

Helpful Habits

A Self-help Tool

Introduction

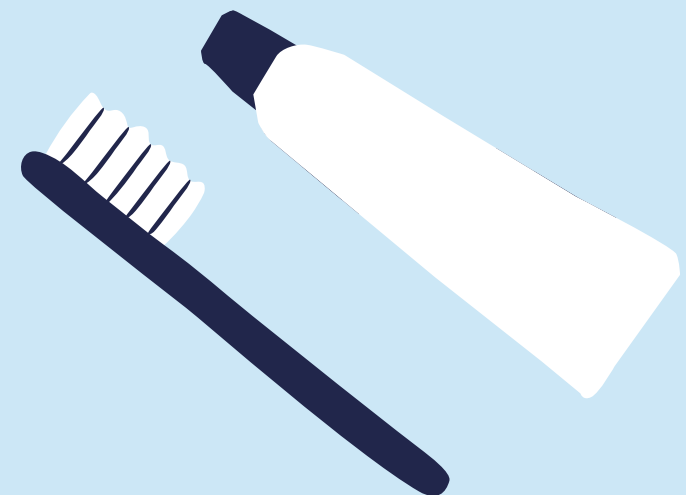
Good habits help us achieve success, claims James Clear in his international best-seller 'Atomic Habits' (2018). He argues that habits are the small steps that build success. Because habits, like cleaning our teeth twice a day, are things we do automatically, they make it easier for us to perform key tasks. When we make positive behaviours habitual, we do them on autopilot.

Small, frequent actions, according to Clear, like eating healthily, taking exercise, studying, or developing your employability, build up over time. "Here's how the math works out: if you can get one per cent better each day for one year, you'll end up thirty-seven times better by the time you're done" (Clear, 2018, p. 15).

Clear explains how to build small, powerful habits into systems, to achieve your aims. “Just as atoms are the building blocks of molecules, atomic habits are the building blocks of remarkable results” (Clear, 2018, p.27). Clear argues that what makes the difference between people who are successful and unsuccessful isn’t the goals they set, or their motivation - it’s whether or not they have habits that deliver success.

Drawing on his experience of recovering from a serious injury and restabilising his career, he writes: “Prevailing wisdom claims that the best way to achieve what we want in life... is to set specific, actionable goals... Eventually, I began to realise that my results had very little to do with the goals I set and nearly everything to do with the systems I followed” (Clear, 2018, p. 23). He concludes that: “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of our systems” (Clear, 2018, p. 27).

This Self-help Tool will give you a potted guide on how to build effective systems out of small habits.



This tool is designed to...

- Help you understand how to build positive habits.
- Help you achieve your goals.
- Help you become the person you want to be by acting according to your aims and values.

Consider using this tool if you...

- Want to increase your chances of successfully achieving your goals.
- Feel that just being strongly motivated on its own won't get you to where you want to be.
- Are struggling to implement your plans and do the things you know will make a difference.

How to use this tool

1 Make it obvious

This is about being super-clear on what new habit you are going to start, and saying where, when, and how you'll do it. For example, if you're going to practice mindfulness each day, you may say, 'When I open my laptop at the start of the day, I'll spend two minutes meditating'.

This is what's termed 'an implementation intention'. There's a formula for these: "When situation X arises, I will perform Y response" (Clear, 2018, p.70). Implementation intentions work when they are specific and concrete. Where possible, specify the day and time. They use cues in your environment to 'trigger' automatic behaviour. Positive behaviours can be stitched together into sequences, or "stacked" (p.76), as with the example to the right.

1) Once I've finished studying in the evening, I'll review my to-do list.

2) Once I've reviewed my to-do list, I'll check what lectures and seminars I have tomorrow.

3) Once I've checked my lectures and seminars, I'll think of five things I'm grateful for that have happened today.

2 Make your new habit attractive

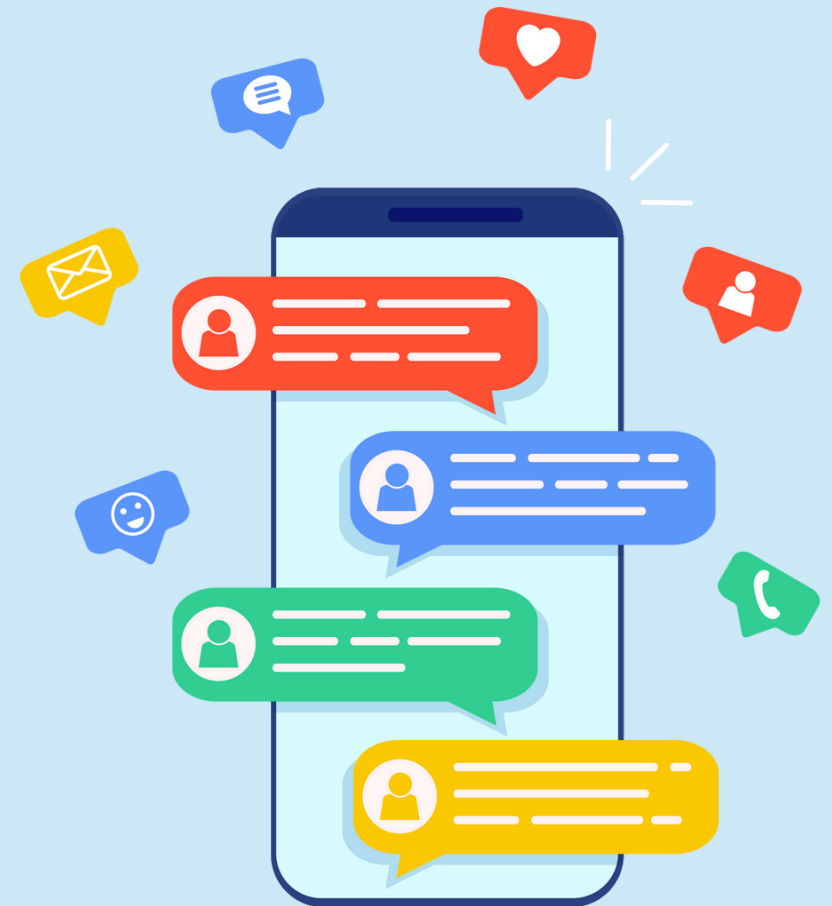
To begin with establishing good habits can be effortful. What can you do to make them more fun and rewarding? Like the old saying that ‘a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down’, you can make new habits more palatable by combining them with things you already like doing. Clear calls these techniques ‘temptation bundling’. For example, your work-out might fly by much faster if you’re listening to music that you really enjoy.

Alternatively, you may link your new habit with something you have to do. For example, you have to sit on the train for 20 minutes to commute to University, so you use this time for extra course revision. Another approach is to promise yourself a reward for doing X. For instance, when you’ve spent two hours on a job application, you’ll take a 20-minute coffee break by the canal.



Joining a group of people who are trying to achieve the same thing is another way to make your habit more appealing. We're social animals after all, so you can harness the power of peer effect to pull you in the direction you want to go. For example, if you're trying to get fit, you could join a gym class. If you're trying to learn a new skill, volunteer with an organisation that gives you the chance to practise it, where you can be encouraged by the other volunteers and staff; or join a Students' Union society.

A lot of students find being part of Enactus an effective way to develop their enterprise skills; or that being a Course Rep develops their communication and problem-solving abilities. Academic societies can be a great way to find out how others on your degree are developing their employability. Perhaps your department runs a mentoring scheme, which brings mentees together to swap notes on common challenges? Some students have found that the Bright Network organisation provides the support of a community of students interested in achieving their career ambitions.



3 Make it easy

This is about reducing the friction in your routine and smoothing the path to adopting your new habit. Here, Clear recommends the following:

- Set your environment up so it supports your new habit. For instance, if you want to study more, put your academic timetable on your pin board above your desk where you can easily see it. If you want to track employers, follow them on LinkedIn and get the app on your phone.
- Set the bar low for a new habit. Clear recommends that when starting a new habit, it shouldn't take more than two minutes, until you've established a regular pattern, when you can then increase the duration. The idea here is to make it so easy that you won't be discouraged.



4 Make it satisfying



Humans are wired to seek immediate gratification. We naturally gravitate to things that feel good in the here and now. Long term benefits, while often more significant, have less pulling power. We favour an immediate, certain reward over a possible (larger) future one. This “time inconsistency” (Clear, 2018, p. 188) makes doing the right thing challenging.

Clear argues this tendency can, however, be overcome. By making your new habit attractive (Step 2 above), you can create an immediate, rewarding pay-off. It may even be possible to strengthen this. For example, say you want to get a new sports top for working out, you put a bit of money aside each time you visit the gym. This way, each gym visit creates a sense of satisfaction as you get closer to saving enough money to make your purchase.

Sticking with your habit on a regular basis is crucial, as it reinforces your sense of identity. The more you do X – run, help out at the food bank, fund-raise etc – the more you get a sense of satisfaction from seeing yourself as someone who is a Runner, a Volunteer, an Entrepreneur, etc. One thing that contributes to a sense of satisfaction is successfully following a new routine. Simply sticking with the programme creates its own sense of reward. Clear recommends visually recording and tracking your ‘streaks’ – how many times in a row you have done X. Inevitably, there will be times when your routine is interrupted. This is unavoidable, and just part of life. When this happens, the important thing is to re-establish your routine as soon as possible.

Pause, Reflect, Act

- Which aspects of Clear's approach stood out as particularly relevant / powerful for you?
- What problems or challenges in sticking to your plans could his techniques help you overcome?
- What new habits would you like to establish?
- How could the approach that Clear sets out help you achieve your career / life goals?
- What small step could you take today that would take you closer to where you want to be?
- Who could help you with this?
- Are there other, related Self-help Tools you'd like to use as well?

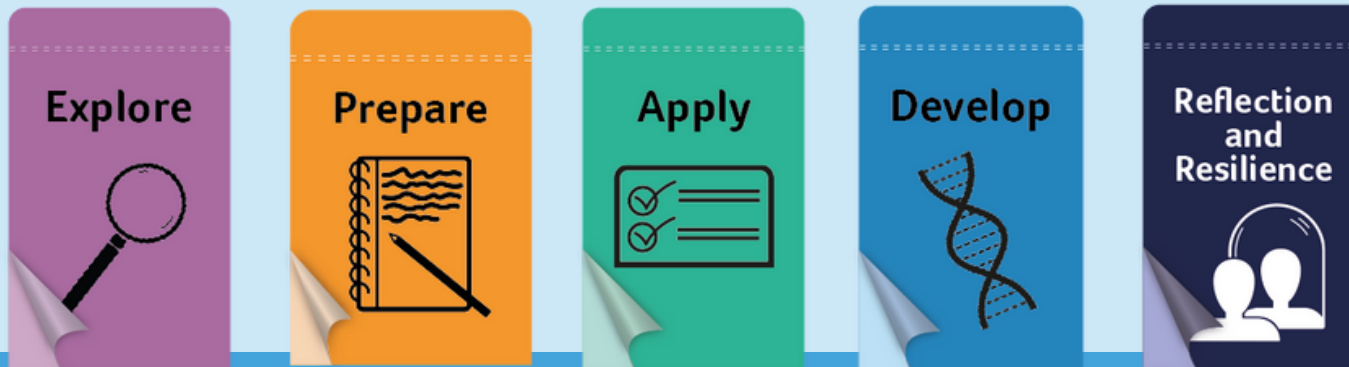
NB: Because everyone is different, no one solution is a magic bullet, so please look at our other Self-help Tools as well, and use the ones that work best for you.

References and Resources

Clear, J. (2018). Atomic habits: An easy and proven way to build good habits and break bad ones. Random House Business Books.

You can find free resources on James Clear's website: [Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results by James Clear](#)

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If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our Self-help Tools with your students, we would love to hear from you and share good practice. We would ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy, and acknowledge the other sources we have used. Thank you.