

The Habit Guide

Zen Habits' Effective Habit
Methods + Solutions

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Why Habits Are Important	1
Part I: How to Stick to a Habit	5
Chapter 1: Overview of Habit Mechanics	6
Chapter 2: Why People Struggle	10
Chapter 3: Overcoming Resistance & Procrastination	13
Chapter 4: One Habit at a Time	18
Chapter 5: Prioritizing Habits & Balancing Multiple Habits	20
Chapter 6: Start Small, Take Tiny Steps	26
Chapter 7: Finding Time for Habits	28
Chapter 8: Remembering — Set Reminders for the Habit	31
Chapter 9: Deeper Motivation	35
Chapter 10: Fully Commit (& the Inertia of Starting)	38
Chapter 11: Don't Overdo Your Habit	42
Chapter 12: Accountability & Unmissable Consequences	44
Chapter 13: Facing Resistance with Mindfulness	49
Chapter 14: The Just Get Started Mindset	52
Chapter 15: Rule - Don't Miss Two Days	54
Chapter 16: Distractions	57
Chapter 17: Overcoming Disruptions Like Illness & Travel	59
Chapter 18: Overcoming a Slump	61
Chapter 19: Create the Right Environment	63
Chapter 20: Practice the Skill of Mindfulness	66
Chapter 21: Journaling & Reflecting	68

Chapter 22: Don't Rely on Feeling Like It	71
Chapter 23: Don't Talk Yourself Out of It	73
Chapter 24: Getting Through the Dip	75
Chapter 25: Restarting & Re-motivating	78
Chapter 26: On Consistency	81
Chapter 27: Overcoming Adversity	83
Chapter 28: Changing Your Identity	86
Chapter 29: Dealing with Negative Thinking	89
Chapter 30: Habit Questions & Other Struggles	92
Part II: Quitting a Habit, Common Habits	98
Chapter 31: Overview of Quitting a Bad Habit	99
Chapter 32: Irregular or Frequent Habits	105
Chapter 33: Eating Habits	112
Chapter 34: Exercise Habits	118
Chapter 35: Discipline, Procrastination, & Motivation Habits	122
Chapter 36: Meditation & Mindfulness Habits	128
Chapter 37: Sleep & Waking Early Habits	131
Chapter 38: Writing or Journaling Daily	135
Chapter 39: Financial Habits	139
Chapter 40: Notes on Other Habits	144
Thank You For Reading	150
About The Author	151

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INTRODUCTION: WHY HABITS ARE IMPORTANT

When I was struggling with lots of areas in my life, I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me.

Why couldn't I stick to any of the exercise plans I'd chosen from magazines? Why couldn't I eat healthier, quit smoking, get my finances in order? Why couldn't I stop procrastinating, finally write that book I'd always planned to write.

Why couldn't I get anything going?

The answer, it turns out, was pretty simple: I had bad habits, and I didn't know how to change them.

I approached a new project, a new exercise or eating plan in the same way that most people approach it: I simply said I would do it.

Going to exercise regularly? All I had to do was put "exercise" on my calendar or to-do list, or just remember to do it, right?

Of course, when it came time to actually doing it, I was busy with a million daily things I had to do for work or my personal life. Or I just didn't feel like it, so I didn't do it.

Then I figured out how habits work.

I researched habits, so that I could figure out how to finally quit smoking (I'd tried and failed to quit seven times already). I read articles, research papers, advice from the American Cancer Society, and more. I put a hundred techniques into action, and some of them worked!

I used the same ideas to start running, eating healthier, decluttering, becoming more focused and productive, and generally starting to change dozens of habits.

My life changed completely.

I learned that habits are extremely important in changing your life. Here's why.

1. If you want to reach a goal, you could just say, "I'm going to work towards this goal regularly." And hope for the best. Or you could form a habit that gets you to that goal -- run daily if you want to finish a marathon, for example, or practice daily if you want to learn guitar.
2. If you put a lot of focus and effort into creating a new habit for a

month, it will become fairly automatic, so you don't need to focus on it as much. After a month, you could work on a second habit, and so on, and after a year of doing this you could have 10-12 new habits. Instead, you could try focusing on 10-12 projects or life changes at once -- it's a juggling act that's not very sustainable. Creating habits one at a time is much more sustainable.

3. Through habit experimentation, you learn your obstacles and learn what environment works best for you. For example, if you are trying to learn to beat procrastination, you learn that you have obstacles when it comes to facing scary tasks, when it comes to running towards distraction, when it comes to rationalizing those distractions. And you can find a system that helps you to overcome those obstacles, like accountability, mindfulness practices, and an Internet distraction blocker

These three reasons are pretty big. But the biggest reason to focus on changing habits is this: **by learning how to stick to small changes, you learn to trust yourself.** That's huge.

What I'm suggesting is that you learn, over the course of this book, to stick to one small change. That's it. Just a tiny change that's so easy you

can't say no. One small change that will prove to yourself that you're trustworthy, that you can actually accomplish change.

And with that, you'll unlock the door to many other small changes. Over the course of months, that adds up to huge, sweeping change that can be unlike anything you've ever experienced.

Part I:

How to Stick to a Habit

In this main section of the book, I show how a habit is formed, why we have trouble sticking to new habits, and my most effective techniques for overcoming that obstacle.

This is the heart of the book, and if you take the time to practice some of these techniques, you'll get much better at sticking to habits. I highly encourage the practice.

CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF HABIT MECHANICS

The basics of creating a habit are pretty simple. But it's made complicated by the obstacles that get in the way.

We'll get to the obstacles soon, and some solutions for overcoming them. But first, let's do a quick overview of the basics.

The mechanics of creating a new habit work like this:

1. You pick a (preferably small) habit to stick to every day.
2. You pick a trigger to tie it to – something you already do every day, like eat breakfast or wake up in the morning.
3. You set up some kind of reminder so you don't forget to do the habit after the trigger.
4. You do the habit right after the trigger happens every day.
5. Ideally, positive feedback for doing the habit, and negative

feedback for not doing the habit, will reinforce the continued doing of the habit.

6. After repeating this for awhile (let's say, 4-6 weeks), it becomes more and more automatic until you don't need reminders.

At this point, it's a pretty automatic habit. When the trigger happens, you'll automatically have the urge to do the habit.

Automaticity

How long you have to repeat this trigger-habit sequence before it becomes fairly automatic depends on a few things:

- How consistent you are with the habit (vs. how many days you miss).
- How easy the habit is (drinking a glass of water is easy, working out for 30 minutes is hard).
- How soon after the trigger you do the habit (should be immediately).
- How rewarding you find the habit (positive feedback). If the habit is a struggle, it's harder to become automatic.

It should be noted that habits aren't like flipping a switch — it's not like they become automatic after a certain number of repetitions. It's more like a spectrum, where they become more and more automatic over time. After a month, it's starting to be automatic, and after a few months it should be fairly automatic. If you do a habit consistently for years, it's very automatic.

If only creating habits were as simple as this! For some very easy habits, it's nearly as simple as the above steps. But for most habits you'll want to form, there are things that get in the way. That's what the rest of this book is designed to overcome.

Other Types of Habits

Also note that this method is for habits that you do once a day, which I've found to be the easiest to form. There are other kinds of habits that you do with different frequencies:

1. Multiple times a day
2. Not every day but weekly or twice weekly
3. Only on weekdays or weekends
4. Irregularly and unpredictably (like when you go out with friends once in awhile, or get mad when someone irritates you)

These are harder to form. The multiple-times-a-day habits are harder to remember doing all day and you might not have the energy to keep it up for very many days. With the less-frequent habits, it often takes forever to do the habit enough times for it to become automatic, or you forget to do them. We'll go into these in a later chapter.

Another more advanced habit skill is **quitting bad habits**. These are habits you don't want, but have been doing them for so long that it's hard to break the trigger-habit bond. We'll get to those in another later chapter, but for now you should just know that these aren't good habits to start with.

Start with the easy stuff — new, positive habits that you're going to do once a day.

CHAPTER 2: WHY PEOPLE STRUGGLE

If forming a habit is as simple as doing a small habit after a trigger every day ... why isn't it an easier thing to do?

Because obstacles get in the way.

Things stop us from simply doing the habit after the trigger, so that we don't repeat the habit enough times for it to become automatic.

Some of the things that get in the way:

- **Resistance/procrastination:** We put off doing the habit, skipping it sometimes, because we don't feel like it, it's uncomfortable, it's easier to stick to our latest distractions. This is probably the biggest obstacle.
- **Busyness:** We have too much to do today, so we rush off to do all of it (a form of procrastination). Or a huge work project has caused us to be overwhelmed, a family crisis has taken all of our

time, or we're traveling and can't do the habit. This actually does not need to be a huge problem, but missing the habit then causes us to have resistance to starting again.

- **Stories in our heads:** We're telling ourselves stories about our lives, including our habits and everything we have to do, all the time. Sometimes the stories are useful: "I'm going to be great at this habit and it's going to change my life!" But lots of times the stories are obstacles: "I can't do this, I suck at habits, I have no discipline, I keep failing, what's wrong with me?" This causes us resistance and we procrastinate.
- **Ideals/fantasies:** When we start a new habit and we're feeling excited about it, we have an ideal or a fantasy about the habit. Perhaps we believe it's going to change our lives in a positive way, it's going to give us peace and calm, it's going to make us productive or fit and healthy. This is not a problem, and is natural ... but what happens if the reality doesn't meet the ideal? Maybe the exercise habit is much harder than we thought, filled with uncertainty and fear. We get discouraged. We then have resistance and we procrastinate.

As you can see, the last three obstacles all result in the first obstacle —

resistance and procrastination. That's because they're all really the same thing, but in different forms.

In the end, the real reason we struggle with habits is because we let the stories or ideals in our heads cause resistance for us. And then we procrastinate.

So how do we solve this problem of resistance? We'll look at that in the next chapter.