



Creating lasting habits

As many of us know, some of those well intentioned new year's resolutions can start to waver a little by only a matter of weeks into the start of the year. I read that the average gym membership is cancelled within three months!

Most long standing habits have been hard wired through repetitive behaviour which creates strong connections in our neural pathways, making these habits virtually unconscious.

Habits are essentially automating a solution to a problem or task, like brushing your teeth or tying your shoe laces. When we first started learning these tasks years ago, it would have created loads of thought and consideration, now we don't give them another thought.

Your life is the sum of your habits, they can literally predict your life outcome. So how do we build these pathways and create habits that last?

1 Find your why – what is your motivation for this habit, is it meaningful, purposeful, achievable and fulfilling? If it's not, it might be worth reviewing!

2 Stick to only creating or changing a few habits at one time.

3 Visualisation – it's good to visualise achieving our goals; what would you do? How would you celebrate? Who would you share the experience with? Interestingly, science shows that we are twice as likely to achieve a goal if we also direct our attention to what would happen if we *don't* achieve the goal, as we are hardwired to move away from pain more than

towards pleasure. A friend of mine who was a teacher, completely changed the GCSE results of an under performing school by getting the students to visualise how they would celebrate the success of getting seven GCSE's.

4 Identity – own the person that you want to be – by adapting the identity, you will adapt the behaviours and actions over a longer period. Rather than "I am going to run 5k" – adopt "I am a runner." Rather than "I am going to lose weight" – adopt "I am a healthy eater". For example, by making your bed each day you are embodying the identity of an organised and tidy person.

5 Immerse yourself in the habit – read books/articles, or listen to podcasts etc. on the subject. The more you direct your interest towards the habit, the more you will identify with the person you want to become. We often talk about habits achieving external results, but I think they can have a profound effect on your internal self and well being.

6 Make them easy – so important! Trying to go from zero to hero is not going to help in the long term. Plan small, manageable action steps that take you towards your goal. James Clear in his book *Atomic Habits* talks about the two minute rule – just doing your habit for two minutes and mastering the art of showing up. Doing a little regularly is like compound interest, it soon accumulates and builds. Want to eat better and be a little fitter? Start with eating one more vegetable with dinner, cut sugar out of your tea or coffee and do a press up before you shower. Want to read more, read two pages a day. Want to start running, put your trainers on and walk to the end of your road. Want a tidy house, start with one corner... seriously, it is about consistency, never intensity. Do that for a week and you will soon start cementing those neuro connections.

7 Environment – create an environment that supports your habit and remove anything that is likely to create the temptation to break it.

8 Focus on the trigger – use a habit that has already been hard wired to create another, like when brushing your teeth, to consider going through those five words you are trying to learn in Spanish. Equally, if you are trying to change a habit, think of how you can change the cue or trigger. Mine was to stop reaching for a glass of wine when I came in from work. Making a cup of tea and running a bath with a book soon became a more appealing habit.

9 Find a friend – ‘inspiration is a contact sport’. Sharing your habit makes it more enjoyable and creates accountability as we don’t like to let people down. Make sure your friend is equally motivated.

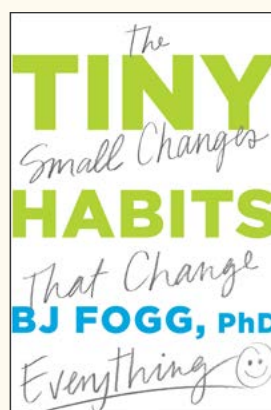
10 Reward – this is powerful, but don’t overdo it or reward yourself with something that is counter-productive to your goals, like eating a pack of doughnuts after a gym session. A nice hot drink at the end of your walk with a friend – absolutely!

11 Journal – reviewing your progress is really helpful, physically writing down what’s working well and ideas to improve or change some of your action steps will help you map your journey.

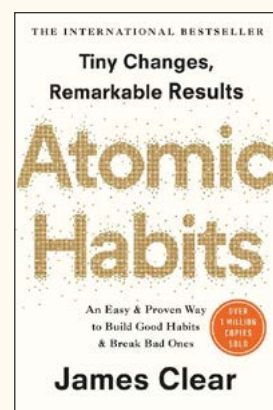
12 Most important – keep moving forward, remember it’s consistency over intensity. Be kind to yourself – if you don’t feel like going for that run, or going to the gym, go for a short walk or do a press up, you will be pleased that you did something and are still moving in the direction of your goals. Work on the 80:20 principle, after all, we are all only human.

Habits need to be established before they can be improved.

RECOMMENDED READING



Tiny Habits
BJ Fogg PhD



Atomic Habits
James Clear