

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

THE 7 PILLARS OF HABIT BUILDING

The Beauty of Bad Habits

Discover The Secret To Breaking Bad Habits And Building Lasting Positive Ones Without Stressing Over Perfection — Chapter One. About a 16-minute read.

Do you feel like some people just seem to be better at keeping good habits than others? That while you struggle with the same loop of start, stop, and start again, they are continually making strides at every new thing they try? Are you tired of enthusiastically trying to make a new habit stick only to go back to your old ways a few days, weeks, or months later?

Habit building may come easier to some than others, but everyone still has to put in the effort to make habits work, at least at the beginning. What if, rather than habits simply coming naturally to certain people, those people were just doing things differently? More effectively?

Building good habits takes work. Cultivating a habit doesn't begin the second you start the behavior. No, habits start with the acknowledgment that something in your life needs changing. Whether it's an old habit from childhood that no longer makes sense, a coping mechanism that ultimately does more harm than good, or bad habits borne out of the path of least resistance, you must first identify the habit you want to break before you can change it and replace it with something better.

That's where this book comes in.

As you work through the chapters, you will learn the process of controlling your behaviors by changing things like your cues, your environment, and your support system. You will

create a plan for success before you even begin, and then track your results so that you can analyze and assess them later. These are the seven pillars of habit building; the secrets to finally sustaining habits—making them stick!

We will also learn what to do if you try to incorporate a new habit into your life and fail, sliding right back into old, unwanted habits. Failure is something everyone deals with, and it's particularly common when we are learning something new. Dwelling on that failure is where the problems arise, so we have an entire chapter dedicated to getting you back on your feet after some missed attempts.

It wasn't until I started taking habit-building seriously that I began to see real progress in my life. While studying for my undergraduate degree, I realized that studying full-time while working evenings and weekends and fulfilling a teaching practicum required a strict schedule and positive habits to be successful. Those habits served me well years later when I returned to complete a Master's degree while pregnant and with a toddler at home!

As a teacher, writer, editor, and mother, my days can easily get away from me if I'm not intentional about how I want them to go. Finding time for healthy eating, exercise, mindfulness, family responsibilities, friends, work, professional development, and general self-care relies on a strict routine and lots of healthy habits. I am no stranger to the seemingly unending loop of breaking an old habit, starting a new one, and then sliding back into my old ways.

Although habits almost become automatic once they have been fully integrated into a daily routine, getting them to that point relies on several factors, including a detailed plan, tracking, and analyzing what's working and what isn't. It's important to me that I have a strong image of the person I want to be: healthy, strong, active, and present for my family, friends, and work so that I can make the right choices even when it would be easier not to. For me, that means taking a nightly walk, even when I would rather be streaming my favorite show or a 10-minute yoga video first thing in the morning, to get my day started on the right foot.

It doesn't mean I've got everything under control. I struggle with stress, interruptions due to illness, schedule changes, or just life getting in the way. I still battle with my own negative coping mechanisms, including procrastination! In the past decade, I have moved to three different countries, in three time zones, on two continents, and have had to adapt my habits to each new location. I have experienced my share of backsliding in certain areas from time to time as a result!

However, my ability to be flexible and adapt my habits to changing circumstances has improved dramatically since I began putting into place the principles found in this book consistently in my life.

One of those principles was finding my personal support system. It's easy to think that we're doing it all alone, but the truth is, there is a community out there for everyone, and it can make the difference between success and failure. Sometimes, that support system is in person, but other times, it's online.

Another principle involved incorporating rewards into my habit journey, something I neglected to do in the past. Doing so helped me to keep consistent with those habits that take time to see results, helping me choose them instead of the ones that offer instant gratification but nothing else of value. I have also learned to find the lesson in failure and apply it to my next attempt to implement the habit into my life.

If you have been frustrated in the past at your inability to cultivate habits that would bring long-term benefits in your life, this book is a great place to start over. Getting intentional about what you want in life increases your chances of making it happen.

You will learn about the habit loop, including cue, craving, behavior, and reward. We will discuss how to identify negative triggers and replace them with positive ones instead. You will understand how to adapt your environment to support your good habits, and how to find the support system and resources that will increase your chance of success. Finally, we will talk about how to cope if you slide back into old, unwanted habits.

Each chapter has exercises to get the momentum going, and the final chapter is a workbook that helps tie everything together. Think of using these pillars to architect your aspirations in life, one where you don't stress over perfection. I've designed this book to be both encouraging and no-nonsense, so that you have the tools you need to overcome every excuse, lack of motivation, and difficult circumstance in your path, as well as the tools to get back on track when you stumble.

If you're ready to put the habits in place that will significantly improve your quality of life, I'm excited that you've found this book. It's time to take control of your habits and start shaping the future you want for yourself. I can't wait for you to get started.

Kathleen Sperduti

Chapter 1: The Beauty of Bad Habits

How Can Something So Bad Feel So Good?

Rahul is jolted awake by the sound of his alarm at 6:30 a.m., as he is every weekday morning. His alarm first went off at 6:00 a.m., but Rahul has been snoozing it in ten-minute increments ever since, as he does every day. Unfortunately for him, 6:30 a.m. is the latest he can push off getting up if he wants to make it to work on time. He has been late so often that he is currently on probation with his manager. Any more late arrivals, he risks losing his job.

It may sound like Rahul oversleeps, but the truth is that he only averages about four hours of sleep on a good night. His problem isn't about getting up in the morning. His problem lies in his nighttime habits: Rahul is part of an online gaming community and regularly stays up until 2:00 a.m. or even 3:00 a.m. playing games online with his friends. He knows he should go to bed earlier to get more sleep, but he just can't seem to log off when he's having so much fun.

Rahul moved to a new city for work two years ago, leaving behind his circle of friends from college. Between his full-time job and volunteer work at an animal shelter, Rahul hasn't had

much time for in-person socializing. Instead, he kept up the nightly habit of playing video games with them.

As soon as he connects with his buddies, he feels the day's stress falling away. The familiarity of the conversation holds none of the awkwardness he often feels when trying to get to know new people. He enjoys the easy banter, the excitement of the game, and the chance to forget that he lives far from home with few friends and a non-existent social life.

The problem is that his new city is in a time zone three hours ahead of his hometown. When he logs off at 3:00 a.m., it's only midnight for his friends back home. He knows that he should limit his gaming, but the fear of missing out and his loneliness contribute to his decision to log on nightly. He convinces himself that he will log off by midnight but gets so caught up in the game he never does. It feels so good to connect with his friends and to fall back into the same easy rhythm they had in college that he convinces himself he will have no trouble getting up the next morning.

Yet, every morning, the cycle continues. Rahul knows that he needs to change his nightly gaming habits, but nothing sticks. If he doesn't get this under control soon, he may lose his job. Not to mention, his health has been taking a toll. Rahul used to enjoy running 10k races but hasn't trained in months. He's too tired. He has been too tired to cook and instead relies on takeout for dinner. He has also been making silly mistakes at work, further straining his relationship with his boss.

Rahul understands that he needs to manage his nighttime gaming so he can get more sleep and function better during the day, but hanging out with his college friends online is the brightest spot of his day. It feels so good, yet it is causing problems in his day-to-day life. It isn't until Rahul learns about the habit loop that his behavior makes sense, and he is able to begin making the changes he needs to break free of his late-night gaming habit.

Have you ever engaged in a habit that you knew was bad for you, but you just couldn't seem to stop?

Why Do Bad Habits Make Us Feel Good?

As Rahul's story demonstrates, certain bad habits can be pleasing no matter how harmful you know them to be. It doesn't need to be as extreme as playing video games nightly into the wee hours of the morning, either. For example, starting each day with a cup of coffee on an empty stomach instead of eating breakfast is a typical bad habit that many people have. It can initially feel good to get those first sips of coffee, but later, you experience a burnout or crash midmorning when the caffeine is no longer keeping your energy up, and you haven't put any real fuel in your body in the form of a nutrient-dense breakfast.

It seems counterintuitive to think that our bad habits often win out when, logically, good habits, like enjoying a healthy breakfast, are better for us now and over time. Yet, that's often the case.

Why?

It is partly because a bad habit is often easier to start and sustain in the short term than a good habit. A quick jolt of caffeine in the morning provides an immediate payoff that preparing a nutritious breakfast might not. The good feeling Rahul gets from hanging with his friends online doing something he enjoys gives him an immediate positive consequence, rather than the delayed feeling of waking up rested the next morning. It is often the difference between instant and delayed gratification.

Bad habits can be particularly addictive because they often function as coping mechanisms. Some coping mechanisms are positive, but many are negative, including bad habits. Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, illicit drug use, binge eating, or engaging in risky behavior are all examples of negative coping strategies. They feel good in the moment but are harmful over time. The vicious cycle of unhealthy coping reinforces bad habits. Repeating unhealthy behaviors eventually becomes a habit.

A coping mechanism is a psychological strategy used to manage stress, trauma, or difficult emotions. They are sometimes employed when we lack functional problem-solving skills. Positive coping mechanisms foster long-term health and well-being, while negative coping mechanisms may feel good at the moment but ultimately cause more harm than good over time.*

What Do Habits Have To Offer?

Habits can become almost unconscious once they have been ingrained into our routine. Research shows that over 40% of our daily activities are habits, done almost unconsciously, which frees up our brains for more onerous tasks*. As a result, they are “cognitively efficient,” freeing up space in our brains to think about other things while still performing the habit regularly. Essentially, habits persist even after the motivation to perform it falls away, or the conscious thought to perform the habit disappears.

Is Your Childhood To Blame?

Many bad (and good!) habits are formed in childhood. At least one study shows that most children’s habits and routines are set by age nine*. That doesn’t mean that no habits are developed after that, but that the basic pattern for habit development typically stays the same as the child ages into adulthood.

Let’s take a closer look at what this means: Young children’s habits are typically first shaped by their primary caregivers. How the child’s day was organized, whether there were set routines around mealtimes or bedtimes, and how children were taught emotional regulation in highly emotional situations—angry, sad, or struggling with a negative emotion or experience—are all forces that shape habits in childhood and into adulthood.

Think about your childhood. Were there set mealtimes in your home or rules around the foods that were available? Did your parents or caregivers comfort you with food or toys rather than teaching you to work through your emotions? Did you witness your parents engaging in healthy habits, such as getting regular exercise?

For many adults, the patterns they learned as children are the ones they carry with them into adulthood. You may not have developed a taste for caffeine as a child, but if you regularly went to school without breakfast, that could transform into the habit of only drinking a cup of coffee in the morning as an adult. If your parents comforted you with a bowl of ice cream or a piece of cake whenever you were upset, your tendency to “eat your emotions” as an adult is a logical extension of that habit.

Does that mean you are doomed to continue the cycle of negative habits you were exposed to as a child? No! It is possible to break out of the cycle of bad habits and replace them with good habits at any point in your life. It just takes a little work.

It is also important to note that not all bad habits are formed in childhood. Many people also tend to adopt unhealthy habits during stressful periods of life when they are unable to cope with stress in healthy ways. Often, what starts as a coping mechanism during a particularly tough period in our lives can turn into a long-lasting bad habit over time.

When Rahul first started playing online games with his friends late into the night, it was a way to cope with the loneliness of being in a new place and not knowing anyone. It developed into a bad habit of playing nightly and staying up so late that it affected his sleep, job, and health.

Habit Formation: The Short Version

Habits, both good and bad, are formed in roughly the same way. We will dig deeper into this in later chapters, but the short version is that habits are formed by Cue > Behavior > Reward*.

The cue is something that triggers the behavior or the habit. For example, for many people, getting out of bed in the morning is the cue for them to turn on the coffee pot. The behavior is the habit of drinking coffee first thing in the morning. Finally, the reward is what the habit gives you, making it addictive. The caffeine rush from the coffee makes you feel good almost immediately*.

So why are bad habits often so much easier to form and sustain than good ones? There are two main reasons:

Bad habits are often easier to perform than good ones

There are bad habits of omission, such as NOT doing something that would be good for you. Choosing not to floss your teeth or avoiding seeing the doctor regularly are bad habits requiring no effort on your part. On the other hand, there are bad habits that are easier to do than good habits. Ordering a pizza for dinner three nights a week is easier than cooking a meal.

Bad habits often offer immediate rewards

The caffeine rush of a cup of coffee, the sugar rush of a cookie in the afternoon, or the relaxation of sitting on your couch rather than going to the gym all offer immediate or quick rewards. When our brain is rewarded immediately, it's easy to want to engage in the behavior repeatedly. All habits offer rewards, but immediate rewards can reinforce unwanted behaviors more easily than delayed ones. Breaking bad habits requires concentration and cognitive effort, which can be difficult when the incentives are not immediate or when the person is depressed, for example*.

Why Are Good Habits So Uncomfortable?

There are several reasons why adopting a new, good habit can be more difficult than adopting a bad or unhealthy habit.

Lack of immediate reward

We feel more rewarded by immediate pleasure than delayed pleasure. Many good habits have delayed rewards that take more willpower to push through in the early stages of habit formation, as the reward isn't immediately evident*. Starting the day with a short workout may have several health benefits, from increasing strength and flexibility to improving cardiovascular ability and potentially increasing longevity. Still, you may not see the benefits of that daily morning exercise routine for several months, making it more difficult to stick to it initially.

Resistance to change

We tend to repeat familiar and comfortable behaviors and avoid novel and challenging ones. If we already have an easy daily routine that provides immediate gratification, changing that routine for a delayed reward can seem overwhelming. We may need to create short-term rewards while we await the natural long-term rewards a new habit will eventually yield. This can also be time-consuming and mean more effort at the beginning when the change is already more difficult to make.

Stress depletes self-regulation

When stressed, the “path of least resistance” can be appealing. It is much easier to distract ourselves from our worries by binge-watching an entire season of our favorite show than spending an hour practicing yoga or meditating. Healthy activities usually require more self-control, which can feel more exhausting when we are already mentally tired or stressed.

Personal challenges

It takes more than just deciding to cultivate a healthy habit. It takes willpower, dedication, and a strategy to work through obstacles and setbacks. Sometimes, we struggle to find the mental strength it takes to work through those obstacles. Tiredness, insecurity, self-esteem, and health concerns are just some challenges to overcome when adopting more healthy habits. In the long run, building healthy habits will require addressing those issues. However, in the short term, behavioral and environmental changes are needed to create a solid foundation for change.

Conscious Change

Before we can change our habits, we need to be aware of them. That’s the beauty of habit and the challenge when we want to change one. Once a habit is ingrained, it becomes automatic. Once it’s automatic, we don’t really have to think about it much. How often do you check your phone and scroll social media? Do you think about it first, or just do it?

To take stock of our habits and identify areas we want to change, we need to make the unconscious conscious. It gives us the upper hand, so to speak. As you move through this

book, you will be guided to improve those habits you want changed. To do that, you must first be aware of your good and bad habits and identify the areas you want to tackle.

Why should you care about the habits you form in your daily life? Whether you are reading this book because you are actively looking to change your personal habits, or because you are intrigued by self-improvement and want to know more, understanding your habits and taking control of the nature of the habits you cultivate in your life will be one of the best things you can do for the person you are and the one you want to become.

Action Steps

I will be including action steps at the end of each chapter so that you can put the information to work on your own. It is strongly encouraged that you take the time to work on the action steps at the end of each chapter before moving to the next, as they often build upon each other.

1. Reflect on your childhood habits. Make a list of the childhood routines and habits that you had before the age of ten. Consider mealtimes, bedtime routines, exercise habits, household chores, etc. Which bad habits from your childhood have continued into adulthood, directly or indirectly? Which good habits have you maintained?
2. Make a list of your bad habits, their cues, and why they make you feel good in the short term. Then, add a reason they may harm you over the long term.
3. Make a list of your good habits, their cues, and why they were difficult for you to start initially (if they were). Then, add how they are good for you in the long term.
4. Make a list of five good habits you would like to cultivate. Perhaps they involve breaking your current bad habits (e.g., if you are sedentary, you may want to incorporate 20 minutes of exercise daily), or perhaps they are entirely new habits.

Now that we understand why bad habits make us feel so good in the short term but are bad for us over time, we can identify those areas for improvement. In Chapter 2, we will learn to identify areas where bad habits have taken hold.

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