to eat cookies, don't buy them. If you don't want to buy them, don't go down that supermarket aisle. (This is a strategy we call "Deciding UP The Decision Delta"...but that will come later).
- If you don't want to watch TV, move your couch so that the TV is not the center of the room.
- If you plan to do focused work, turn your phone off.

Making an easy temptation hard to access helps to keep distractions at bay. In fact, only 20 seconds is needed to stop us falling back to the bad habit<sup>35</sup>.

The "out of sight, out of mind" helps here. For example, if you want to fix your social media doom scrolling, remove the apps from your phone and delete the autofill password that pops up on your browser. The extra effort of manually logging in each time creates a significant hurdle.

It can also work in the opposite direction. If you want to drink more water, keep a water bottle with you that's filled up. Or put a jug of water on your desk at work to remind you.

## Use a vacation to break bad habits that won't shift

Sometimes you've been trying for *ages* to break a bad habit, and you're finding it tricky. Smoking is one example. You're frustrated and feel like giving up.

Going on vacation can help you break it.

Our internal and external environment triggers most of our habits. These both change when you're on vacation<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Thaler, Richard, Cass Sunstein and John Balz. "Choice architecture". In *The Behavioral Foundations of Public Policy*, edited by Shafir, Eldar. pp. 428-439. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Anchor, Shawn. *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. London: Virgin Books, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Baumeister, Roy F., and John Tierney. [Willpower](#): Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

You're far away from the people, places, and events associated with cigarettes, so smoking is less likely. When you get home, the bad habit has had a big dent taken out of it. Continuing to break it feels manageable.

## Get outside

"Green exercise" (another way of saying "physical exercise done outside") is a powerful way to use your environment to boost your willpower when you can feel it running low<sup>37</sup>.

Just five minutes of green exercise decreases stress, improves your mood, and strengthens your self-control<sup>38</sup>. If you're feeling particularly low in willpower and energy, it can have a huge impact.

And you don't even need to overdo it. Shorter bursts have more impact on your mood than longer workouts. You'll come back refreshed, energized, and ready to tackle the challenge from a new perspective.

## Summary

Our environment is influential to the habits we develop and maintain. Become aware of your online and offline environment. Regularly ask yourself if it's supporting you in creating the life you want. If it isn't, look to change it.

Our environments are extensions of our body. The better we can come to understand this concept—and exhibit our understanding through practice—the better off we'll be.

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<sup>37</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. [\*The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It\*](#). New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid



# Part 3: 5 ways your emotions improve your self-discipline

[\[Take me back to Contents\]](#)

*"Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going." — Jim Ryun*

Your emotions play a huge role in your behavior. Being aware of them and their impact on your choices means you can leverage them to boost your willpower and self-control.

We can work with our emotions to create a habit hacking environment. For example, when you're feeling bored with a project, you're likely to be less productive. You're easily distracted and simply can't be bothered. Alternatively, when you're excited about something, it's incredible how quickly time passes. It's much easier to exercise willpower when you're feeling happy.

Here are five ways you can work with your emotions to turn intentions into behavior (and habit).

## 1. Watch something that makes you laugh

Not that anyone needs an excuse to watch something funny, but here is one just in case: watching funny videos restores depleted willpower and helps you get back on track with a difficult task<sup>39</sup>.

An adorable video of puppies falling over might just be what you need to give yourself a willpower boost. If puppies don't do it for you, follow what makes you laugh—standup clips, skateboarding gone wrong...YouTube is your oyster.

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<sup>39</sup> Kelly McGonigal Ph.D. "Five Temptations That Actually Boost Your Willpower." Accessed 13 June, 2021. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-science-willpower/201204/five-temptations-actually-boost-your-willpower>

## 2. The power of gratitude and appreciation

When there's a choice between getting ahead on work all evening or going out with friends, most of us choose the latter. Even though we know that working will likely increase our chances at succeeding, we are wired to choose pleasure **now** over reward in the **future**.

We can use our emotional state to influence this. A feeling of gratitude reduces our impatience and increases our self-control<sup>40</sup>. It helps you feel motivated to continue for the sake of your future self. And, unlike willpower, a feeling of gratitude doesn't require much effort...

The best way to increase gratitude is to start writing down what you're thankful for every day. Some people prefer to do this in the morning, others in the evening. It doesn't matter. What is important is to list at least three things you are grateful to have. For example:

1. An everyday item, like toothpaste.
2. Someone in your life, like a family member.
3. Something new that happened to you recently, like making a new friend.

If you find this hard, think of the little things. The person who held the door open for you. A kind note from a colleague. Reaching the end of the day with nothing disastrous happening.

It is also helpful to think back to events and situations that helped you achieve previous goals. Perhaps you had a mentor early in your career or someone who helped you financially. You may have even been in the right place at the right time for something. Luck, when reframed like this, can lead to a feeling of gratitude.

This feeling of gratitude increases our willpower<sup>41</sup>. You persevere with the task, start to feel grateful you've continued to put the effort in, which leads to an increased focus...and so on.

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<sup>40</sup> GDeSteno, David, Ye Li, Leah Dickens, and Jennifer S. Lerner. "Gratitude: A Tool for Reducing Economic Impatience". *Psychological Science*. 25, 6 (2014): 1262-7. [10.1177/0956797614529979](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614529979)

<sup>41</sup> DeSteno, David. "Gratitude Is the New Willpower." *Harvard Business Review*. April 09, 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/04/gratitude-is-the-new-willpower>

### 3. Pride

When you've been actively working towards a goal and are making significant progress, a feeling of pride can increase your self-control<sup>42</sup>.

For example, if you were out for dinner with a friend and out of the blue she said, "I can tell you've been working out, you look great", your feelings of pride lead you to work out as consistently as before.

You're more invested in your goal because it's now part of your identity. You're the person who goes to the gym. And so, to maintain this identity, you continue. It actually might be harder to stop than to keep going.

A feeling of pride is linked to increased Heart Rate Variability<sup>43</sup> (HRV, mentioned in [Part 2](#)), which we now know is important to sustaining, and even increasing, reserves of willpower.

However, too much pride can lead to arrogance in the form of false pride. To avoid this, adopt a growth mindset. Everything becomes a learning opportunity, so putting in effort matters. It's a good feeling to be proud of what you're doing.

Pride in who you are, rather than what you've accomplished, is the key to self-discipline.

### 4. Finding the silver lining

An optimistic person is better at coping with hardship<sup>44</sup>. Optimism boosts your self-control: you're sure the result you want is just around the corner, so you're willing to work until you get it.

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<sup>42</sup> Salerno, Anthony, Juliano Laran, and Chris Janiszewski. "Pride and Regulatory Behavior: The Influence of Appraisal Information and Self-Regulatory Goals." *Journal of Consumer Research*. 42, no. 3 (2015): 499–514; <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv037>

<sup>43</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It*. New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Conversano, Ciro; Alessandro Rotondo, Elena Lensi, Olivia Della Vista, Francesca Arpone, and Mario Antonio Reda. "Optimism and Its Impact on Mental and Physical Well-Being." *Clinical Practice & Epidemiology in Mental Health* 6 (2010): 25-29. [10.2174/1745017901006010025](https://doi.org/10.2174/1745017901006010025)

Being optimistic also means you're more likely to face problems head-on, rather than to avoid them. You're focusing on what you can control, rather than wasting willpower on what you can't<sup>45</sup>.

Daniel Kahneman, in his book, [\*Thinking, Fast and Slow\*](#), talks about "optimistic bias." It refers to our everlasting hope in something: we still believe in a positive result even if there are odds stacked against it. This optimistic bias helps us see past obstacles and take risks. You're more likely to continue striving for your goals because you inherently believe they will happen. It's a big willpower boost.

## 5. "Surf the Urge"

Cues in the environment trigger habits. When you know what these triggers and cues are, you can put a plan in place to change the habit.

Triggers, cues, habits...they run in loops<sup>46</sup>:

- There is the initial **cue**: a stressful email.
- It triggers the **urge** to do something that gives you the change of state you want: a feeling of relief.
- It leads to a **response**: smoking.
- And finishes with a **reward**: the nicotine fix.

A habit is formed: relieving stress (from nicotine) is associated with smoking.

We don't notice many of our habit loops.

Do you know which shoe you tie first? Do you remember locking the door when you leave the house? Do you automatically change out of your work clothes every time you come home?

Breaking a bad habit requires an initial boost of willpower. Not having a cigarette after lunch feels impossible at the beginning. So, we postpone taking action until "tomorrow."

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<sup>45</sup> O'Connor, Richard. [\*Rewire: Change Your Brain to Break Bad Habits, Overcome Addictions, Conquer Self-Destructive Behavior\*](#). New York: Penguin Random House USA, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Duhigg, Charles. [\*The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business\*](#). New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014.

But...tomorrow never comes. And because you'll be stopping tomorrow, it means today you can have a cigarette.

Constantly relying on willpower to stop the neverending urge is exhausting. Especially because we only have a limited resource of willpower<sup>47</sup>. Most of us know the feeling that the harder we deny something that we want, the more we want it (I see ya there watching back-to-back episodes of Game of Thrones when you should be studying...).

There is an alternative approach to fighting temptation.

It focuses on *managing* the urge that comes after the cue. Doing this helps you neatly sidestep bad habits.

“Surfing the Urge” is a mindfulness-based technique where you pay close attention to the urge, without trying to change or get rid of it. At its core, it’s overcoming temptations by simply allowing them to just be. The idea is to observe, rather than fight or avoid.

Going back to our example of smoking, when the urge to have a cigarette appears, pay close attention to it.

Ask yourself:

- What does the urge feel like?
- What am I thinking right now?
- Where is the feeling in my body?

It’s curiosity. A meta-feeling that is a part of, but simultaneously an *outside* awareness of, the situation and feeling.

Stay with these sensations. Notice the urge for what it is: an urge. Realize that this is a moment that will pass, whether you submit to it or not. Watch it rise and fall.

When we deliberately pay attention to see temptations as moments in time that will pass, it creates a sense of perspective.

The power flips: you notice you have an urge to do something, and it’s now a **choice** whether you follow it or not.

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<sup>47</sup> Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M., & Tice, D. M. “Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no 5 (1998): 1252–1265.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.5.1252>

It becomes a **choice** to smoke a cigarette to relieve stress...or satiate the craving by biting into an apple...or drinking a big glass of water...or whatever response you choose to replace smoking<sup>\*48</sup>. You're back in the driving seat of your life.

We can also leverage this technique when forming new habits. When you feel an urge in the direction of what you want, like heading out for a run, ride that wave as far as you can.

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<sup>48</sup> Realistically, this is much harder done than said when it comes to smoking. I've got some thoughts on how I'd approach it if I dealt with that. If enough of you are interested in this as a topic, I'll create a free mini course walk through of the approach I'd take, why, how, etc. If you want to see this happen, email me at [chris@hackthathabit.com](mailto:chris@hackthathabit.com) with the subject line "HOW TO STOP SMOKING".

# Part 4: 10 mental hacks to form new habits

[\[Take me back to Contents\]](#)

*"We are what we repeatedly do...Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."* — Will Durant ([not Aristotle](#)...supposedly...but does it *really* matter? It's such a boss statement, I think not.)

Our mind is immensely powerful. Its job is to keep us safe and it will believe whatever you tell it. It doesn't care if what you tell it is right or wrong, helpful or unhelpful.

Collaborate with your mind and work *with* it to create or break the habits you want. It's the ultimate mental hack.

And here are 10 ways you can do just that.

## 1. The power of planning

Proper planning is the ultimate hack. Prepping for when you have less willpower lessens the chances of slipping back into unwanted habits.

This section includes 5 different strategies that can help you plan:

1. Pause-and-plan
2. The if-then technique
3. Precommitment
4. Start right with the Yerkes-Dodson Law
5. Prioritize effectively

## When stress happens, pause-and-plan

When stressed, our body moves into a fight, flight, or freeze response<sup>49</sup>. The sympathetic nervous system triggers adrenaline and cortisol, leading to increased heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate<sup>50</sup>. It can save your life in a dangerous situation...but it's not helpful if you're just experiencing a stressful day. Stress triggers impulsive reactions to everyday situations, destroying your willpower in the process<sup>51</sup>.

At the sight of a cue, like a stressful email, our body responds impulsively. We're instinctively driven to act, which sends energy away from the wise decision-making parts of our brain. The stress makes us focus on short-term gains. A quick fix to solve the problem.

At this point, we need our brain to bring our body back on board with the plan and *not* follow the impulse. The pause-and-plan response does exactly this. It cultivates *more* self-control.

Learn how to manage your reaction to stressful cues. It can boost your willpower at your weakest point. The pause-and-plan response helps with this by sending energy to the prefrontal cortex, which is the hub of self-control in our brain<sup>52</sup>.

The aim of the pause-and-plan response is for your brain to rescue your body's natural impulses, stopping them in their tracks. As Dr. Kelly McGonigal explains in her book, [\*The Willpower Instinct\*](#):

*"...Your prefrontal cortex will communicate the need for self-control to lower brain regions that regulate your heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and other automatic functions...Instead of speeding up, your heart slows down, and your blood pressure stays normal. Instead of hyperventilating like a madman, you take a deep breath. Instead of tensing muscles to prime them for action, your body relaxes a little."*

So instead of simply acting on instinct, your mind follows this process: breathe, pause, plan, act.

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<sup>49</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. [\*The Willpower Instinct\*](#): How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It. New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Harvard Health Publishing: "Understanding the stress response." Accessed June 27, 2021. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>

<sup>51</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. [\*The Willpower Instinct\*](#): How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It. New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid



The more you're able to manage your stress levels, the less willpower it will cost you.

What is a good pause-and-plan response? Dr. Kelly McGonigal recommends building habits like meditating, deep breathing (10 to 15 seconds per breath with your exhale being longer than your inhale) and staying active. An easy place to start is with a mini habit of meditating for one minute a day (search for "one-minute meditations" to inspire you).

She also discovered the best stress-relief strategies are exercise, reading, spending time with loved ones, doing something creative—essentially anything that gets you out of your head<sup>53</sup>.

The least effective strategies (but the ones we are drawn towards) are smoking, drinking, playing video games, and watching Netflix for more than two hours.

Effective stress management strategies give you a boost of mood-enhancing brain chemicals, like serotonin, GABA, and the feel-good hormone oxytocin<sup>54</sup>. We often underestimate how powerful they can be.

## The if-then technique

When we start working towards a new goal, we're full of good intentions. We tell ourselves that we'll keep going, no matter what happens.

Yet most of us have stopped chasing goals in the past.

Usually, it's because intention is a poor predictor of behavioral change. It's known as the *intention-behavior gap*<sup>55</sup>. Despite your good intentions, it may not translate into behavior.

The if-then technique is one of the most widely researched and best validated tools for helping us cross this gap. It's a way to help you hit your goals using a simple planning

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<sup>53</sup> McGonigal, Kelly. *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It*. New York: Avery Publishing Group, 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Sheeran, Paschal and Thomas L Webb. "The Intention-Behavior Gap." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*. 10, no. 9 (2016): 503-518. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12265>

strategy<sup>56</sup>. Having little willpower becomes less of a problem: you've already put in place a plan to take action in a positive direction. Regardless of if you feel like it.

The if-then technique works like this: *If X happens, then I will do Y.*

X = cue or trigger

Y = behavior you know you should do

For example:

- If it's Monday, Wednesday, and Friday lunchtime, **then** I will go for a run.
- If it's right after I've had dinner, **then** I'll do 60 minutes of writing.
- If it's after my 2PM meeting, **then** I'll sort out this problem.

Instead of having to consciously decide how to act, you outsource that decision to an automatic process. You've linked situations to carefully crafted responses that help you work towards your goals<sup>57 58</sup>

It's also a great strategy to use for short chunks of time. You can power through those small tasks that never seem to end. For example, "if I only have 20 minutes before my next engagement, **then** I will respond to emails."

When repeated enough times, an if-then plan can become a routine...a new habit. It's these small hacks that can lead to surprising results. Jennifer Dewalt, for example, learned to code by building 180 mini websites in 180 days<sup>59</sup>.

However, this technique doesn't always work when applied to rewards<sup>60</sup>.

You can use if-then for rewards when the task has a clear set of rules with a single solution. You know exactly what you need to do to complete it. Once finished, you have a

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<sup>56</sup> Gollwitzer, Peter M. "Weakness of the will: Is a quick fix possible?" *Motivation and Emotion* 38 (2014): 305–322. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-014-9416-3>

<sup>57</sup> Gollwitzer, Peter M. "Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans." *American Psychologist* 54, 7 (1999): 493–503. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.7.493>

<sup>58</sup> Gollwitzer, Peter and Paschal Sheeran. "Implementation Intentions and Goal Achievement: A Meta-analysis of Effects and Processes." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2006): 69-119. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)38002-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38002-1)

<sup>59</sup> Jennifer Dewalt. "Today's Website." Accessed June 19, 2021. <https://jenniferdewalt.com/index.html>

<sup>60</sup> Ariely, Dan, Uri Gneezy, George Loewenstein, and Nina Mazar. "Large Stakes and Big Mistakes". Boston: Federal Reserve Banks of Boston, 2005. Accessed June 15, 2021. <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/research-department-working-paper/2005/large-stakes-and-big-mistakes.aspx>

reward. Daniel Pink, author of [Drive](#), calls this behavior Type-X. It's extrinsically motivated, i.e. you're doing it for an external reward.

But, for more complex problems and behavior change, like getting into the habit of saving money, if-then rewards don't work. This is because the action needs to come from what Pink calls Type-I behavior: intrinsic motivation.

Type-I people are intrinsically motivated to keep their life on track. Motivation and willpower become renewable resources. In the long-term Type-I people are often more successful than Type-X people who base decisions on external factors like money<sup>61</sup>.

So how can you increase Type-I behavior? Pink describes 3 elements: Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose. Otherwise defined as: freedom, improving, and working towards something bigger than yourself.

## **Pre-commit...or don't do it**

Your ultimate offensive weapon for stopping bad habits is precommitment<sup>62</sup>. It's when you use a strategy to protect yourself from procrastination and impulsive behavior. In other words, you create a plan to stop you from checking Instagram for the 208th time that day.

A lot of us have done some variation of this in the past:

- If you're avoiding junk food, you don't buy it
- If you want to focus more, you download an app on your phone that locks you out of specific websites or apps
- If you want to go running, you find a running buddy

We can take this further by pre-committing to a plan for times when you automatically return to an unwanted habit. It means when you reach for something on autopilot, an alternative is already in place. For example:

- Delete IG from your phone and replace it with a news app to satiate your scrolling fix

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<sup>61</sup> Pink, Daniel H. [Drive](#): *The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Baumeister, Roy F. and John Tierney. [Willpower](#): *Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

- Create a separate Instagram account and only follow accounts that exhibit the behavior you want
- Have 10 places you only go for food because they offer healthy options

These are all great practices. But sometimes we need a few extra steps in times of need. How many of us have sat down at a laptop to do work, only to fill the whole day with everything *but* what you planned to do?

This is when the “Nothing Alternative” can help<sup>63</sup>. It’s a powerful productivity trick you can use when you have an unpleasant but necessary task to do, are trying to establish a new habit, and when you are prone to procrastination.

It works like this:

1. You set aside time to do the activity, like going for a run.
2. You either do the activity...or you do nothing else during that time.

It’s most effective when combined with the Precommitment technique. Select a time to do the behavior you need to, or do nothing. For instance, from 11AM-1PM, you are either working on your side hustle...or you’re doing nothing.

It means your mind does not feel imprisoned by *having* to do the behavior you want, but it realizes that the alternative is boring. And we hate being bored. So the enjoyable option becomes what you wanted to do in the first place!

The Nothing Alternative works best when you’re focused on one task at a time, you’ve turned off all notifications, and you set a timer.

## **Don’t start small, start right — Yerkes-Dodson Law**

Have you ever worked on a project with a tight, yet achievable, deadline where your skillset was the primary reason for its success? Even though it may have been challenging, chances are you did some of your best work.

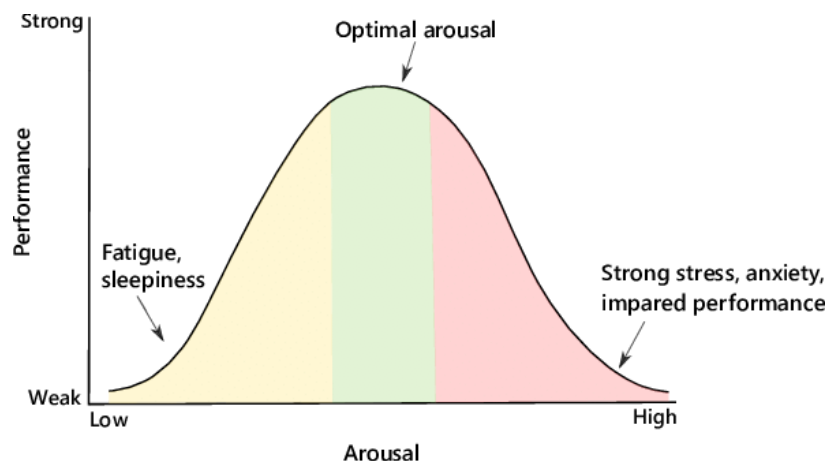
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<sup>63</sup> Baumeister, Roy F. and John Tierney. [Willpower](#): Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

There's a subtle relationship between pressure and performance. Too much or not enough pressure, performance can suffer. With the right amount, you often perform brilliantly.

This also applies to motivation. Too much can reduce the chances of success. Not enough and you won't get started.

The Inverted-U theory, or the Yerkes-Dodson Law<sup>64</sup> explains this [image](#) below:



Increasing stress and arousal levels helps you focus and become motivated to do the activity...but only up to a certain point.

Put simply: goals too big? You won't start and/or will fail under pressure. Goals too small? You won't start and/or care enough to do well.

**The goal: find the balance where you feel fulfilled but not overwhelmed.**

## Prioritize effectively

There are millions of opportunities available to us. And if we try to follow them all...it's exhausting. So we have to prioritize.

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<sup>64</sup> Yerkes, Robert, M. and John Dillingham Dodson. "The Relation of Strength of Stimulus to Rapidity of Habit Formation. Journal of Comparative." *Neurology & Psychology*, 18 (1908): 459-482.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/cne.920180503>

But, we can only prioritize once we know what our goals are, how to achieve them, and (this is something most people miss) how they influence each other.

Once we know what our goals are, it makes forming new habits easier. You've already decided on the path to take. So between pizza or salad, you'll pick the one aligned with your pre-planned and prioritized goals.

Creating a Value Hierarchy helps us prioritize goals (more on that in [this article](#)). It's a list of the behaviors and personal qualities of your ideal self. It can include anything from habits (like exercise) to qualities (like empathy and compassion).

When you become overwhelmed, the Hierarchy reminds you of what matters most. It also gives you the flexibility to change the measurable goalposts in different areas of your life. Someone hard-working with healthy habits can achieve many SMART goals (a popular goal-setting acronym for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-based goals).

Compare this to someone who has only set SMART goals. They may be on a salary of \$120k per year by the time they are 26, but other areas of their life, such as spending time with family, might have suffered.

This is why it's important to create a Value Hierarchy of behaviors and qualities, rather than fixed goals. And, ultimately "time-based" goals are usually arbitrary and weaken the link between the behaviors that will lead you to your desired outcome and the actual achievement of your desired outcome, so be careful what you measure.

(**Hint:** measure your behavior, check out our [free 20-minute habit course](#) for more on how to do so).

## 2. Batch, batch, batch

Batching is when you group similar tasks and complete them all in one swoop. It's a habit hack that has multiple benefits and can free up hours of your day.

In addition, it saves you energy. It takes lots of energy to jump from task to task—even if it doesn't feel like it at the moment. It also takes a long time to get back into what you were

focused on, which can mean the project takes up to 50% longer to complete<sup>65</sup>. Batching is a fantastic way to strengthen your ability to deeply focus.

When batching, list out your tasks for the week. This could be anything from life admin to cleaning, to working on a side hustle. Start to group together similar tasks or pair up two that complement each other. Tasks generally fall into two different types:<sup>66</sup>:

- **Shallow tasks:** These require lower levels of productive energy and are great for short work sprints. For example, checking email.
- **Deep tasks:** These require high levels of productive energy and focus, with little distractions. For example, coding a website.

When batching tasks, it's helpful to schedule time in the week when you will complete them.

Here is some inspiration of what to batch (courtesy of Tim Ferriss<sup>67</sup>):

1. Cook your meals for the week on a Sunday.
2. Set aside specific times of the day to check email and social media, for example, 7-8AM and 5-6PM.
3. Go for a walk (to get your green exercise) and batch your phone calls to loved ones.
4. Go for one big weekly food shop (or, if you're able to, order your groceries online to be delivered. This is especially effective for those of us wanting to avoid certain foods).

### 3. Get accountability

Accountability steps in when our willpower fails. Especially public accountability. If you tell all your coworkers that you are planning to start a business and quit your job within 12 months and you're still there at month 13, people will start asking what happened.

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<sup>65</sup> Medina, John. *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School*. Seattle: Pear Press, 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Newport, Cal. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Ferriss, Tim. "How Batching Can Help You Maximize Your Productivity | Tim Ferriss." YouTube video, 5:38. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghVdzAeX0bg>

An accountability partner is a less extreme version of this. They are someone who we ask to keep us accountable to goals, to give regular reminders, and help stick to deadlines. You might both be working towards the same goals, like running buddies where you exercise together at a specific time, or different goals.

It also gives us an extra reason to complete them. Most of us hate being shown up by someone else. So if you and Aaron create a goal of updating your resume by Sunday, and Aaron texts you on Friday telling you he's finished, it's the kick you need to do some work.

When setting up your accountability, ask yourself: What is the most important goal I'm focused on? And what is the very next step I need to take?

If your goal is losing 10lbs, then the next step might be to create a gym routine. And this is where accountability can help. For example:

- You've decided to work out Monday-Friday at 7AM, and you have to send your accountability partner a photo to prove this. If you skip a day for no good reason, you have to pay a fine to your partner.
- You tell your kids that you will take them to Disney if you don't have takeout during the week and put the money you would have spent in the Disney fund.
- You sign up for an app where your money is donated to a cause you disagree with if you don't stick to your healthy eating schedule. Even if you're feeling like binging on junk food, that voice in your head will go: "Well I don't want my money supporting this organization...so I'd better not do it."

You can get creative with accountability partners. Figure out what works for you and set up a process to help you when your willpower is lowest.

## 4. Decide up the "Decision-Delta"

With every decision we consciously make, our willpower gets slightly drained. Too many and that old habit you've been trying to break looks more and more tempting by evening.

Therefore, the best decision is the one you only make **once**. Making a decision that gets rid of a bunch of future decisions is a great investment. You're saving precious willpower. Check out our video on **Effective Decision Making**.



Although this doesn't work for every decision, for the ones it works on, the further "upstream" we go the better.

For example, the best morning routine is the one that's been decided months in advance. Instead of running around like a headless chicken after you wake up, your body and mind operate on autopilot. You know at 6:30 am, you will meditate. Before you shower, you will do 10 minutes of yoga. After you shower, you will look at your goals for the day.

Sometimes the upstream decision may drain your willpower at the time—but it's worth it. For example:

- Decide once what to eat for breakfast and have it every day.
- Wear similar clothes every day, or pick set outfits for set days (see Zuckerberg, Obama, and Huffington for great examples of this).
- Follow the same route around the supermarket when you go food shopping.

These are great ways to save willpower, to learn more about that, check out our article on [49 ways to save in the EBC](#).

## 5. Temporal discounting

Given a choice between \$20 today or \$25 in a month, people often choose to get money today<sup>68</sup> (we're an impatient species). We perceive a delayed reward as less valuable. This way of thinking is called **temporal discounting**.

A lot of important decisions around our health, finances, and careers are affected by temporal discounting. You know the habit of investing in a 401k or pension is important for your retirement. But that expensive vacation to Mexico next month is a chance of a lifetime, ya know?!

We prefer immediate pleasure because our brain evolved to process information to make decisions quickly.

A caveman didn't have to make the complex choices we face today. He didn't even know if he would survive until evening. So, humans evolved to choose the decisions that helped us

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<sup>68</sup> Denburg, Natalie, L. and William M. Hedgcock. "Chapter 5 - Age-Associated Executive Dysfunction, the Prefrontal Cortex, and Complex Decision Making." In *Aging and Decision Making*, edited by Hess, Thomas M., JoNell Strough and Corinna E. Löckenhoff, 79-101. Massachusetts: Academic Press, 2015

stay alive. We focused on the concrete thing in front of us now, not the possibility of it in the future.

This bias is partly why it's so hard to form a habit that will benefit us in today's context.

You need a lot of patience to turn a future-based intention into an everyday behavior. This patience means you didn't buy new shoes this evening because you're saving money to buy a house.

Our diet doesn't help (see [Part 2: You are what you eat](#)). Eating sugar heightens short-term decision-making<sup>69</sup>. Reaching for a banana rather than chocolate helps you make better decisions around typically impulsive behavior.

Daniel Kahneman, author of [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#), researched our lack of patience further. He found we make choices that are usually biased towards the happiness of our present experiences, what he calls our "experiencing selves."<sup>70</sup> You're craving something now, so you satiate it and feel happy.

However, making choices biased towards the happiness of our future self creates habits that stick for the long term. Like the habit of saving 20% each paycheck towards your retirement. After a while, it starts to feel normal (and even easier if you set up an automatic transfer).

So, what can we do to avoid making short-term decisions and build long-term habits?

One strategy is to think of our future self as a separate person—and realistically, we treat our future selves the same way we treat strangers, it's just adding some awareness to what we already do. We often do this unconsciously. How many times have you said yes to something two months away, only to regret that decision the night before?

We often make decisions from a place of emotion. When we pause to think about how this decision will impact our future self, activity in the ventral medial prefrontal cortex

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<sup>69</sup> Wang, X. T. and Robert D. Dvorak. "Sweet Future: Fluctuating Blood Glucose Levels Affect Future Discounting". *Psychological Science* 21, no. 2 (2010): 183-188.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797609358096>

<sup>70</sup> Kahneman, Daniel. "The riddle of experience vs. memory." TED2010, 19:50.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel\\_kahneman\\_the\\_riddle\\_of\\_experience\\_vs\\_memory/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory/transcript)

(VMPFC) drops<sup>71</sup>. It's the part of the brain that influences decision-making. Less activity in the VMPFC helps you think reasonably and rationally.

We can take advantage of this and leverage our future mental state as motivation to take action. Thinking about the dopamine you will feel after completing a five-mile run helps you put on your running shoes and get out of the house.

Take this a step further and send an email to your future self. Write about the intentions and behaviors you want to adopt. Use a platform like [futureme.org](https://futureme.org) to surprise your future self with an email describing how you imagined you would be living in the future! (It's a pretty cool experience receiving an email from your past self that you completely forgot about.)

**Precommitting**, a concept already covered, also helps<sup>72</sup>. Locking Future You into decisions now increases your chances of success.

Make it difficult for your future self to back out. For example—a meal delivery subscription service, like Blue Apron, locks you into a recurring contract. You're more likely to eat well next week when healthy food turns up at your door.

Finally, **breaking big goals down** into smaller steps helps feed the part of us that craves immediate rewards. Celebrate every small milestone you hit. They all add up and before you know it, you're well on your way to hitting your goal.

So, the next time you're about to do or not do a behavior, take a few minutes to engage in mental time travel.

1. Think about your future self. Consider the choices at hand and think about how you would feel in the future if you chose to follow a certain path.
2. Is there anything you can do to pre-commit yourself to a decision?
3. Is there a way you can break bigger goals down into smaller milestones?

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<sup>71</sup> Vishton, Peter M. "Outsmart Yourself: Brain-Based Strategies to a Better You". Lecture 7.

<https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/outsmart-yourself-brain-based-strategies-to-a-better-you>

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

## 6. The Zeigarnik Effect

There's something in your mind right now that is subconsciously draining your willpower...without you realizing: Incomplete and unfinished tasks.

The Zeigarnik Effect<sup>73</sup> suggests we remember incomplete tasks more than completed ones. When something ends, we forget about it (which might be the reason why we're so keen to have closure after a relationship ends).

Unfinished tasks continue using a portion of your working memory. They use up willpower and drains your willpower. And when your willpower is low, the habit you want to create or stop feels harder to do.

Counter the Zeigarnik Effect by keeping a written to-do list of projects and tasks. **Your working memory is no longer activated when an unfinished task has a plan**<sup>74</sup>. And more working memory means higher willpower. As David Allen, author of [Getting Things Done](#), says: "Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them."

## 7. Reframing

It's a Friday afternoon. You're in the middle of kicking your addiction to scrolling on Instagram and have told yourself that you'll only look at it on the weekend. But...doesn't the weekend begin when work finishes on a Friday? You've been so good at not checking it for 4 days in a row, surely you deserve to take Friday evening off.

Here is when the power of reframing swoops in to save you.

**Original thought:** The weekend starts Friday evening, and because I've been so good during the week, I deserve a reward. (Also, see *motivated reasoning* and the *what-the-hell effect*.)

**Reframed thought:** If you check it, then all that effort you made on Monday-Thursday will go to waste. You will have failed at your goal to stay off Instagram for 5 days.

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<sup>73</sup> Florence L. Denmark. "Zeigarnik Effect". *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology* (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0924>

<sup>74</sup> Baumeister, Roy F., and John Tierney. [Willpower](#): Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength. New York: Penguin Books, 2012. Pg 81.

Reframing is also known as the sunk cost fallacy, often linked to negative events. For example, you bought a \$60 ticket to a concert. The night before, you don't feel like going. But because you've already spent \$60, you feel like you should—if only to get your money's worth.

We can take advantage of this.

Going back to the Instagram example: you've already invested willpower and energy for 4 days. You don't want all that effort to be spent in vain. "I've spent all this effort not going on social media, so I'm not going to throw it all away by checking it."

The secret is to focus on the process, not the destination. The process of not checking Instagram when we say we're not going to. To not break the number of days we've kept to this goal.

And to keep going, even when we feel like giving up.

## 8. Postponement & non-denial of a craving

You already know from section 2.8 on *Your physical environment* that distracting yourself for 20 seconds helps avoid temptation.

Shifting the behavior from "I want it now" to "I will have it later" is a powerful mental hack.

It satiates the part of your brain that craves instant reward while avoiding the actual behavior. You can keep putting it off again and again. In fact, postponing a craving is more effective than flat-out denying it<sup>75</sup>.

So the next time you have a craving, instead of telling yourself "no", postpone it. Tell yourself that you'll have it later...and make sure that "later" never comes.

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<sup>75</sup> Baumeister, Roy F., and John Tierney. [Willpower](#): Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength. New York: Penguin Books, 2012. Pg 225.

## 9. Set upper limits

How would you approach a goal of doing 20 push-ups?

The most common way is to set a minimum target: “I’m going to do at least 12 push-ups today.”

When we’re setting a goal, we often overestimate how much we can do. If your limit is usually 5 push-ups, the likelihood of hitting 12 is fairly low. And when we don’t hit a goal the first time, our willpower starts to fade.

The target just feels too far away. So we stop.

Setting an upper limit as a *maximum* helps us get around this. For example: “I’m *not* going to do more than 12 push-ups.”

If you hit 12, great—you can stop. If you do seven, that’s also great because you haven’t gone over 12. It makes the process more manageable. You know you won’t be exerting effort for more than a certain amount of time.

It really hit home when I went out running in an area with trash along the route. I’d pick it up because there wasn’t too much. I had created a natural upper limit: I couldn’t pick up more than I could carry.

When I changed my running route, I went through areas where there was too much trash to pick up all in one go. I found myself not doing it at all. It felt too overwhelming, so I just didn’t “start” the behavior.

After realizing this, I set an “upper limit” that boosted my willpower: “I will pick up a maximum of five pieces of trash on my runs.”

Upper limits work best for projects or goals that seem (and are) way too big. It’s a strategy to break it down and ensure you’re making progress in manageable bites.

## 10. Beating procrastination

80-95% of people regularly procrastinate, with 50% saying they procrastinate all the time<sup>76</sup>. Most people also find their procrastination frequently causes problems<sup>77</sup>.

What is procrastination? It's a self-defeating behavior that involves postponing and putting off actions that should happen quickly to meet goals.

Procrastination is possibly the reason why you've never gotten round to updating your resume or hiking the Grand Canyon on New Year's Eve (even though you've wanted to for the past five years).

Here are some ways you can beat it:

### **1. Take 15-20 minutes to sit quietly and think about what you are going to do.**

Break the cycle of delay, distraction, and overthinking. Our unconscious mind is often the driver behind our decisions and behaviors. Intentionally doing nothing breaks the pattern of engaging in a habit we use to distract ourselves or lower anxiety.

Intentionally do nothing by focusing on your breathing. Think about the task at hand. Take a few moments to bring to mind what matters a lot to you: friends, a small white dog called Pepper, bagels with cream cheese. Take a deep breath...Then start the task.

### **2. Avoid choking under pressure.**

This links back to the [Yerkes-Dodson Law](#) mentioned when we have too much or too little motivation to complete a task, we don't do it. You want to be in a place where you have just enough.

You can find this place by writing down what you need to do. Then ask yourself: Which actions could you do now, and which can you do later?

Try to avoid the trap of taking on too much now. We often have more time than we think! Reduce the pressure you put on yourself. The procrastination will start to decrease.

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<sup>76</sup> Vishton, Peter M. "Outsmart Yourself: Brain-Based Strategies to a Better You". Lecture 2.

<https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/outsmart-yourself-brain-based-strategies-to-a-better-you>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Know your procrastination triggers.

Chris Bailey, author of [The Productivity Project: Proven Ways To Become More Awesome](#), found there are 6 procrastination triggers:

1. Boring
2. Difficult
3. Frustrating
4. Unstructured or ambiguous
5. Lacking in personal meaning
6. Lacking in intrinsic rewards (e.g. being fun)

The more triggers a task has, the greater your procrastination.

Think about something you're procrastinating on now. Which of the above triggers are happening? And what can you do to reduce their effects? Once you know this, it gives you the power to do something about it.

### 4. Take breaks

Just as not working enough slows down progress towards your goals, working too much can do the same.

When we don't take any breaks, our brain starts associating the project with tiredness and negative emotions. And if we're not excited to do something, it takes a lot more willpower to do it. Procrastination starts to creep in.

Counterintuitively to what you would think, taking breaks can make you more productive<sup>78</sup>. Even brief breaks help you stay on track. Our brain is built to spot and respond to change<sup>79</sup>. When we try to focus for too long on one task, we stop paying attention.

Switch it up by taking mini-breaks when working on a project, or temporarily pause a larger goal to allow you to rest. You'll find it positively impacts your productivity.

### 5. Break large goals into small tasks

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<sup>78</sup> Ariga, Atsunori and Alejandro Lleras. "Brief and rare mental "breaks" keep you focused: deactivation and reactivation of task goals preempt vigilance decrements." *Cognition* 118, no. 3 (2011): 439-443. 10.1016/j.cognition.2010.12.007.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid



Remember that humans are impatient creatures who want rewards right now? We can leverage this by breaking any large project into 20-minute tasks. Track your progress and tick off whenever you complete a task for maximum productivity.

It works because even if the project hasn't finished, you're seeing yourself moving closer to the finish line. It's especially rewarding if it's an unpleasant task.

This sense of progress directly feeds the pleasure center in our brain (one of the unconscious control systems we're often unaware of). Progress is only motivating if you view your actions as proof that you are working towards your goal.

Celebrate those small successes. When we decide to take on a challenge and complete it, we get a burst of pleasure. A shot of dopamine-related activity goes off in our brain. We feel satisfied and happy.

Setting internal deadlines and ticking off smaller tasks along the way keeps us motivated.

## **6. Get organized**

A cluttered environment is highly associated with procrastination. Multiple items are a distraction, a reminder of something else to do<sup>80</sup>. Mental clutter works the same way.

Every time we are distracted by a thought or a rogue stapler on our desk, we lose efficiency. You can hugely reduce your procrastination by eliminating these distractions.

Make to-do lists to get the thoughts out of your head. Put all the items on your desk into a neat pile. Save all those open tabs (I see you there with 10 tabs open...) into a note, or use software like OneTab. You can attend to them later when the task at hand is finished.

Freeing up your mind from mental clutter is the best way to give you more energy to focus.

## **7. Making lists**

Lists are so important they get a whole point to themselves.

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<sup>80</sup> O'Connor, Richard. [Rewire](#): Change Your Brain to Break Bad Habits, Overcome Addictions, Conquer Self-Destructive Behavior. New York: Penguin Random House US, 2015.

Lists are a fantastic way to balance long-term planning with short-term actions<sup>81</sup>. They offer you immediate encouragement (you've just got three tasks to focus on, rather than an overwhelming list of 10) while giving you a way to track progress.

Tracking and measuring progress boosts motivation. Dan Sullivan, The Strategic Coach, calls this "measuring the gain, not the gap."<sup>82</sup> You're measuring where you are versus where you started. Most people measure where they are to where they want to be, ie: the gap between their current self and their future self.

This simple flip can be all the encouragement you need to keep going. It gives your mind proof that you *are* making progress. And all you need to do is continue taking action.

## 8. Temptation bundling

Temptation bundling is when you link an action you *want* to do with what you *need* to do. It's a clever way of using rewards that offer instant gratification to spark willpower to do what you don't want to do.

You may already be using temptation bundling without realizing it. For example, catching up on your favorite TV shows while working on your website. Or listening to podcasts while paying bills.

James Clear, author of [Atomic Habits](#), gives the example of Ronan Byrne:

*Ronan Byrne, an electrical engineering student in Dublin, Ireland, enjoyed watching Netflix, but he also knew that he should exercise more often than he did. Putting his engineering skills to use, Byrne hacked his stationary bike and connected it to his laptop and television. Then he wrote a computer program that would allow Netflix to run only if he was cycling at a certain speed. If he slowed down for too long, whatever show he was watching would pause until he started pedaling again<sup>83</sup>.*

Temptation bundling in Ronan's case was watching Netflix (what he wanted to do) and riding his bike (what he needed to do).

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<sup>81</sup> Baumeister, Roy F, and John Tierney. [Willpower](#): Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Sullivan, Dan and Benjamin Hardy. *The Gap and the Gain: The High Achievers' Guide to Happiness, Confidence, and Success*. California: Hay House Business. 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Clear, James. "How to Stop Procrastinating and Boost Your Willpower by Using "Temptation Bundling"" James Clear. <https://jamesclear.com/temptation-bundling>

It helps you do more of the actions you know you should be doing, rather than only what you want to be doing. Ideally, once the task you *should* be doing becomes a habit, you'll find it takes less and less time. The craving for the reward reduces. You show up, do the task, and move on.

Here's how to kickstart better habits using temptation bundling:

Take a sheet of paper and on the left-hand side, write down everything you enjoy doing and what you find tempting. For example, listening to podcasts, eating donuts, watching Killing Eve.

On the right-hand side of the page, lists the tasks and behaviors you should be doing that you either don't do or procrastinate over. Like writing a blog post or updating your resume.

Look through both lists and see if you can link one of the behaviors you want to be doing with a behavior you know you need to do. For example:

- Only listen to podcasts when working out.
  - Only drink your favorite brand of coffee when you're doing an assignment or work.
  - Only watch your favorite TV shows when ironing.
-

# Bonus: Some useful bright-lines

[\[Take me back to Contents\]](#)

In the spring of 1839, Judge Williams\* came to a conclusion in the Houses of Parliament, London, UK. It was days in the making. A gaggle of journalists waited anxiously, all eager to be the first to report on the news.

A popular children's game had turned serious. "Knock and run" is as the title says...run up to a door, knock on it, then run away. For the inhabitants behind the door, it was a nightmare. Especially when repeated again and again (the children ran away too quickly to be caught).

Eventually...it was decided: Section 54 of the Metropolitan Police Act 1839 makes it an offense to "wilfully and wantonly disturb any inhabitant by pulling or ringing any doorbell or knocking at any door without lawful excuse."<sup>84</sup>

Knock and run had become illegal. And Judge Williams\* had created a bright-line rule.

A bright-line is a clearly defined rule or standard. It leaves no wiggle room for reasoning or interpretation. Section 54 of the Metropolitan Police Act 1839 is just one example. It's hard to explain yourself to a police officer when you've been spotted knocking then running.

Bright-lines can be very powerful when used in our personal and professional lives. In fact most of us, myself included, could benefit from setting them. We often tell ourselves things like:

- I'll keep the house cleaner
- I'll check Facebook less frequently
- I want to eat healthier
- I want to practice meditation more

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<sup>84</sup> "Metropolitan Police Act 1839". Accessed 12th July, 2021.  
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/2-3/47/section/54>

These phrases give us lots and lots of wiggle room. When is “less frequently”? How often does that mean you can check Facebook every day? And how much is “more” meditation? Is it once a week, once a month, once whenever-you-feel-like-it?

It’s easy to say these statements to yourself. We often say them late at night, just before we drift off. An eager thought will pop into your head: “I must meditate more.” You go to sleep happy. You know you’ll be a changed person when you wake, ready to meditate.

Statements like this let us off the hook. We can never really say if we succeed—or if we fail. And that’s crucial: not failing means we are still worthy. We’re still good enough. So we stay in this limbo without improving. Because what we measure, we improve.

I’m not saying everything in your life needs to be measured. I did that years ago and it was awful. It turns out, tracking almost everything in your life can drive you mad.

But if something’s important to you, you might want to consider setting a bright-line. Take the following examples:

- I clean the house every Saturday at 4PM
- I check Facebook between 7AM - 8AM, then between 7PM - 8PM
- I only get takeout on Saturday and Sunday
- I practice meditation every day at 7:30 am for 10 minutes

Bright-lines are also huge at boosting your willpower. By making just one decision (I clean the house every Saturday at 4PM), you’re conserving your willpower for other choices. It leaves you less likely to suffer from decision fatigue and mental exhaustion.

You can use bright-line rules in every area of your life.

Here are some for inspiration:

- Every time I get an unwanted email, I unsubscribe from it right away.
  - *Similar:* If I ever provide my email to get something (pdf or ebook), I unsubscribe right after downloading it.
- After I’ve finished eating, I rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher.
  - *Similar:* If the dishwasher is full and dirty, I start it.
  - *Similar:* If the dishwasher is full and clean, I empty it. Then I load the dirty dishes.

- If I can complete a task in 2 minutes or less, I do it right away...UNLESS I am doing something and don't want to get out of the flow.
  - In which case—and if it takes longer than 2 minutes—I make a note of it on my phone with a specific time that will allow for action. For example, I'm in the middle of journaling and remember I need to buy more frixion pens for my rocketbook. I tell Siri to “remind me to buy frixion pens at 5PM.”
- If I experience the “I'll do it later” self-talk, I do it now. I know it's just my body getting me ready to do whatever it is I thought I wanted to avoid.
  - For example, if I had too much to drink or felt tired, I might have the thought that I will exercise *later* instead of at the time I was going to. As quickly as possible, I take action. It could be putting on my running shoes, starting a podcast, or beginning to stretch. If I can do those simple beginning steps, I've successfully “turned on the habit.” I've activated that specific program.
- If I'm meditating and become aware of my thoughts drifting, I will start focusing on one breath at a time.
- When I finish with an item, I put it back in its respective place. If it doesn't have a specific place, I create one or get rid of it.

Take some time to review important areas of your life that you feel need more attention. See if you can set any bright-lines for them. Write them down and stick them up in a visible place to help you remember.

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# Next steps: take the habit highway to your new life

[\[Take me back to Contents\]](#)

You've learned some key mindsets and strategies to create a habit hacking environment.

And you've seen how to do it in days or weeks, **instead of the years it took me**. And now it's time to go from reading the ideas to making tangible progress towards your goals.

Humans are powered by habits, hopefully you're becoming more aware of this fact. Habits are the reason you put your left sock on first, or why you check your work email late at night. It's the driving force behind the decisions that make up...**You**.

Great habits aren't about constant willpower, they're about using as little willpower as possible to *create* them, so that you don't have to rely on your limiting and fleeting willpower.

That means learning how to:

- Create an optimal habit-hacking physical environment around you
- Collaborate with your mind to get it working FOR you, not against you
- Bounceback when you hit a roadblock

We give away loads of free material about these topics. And even have a [free course](#) that shows you everything from the psychology of great habits to detailed breakdowns of mindset strategies, higher quality decision-making, better self-compassion, and effective living.



Alternatively, we offer a [paid option \(\\$99\)](#) that goes more in-depth on the Economy of Behavior Control and walks you through how to create the habits that will help you live the life you wish. It's entirely up to you!

A partner on the path,  
Chris