

BOOST

Create Good Habits Using
Psychology & Technology

BY MAX OGLES

Boost: Create Good Habits Using Psychology and Technology

By Max Ogles

This book includes an app guide titled
“117 Apps to Help You Create Good Habits,” which you can download for
FREE at <http://www.maxogles.com/exclusive>.

Boost: Create Good Habits Using Psychology and Technology
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Topics include: habit, habits, good habits, bad habits, breaking habits, healthy habits, changing habits, and behavioral psychology.

Your Free App Guide

First, thank you for reading my book. While we may not know each other personally, I'm sure we have many things in common, particularly that we're both motivated to improve ourselves and create good habits. As I've worked to improve myself, I've found it helpful to use apps and other online programs as tools for tracking my goals, finding motivation, and interacting with others who share the same goals as me.

There are thousands of apps that can help us create good habits, and that's a good thing; we all have unique personalities, and a variety of different tools will help us succeed. The more options we have to choose from, the more likely we are to find things that work for us. To help you decide which apps or technologies you'd like to try, I created a guide that will introduce you to some of the best habit-forming apps that are available.

As a thank you for purchasing my book, I'd like to give you this useful guide for free. It's called, "117 Apps to Help You Create Good Habits."



Go to <http://www.maxogles.com/exclusive> to download the complete guide for free.

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Introduction

Not long ago, I had a conversation with my mom about some impressive new technology for developing good habits. My mom is fairly tech-savvy and knows I'm into habit-forming technology, so she made a point of mentioning the new “wearable” that she had seen. I was already familiar with the device she was excited about, the latest version of Fitbit. A Fitbit is a small device that you wear throughout the day to track important health metrics, such as number of steps, calories burned, and sleep quality.

Though I don't own a Fitbit, I've read a decent number of reviews about it and talked with my friends who use it. “Well,” I told my mom, “it does track some useful data, but the real problem is that most people can't seem to stick with it for more than a few months.” (This is true about Fitbit, along with most other health technology devices—most people give up on health technology after just a few months.) Then my mom made an interesting point: “Oh, sure, you're probably right, but I don't really mind. If it helps motivate me to be healthy for a few months, that's great—then I'll just move on and try something else. I'm always looking for new things to try, and I'm always trying to be healthy, so that works fine for me.”

At first, what my mom said didn't make sense. Why would you want a device that doesn't ultimately solve the problem you're targeting when you know that you'll just give it up in a few months? Over time, though, I've come to understand better what she meant. Most people will spend their entire lives trying to be healthy, because they know that it helps them feel good, be happier, and live longer lives. The quest for a healthy life never ends; just because they're healthy today does not mean they can stop everything and live healthily ever after. Even extremely healthy individuals have to keep up their motivation and good habits to maintain the lifestyle that they've worked hard to achieve.

The same lesson applies broadly to all areas of improvement in your life. You can spend your entire life, working to be a better person, developing skills and habits to become a new version of yourself. Books, tools, coaches, and other resources that promise to make you perfect in one area of your life cannot be true; you will always have room for improvement.

As a writer, I had doubts about writing a book about personal improvement because I know that I have plenty to improve myself. But the intent of this book isn't to solve all of your (and my) problems. The truth is that we will read many books in our lives, including great ones like *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey or *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg. We will learn new

ideas and interesting principles, but we will still have plenty of room for improvement. No single book can solve our problems and that's why we keep reading. This book is written to help us improve ourselves, even just a little, to help us maintain an upward trajectory as we constantly work to be better.

I've worked hard to make this book meaningful, but it is not definitive or comprehensive; it should be used along with many other resources you find as you work to create good habits. I collected a variety of different ideas and opinions about habits and tried to illustrate these principles with research and stories. Rather than have intrusive in-text citations or footnotes, I have listed all the sources for my research and stories in a notes section with just simple superscript numbers in the text. Reading the research and stories is informative and inspiring, but personal change still requires diligent application, experimentation, research, and persistence.

Broadly, the book will discuss two themes, psychology and technology, and what I've learned about using them separately and in conjunction with each other to create good habits. I'll offer a brief introduction to each theme here, and you'll see them as the prominent themes throughout the book.

Add Some Psychology

I don't know that I've ever met a person who strongly dislikes psychology. There may be some people who hate psychology—an undergraduate student jaded by a particularly boring psych 101 class, or a disciple of the hard sciences who dismisses the worth of soft psychology—but generally, as a society, we seem to be obsessed with it. That's because trying to understand ourselves is a fascinating process. Psychology helps us understand why we make stupid decisions, why other people make stupid decisions that affect us, and why we aren't 100% logical and rational all of the time. In a way, psychology is entirely a discipline of self-improvement; it helps us analyze our thoughts, actions, and motivations to learn how we can avoid misjudgments.

In self-improvement, psychology helps us step outside of ourselves and view our thoughts and actions from a third-person perspective. This perspective, an outside view of ourselves, is essential to making progress. I learned once that there are people who act, and people who are acted upon, meaning that some people control the trajectory of their lives (*carpe diem!*) and others let life happen to them (*que será, será*). If they never step outside of themselves to view their lives, they'll always let life happen to them. They'll go to work, come home, eat dinner, watch TV, and go to bed, never wondering what other opportunities might be available to them. Psychology provides a framework for

analyzing our thoughts and actions to see where we can improve so that ultimately we can be at the helm of our own ship.

And Some Technology

A news report from *Metro News (UK)* on December 18, 2013 read as follows: “A woman had to be rescued after accidentally walking off the end of a pier in Australia while checking Facebook on her phone.”¹ It’s crazy, right? A woman walked right off a pier while checking her phone. If you continue reading the news article, you learn that she floated along the Australian coast for 20 minutes, waiting for help, because she didn’t know how to swim. And, an especially important note, she was still holding her phone when the rescuers found her! I like to think that they pulled up next to her in a boat and yelled, “We’re here to save you!” and she responded, “Just a sec, I definitely have to post this on Instagram!”

Most of us readily admit that we’re addicted to the Internet, and incidents like this just add to the mountain of evidence. That goes without mentioning the thousands of horrific and depressing stories we hear about cell phone incidents that don’t end as well (#1 offender: texting while driving). This is the pessimistic view of the future of technology: We become a numb, hollow society, wholly motivated by the quick hits of dopamine that smart phone notifications and YouTube cat videos have to offer. That’s a pretty dim forecast. For how depressing the pessimistic view is, the optimistic view is every bit as exciting: A society of motivated, disciplined individuals who achieve their goals and maximize their potential with the help of technology.

Technology certainly seems ideal for facilitating good habits and personal development. It’s ubiquitous, reaches billions of people, allows access to unlimited information, and is already firmly incorporated into our daily habits. However, not every technology is ideal for every individual, especially with each person’s unique goals, motivations, and idiosyncrasies. Technology *can* help us achieve our goals, but it requires creativity and experimentation to determine how best to implement it. Throughout this book, I will mention various technologies that can be used to change behavior and create good habits. Remember, you will also have free access to an exclusive technology guide I created that will introduce you to dozens of apps and programs you can use to create good habits. You can download the guide for free at www.maxogles.com/exclusive.

Who Is This Guy?

Before you dive in, I thought you might also like to know a few details about me, Max Ogles, the author. I'm a tech entrepreneur, writer, husband, and father, and, like you, I have a long list of good habits I'm working on. In addition to my personal experience with habits, I've spent the last 5 years in the technology industry, building products to help people change their behavior. Some of the technologies I've helped build include web platforms, apps, and behavior modification programs based on text messaging.

In working with thousands of people who want to change, one of the most important lessons I've learned is that each person is incredibly unique and complex. That means that the same strategies won't help *everyone* achieve their goals. They might work for some people, but fail miserably for others. Personal improvement is important to me, and my goal for this book is to share the things that I've learned; hopefully many of these ideas will be beneficial to you as well. Nearly all of the stories that I tell throughout the book involve real people and their actual accomplishments; they serve as examples that we can achieve our goals as well.

I'm eager to hear what you think! You can respond to my writing in the comment sections on my essays at MaxOgles.com/essays or send me a message on Twitter ([@maxogles](https://twitter.com/maxogles)). I would also love for you to leave a [review about the book on Amazon.com](#) and would be very grateful for the feedback. If you do enjoy reading, there's plenty more to read online. You can get free email updates from my blog at www.maxogles.com/newsletter.

How to Use This Book

Here's the last note before we dive in; I promise.

I wanted this book to be interesting and engaging, but, at the same time, incredibly useful. Most of the chapters teach principles by means of storytelling, combined with analysis to help you understand how to apply those principles in your life. For convenience, I divided the book into two parts: *How to Start Habits* and *How to Make Habits Last*. The first part will help you learn how to get started with a new habit, including where to find motivation and how to give yourself the correct perspective. The second part will offer ideas about how to maintain good habits and make them last.

Like I said above, I wanted this book to be useful. To me, that means that in each chapter, you can learn specific things to apply immediately in your life. In order to make the book as useful as possible, each chapter includes a bullet point summary of the key points of the chapter, along with specific actions you can take to apply the principles from the chapter. You will find this information at the end of every chapter.

I'd like to think that if you don't have time to read a full chapter or if you forget what you learned and want to come back to it later, these end-of-chapter summaries will help you quickly access the most important information.

Okay, here we go.

1. How to Do Something Extraordinary

Let's not waste any time: I'm going to teach you how to do something *extraordinary*. Extraordinary can come in many shapes in sizes, but much of that has to do with perspective. For my daughter, who is 3 years old, successfully making it to the toilet at the right time was an extraordinary achievement. We spent hours and hours sitting on a small stool by the toilet, coaching and singing songs, teaching her how to "go potty"—that is, when we weren't busy cleaning up potty accidents around the rest of the house. When you invest that much time and effort into something and then succeed, you can't help feeling a huge sense of accomplishment.

The point is that *extraordinary* is often how we classify something when we're on the outside peering in. It's something that seems to be nearly impossible, far out of reach, until we accomplish it. On the individual level, extraordinary might mean completely paying off \$15,000 in credit card debt or completing a 5K run, if those are accomplishments that would be significant and meaningful to us. When we hear the word *extraordinary*, we also sometimes think *unattainable*. To accomplish something extraordinary seems so distant that we might preclude ourselves from even attempting it. Therein lies another important point: anyone can achieve extraordinary things. Don't believe me? I'll tell you a story.

While most of us only encounter terrorism and oppression when reading the news, an Afghan woman, Hamida Gulistani, has to deal with these things firsthand every day of her life. That's because Hamida is leading the charge for equality in her home country—she's become the face of women's rights in Afghanistan. In a male-dominated, Taliban-infested country, Hamida is one of the few individuals who not only has the credibility to speak up for women but also has the willingness to do so. She holds an elected office in the government, appears regularly on national television, and works actively with the U.S. State Department. Hamida truly is fearless, regularly confronting the scariest and most evil acts of terrorism—severe abuse and horrific murders—always at the risk of her own life. So how did she become the de facto leader for women's rights in Afghanistan? She started by helping just one woman.

In 2005, Hamida worked as a nurse in a medical clinic in the city of Ghazni. One particular day, Hamida treated a woman with scars and bruising all over her body. While the patient first claimed that the bruises were from an accident, Hamida soon learned that the woman had been abused by her husband. So Hamida took action. Since the police were likely to ignore the issue altogether,

Hamida contacted local media outlets to have the abused woman share her story. The story spread quickly and remained in the spotlight so that other people took notice. Eventually, law enforcement did take action—the wife received justice when the husband was reprimanded, forced to apologize to his wife, and spent 6 months in jail.

The news of Hamida's role in the incident spread quickly. After helping just this one woman, Hamida received an avalanche of requests from other women in similar circumstances. So she started helping them, one by one. They would come to the clinic or call Hamida's cell phone, and Hamida never turned them down. It reached the point that she could no longer work at the medical clinic because she was so busy responding to phone calls requesting her help. At that point, she gave up her job to become a full-time advocate for women's rights. Now she's a true hero of civil liberties in Afghanistan, all because she started by helping one woman.¹

When you think of the thousands of women whom Hamida Gulistani has helped, along with the cultural shift she's leading, it's difficult to see how you or I could ever have that type of impact in the world. Leading a civil rights revolution in a violent, politically unstable country isn't something you casually add to your resume. But when you look at Hamida's origins, her story is much more relatable. While working as an ordinary nurse, she saw an opportunity to help one woman. Next, she was willing to try a simple idea to involve the local media in the story. Then, she just kept doing her best to help the other women who came along. At the time, she wasn't an internationally recognized civil rights leader; she made an impact by answering one phone call at a time. If you want to achieve extraordinary things, begin with the ordinary.

Before you can create any habits (let alone the extraordinary ones) you need to focus on perspective. We start with perspective because, without it, we may never start at all. If you've ever completed a marathon, you know exactly what I mean. I ran a marathon for the first time this year. But now, *even though I successfully ran a marathon*, running 26.2 miles seems unthinkable. It's a very, very long distance to run! When I started training, I ran a very painful, slow, tedious 3 miles. After 4 months of training, however, 3 miles felt like a nice break, because I became accustomed to 7, 10, and even 20-mile runs. If I hadn't maintained the correct perspective at the outset, it would have been easy to let the length of a full marathon overwhelm me. But I knew when I started that it didn't need to come all at once; I increased my training distance gradually, over several months, until I developed the strength and endurance to complete the marathon. Perspective is an essential part of starting any goal or habit.

The Great Ones Start Small

If we break down Hamida Gulistani's story, we can learn how she began her extraordinary achievements. The basic principles of Hamida's success are founded in scientific research, beginning with how she framed her goal: she started small. She didn't launch a national campaign to overhaul her country's culture; she simply looked at one woman in distress and realized that she could help. Psychological research confirms the principle that small, proximal goals are more effective than long-term (distal) goals. Here's the experiment that proved it.

In the late 90s, psychology professors at the University of Toronto gathered a group of students and asked them to play a game. This is what they told the students:

Imagine you work for a toy company and you earn money based on the number of toys that you create and sell. You'll work for 10 days, and each day you'll purchase supplies and/or sell the toys that you make. Since the prices of supplies and toys will change daily, you'll need to manage your resources carefully to make the most possible money.²

The game was designed to be difficult, and the researchers created three experimental groups of students who would participate. The first group was assigned to play the game without any additional guidance. They did their best to manage their money throughout the game and the results were recorded at the end. For the second group, the researchers suggested a very specific goal of how much money each student should attempt to earn by the end of the game. Finally, with a third group, the researchers suggested a goal amount of money that the students should earn for EACH individual "day" within the game; they also suggested a goal to the students regarding how much they should earn by the end of the game.

It's not hard to guess which group of students performed the best. The third group of students not only had a long-term goal, but also had daily proximal goals that would help them achieve the long-term goal. With small, intermittent goals to focus on, the third group easily outperformed the others. By breaking down a complex game into ten small parts, the students were able to achieve small successes that added up to big success in the game as a whole.²

The study illustrated a simple principle—to accomplish big things, set small proximal goals that will help us work toward our larger goal. When we want to achieve something extraordinary, we first break it into parts. The grandiose goals

are often too daunting for us to even attempt them, unless we shift our perspective and ask, “What’s the first step to achieving this?” Create a manageable first step, and we’ll be on the right track.

Take It from Nike

The second important principle to be learned from Hamida Gulistani is just how quickly she took action. She was in the clinic with a patient, found out about the troubling situation, and never hesitated. She put to use the good ol’ Nike slogan: “Just do it.” Could you act as quickly as she did? How often do we have an important, somewhat unexpected idea pop into our heads, but we dismiss it without taking action. For me, these ideas arrive with a *bang*. I think, “I should do that!” But then I hesitate, allowing myself to debate the issue for a few minutes until all the momentum has worn off. If I had been in Hamida’s shoes, I might have thought, “It’s none of my business. I’m not the right person to handle this problem. I should look for someone else with the authority to help this woman.” Then I would report it to a supervisor and likely forget about it the next day.

The Nike principle, which Hamida executed perfectly, leaves no room for debate and indecision. Don’t wait; just do it. When the opportunity arrived, Hamida took it, and that’s a lesson we should all try to apply to our own goals. In the scientific research about goal setting, this principle could be considered “implementation intention.” Before you let those words bore you into a coma, have no fear—I won’t launch into a dissertation on the topic. The psychology is very easy to explain: If you commit to doing something specific at a future time, you’ll be more likely to do it. You make a decision about something long before the moment of decision arrives.

Making the Leap

There’s one more important point to make regarding Hamida’s impressive beginnings: she built on the momentum. This is something we’ll dwell on quite a bit—the second half of this book will teach you how to maintain momentum—but I think it’s important to mention now, too. We’ll step away from psychology, for a moment, to take a look at one of the traditional sciences, physics.

You might say that Newton’s First Law of Motion applies to life as well as physics: an object in motion tends to stay in motion. One action leads to more action. To put it another way, you don’t have to jump out of a plane all at once—just take the first step. For Hamida Gulistani, it began with helping one woman. She didn’t go looking for additional opportunities afterwards; the opportunities

came to her. If you do something well (even just ONE thing) people will ask you to do it again. One action led to another, and Hamida did her best to keep up with the momentum.

This principle of momentum can be applied to both large and small things that you want to accomplish in life, as illustrated by what I call “the cleaning principle.” Here’s an example of the cleaning principle: if I rinse off just one plate and put it in the dishwasher, a magical burst of ultra positive cleaning momentum almost always leads me to clean the whole kitchen. I start with a simple task of cleaning one plate, and the feeling of accomplishment gives me energy to reach further and do more. I’m definitely not a clean freak, but often an easy chore will help me take on the bigger projects that I really need to get done.

And of course, this momentum applies on a large scale as well. Each task that we accomplish allows us to increase our skills and expertise so that we’re better prepared (and more willing) to tackle the next task. An object in motion continues in motion. But don’t forget about the reciprocal half of Newton’s law of inertia: an object at rest will stay at rest, unless acted upon by another force. If an object in motion correlates to the “cleaning” principle, an object at rest correlates to binge-watching an entire TV series on Netflix. The laws of physics (applied to our lives) can help us build momentum to achieve extraordinary goals, but they can also keep us in a rut where we can’t make any progress. The important thing to remember is that even one small positive action, like turning off the TV, can create the momentum we need to get back on track.

Another Example of Extraordinary

Now that we’ve taken a look at the different steps that Hamida Gulistani used on her path to becoming extraordinary, let’s look at another example and see how the steps apply. In 2009, an 8-year-old girl named Isabella Rose Taylor attended a sewing camp. She was already an amateur artist, often looking for ways to include scraps of fabric or other materials in her artwork; sewing as a means of creating art was a natural next step. It didn’t take long for Isabella to start designing and sewing her own clothes. And, as her friends noticed her entirely unique style, Isabella found herself taking requests from them, too.

As the popularity of Isabella’s clothing grew, so did her confidence. She showed her clothing at a local boutique and had a fantastic response from customers. When it became clear that Isabella had a talent for design and a real business opportunity, her parents helped her find a coach, Liza Deyrmenjian. Liza was the perfect fit: she had over 25 years of experience in the fashion

industry and ran a fashion-business consulting firm called Fashion Accelerator 360. With help from Liza, Isabella learned the ins and outs of the clothing production process. After a few years of hard work creating unique collections, building a following, and attracting attention in the fashion industry, she achieved something extraordinary at the age of just 13: the major clothing retailer Nordstrom agreed to carry her collection of clothing.³

Selling your personal clothing line at Nordstrom is impressive regardless of how old you are. Most adults have no idea how to operate a sewing machine, let alone how to design and create an entire clothing line with quality and style to appear in Nordstrom. So how did a 13-year-old manage it? Like Hamida Gulistani, Isabella didn't set out to achieve something extraordinary—she just learned how to sew some clothes for herself. She started small, and made things happen. She wasn't afraid to make and wear her own clothes (using the Nike principle) and the momentum continued from there. Her friends liked the clothes, she found an opportunity to show customers, and she found a coach to teach her about the industry—all the while taking small steps but riding the momentum. Eventually, she managed to sell her clothes at Nordstrom. At the age of 13, she has plenty of time to continue doing extraordinary things.

Perspective

Most of us will spend our lives in admiration of individuals like Hamida Gulistani, who stares in the face of terrorism in her home country, gives hope to thousands of helpless victims, and risks her life for the benefit of humanity, or Isabella Rose Turner, who landed an entire clothing collection in one of the most prestigious clothing retailers in the world at the age of 13. But we shouldn't be afraid to join Hamida and Isabella, either, by taking one small step at a time and trying to keep up with the momentum that follows. Remember to maintain the right perspective. When you look at incredible people and the extraordinary things they've done, you might think, "I could never do that." But that's an unfair comparison. People who do extraordinary things begin by doing ordinary things. Begin by doing something ordinary, do it well, then you'll build the momentum that you need to be extraordinary.

// Just the Highlights

1. Extraordinary accomplishments are things that seem nearly unattainable, so in order to attain them we need to have the right perspective.

2. Begin by taking small steps toward your goal. People who achieve extraordinary things nearly always begin by doing ordinary things.
3. Use the Nike principle to take action: Just do it. Don't wait until you feel ready.
4. When you approach a new challenge, don't let the momentum wear off. Apply Newton's first law of motion to your good habits: an object in motion tends to stay in motion.
5. Always remember: keep the right perspective. It's the first step to achieving extraordinary things.

// What Should You Do Next?

1. Think of somebody extraordinary that you want to be like. Now, ask yourself, "How did they get started?" Depending on who the extraordinary person is, you may be able to learn about them online and actually read about their beginnings. If it's a musician, what was the first song that they played? If it's an athlete, what was the first training activity they performed? Find out how they started (or make your best guess) and go do that one thing yourself.
2. Ask yourself what activities you do that really help you build momentum towards a goal. For me, it's the "cleaning" principle that I mentioned above. What about you? If you read a chapter of a book, does that motivate you to write your own book? If you take a walk outside, does that motivate you to start running? Identify one activity that motivates you to do other healthy, productive activities. Now go do that activity by the end of the week! You're building momentum for yourself.
3. What's a habit that seems nearly unattainable to achieve? Is it running every day? Giving up unhealthy food? Waking up early? Remember that you won't achieve it all at once (i.e., you're not likely to wake up at 4:30 AM tomorrow and jump out of bed ready for the day). You don't need to achieve the habit all at once. What is a simple step you can take in the right direction? Try one simple step, and, as you build momentum, you'll be motivated to do harder things.

2. The First Step of Any Habit

If you're not familiar with the annual contest hosted by the Akron Global Polymer Academy, your 10-year-old self might be ashamed of you. The actual name of the contest is the "Rubber Band Contest for Young Inventors"¹ and it draws dozens of entries each year, ranging from highly sophisticated science fair projects to highly entertaining grade school weaponry. My favorite entry from the most recent competition was an Oreo-slicing machine. Two razor blades were attached to an arm at precise distance from each other. You pull back the arm (which uses rubber bands as resistance, of course) and when you let go of the blades they slice directly down the sides of the Oreo, separating the creme from the cookie. And with that, a decades-old problem is solved.

In 2013, one of the rubber band contest winners was then 11-year-old Andrew Pelham, who tackled an extremely rare but entirely preventable cause of death, infant death by heat exhaustion. These are deaths that make us shudder in horror: on a hot summer day, a preoccupied parent absent-mindedly leaves an infant in the back seat of the car. A few short minutes in the high temperatures prove fatal to the baby. Andrew's invention solved this problem. Based on the pictures I've seen, he created a long chain of rubber bands that attached to both the baby carrier and the driver's front door. When the driver opens the door, he or she is unable to exit without being reminded of the baby in the backseat.²

Though I'm not sure how many people have actually used Andrew's *E-Z Baby Saver*, I'm confident that, when in use, it likely prevents 100% of potential infant deaths due to heat exhaustion. That's because Andrew created a fail-proof *trigger* that sets in motion the "baby saving" behavior. His invention serves as the perfect example of how we should go about learning any new habit, from choosing healthy foods to getting to bed on time. The first step to any habit is a trigger—a stimulus or cue—that sets everything in motion. When we identify existing triggers or create new ones, we're beginning the process of developing a habit or ending a bad habit.

A World of Triggers

As I researched Andrew's award-winning rubber band chain, I stumbled across another invention from 17-year-old Alissa Chavez that solves the same problem. She took a significantly more advanced approach, using weight and location sensors to create an alarm that sounds when a child is left in the car.³ I think Alissa's variation of the baby-saving invention proves a point, which is

that our hyper-technological world offers an endless variety of triggers. Just in a car alone, we already have alerts to tell us that the seatbelt isn't fastened, the keys are still in the ignition, and the headlights are still on—why not a reminder about the tiny passengers in the backseat? Technology is everywhere telling us when to act and what to do, triggering good and bad behaviors throughout the day.

The next time you enter a fast-food restaurant, pay close attention to the sights and sounds behind the scenes; you'll be overwhelmed by the cacophony of triggers. During the summer after I turned 16, I fulfilled my teenage rite of passage working at none other than the quintessential fast-food restaurant, McDonald's. With years of experience preparing really fast food, McDonald's has learned that buzzers, beepers, and blinking lights keep a hectic workforce on task and on schedule. Though I've eagerly allowed my experience at McDonald's to escape from memory, I can still recall a handful of the various sounds: a loud beep when it's time to take the fries out, a buzz for the grill that cooks the burgers, a chime when a new car pulls up to the drive through. The sounds are embedded in the fast-food experience, because they *work*.

Rarely, if ever, do you see overcooked food at a fast-food restaurant. While it's common to end up with overcooked food at home (especially if you're easily distracted, like I am), it hardly happens at fast-food places. The fries are always a perfect golden brown and the burgers are always just between medium and medium-well, and it's all due to triggers. Though you may dislike the unhealthy attributes of fast food, there's no denying that it's an efficient and profitable business. If you wanted to run your life with the same efficiency and profitability, wouldn't you implement your own triggers?

While you may not have the technical savvy to rig a weight sensor in your kid's car seat or build precise timers for every cooking apparatus in your kitchen, you can absolutely create triggers that enable good habits in your life. In the rest of this chapter we'll discuss external and internal triggers and how you can link them to good habits.

External Triggers

Most of what we've discussed so far—lifesaving rubber band inventions and methods of fry-cooking perfection—involve external triggers. These are the sights, sounds, and objects that help us remember good behaviors. Most of us use the same external trigger each morning, an alarm, to help us wake up. Smart phones have made it so that more and more simple technologies are freely available to us, which means an endless variety of triggers to keep our habits up

to par.

One technology in particular stands out in this regard: an incredible platform called IFTTT offers dozens of triggers that can be useful for creating healthy habits. Remember, if you can create the right triggers at the right times in your life, you've mastered the first step of creating good habits. IFTTT stands for "If This, Then That" and it allows you to connect one action to another action, forming simple triggers using technology. (You can sign up to use it for free at www.ifttt.com.)

For example, let's say you're trying to curb your spending habits, which means avoiding your favorite store at the mall. IFTTT can use the GPS technology in your phone to know exactly when you're near the store. If you get too close, IFTTT will send an immediate alert. The alert could be something meaningful, like a message you wrote to yourself reminding you about the vacation that you're trying to save up for. You remember the vacation, and you decide not to go to the store after all.

Plenty of other apps offer many of the functionalities of IFTTT, but I mentioned it in particular because of the incredible selection of triggers it provides. The platform is designed to allow ordinary people (not just computer scientists and manufacturing engineers) to implement helpful triggers in their daily lives. Many other apps do the same, and you should experiment with a variety to see what works best for you.

Internal Triggers

The more difficult, more pervasive triggers are *internal* triggers. They aren't sounds or reminders that you can easily create; they're more closely tied to psychology of emotions and how we think. Here's a perfect example: Earlier this morning, I drove my car to Jiffy Lube to have some maintenance done. After I parked my car, a mechanic led me to the small lobby to wait, along with a few other customers who were sitting there. I briefly looked around the room, sat down in my chair, and pulled out my phone to check Facebook and Twitter. Checking my phone was a habit directly related to a trigger, so what was that trigger? I was bored. Since I've stopped by Jiffy Lube many times, I knew that it would take 15 minutes or so until they finished working on my car. In fact, the boredom had barely even set in—I anticipated that I would be bored and immediately pulled out my phone to entertain myself. (It's embarrassing how quickly I reach for my phone in these situations, but I'll save that confession for another book.)

Not only did I reach for my phone, but when I quickly glanced around the

room, the two other customers were also looking at their phones. Boredom is a very strong trigger that immediately causes us to whip out our phones, and other emotions can have a similar effect. Unfortunately, emotions often trigger undesirable habits: when we're frustrated, we often eat unhealthy food, spend money, or watch hours of TV to help ourselves feel better. From personal experience, I know that it's incredibly difficult to avoid internal triggers. So, instead of trying to avoid the triggers, it's best to learn when they're likely to occur and make sure that, when these triggers happen, we learn to do positive habits instead of negative ones.

Using Triggers for Good Habits

When it comes to triggering good habits, I would suggest two potential strategies. First, you can create a new trigger altogether by introducing it into your life (I'll explain this further below). Second, you can identify triggers that already exist but that currently set bad habits in motion. Then attach good habits to these triggers to replace the bad habits. Here are three steps you can follow to help with the process of creating effective triggers.

1. Find the right timing.

The first step is to identify, out of the hundreds of triggers that happen in your life each day, when the important ones occur. Here's an example. On my drive home from work every day, I pass a small drive-through soda shack called Sodalicious that offers dozens of varieties of sodas that can be mixed with different fruit flavors. I always see a line of five or six cars waiting to order soda at the small shack; many people stop to grab a drink on their way home from work. A big cup of ice-cold soda might seem like a perfect reward for the drive home after a full day of work. But we all know soda has a ton of empty calories, so how would we go about avoiding Sodalicious?

The drive home from work can be loaded with triggers, because we're often tired, hungry, and emotionally drained. And a nice, sugary Sodalicious beverage can help us forget all that pain. If these emotions are the triggers that make us think of Sodalicious, we need to prevent them from happening. If the external trigger is driving by Sodalicious at 5 PM, driving a different route may lessen the likelihood of stopping on the way home. But maybe the trigger will occur regardless of whether you pass Sodalicious, so you'll be tempted to stop by another fast food place instead. That could mean that the trigger isn't Sodalicious at all—maybe it's an internal trigger: feeling tired. That means that each day at 5 PM you'll feel tired (and hungry) regardless of the route you drive home. You

could solve the problem by coming up with a substitute “good habit” to use at 5 PM, like saving a healthy snack that you’ll eat specifically on the ride home.

An important aspect of identifying when triggers occur is to step outside of your daily autopilot and analyze your routines. Routines consist of all of the habits, both good and bad, that you already have in place. To change your habits, you need to set aside specific time to analyze your routines and figure out what the most likely triggers are for the habits you want to change. Or, identify the best time to trigger a new habit that you’re trying to create.

2. What type of trigger do you need?

When you are creating a new trigger, you need to determine what *type* of trigger it is. Type isn’t a reference to internal or external triggers; it’s a reference to how motivated and able you are to do the behavior that you’re trying to trigger. This principle is taught by Stanford psychologist BJ Fogg, who says that there are different types of triggers depending on the level of motivation and ability that you have to achieve a particular habit. That means you may need a trigger that provides motivation or that facilitates the habit.⁴ (See note 4 for this chapter to learn more about Fogg’s different types of triggers.) To offer a more concrete explanation of the types of triggers, you can think of it like this: some habits are easy to do, you love doing them, and all you need is a quick reminder to do them. Other habits you aren’t as excited about, so you need more than just a reminder—you need a boost or a nudge.

In order to find out whether you need a nudge or just a reminder, you can ask yourself some simple questions about the new habit you’re trying to achieve: “Am I motivated to do it?” and “Am I able to do it?” When your alarm goes off in the morning, are you excited to jump up and go to the gym? Maybe not. That means you’ll need to create a trigger that has more oomph than just the alarm. You could create an alarm ringtone that’s the theme song from the *Rocky* movie soundtrack. Maybe you already have high motivation, but you don’t have the skills to do the habit. This could be the case for many people who are trying to lose weight. If so, the ideal trigger would be something that not only cues the good behavior, but also provides instruction about doing it correctly. If you use a weight loss app, it can remind you to eat a healthy dinner, and then also suggest how many calories you should eat and some of the foods that you could try.

3. Create the connection.

In one of the most well known psychological research studies ever, Ivan

Pavlov showed that he could use seemingly random triggers (bells, whistles, electric shocks, etc.) to cause dogs to salivate. The two events, the trigger and the salivation, were entirely unrelated at first, but formed a strong connection with some training. Without that connection, the trigger would not be a trigger at all.

There are many ways to create this connection between a trigger and your desired habit. The most common way is to act on the habit immediately after the trigger occurs. Sodalicious is a tempting habit because I pass it right as I'm feeling tired on my way home from work. To build good habits, a common strategy is to take something you already do each day and make that a trigger for the habit that you'd like to do. For example, I wanted to memorize some inspiring quotes, so I used "getting out of the shower" as a trigger. Each day, before I turned off the water in the shower, I recited a quote out loud as a reminder to myself.

Like I mentioned before, internal triggers are generally emotions or feelings that cue us to act in a certain way. Most often, internal triggers cause us to desire bad behaviors, which we need to replace with good behaviors. In one interesting study about comfort foods, a food researcher discovered that we're most likely to eat comfort foods when we're *happy*, not sad. So, happiness (and wanting to give yourself a reward) might be a trigger for eating unhealthy foods. If you can pick the time of day that you think this is most likely to happen, you can put in place a plan to substitute a new comfort food for the old one. Instead of ice cream, try watermelon. (You get the idea.) If you're diligent in using a substitution, you can eventually reach the point where you have a new comfort food, watermelon, instead of ice cream.

When you pair two everyday behaviors together like this and repeat them over time, you form a strong connection between them. Eventually you reach the point at which the habit inevitably follows the trigger. And that's exactly what you want.

// Just the Highlights

1. All habits begin with a trigger. If we are creating good habits, it's important to know what will trigger those habits to occur.
2. We live in a world of triggers. They can be alerts, reminders, or emotions and feelings. They set a particular behavior in motion.
3. Sometimes, we need to create new triggers for the habits we're trying to

accomplish. Sometimes, the trigger is already in place.

4. The first step to creating a trigger is to identify when it will happen.
5. The second step to creating a trigger is to understand what type of trigger we need. Is it a simple reminder, or do we need a friendly nudge?
6. The final step in creating a trigger is making the connection between the trigger and the habit. If the trigger already exists, you may need to connect it to a new habit to replace a bad habit.

// What Should You Do Next?

1. What are some daily habits that you already have in place? Make a list of 10 of the simplest habits you do every day, like getting out of bed, taking a shower, driving home from work, etc. Now, choose a new good habit that you wish you were doing every day. Can you use one of your existing daily habits (getting out of bed, showering, etc.) as the trigger for your new, good habit? For example: When you brush your teeth at night, use that as a trigger to spend 10 minutes reading. Every day, after you brush your teeth, read for 10 minutes. You can create a new trigger using an existing habit.
2. Choose a bad habit that you would like to get rid of. Now make a huge list of all of the things that may trigger those bad habits. You could list emotions, places, people, and activities—anything that sets in motion your bad habit. After you've come up with a few triggers that may be causing your bad habit, choose a good habit that you'd like to do instead. When you expect one of the triggers to occur, practice doing the new, good habit instead of the bad habit.
3. Visit www.ifttt.com to sign up for a free account. Try browsing through the dozens of services and technologies that they connect on their platform. Try using one of their pre-made recipes to see how it works. Then, set up your own trigger to occur that will help you create a good habit. For example, you could create a recipe using time of day (9 o'clock each morning) then send yourself an automated phone call at that time each day.

3. Creating Inspiration to Motivate Yourself

After a full day of work, I come home to have dinner, play with my kids, and spend the evening with my wife. By around 8:30 PM, we put the kids to bed. Then we clean a few things around the house and eventually sit down on the sofa to relax. After working, moving, exercising, and generally staying busy for most of the day, it's nice to have a moment of rest. But then I'm faced with a dilemma: should I do something productive, like read a book or write on my blog, or give in and watch a TV show? The good habits are within reach, but will I really have the motivation to achieve them?

In moments like these, we discover our intrinsic motivation—how strong our inner desire is to achieve something. It's not easy to change your intrinsic motivations, because they're closely linked to who you are and what's important to you. However, I've noticed that sometimes, in these moments of decision, I find inspiration. For example, I might remember an interesting story that I was excited to write about. If I'm inspired to write, I'll choose to do it instead of watching TV—I choose the good habit over the bad. Inspiration is closely tied to intrinsic motivation; they give us energy and momentum to do good. If you can find ways to inspire yourself, your good habits will be easier to achieve. So that begs the question: how do you inspire yourself? Let's learn from some of the most talented people in history.

Although musical preference is generally open to debate, the world seems to have come to a consensus about who deserves to be crowned the greatest band in history: The Beatles. Of course, you can disagree with this all you want, but The Beatles lead the pack in sales (nearly one billion albums sold, based on some estimates), number one hits (20!), and public opinion (if you Google “greatest band of all time,” The Beatles are the first search result). The Beatles are so beloved that Abbey Road, the road in London that served as the setting for their *Abbey Road* album cover, may employ a full-time crossing guard due to the dozens of adoring fans who stop in the road to take pictures.¹

With all of this success, it's natural for us to wonder who the band members were, where they came from, and how they reached this level of musical genius. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell uses The Beatles as an example of how ten thousand hours of deliberate practice elevated the band to an elite level of performance.² That may be the case, but one of their songs, in particular, originated in a single moment of pure inspiration, and it went on to become one of their greatest hits.

The song was called “Scrambled Eggs.” At least, that's what Paul McCartney

says they called it originally. He tells the story of how the melody came about:

I woke up with a lovely tune in my head. I thought, ‘That’s great, I wonder what that is?’ There was an upright piano next to me, to the right of the bed by the window. I got out of bed, sat at the piano, found G, found F sharp minor 7th – and that leads you through then to B to E minor, and finally back to E. It all leads forward logically. I liked the melody a lot but because I’d dreamed it I couldn’t believe I’d written it. I thought, ‘No, I’ve never written like this before.’ But I had the tune, which was the most magic thing.³

McCartney explained that the tune was so familiar to him that he went around asking other people in the music industry, “Who wrote this song?” Eventually he accepted that he had written the song himself—inspiration had struck and the melody was born. At the outset, McCartney just sang along with silly lyrics, “Scrambled eggs...oh, my baby, how I love your legs...” because he only had the melody. The song eventually became “Yesterday.” It has dozens of accolades, including number one on the U.S. billboard charts, and may be the most “covered” song of all time. The number one song of the 20th century, “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” also came to the composer, Harold Arlen, in a moment of inspiration.

The Origins of Inspiration

If only it were that easy—you wake up in the morning next to a piano and sound out one of the greatest melodies of the last century. You may be surprised to learn that while this type of inspiration is clearly an outlier, finding inspiration is something that you can actually DO; you don’t need to wait for it to occur. Allow me to introduce you to the study of inspiration within the field of psychology.

In 2003, two psychologists at the University of Rochester, Todd Thrash and Andrew Elliot, set out to conduct the definitive study of inspiration using psychology. This was not your average academic study—it was a seven-part study that tested dozens of hypotheses about inspiration and created a framework for ongoing study about inspiration for future researchers. The entire research study was an impressive undertaking, and, by the end, the researchers had two very important results: 1) a psychological scale that could be used to measure inspiration, and 2) a list of over 30 personality traits with data to show whether these traits cause inspiration to occur. In essence, Thrash and Elliot turned inspiration into a science: if you exhibit particular personality traits, you’re more

likely to be inspired.

That brings us to the burning question: What were the inspiring personality traits? As I said, they tested over 30 different traits; some were directly related to inspiration, others not at all. Here are the top three traits, with the first having the strongest correlation to inspiration: 1) openness to experience, 2) self-esteem, and 3) creativity. Now, obviously, you can't just pick-up some extra creativity in the checkout aisle at Wal-Mart—it's a personality trait; it's part of who you are. But you can change your personality over time, and if you strengthen these traits in particular, you can optimize yourself to receive McCartney-esque inspiration.

The Top Traits

Each personality trait has volumes of literature on its own, so I trust that you'll dive into the ocean of research and find what works best for you. However, here are a few suggestions to get you started. And, since technology can be a powerful force in personal change, I'll include a few apps that might help you along the way.

1. Openness to Experience

In their conclusions about this trait, Thrash and Elliot wrote, "These findings suggest that inspiration is facilitated by receptiveness." *Openness* is certainly not an easy trait to develop. We like habits and customs because they give us comfort and security. For example, do you drive the same route to work every day? So do I. It's the fastest route, that's why I take it, but the repetition of the same sights every day doesn't seem to offer much in the way of inspiration.

Here's a simple suggestion to start being more open: Give up one thing you're accustomed to. Try a new food, drive a new route to work, listen to a radio station that you've never heard before—anything to break an old routine. For years, I've ordered the same exact burrito from the menu at one of my favorite restaurants, Cafe Rio. I never order anything else, and honestly I don't even know what else is on the menu. But if you'll try a small experiment, I will too: the next time I visit Cafe Rio, I'll order something different.

If you want to think bigger than just a new lunch entree or route to work, you might try out Everest (www.everest.com) an app that's meant to help you achieve goals. Everest seems to place an emphasis on trying new things, so the social community within the app might help nudge you in the direction of developing openness. (Remember to get my free guide, "117 Apps to Help You Create Good Habits," which has this and other apps you can use to create good habits. Find it for free at <http://www.maxogles.com/exclusive>.)

2. Self-Esteem

Inspiration comes more frequently to people with high self-esteem, and that makes sense: with high self-esteem, you're less likely to set artificial limitations on your own abilities or be inhibited by what other people might think. Low self-esteem can have deep psychological roots and I'm certainly not qualified to offer advice for such a complex issue. Instead, I'll offer a simplistic suggestion that is applicable to self-esteem: avoid comparing yourself to others.

Comparing yourself to other people is a worthless exercise because there will always be someone smarter, richer, and more beautiful than you are. And that's based on statistics: you virtually have no chance of ever being the best in the world at anything. (If it makes you feel better, I'm right there with you!) So rather than focusing on everything you don't have, make an inventory of what you DO have.

I'm sure there are hundreds of tools you can use to list what you have and what you're grateful for; I've found one app that I especially like, called [Grateful](#). Every day it asks for one thing you are grateful for, with a simple and effective interface.

3. Creativity

Creativity is similar to openness in that we need to let go of conventional or routine ways of doing things to find new ways of expressing ourselves. Unfortunately we often have default habits that we rely on in situations that might otherwise yield creativity. For example, when we stand in line at a fast-food restaurant, we don't exhibit any creativity in attempting to preoccupy ourselves—we just scroll away on our smart phones. In fact, not long ago some psychologists found that most people would rather experience a mild shock than sit idly, doing nothing.⁴

If you'd like to be more creative, my app suggestion is a bit counterintuitive. Choose to use an app that limits your smart phone functionality so that it becomes less of a distraction. Stop opening apps, checking notifications, and taking phone calls to devote more time to clear thinking. An app for this on iPhone is called [Mobile Flow](#). It works in conjunction with Airplane mode on your phone, so it eliminates all unnecessary distractions. Deliberate focus can allow you to think and be creative without distractions, so I highly recommend the app.

Finding Inspiration

Openness to experience, self-esteem, and creativity are three attributes that can help you be prepared for inspiration. But, of course, even if you have these traits, they don't guarantee that you'll magically receive inspiration. Remember, you won't always be inspired to do great things; sometimes, you have to work hard without knowing what the end result will be. That was the case for Nikola Tesla, whom many consider the pioneer of electrical engineering. After mentioning several different apps that may help you find inspiration, I find it particularly appropriate to mention Tesla; his discoveries have had a direct impact on the electrical technologies we use today.

You can easily find Nikola Tesla's fascinating autobiography for free online. As you read details and stories from his life, you can begin to identify very strong personality traits. For example, he was relentlessly curious. He was always building and inventing, obsessed with solving mechanical puzzles, like "how to produce continuous motion through steady air pressure." Unsurprisingly, he was a bit eccentric, because he focused so intently on his work. Though we don't know him personally, the autobiography offers plenty of insights into the mind of Tesla. Based on the traits that we've discussed—openness to experience, self-esteem, and creativity—he seems to have been primed for inspiration. But it didn't come until after many years of hard work.

After so many long years of work (and sickness, which Tesla frequently dealt with), he had a moment of pure inspiration—one of the greatest in scientific history. He was walking along in the park, with a friend, reciting poetry. Here's what happened in his words:

At that age I knew entire books by heart, word for word. One of these was Goethe's *Faust*. The sun was just setting and reminded me of the glorious passage:

The glow retreats, done is the day of toil;
It yonder hastes, new fields of life exploring;
Ah, that no wing can lift me from the soil
Upon its track to follow, follow soaring!
A glorious dream! though now the glories fade.
Alas! the wings that lift the mind no aid
Of wings to lift the body can bequeath me.

As I uttered these inspiring words the idea came like a flash of lightning and in an instant the truth was revealed. I drew with a stick on the sand the diagrams shown 6 years later in my address before the American Institute of

Electrical Engineers, and my companion understood them perfectly. The images I saw were wonderfully sharp and clear and had the solidity of metal and stone, so much so that I told him: "See my motor here; watch me reverse it." I cannot begin to describe my emotions.⁵

In that moment, Tesla discovered an original design for a motor that would generate electricity using alternating currents. While other inventors, including Thomas Edison, had been aware of alternating current, no one had been able to produce it in a way that would be strong enough to support commercial power systems. Tesla's discovery solved that problem and, as he mentioned, he presented those very ideas to the American Institute of Electrical Engineers 6 years later. Eventually a strategic debate occurred (over the course of many years) between Thomas Edison, who supported the idea of using Direct Current (DC) to transfer electricity, and George Westinghouse, who supported Tesla's idea of using Alternating Current (AC). While both types of electrical current were implemented, eventually AC proved to be the superior option because it was easier to transmit over long distances.

I won't dive into all the details of the debate between AC and DC power systems, but the important takeaway is this: in the moment described above, Nikola Tesla discovered a method for transmitting alternating current, which outperformed Edison's system and is the system we use to generate electricity today.

Using Inspiration to Create Good Habits

In both of the examples that I've shared—the stories of Paul McCartney and Nikola Tesla—we learn how some of the most talented people in the history of the world arrived at pivotal moments of inspiration. But you don't need monumental, earth-changing inspiration to create good habits. The examples of McCartney and Tesla demonstrate the process of receiving inspiration, which can occur on a small, individual level on a daily basis. With hard work, openness to experience, healthy self-esteem, and creativity, you can live in way that you are inspired to do good regularly. You don't need to memorize whole books, like Tesla, or sleep by a piano, like McCartney. Allow yourself to keep an open mind so that the inspiration can come, and you'll develop intrinsic motivation for your good habits.

// Just the Highlights

1. Intrinsic motivation can help us overcome tough moments of decision and choose to do good habits.
2. It's not always easy to create intrinsic motivation but intrinsic motivation is closely tied to inspiration.
3. We can increase our ability to receive inspiration by being open to experience, having healthy self-esteem, and exercising creativity.
4. Paul McCartney and Nikola Tesla both offer examples of the process of receiving inspiration. Some of their greatest work came as a result of inspiration.
5. To achieve good habits, we don't need to have momentous, earth-changing inspiration.
6. Work hard and focus on the attributes of openness to experience, self-esteem, and creativity to foster small daily moments of inspiration that will lead to good habits.

// What Should You Do Next?

1. Receiving inspiration is closely tied to a person's openness to experience. The next time you visit your favorite restaurant, order something new on the menu that you've never tried before. This will help you develop a habit of being open to new things and not allowing yourself to be stuck in routine habits that are less likely to result in creativity.
2. Practice gratitude to develop your self-esteem. Gratitude allows us to focus more on the things that you have than the things that you do NOT have, which helps you be more confident in your personal abilities. Write a simple thank you note to someone who has had an important impact on your life.
3. Attempt something creative that you have never tried before. Write a poem, draw a self-portrait, design the plot for a movie, or tackle some other creative activity. Even spending just a few minutes working creatively on something can help you relax and spark new ideas that are relevant to other parts of your life.

4. A New Look at Using Incentives for Motivation

There are some professions—lawyer, accountant, car salesperson, among others—that lend themselves to a lifetime of boring, repetitive jokes from unassuming strangers. “So what do you do for a living?” can be a cringe-worthy question if you’re in one of these professions, because of the predictably tacky follow-up jokes. I haven’t had to deal with a lame-joke-inducing profession myself, but I’ve spent a lifetime of dealing with it by proxy. That’s because I’ve spent my life telling people what my dad does for a living: he’s a psychologist.

After explaining to someone that my dad is a psychologist, I can generally expect a joke about how he must have psychoanalyzed me, or how it must be nice to have inexpensive therapy, or how, even with a psychologist for a dad, I still managed to end up a bit crazy. Lack of originality aside, these jokes bothered me because the stereotypes didn’t seem to fit—I talked with my dad just as anybody else talks with their dad. I’ve noticed he’s good at listening and tends to offer great advice, which may have to do with his training in therapy, but, aside from that, I don’t think his psychology background shows through. As I’ve grown older, though, I’ve realized that more than a few parenting tricks relied on simple principles of psychology.

Pianos and Pigeons

When I was about 10 years old, my dad presented a plan to my two sisters and me. We were all enrolled in piano lessons (mandatory for all of us until age 18) and he designed a plan that would motivate us to practice the piano every day. We called it “Lucky Piano Day.” Every day, my dad would come home from work and ask which of us had practiced the piano that day. And, roughly, every 2 weeks or so, my dad would announce, “Today is Lucky Piano Day!” If we had practiced the piano on Lucky Piano Day, we earned a reward of a few dollars. If we hadn’t practiced, we didn’t earn the reward. Because we didn’t know which day would be “lucky,” we ended up practicing every day, just to be safe.

Does this reward cycle sound familiar? My dad designed a reward system to create positive reinforcement. He wanted us to practice the piano, so he rewarded us when we completed this task. However, he used a subtle twist: variable rewards. Instead of always offering the reward, he only gave it intermittently, so we were unable to predict when it would occur. Psychologist B. F. Skinner was a key contributor to the ideas of reinforcement and variable rewards. Following dozens of studies with pigeons and mice, Skinner proved

how effective positive reinforcement could be to achieve a desired behavior.¹ In my dad's experiment, I was the pigeon—and the rewards were just as effective on me.

Creating Motivation

Both Skinner's experiments and my dad's reinvention of them remind us that good behaviors can often be motivated by rewards. Up to this point in the book, we've discussed how to create the right perspective for achieving our goals, how to create the right triggers, and how we can create inspiration to motivate ourselves. This chapter deals with extra boosts of motivation—external motivation—that can help us get started when nothing else will.

Maybe you've already designed a way to reward yourself for good behavior: you might treat yourself to a fresh fruit smoothie after exercising or set aside some spending cash to splurge after you hit a savings goal. Simple rewards like this can be very effective, and I think it's a good idea to try them with your habits. Personally, I treat myself to a bottle of Gatorade after going on a run. However, this type of extrinsic reward isn't always the solution. Just as you can't always bribe your kids to do what you want them to do (they'll get spoiled!), it's not always effective to bribe yourself to do good behaviors because it likely isn't sustainable. Using rewards as incentives is one of the oldest motivational strategies that exist. So, instead of discussing incentives, which you're likely already familiar with, let's learn how a seemingly common reward system can be flipped upside down to become even more motivating.

A Study of Teachers

One of the longstanding political debates in the United States concerns public education—no matter what changes we make to the system, there always seem to be plenty of problems to fix. Hiring high quality teachers and regularly evaluating them is a major issue in particular. In 2010, a group of economists set out to tweak the educational system using financial incentives. They designed a research study with the goal of improving teacher performance, and thereby student performance, by motivating the teachers with big cash bonuses.

Of course, cash bonuses as a job incentive are nothing new. But the interesting part of the study was the unconventional method that the economists used to administer the bonuses. Of the 150 teachers who participated in the study, half received their bonuses at the end of the school year based on the testing results of their students. The other half of the teachers received their bonuses *at the*

beginning of the school year, with the understanding that they would have to pay back part of their bonuses if their students didn't perform well at the end of the year. All other factors were the same, including the size of the bonuses and the criteria for grading performance.

Whether the bonus came at the beginning or at the end of the year, you would think it would offer significant motivation for teachers. After all, money is one of the easiest levers to pull if you're trying to manipulate behavior. But when the school year had ended and the performance results were in, the second group—the teachers who received bonuses at the BEGINNING of the year—had significantly better results. The research team determined that loss aversion, or the fear of losing what they already have, was the primary factor that motivated teachers to perform better.²

Economics for Babies

The key to the teacher performance study was a principle that economists and psychologists call “loss aversion.” It's easy enough to understand: the pain of losing something outweighs the joy of gaining something, even if those two things have equal value. One group of teachers was motivated by the fear of losing the bonuses they had already received; the other group of teachers was motivated by the potential to earn a bonus. And the fear of losing a bonus was more motivating than the prospect of earning a bonus.

A simple, real-life situation might help to illustrate loss aversion as well. I have a one-year-old daughter who loves to play with balls and she often wobbles around the house clutching them close to her chest. If I hand her a ball, she'll take it from me, then hold it up and smile to show me she's pleased. But if she's holding the ball and I take it from her, she throws her head back and drops on the floor screaming hysterically. She expresses mild amusement when she receives a ball, yet writhes in agony when she loses a ball. She's just adhering to economic principles: the pain of losing a ball far outweighs the pleasure of receiving one.

Loss Aversion in the Wild

Now that we understand loss aversion, how can we use it to our advantage? Let's take a look at two different creative uses of loss aversion that motivate people to behave differently than they would otherwise.

1. Lose if you snooze

There are plenty of apps to choose from that “threaten” to take your money if

you don't keep up with your goals. My favorite of these is Stickk.com, which helps you set up a goal, then creates a consequence, like donating your money to charity, if you don't achieve your goal. But since Stickk is already relatively well known, I thought I would introduce you to a devious (and technically illegal) alarm clock that made the news in 2013.

If you REALLY want to wake up early, and you're fully invested in a loss aversion strategy for motivation, build yourself a money-shredding alarm clock. The alarm goes off, along with a timer. If you don't get up and stop the alarm soon enough, it will slowly feed your cash into a small paper shredder.³ This seems to be a very literal implementation of loss aversion: take action now, or your money will be destroyed. I haven't personally tried an alarm clock like this, but I imagine it would be very effective. If you decide to rig something like this for yourself, however, you may want to be, umm, discreet about your new wake-up strategy, since destroying money is a felony in the United States.

2. Saving Energy

You might find that loss aversion already exists in some areas of your life, but you don't find it motivating because you aren't even aware of it. This was the case with a simple study conducted about the amount of energy used in homes. Most of us receive a utility bill each month for the energy that we've used, but as long as the bill stays relatively the same, we hardly think about how much money we're spending.

In the energy conservation study, homeowners were given an "in home display" that showed them exactly how much energy they were using in real-time throughout the month. This direct feedback motivated homeowners to change their behavior, reducing their consumption of energy by an average of 7%.⁴ Without knowing how fast we're consuming energy, we blindly pay the bill that comes each month. But when we can see the amount of energy being used (and feel the pain of how much we're spending) it's a lot more motivating to change our behavior.

Creating Loss Aversion

Whether you're trying to change your own behavior or trying to influence others, loss aversion can be a powerful form of motivation. If you take a look at the different motivating factors in your life, you may find that you can replace traditional incentives with loss aversion strategies. It's a subtle shift in perspective, but it takes advantage of your psychological tendencies and,

ultimately, may help you achieve the results you're looking for.

It's really not that difficult to create a loss aversion strategy and apply it to your personal goals. Pick a specific goal or task that you'd like to achieve, and then create a consequence for yourself if you fail to achieve that goal. Let's take a look at a real-life example, and I'll suggest some ideas about how you can create simple rewards (and punishments!) to motivate yourself to develop good habits.

1. Create the goal

What's the goal that you want to achieve? A fairly common goal is to wake up earlier in the morning, so let's use that as an example. In fact, as you'll read later, that's been a goal of mine in the past. I'll make a goal to wake up 30 minutes earlier each day, which should be within reach, based on my past experiences waking up early. Since I know that some days I'll fail, I'll give myself some leeway: for the next 30 days, I'll wake up 80% of the time. That means I'll need to be successful for 24 out of 30 days. Now I have a reasonable goal that I think I'll be able to achieve.

2. Create the disincentive

If I achieve my goal, I'd like to reward myself. I've wanted to buy some new winter running gear, so that can be my reward. However, we need to incorporate loss aversion, too. If I don't achieve my goal (i.e., anything less than 24 days waking up early), I'll take the money that I would have spent on running clothes and donate it to an organization that I really don't like. I graduated from Brigham Young University, and our biggest athletic rivals are the University of Utah. I want to be *really* motivated not to fail, so if I do fail to reach my goal I'll donate the money to...the University of Utah. By picking the U of U, it will be even more painful to not achieve my goal and I'll be extra motivated to achieve it.

3. Recruit someone you trust

If you're like me, it's difficult to hold yourself accountable. That's where another person comes in. I'd like to choose someone who I really trust, but who won't cave in when it's time to hold me accountable. I have a good friend who loves University of Utah football (he'll want to send them my donation) but I know he'll be fair and give me the reward if I achieve my goal. Before I start, I'll explain the goal to him and write a check made out to the University of Utah.

My friend will hold onto the check so that if I fail, he'll send in my donation. If I'm successful, he'll rip up the check. This simple example of loss aversion can really work, but you need to personalize each step to yourself. Choose a reward that is *really* motivating to you, along with a consequence that you *really* want to avoid. Then recruit a friend you trust, and you'll be on your way to achieving your new habit.

A Final Thought on Motivation

Like I mentioned before, rewards and incentives are some of the most common strategies used to motivate people to change their behavior. Look no further than the thousands of jobs that include commissions and bonuses to motivate employees to achieve their goals. These external motivators can be very effective, which is why they're used so frequently. But when you set up rewards for yourself or others, always make sure that you're encouraging the correct behavior. Some studies have shown that when rewards are used as motivation to do a particular activity, the activity itself becomes less enjoyable to do.⁵ As you create good habits, rewards can be a powerful motivator, but always make sure to test and adjust to ensure that your motivations are aligned with what you truly want.

// Just the Highlights

1. Using mice and pigeons, scientists have proven how incentives can be used to drive certain behaviors.
2. Incentives are one of the oldest motivational strategies, but they do have drawbacks and shouldn't be used exclusively.
3. An alternative to incentives is based on loss aversion, or the fear of losing something that you already have.
4. Loss aversion has been shown to be effective in many scenarios, such as the money-shredding alarm clock and the in-home displays that show how much electricity you're using.
5. You can implement a simple loss aversion strategy by 1) setting a goal, 2) deciding on a consequence if you fail to reach your goal, 3) asking a close friend to hold you accountable.

// What Should You Do Next?

1. Try implementing a simple reward strategy for yourself. Pick something that will be relatively easy to achieve, like exercising for 15 minutes one day. Now select a reward for yourself. The size of reward should reflect the difficulty of the task, so you won't need to plan any kind of elaborate reward. The reward could be as simple as allowing yourself to buy a new song from iTunes. Try several variations of this (simple task, simple reward) to learn what rewards are motivating for you.
2. Use the steps above to create a loss aversion strategy for yourself. If you want to make it a bit more fun, find a friend to actually set the goal with you. If you fail, you give money to a friend. If they fail, they give you the cash. And if you both succeed, celebrate together.
3. Try using one of the apps described in my app guide. (You can download the guide for free at www.maxogles.com/exclusive.) Look for the section titled "loss aversion" and you'll find suggestions that relate to the motivational strategies discussed in this chapter.

5. Why Good Habits Don't Last

You may have noticed that even when you manage to do a good behavior once, it's often very difficult to sustain that behavior. Well, you're not alone. You might call this the curse of the New Year's Resolution, the goal you set but never achieve. But just how bad are we at sticking to good behaviors?

Alan Deutschman, the author of a book about habits called *Change or Die*, shared the following story from a conference he attended. He was at the "Global Innovation Outlook" conference in 2004; the conference, hosted by IBM, was meant to gather innovative leaders from around the world to solve really big problems. One of the speakers was Dr. Edward Miller, who was serving as the dean of the medical school and CEO of the hospital at Johns Hopkins University. Deutschman writes about Dr. Miller's speech:

He turned the discussion to patients whose heart disease is so severe that they undergo bypass surgery, a traumatic and expensive procedure that can cost more than \$100,000 if complications arise. About 600,000 people have bypasses every year in the United States, and 1.3 million heart patients have angioplasties — all at a total cost of around \$30 billion. The procedures temporarily relieve chest pains but rarely prevent heart attacks or prolong lives. ...But many patients could avoid the return of pain and the need to repeat the surgery — not to mention arrest the course of their disease before it kills them — by switching to healthier lifestyles. Yet very few do. "If you look at people after coronary-artery bypass grafting two years later, 90% of them have not changed their lifestyle," Miller said.¹

If you didn't catch that incredibly scary stat, I'll repeat it for you: 9 out of 10 people who undergo heart bypass surgeries fail to change their behavior, even though it would help them avoid pain, surgery, and likely an early death! While most of us haven't had heart bypass surgery, we've all failed at something. Luckily, most of us don't face death as a consequence. Here's a short list of some of the habits I started, only to eventually fail:

- For 2 months, I went running three to four times each week. (I even ran a half marathon!) Then I quit running and didn't run again for over a year.
- I decided to improve my reading speed and comprehension. I read every day, practicing with a course called Breakthrough Rapid Reading. I quit after the first month.

- I finally created a habit of waking up early. For 3 months, I woke up at 5:30 AM every day. Laziness caught up with me—now it's hard to get up before 7:30.

Thankfully, these failures didn't have any significant consequences attached to them. My life would be slightly better if I had kept them up, but, even without them, I can be pretty happy and content. But the thing that bothers me is that each time, I felt that these were habits that were firmly in place; I had done them consistently for fairly long periods of time before I failed. I had mastered self-control, exercised willpower, and shaped my life with these new productive routines, but each time, the final outcome was a miserable regression back to the status quo. If I'm successful at starting to create a habit, why is it that so many of these attempts have ended in failure?

The #1 Reason

The reason these habits failed for me, and the number one reason people give up on good habits generally is that they *just aren't enjoyable*. It's a simple truth: you are less likely to continue doing something that you do not enjoy. Here's some proof.

In the beginning of 2014, researchers completed a simple study about work "burnout." First, they asked 154 undergraduate students to complete a series of word puzzles. Depending on your personality, "word puzzles" might sound like the 10th circle of hell, or maybe it works you up into a giddy, borderline embarrassing excitement. The researchers accounted for this by asking students, "How enjoyable do you think this task will be?" then they set them to work on the puzzles.

The results were impressive: the students who enjoyed working on puzzles performed the best when solving them. To make things even more interesting, researchers asked students to complete a simple task after working on the puzzles. The students had to squeeze a "grip exerciser," the spring-loaded contraption used to strengthen your hand. Researchers then proved that the students who enjoyed completing the puzzles were also less fatigued, and were able to squeeze the grip for a longer period of time. Regarding the experiment, researcher Paul O'Keefe said, "Engaging in personally interesting activities not only improves performance, but also creates an energized experience that allows people to *persist when persisting would otherwise cause them to burn out.*"²

The experiment illustrates a simple principle: we're more likely to do things we enjoy. Of course, the study I just described was a one-time event that likely

lasted no longer than an hour; does the same principle apply over longer periods of time? Definitely. Research specifically about exercise has shown that people who enjoy active activities are more likely to report high levels of activity, while people who enjoy sedentary activities are less likely to report high levels of activity. And there's another interesting fact: people who are in the "maintenance" stage of their habits find much more enjoyment than people who are still in the early stages of developing a habit. That is to say, a person who has been a runner for a long time, for example, is likely to enjoy running much more than someone who just started running.³ There isn't clear evidence to show *why* the experienced runner enjoys running more, but I would argue that it's because people who dislike running give up long before it becomes a habit and they experience the "runner's high."

That Makes Sense, But So What?

If you enjoy doing something, naturally you'll be more likely to do it. This is practically common sense. But let's say I'm trying to create a new habit, like running daily, and it's really not something that I innately enjoy. How will I get myself to run every morning? Often we convince ourselves that it doesn't matter if we enjoy it, because we have the willpower to force ourselves to do it. So what will I do? I'll gut it out, forcing myself to run with the "no pain, no gain" mantra, enduring agony as I run each day. And that's a big mistake.

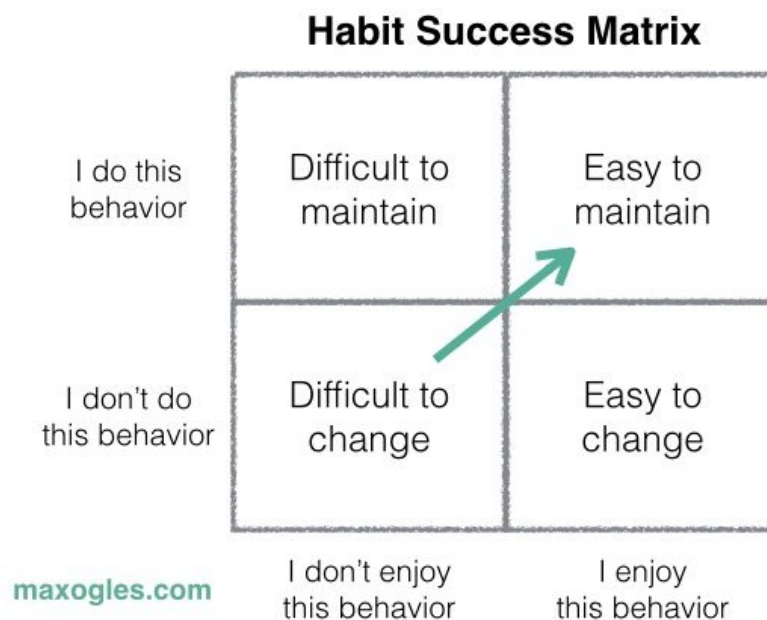
In another study, this one at Northwestern University, researchers administered a "willpower test" to a group of heavy smokers. In reality, it wasn't a willpower test at all, just mindless word associations in a quiz. However, at the end, the participants received a score indicating that they had either high or low "impulse control." In other words, after taking this meaningless test, some of the smokers were told that they had high willpower and others were told that they had low willpower. In the second part of the experiment, all of the smokers watched the movie *Coffee and Cigarettes*, and they were offered rewards to refrain from smoking. In this scenario, researchers found that the group who believed they had "high impulse control" was actually *more likely to give in to the temptation of smoking!*⁴

Remember, neither group actually had higher willpower—random assignment made it so that the groups were relatively the same. But one group *thought* that they had higher willpower, and that led to them overestimating their abilities. As soon as we begin to rely too much on willpower and overestimate our self control, that's when we're most vulnerable to fail.

Convert to Enjoyable

The same pattern held true for each of my failed behaviors. For example, I worked for months to adjust to waking up early, always forcing myself out of bed, even though I hated it. I reached the point where I thought I had mastered it, and that's the point when I failed. Eventually, I read a blog post online by accomplished personal development blogger Steve Pavlina, entitled, "How to Wake Up Feeling Totally Alert." Steve's premise is that if you feel terrible when you wake up and have to work extra hard to get out of bed in the morning, you're doing it wrong. Waking up early should be something that you enjoy and look forward to. If you teach yourself to *enjoy the habit*, you won't even need to rely on willpower because you'll be excited to do it.⁵

The more I thought about my failed habits, the more I realized that I really didn't *enjoy* any of them; I did them to be productive and often felt good afterwards, but initiating the process was always painful. As I diagnosed my failed habits, I came up with this matrix:



During the months that I woke up early, I had the habit of waking up, but didn't enjoy it; every day was painful. I was stuck in the top left quadrant of the Habit Success Matrix, which made the behavior "difficult to maintain." If I had found a way to make it enjoyable, I could have moved to the sweet spot, the top right quadrant, and the behavior would have been easy to maintain. Instead, my willpower and desire slowly drained until I eventually gave up. The moral of this

story? Focus on making new behaviors enjoyable. If you're trying to start a new behavior and you find it enjoyable, it will be easy to change and make it a habit.

How Do You Make Things Enjoyable?

A full book could be devoted to answering this question, "How do you make behaviors enjoyable?" so I won't promise a solution here. Instead, I'll stick with two ideas that I've seen over and over again in a variety of forms.

1. Simplify

Stanford psychologist BJ Fogg calls this idea "Tiny Habits." Technology author Nir Eyal calls it "Minimum Enjoyable Actions." And well-known habit blogger Leo Babauta says, "Make it so easy you can't say no."⁶ Each of these habit experts is using the same principle: simplification. It's a tried and true principle of behavior change: when you start a new habit, stick to the absolute simplest action possible. The idea is that if you start with an incredibly simple action, you can slowly add complexity over time in order to create behavior change.

Much of the pain and agony we experience as we try to engage new habits comes from self-imposed expectations. We tell ourselves, "I have to go to the gym every day or I'm a failure," or "If I eat one dessert, my entire fitness plan is ruined." By focusing on the simplest possible action, we guarantee our success and make it much easier to progress over time. Trying to eat healthy? Start by eating one piece of kale. Just one. Do that every day for a week, until you feel ready to work yourself up to another piece of kale. Your body and mind have time to adjust, and it will be much easier to learn to enjoy your new habits instead of forcing yourself into something you simply can't enjoy.

2. Attitude

If we're trying to create a good habit, it's because we know that the habit will benefit our lives in some way. When I spent time improving my reading habits, it was because I knew that my life would be improved if I read more often and increased my comprehension while reading. It's not easy to determine our attitude, but if we can remind ourselves of the good that will result from our habits, that will help us to enjoy them more.

Sometimes we diminish the importance of happiness and optimism because we don't readily see the effects that they have on our habits. But optimism can be incredibly powerful. Several years ago, Met Life insurance had a major issue

with their insurance sales consultants quitting their jobs within the first year. In order to solve the problem, the company added an “optimism profile” to their job screening process to determine which job candidates were more optimistic. Their hypothesis was that optimistic employees would perform better over the long-term. They strictly applied their hypothesis. Applicants who were optimists, but failed to meet Met Life's other standards, were hired anyway. And the results were amazing: “This group outsold its pessimistic counterparts by 21% its first year and by 57% the next.” Optimism can be a key competitive advantage and is definitely applicable as you create good habits.

One of the easiest ways to create a positive, optimistic attitude is to smile. Research studies have shown that smiling “can be as stimulating as receiving up to 16,000 Pounds Sterling in cash.” One study in particular analyzed the smiles of baseball players from 1952 trading cards; based on the smile, researchers could actually predict the lifespan of individual players!⁷ Simple strategies like smiling, thinking positive thoughts, and remembering the benefits of your new habit can help you enjoy it more.

But What If You Enjoy a Bad Habit?

We’ve spent quite a bit of time discussing how important it is to *enjoy* behaviors if we want them to last. But what if we have the opposite problem? With any bad habit (smoking, overeating, overspending, etc.), we continue the habit because we find enjoyment or pleasure in doing it. Often, these bad habits are the result of addictions, which may require professional help to overcome. If you’re trying to overcome a fairly simple bad habit, though, one of the best strategies you can use is to replace the bad habit with a positive alternative. Remember chapter 2: all habits begin with a trigger. If you want to end a bad habit, identify the trigger that sets the bad habit in motion. Then, when the trigger occurs, be ready to replace your bad habit with a positive alternative. It’s not easy to substitute good habits for bad habits like this, but if you keep trying with a variety of strategies, you should find some that work well for you.

Creating a Lifestyle

The examples throughout this chapter have made it fairly clear: if you don’t enjoy a habit, it will be difficult to maintain. For a long time, I hesitated to share this advice with anyone, mainly because it seemed so obvious. But when we’re trying very hard to change our habits, sometimes we forget what’s obvious. Even worse, we may find ourselves repeating ineffective strategies with little success.

My final note on this subject is to remember that you should focus on a healthy *lifestyle*. I like the word *lifestyle* because it literally means “the way you live.” If you force yourself to do undesirable behaviors, pain and agony will be key components of the way you live. Your lifestyle can be both productive *and* enjoyable if you focus on learning to enjoy your habits.

// Just the Highlights

1. It's a scary stat: 9 out of 10 heart bypass surgery patients are unable to change their unhealthy habits post-surgery.
2. Research shows that we burn out more quickly when we don't enjoy an activity. For example, we're more likely to exercise if we enjoy being active.
3. Attempting to “gut it out” is not an effective strategy because it's not sustainable. The point at which we think we have the most willpower may actually be when we're most likely to give in to temptation.
4. The best way to maintain a behavior for a long time is to learn to enjoy it.
5. Two simple strategies for learning to enjoy a behavior are a) make it as simple as humanly possible and b) change your attitude (try smiling!).
6. Sometimes, we have the opposite problem: we can't quit a bad habit because we enjoy it *too much*. A basic strategy for quitting a bad habit is to try to replace it with a positive habit.

// What Should You Do Next?

1. Take a moment to analyze one of your own habit “failures.” What is a habit that you tried to maintain but ended up giving up? Now think about what caused you to fail. Did you enjoy doing that habit? Probably not. Why didn't you enjoy it? Is there anything that you could have done to enjoy it more? I hated running because I couldn't help focusing on the painful aspects of exercise. Once I started listening to podcasts, I started to enjoy running because it was a chance for me to learn and listen to shows that I enjoy. Find out why you disliked your good habit, and try a strategy to enjoy it.
2. Choose another good behavior that you HATE doing, and find the tiny habit

that you use to get started. Do you hate eating healthy food? Do you hate exercising? Do you hate cleaning the house? Choose the habit, and then determine the easiest possible action you could take to make progress on that habit. (And I mean EASIEST.) If you hate exercising, just change into your exercise clothes—nothing else. If you hate eating healthy food, just eat one baby carrot—only one. Make the simple action a habit, and slowly make it more complex after you have time to adjust.

3. Make a list that describes the lifestyle that you'd like to have. It may help to consider the habits or routines that others have that you wish you had. (For example, I'm always jealous when I hear people say that the first thing they do in the morning is wake up and write for a few hours.) On your list, include all of the activities that form your ideal daily routine, including some good habits and activities that you already do, along with others that you wish you did. Now, look through your list and identify any habits or activities that you wish you did, but don't particularly enjoy doing. (Exercising, flossing, healthy eating, cleaning your house, etc.) Make a plan to have a positive attitude about one of these activities. Try smiling while you do it, or writing down positive thoughts about why you do it, or devising another method of "pumping yourself up" to do it. See if you can slowly teach yourself to look forward to this activity instead of dreading it.

6. How to Use Social Influence from 2.7 Billion People

We all know Mark Zuckerberg as the nerdy Harvard dropout who launched a simple “Hot or Not” website that eventually became Facebook. Hardly 11 years later, Facebook has over a billion users and Zuckerberg is the 15th richest person in the world.¹ You could say that Zuckerberg has found more than enough success in his short career. But apparently, achieving the milestone of one billion people on Facebook wasn’t enough: in 2013, Mark Zuckerberg launched an organization that he says will reach even more people than Facebook.

Zuck’s new project is called Internet.org; its goal is to connect *everyone* in the world, by giving them access to the Internet. Of the 7 billion people on the earth, only 2.7 billion currently have access to the Internet, and the number doesn’t seem to be increasing very quickly. Zuckerberg wants to change that. In a press release announcing Internet.org, he said, “Connecting the world is one of the greatest challenges of our generation.”² He argues that access to the Internet is a human right, though currently, it certainly seems to be more of a privilege.

You almost certainly accessed this book online, so that puts you in the roughly 38% of the world’s population who are lucky enough to have the Internet. You’re connected to 2.7 billion other people, from Iraqi terrorists on Twitter to Swedish video gaming celebrities on YouTube. But are you using this impressive technology to it’s fullest potential? Why is Zuckerberg so impassioned about open access to the Internet, and do we fully value the privilege that we have? Let’s take a look at why this superconnectivity is so important and how it can help us achieve things that might otherwise be impossible.

Make it Count

One of the most significant innovations in the history of mankind is something that took thousands of years to discover, and yet any first grader could easily explain it to you today. Can you guess what it is? It’s the number zero. Without zero, we wouldn’t have calculus or the coordinate plane, both of which are essential pieces of the math calculations we use to build millions of things. Although it seems simplistic, zero is a foundational principle of most of the technology that we use today. To offer one specific example, zeros are essential to binary code, the basic language used by all computers. The importance of zero can’t be overstated—the mathematician and author Tobias Dantzig wrote, “In the history of culture, the discovery of zero will always stand out as one of the

greatest single achievements of the human race.”³

There are two cultures that seem to have been the first to use zero; they discovered it independently on opposite sides of the world. One was the Babylonians, around 350 BC, and the other was the mythical and mysterious Mayans, around 300 AD. In fact, the Mayans seemed to have an incredibly advanced and complex society, with scientific discoveries that Europeans didn’t make until thousands of years later. The Mayans lived isolated in history, never given the opportunity to share their achievements with the world. The number zero wasn’t used in Europe until a thousand years later, while the Mayans (and Babylonians) had it all along.⁴

And that’s why the Internet is so powerful—it equalizes the opportunity for knowledge so that anyone in the world can have access to it. As Thomas Friedman points out in his book *The World is Flat*, the world is now a level playing field where anyone can succeed. Because the Internet offers access to other people around the world, we can find those who are similar to us and benefit from their experiences and expertise. When you’re trying to maintain a good habit, never underestimate the power of social influence—it can be the determining factor for whether you succeed or fail.

The Power of Social Influences

If you need an example of just how impactful social influence is, look no further than the famous studies conducted by psychologist Solomon Asch in the 1950s. The research that Asch conducted had to do with individuals conforming to social pressure within a group setting. If you’re a member of the group and the group makes a decision, will you automatically conform to the group, even if you disagree with the majority opinion?

Here’s an example of one of Asch’s experiments. In a classroom of eight students, a researcher has drawn four lines of varied length on a chalkboard. The students are given a simple task: choose which of the last three lines is the same length as the first line. The lines are clearly drawn and have distinctly different lengths, so the task is fairly simple (no mind games or vision tricks to worry about). In fact, to illustrate how easy the task was, there were virtually no errors when students completed the task under the normal circumstances I just described. However, Asch wasn’t testing how well they could judge the length of the lines—he was testing social influence. So, in some instances of the experiment, he included just one student in the classroom that was actually completing the task; the other seven students were confederates planted in the room to assist with the experiment. When the confederates were in the room,

Asch assigned the same task as before, except this time the confederates answered *incorrectly*. The goal was to see if the “subject” of the experiment (the only student who was not aware of the experiment) would conform to the group or confidently state the correct answer. After a room full of confederates gave an obviously incorrect answer, nearly 33% of the participants conformed to social pressure and gave the incorrect answer!⁵

We all like to think that we wouldn’t be among the students who gave in to social pressure. And maybe we wouldn’t, as 67% of the participants didn’t cave in. You might think that 33% of subjects conforming seems like a relatively small percentage. But remember, it was a VERY simple exercise and the answer was perfectly clear. That means that 33% of participants actually lied outright, offering an idiotic answer, just to avoid nonconformity. And real life isn’t as black and white as the experiment. Often the situations we encounter in real life don’t have a clear-cut answer. If 33% of us would conform to social pressure when there IS a specific known answer, how much more likely are we to conform when there isn’t? Most of the time, we do it unknowingly, but it shows in the small decisions we make or actions we take. And, unfortunately, like many of the subjects in Solomon Asch’s experiments, we often succumb to social pressures that are detrimental to us. That’s certainly the case with what has been the deadliest habit of the last century, cigarette smoking.

The Deadliest Habit

The Saturday morning of January 14, 1964 marks a significant event in American history, though I doubt many people recognize the reason behind it. On that date, Luther Terry, the Surgeon General of the United States, announced at a press conference that a research committee had confirmed the deadly side effects of smoking cigarettes. The official report read: “Cigarette smoking is causally related to lung cancer in men; the magnitude of the effect of cigarette smoking far outweighs all other factors.”

Now more than 50 years since those findings, the average American life expectancy has increased 30% and an estimated 8 million tobacco-related deaths have been prevented. But the funny thing is that American teenagers only recently adopted this strong sentiment against cigarettes.⁶ I was born in the 80s, and I clearly remember school-sponsored anti-smoking campaigns from grade school clear through high school, with the constant refrain of “smoking isn’t cool, though your friends might tell you that it is.” Today, it seems that the message is more direct: “Smoking will kill you.” No need to mention that cigarettes aren’t cool, because teenagers generally accept it as a fact.

Let's take a look at the timeline of events: 1964, Surgeon General's Warning. For approximately 20 years following that announcement, tobacco companies did an admirable job obfuscating the research and creating controversy, so that many Americans disregarded the negative effects of cigarettes. In 1986, a follow-up study was released regarding second-hand smoke. The early 90s finally marked real progress, with tax increases, dedicated public school campaigns, and significant lawsuits against tobacco companies. Among teenagers, tobacco use finally peaked in 1997—33 years after it was proven to cause lung cancer!

The most interesting element of this story to me is the stubborn tenacity of teenage trendsetting. Though the per capita consumption of cigarettes began to drop almost immediately following the 1964 announcement, the teenage population carried on like rebels without a cause all the way to the end of the century. Millions of people voluntarily subjected themselves to a deadly habit, and many of them did it primarily because of the social benefits. Smoking is so closely linked to social influence that a research study showed that a decrease in social acceptance could be just as effective in lowering cigarette consumption as increasing the price of cigarettes.⁷ The endless supply of horrific, smoking-related statistics shows just how powerful social influence can be.

Make Me Better

While I've offered a few illustrations of negative social influence, the goal of this book is to help us leverage *positive* social influences. Almost all of us want to become better. We want to be happier, healthier, and richer; we want to be vastly improved versions of ourselves. And with the Internet, we have a massive network of knowledge and social influence to help us do just that. As I've worked to create my own habits, I've found that there are two ways in particular that I try to connect with other people and use their social influence for good.

1. Finding People Who Are as Weird as You Are

With 2.7 billion people on the Internet, inevitably someone somewhere has the same goals (and struggles) as you. It's motivating and comforting to interact with people who are like us. The Internet makes it so that we can feel that we're part of something without the need for physical proximity. I've felt this in my own life when I use Twitter—since I follow many people who live in Silicon Valley, I often feel like I'm right in the middle of the latest valley technology debate, even though I live two states away.

If you're looking to connect with like-minded individuals who share your goals, a lot of sites and apps have built friendly communities where you can connect. For a simple, goal-oriented approach, I love the Lift app, which you can find at www.lift.do. When you open the app, you can search for the goal that you want to achieve, and there are bound to be dozens and possibly hundreds or thousands of people who have the same goal. But the main reason I love Lift is because it allows you to offer "props." A prop is similar to a Facebook "like"—just a positive acknowledgement from someone else that you're doing a great job. You may not want to engage in a lengthy interaction with complete strangers online, but Lift facilitates encouragement as you work on your goal, and it comes from someone you've never met before. You can give props to someone living in London who shares your goal to floss every day.

Aside from the Lift app, there are literally hundreds of other places to find communities online where people have the same goals as you. Reddit (reddit.com) is an online community for sharing news about specific topics, a massive forum for the entire Internet. If you're familiar with Reddit, you know just how useful and powerful it can be. If you aren't familiar with it, here's an example of how you might use it. Let's say you have a goal to wake up earlier. To connect with people on Reddit, you could search for the "subreddits" (unique categories) that are specific to sleep. For sleep habits, I found subreddit categories called "sleep," "GetOutOfBed," "LifeProTips," and dozens of others. Just scroll through conversations, add comments, and vote for comments that you like. With the help of Reddit, it literally takes seconds to connect with thousands of people who have the same interests as you.

2. Finding People Who Are 1000x More Talented Than You Are

Imagine if the Europeans had access to social media to see what the Mayans were up to. The Mayans would have been Instagramming the corn they had for lunch and the chocolate they had for dessert, and the Europeans would have been thinking, "Maybe it's just the X-Pro II filter but...dang...that looks way more delicious than what I'm eating." Pretty soon, the Europeans would be asking for recipes (which the Mayans would post to Pinterest, of course). And some of the intellectual Europeans would be asking about how the Mayans created their calendar and how they discovered the number zero. Exchanging ideas and knowledge is central to the idea of the Internet and worldwide connectivity. If you're not learning on the Internet—really learning, not just entertaining yourself with gifs and lists—you're shutting yourself out from a massive opportunity.

On Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Reddit, and just about anywhere on the Internet you can find people who are smarter and more talented than you are. If you want to become a better person in any area of your life, there's no reason you can't find someone online to help. Some of the best resources are websites designed specifically for that purpose. Take, for example, the website Clarity.fm, which allows you to find experts from all over the world and ask for their advice, or Skillshare.com, where you can find inexpensive online courses to learn new skills.

You might want find a talented coach to help you learn a new skill you're trying to develop. There are dozens of sites to help you with this, including the ones I mentioned above, but I'll point you to one in particular: Helpouts, by Google. (helpouts.google.com) I went to the Helpouts website and did a quick search for "eating healthy" to see what would come up. There were over 70 listings that appeared—all experts on eating healthy who are willing to offer specific advice and coaching over the phone. I was able to click on their profiles to see how qualified they were, as well as scroll through ratings to see whether other people enjoyed working with a particular coach. Some of the coaches are fairly expensive to meet with, but others are entirely free. But the important thing is that you have immediate access to thousands of experts who can teach you whatever you want. When you have access to the Internet, you can no longer use "I don't know how" as an excuse.

Don't Wait

You're one of the 38% who have access to the Internet now—will you use it for good? Don't wait to take advantage of the 2.7 billion other people at your fingertips. Make a friend, learn something new, or share an idea, so we can all help each other improve and become better versions of ourselves. There's not really any way to completely avoid social influence in your habits, but if you take a proactive approach, that influence can be more positive than negative. And, with the Internet, you don't even need to be near other people because you can find and interact with plenty of people just like you all over the world.

// Just the Highlights

1. Of the 7 billion people in the world, only 38% have access to the Internet. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg believes that connecting the world is the greatest challenge of this generation.

2. Access to the Internet is an incredible opportunity that most people in history never had access to. In fact, the Mayans invented the number zero long before it was broadly used in Europe.
3. Social influence is a powerful force in creating good habits. Psychologist Solomon Asch carried out dozens of studies in the 1950s to prove how powerful social influence can be.
4. The deadliest habit of the last century, cigarette smoking, also proves the magnitude of social influence. Long after discovering that cigarettes were deadly, teenage smoking increased annually for many years.
5. We can use the Internet to create social influence for our habits. One way to do this is to find other like-minded people and interact with them, sharing our goals and struggles.
6. The Internet is also a powerful tool because it gives us access to experts around the world who we may never know otherwise. Using their advice, we can learn how to improve our lives.

// What Should You Do Next?

1. Make a list of all of the people in your life with whom you interact on a daily basis. Next to their names, write one way that they influence your habits for good or bad. Many of them (like a spouse or people you live with) will influence you in a variety of ways. Pick one relationship in particular that is negatively affecting your habits and make a mini plan to adjust your relationship so that the social influence won't have as much of a negative impact on you.
2. Do some research online to meet other people who share similar interests as you. You could try using Reddit, like the example earlier in the chapter, or another site. You might even just Google a few different search terms to see what groups come up. Often you can find a blogger who writes about things you're interested in and follow the comment sections on their posts to find other interesting people. As you interact more in these different settings, you'll become more comfortable with other people and willing to trade ideas about how to improve.
3. Find a coach or a mentor to help with a habit you're working on. If you don't want a one-on-one interaction, you could try a site like Udemy, Coursera, Lynda,

or Skillshare to take a course that will help you improve your knowledge and skills. If you decide to take a course, make sure to do one that allows you to receive feedback from others (a professor or other students) so that you can always gauge how you're improving.

7. Why (and How) We Should Help Others

Generally, we consider self-improvement to be good. We're becoming better versions of ourselves, which means increased intelligence, abilities, and attributes. But if there's a negative aspect of self-improvement, it's that we actually focus *too much* on ourselves. Which brings up the question: do we really care about anyone but ourselves? If you've ever sat through a semester of Economics 101, you've probably been faced with that question. Economists love to argue that, no, we don't really care about anyone else; rational human beings are entirely self-interested. In the words of the "first" economist, Adam Smith, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."¹

When you consider the ways that we commonly use technology, you begin to see that the economists have a point. A decent argument could be made that the sites we consider *social* media could easily be labeled *narcissistic* media. According to a 2013 Pew Research study, the most popular social sites are Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter and Instagram—in that order.² From the photo of lunch that you shared on Instagram to the entirely uninteresting article about your employer that you published on LinkedIn, each of the top networks awards you with likes, hearts, and favorites for your egotism. (By the way, research confirms that heavy Facebook users are more likely to be narcissistic.³)

To fuel the stereotype further, mobile phones at times completely impair our ability to perceive others or our own surroundings. In the very beginning of this book, I mentioned one of my favorite news story of all time: the woman who walked off a pier while on her phone.⁴ I realize I've pinpointed a fairly ridiculous example, but we're all guilty of the cell phone blinders—just like the last time I said "Hold on, I need to finish this text," when a person right in front of me tried to say something to me.

It's a very bleak technological world, but is there hope? Or do we really only care about ourselves? Economists have plenty of fancy arguments, but when it comes down to it, most of us still feel like there's something more—hope, compassion, selflessness—the human attributes that economists tend to ignore. Personally, I stand with the optimists in believing that we can often find motivation in the sincere desire to help other people. In the last chapter, we looked at how we can be influenced for good and bad. In this chapter, we'll stop thinking about ourselves and start thinking about how we can help other people. First, we'll look at evidence that altruism really exists (some of us DO really

care about other people!). Then, ironically, we'll see how helping other people can actually be better for us, too, as we try to create good habits.

In the Face of Trypanophobia

If you scrolled through a list of the most common phobias, you'd expect to see acrophobia (fear of heights), pteromerhanophobia (fear of flying), and arachnophobia (you got this one, right?). Not far down the list is one more that you won't recognize: trypanophobia, the fear of injections. Unless you're a phlebotomist, diabetic, or heroin addict, the idea of sticking yourself with a needle probably doesn't sit well with you. And yet, more than 9 million people volunteer to take one in the arm for blood donations each year.⁵ The self-interested person would likely avoid the experience altogether; it's basically uncomfortable from beginning to end. You're forced to read (err...skim) a ten-page medical document, answer a crazy list of questions about your sexual history, endure a finger prick that's worse than the needle itself, allow a stranger to stick a needle in you and drain a pint of blood from your body, and spend the next several hours with an achy arm.

If the only reward for donating blood is the satisfaction of saving lives, it must be evidence of altruism, right? A few years ago in Ohio, a research group set out to test this very assumption. Since they were economists, they pursued it with the question, "How will financial incentives impact behavior in a 'pro-social' activity"? In other words, if people are doing something simply for the good of others, how will their behavior change if they are paid to do it?

In the first part of the study, the results showed evidence of rational, self-interested individuals. The paid blood donors were more likely to donate, more likely to recruit other people to donate, and more willing to change their donation time or location. Plus, the more they got paid, the more likely they were to do all these things. The second part of the study unveiled an interesting reversal: when donors who did NOT expect to be paid were given a reward by surprise, they were less likely to donate thereafter. The researchers concluded that giving people money actually negatively affected their experience. Because the free donors were motivated by altruism, not a reward, the experience was ruined when they received the reward.⁶ The research proved that altruism is real, at least for many of the donors who participated in the study.

Nice Guys Finish Last?

When we talk about altruism, it's only natural that we begin to wonder

whether it's actually beneficial to be altruistic. (If there *are* benefits to altruism, we might question the premise of altruism itself, but we'll leave that for a philosophical essay about altruism). So, is it good to be nice? It's a question that we obsess about, particularly because we hate the idea that "nice guys finish last." Luckily there is plenty of research to answer the question, beginning with a study about how altruism affects health.

In 2013, the *American Journal of Public Health* published a research study that collected data to show that altruistic people live longer. Unfortunately, the study didn't include any fun psychological experiments that would make a good story for me to share here, but it did have an interesting wrinkle: in order for the study to work, some of the participants needed to die. Since one of the key data points was mortality rate, all participants were at least 65 years old and the participant mortality rates were tracked for 5 years following the initial assessment. But before anyone died, the researchers collected a massive amount of data. Over 800 participants answered dozens of questions, ranging from health topics to altruistic habits, and every relevant question in between.

For 5 years, the researchers diligently tracked participant deaths, using newspaper obituaries and monthly state-record tapes, until they were finally able to work their statistical magic. The results were intriguing: First, as you might guess, the data showed that people who experienced stressful events were more likely to die sooner. BUT the helpful, altruistic people who experienced stressful events were not any more likely to die sooner. The researchers concluded, "Help given to others is a better predictor of health and well-being than are indicators of social engagement or received social support." Additionally, "Social connections may be beneficial to the extent that they provide individuals with the opportunity to benefit others." Not only did the "helpers" deal with stress better but also the researchers actually suggested that a key benefit of having friends might be the opportunities we have to help them.⁷

Show Me the Money

The benefits of altruism don't stop at health; altruism might make you rich, too. Like I mentioned earlier, we truly are obsessed with determining whether nice guys *really* finish last. I think it's because most of us consider ourselves nice people. But at the same time, none of us aspire to a lifetime of last place finishes. As a result, there are dozens of research studies around altruism, including some about wealth.

Arthur C. Brooks, a well-known economist and author, has written extensively about the topic, "why giving matters." That's because, after several years of

analyzing data from over 30,000 people in the U.S., his conclusions about giving were counterintuitive. To sum it up in his words, “Giving makes you rich.” Here he is telling the story:

Specifically, here’s what I found. If you have two families that are exactly identical—in other words, same religion, same race, same number of kids, same town, same level of education, and everything’s the same—except that one family gives a hundred dollars more to charity than the second family, then the giving family will earn on average \$375 more in income than the non-giving family—and that’s statistically attributable to the gift.

So I did what college professors always do in this case: I got rid of the data. I said, “That can’t be right. I’ve obviously messed something up.” I got new software. I looked for new data. I re-crunched the numbers. I kept coming up with the same thing.

I ran the numbers again, and I looked at volunteering. I found the same thing: People who volunteer do better financially. I ran the numbers on blood contributions and blood donations. Think about that—giving blood. You’re not going to get richer if you give blood, are you? Well, yes, you are.⁸

Pretty incredible, huh? It’s worth pointing out that Brooks was skeptical of his own work—he didn’t believe it. Even after analyzing everything multiple times, he didn’t publish any papers right away because he was still skeptical. Anyone with basic training in statistics knows to watch out for “correlation,” because it doesn’t imply causation. But in Brooks’ research, increased income earned was, as he said, “statistically attributable to the gift.” We can learn from Arthur Brooks that altruism has significant personal financial benefits—and that’s coming from an economist.

Help Others to Help Yourself

When we’re trying to develop new habits, change bad behaviors, or exercise self-discipline in any way, we almost always look to motivation as a solution. Of course, a library of behavioral psychology literature will tell you that it’s not that simple, but finding new sources of motivation certainly can make a difference.

As we’ve discussed in this chapter, one way to motivate yourself is actually by helping others. It’s almost a paradox, but if you have a strong desire to help others, it can actually have a positive effect on you as well. Here’s an example. Imagine you have a goal of exercising every day, but no matter what you try,

you're unable to get out of bed in the morning to exercise. You try setting up a reward for yourself (dinner at a nice restaurant), making it social by going with friends, and memorizing every motivational quote you can find, but still no success.

Then you find out that your best friend's daughter has a very rare disease, and the family is planning a 5K race to pay for the astronomical medical costs. You won't be able to run the 5K unless you exercise to train for it, and, all of a sudden, you have real motivation to run in the morning. Your concern for your friend's family is your primary motivation, but, of course, you'll benefit personally from the exercise too.

An App for That

I realize that most of us do not find ourselves in the exact situation that I described, but smart phones, apps, and the Internet make it fairly easy to create the same type of motivation. After plenty of failed attempts at running regularly, I've run over 400 miles in the last few months and even ran my first marathon. One of the major motivators for me has been an app called Charity Miles, which you can find at www.charitymiles.org.

When you run with Charity Miles, it uses your phone's GPS to track the total distance traveled. You earn money for each mile you travel, and then you select a charity that you'd like to donate the money to. Charity Miles has corporate sponsors who pay for each mile that Charity Miles users travel. So, each time I go running, I'm sending money to an organization that really needs it. It's not a lot—I've donated over \$100 to charity over the course of 400 miles—but to me, it makes a big difference. I always remember to use the app and I constantly tell other people to use it because it's so simple and meaningful.

Along the same lines is CharityBets at www.charitybets.com. I haven't personally used the site yet, but it allows you to set a personal goal and recruit others to make donations. If you reach your goal (e.g., a marathon in 4 hours) then the donations are sent to a charity that you choose. If you involve friends and family and choose a charity that's important to you, it's easy to see how CharityBets can help you create altruistic motivations for achieving your goals. As you know, many other apps can assist you in helping other people as well. Try a few to see what you like and hopefully you can find one that sticks.

A Final Note from an Optimist

I admitted before that I'm an optimist; I really believe that most of us find at least some motivation in the desire to help others. The desire is so strong that we

can often find that *we help ourselves by helping others*. If, as you're trying to reach your own goals, you need extra motivation, I'd suggest testing out this principle of altruism. Find a person, group, or a cause that's important to you, and use it to drive the goals that you want to achieve for yourself. As you become active in these opportunities, you'll begin to see real data in your own life to verify research results I mentioned earlier in this chapter. I'm not promising you'll be rich and live to be a hundred years old, but I do believe that your quality of life will improve and you'll see additional progress in your goals and habits.

// Just the Highlights

1. Social media, along with many other new technologies, tends to emphasize narcissism rather than altruism.
2. While economists like to argue that we are inherently selfish, a research study involving blood donations proved that many people donate blood primarily to help other people.
3. Psychologists have found that people who help other people are actually more likely to live longer. In fact, some experts make the claim that having friends is an important aspect of our wellbeing because of the opportunities we have to help them.
4. Research also proves that people who liberally donate their money to charitable causes are wealthier than people who donate less. The increase in wealth can be directly attributed to the behavior of giving.
5. In an ironic twist, it actually seems possible that by helping others, we are often helping ourselves as well. Altruism can be used as motivation for us to achieve good habits.
6. Apps such as CharityMiles and CharityBets allow us to combine good habits, like exercising, with good causes such as charitable organizations.
7. We can help ourselves create good habits by helping other people.

// What Should You Do Next?

1. Help someone else: close friend, stranger, relative, acquaintance—you choose. You could give them money to help with a good cause, volunteer some time or expertise, or find some other opportunity to help them. It doesn't need to be anything huge or life-changing; the goal is to intentionally help another person without an expectation of personal gain. In my experience, helping other people results in personal optimism, confidence, and motivation. So do something good to help another person!
2. Find an app or program that will allow you to help another person as you work toward your personal goal. There are some good examples in my app guide (maxogles.com/exclusive), but you can also do some Google searching on your own to find some. I would suggest searching using terms like “volunteer apps” and other similar variations. The apps mentioned above, CharityMiles and CharityBets, are both great options if you're working on a fitness goal.
3. Create a list of volunteer activities that you could participate in over the next several years. They could be one-time opportunities or ongoing commitments. The bigger the list, the better, and focus on initiatives or groups that you're really excited about. After you have a list of 20 or so ideas, start checking them off. You could use this as a volunteer “bucket list” or just find one activity that you really enjoy and stick with it. Volunteering will result in positive emotional benefits and, as we learned in this chapter, will improve your health and financial prospects as well.

8. How to Measure Your Goals

If you spend enough time learning about habits, behavior change, and psychology, you quickly realize that there's much more information than you could possibly implement in your life. There are hundreds of theories, models, and studies; often what seems like a basic principle has a vast library of research behind it. But the truth is that, often, you can dramatically change your life by applying just one or two simple strategies. So—if you could only choose one strategy from all the mountains of psychological data, what should you choose in order to have the biggest impact?

Let's answer that question with (you guessed it) a research study. In 2008, Kaiser Permanente published new research about weight loss based on a study with nearly 1,700 participants. It was a fairly straightforward weight loss study: some participants tried weight loss strategies while others did not, then the results from the two groups were compared. When the study was complete, one weight loss strategy in particular proved to be extremely effective: keeping a daily food record. The lead author from Kaiser Permanente, Jack Hollis, said, "Those who kept daily food records lost twice as much weight as those who kept no records. It seems that the simple act of writing down what you eat encourages people to consume fewer calories."¹

That's right—the participants who kept daily food records lost TWICE as much weight. If you could only choose one strategy to change your habits, and you wanted to start with something simple, tracking your behavior seems like the obvious choice. When you think about it, tracking and measuring performance is something we do every day at work. We have performance evaluations, reviews, and customer satisfaction ratings. All of these things help us achieve good behavior; it makes sense to apply these principles on a personal level for our habits as well.

You don't need to look very far to find an example of corporate "behavior tracking." Every once in a while, you might put on a piece of clothing that you've recently purchased from the store and find a small sticker on the inside of the fabric. It's often a small circle with a number on it that looks something like this:



You probably know that the “QC” stands for “quality control” and the number refers to a specific individual who personally inspected your piece of clothing at the manufacturer. The quality control process is a very important step in the manufacturing of many products, especially foods, like meat or eggs, which have the potential to spread harmful bacteria and diseases. “Quality control” also refers to the process of teaching and training new employees to make sure items are produced efficiently and no accidents occur. It’s a system for tracking employee behavior to ensure high performance.

Quality control came about naturally as part of the manufacturing process; as companies tried to stay competitive by producing high-quality products, it made sense to monitor production to ensure the highest standards. We usually take quality control for granted because it happens behind the scenes. But the next time you stop by a Krispy Kreme donut restaurant, where you can watch golden pastries make their way along a conveyor belt toward a shower of sugary glaze, look for workers who are throwing out the uncooked or poorly formed donuts. Krispy Kreme has stringent standards of quality for their donuts; everything is precisely calculated, from color and shape to taste and texture. And they’ve perfected the quality control process. After all, the company promises “Impeccable presentation...wherever Krispy Kreme is sold.”

Implement Your Own Quality Control

Large companies use quality control to maintain the highest standards of performance. If you want the highest standards of performance in your personal habits, you should implement a simple quality control for yourself as well. Joseph Juran, an evangelist for quality control (he literally wrote the book on it) said about performance, “Without a standard, there is no logical basis for making a decision or taking action.”²

His advice makes sense: How can you take action and improve if you have no standard to compare yourself against? The easiest way to create a standard for your personal habits is to measure or track your progress. Measure how your habit is going to establish a standard, and then continue to compare yourself against that standard. Before you dismiss this as too much work, allow me to

introduce you to the simplest method I know for tracking your habit progress; it's called the Seinfeld Principle.

The Seinfeld Principle

Several years ago, a story about comedian Jerry Seinfeld was a popular blog topic because of a simple suggestion that he offered to a young comedian. In fact, the story became so popular that Seinfeld's advice is now commonly referred to as the "Seinfeld Principle." Here's the encounter as told by the young comedian who spoke with Jerry:

He told me to get a big wall calendar that has a whole year on one page and hang it on a prominent wall. The next step was to get a big red magic marker. He said for each day that I do my task of writing [a joke], I get to put a big red X over that day. "After a few days you'll have a chain. Just keep at it and the chain will grow longer every day. You'll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job next is to not break the chain."

"Don't break the chain," he said again for emphasis.³

You've probably heard this idea before in other forms and maybe you've even tried it yourself. It's as simple as marking each day that you succeed with the habit you're developing until you have a streak (or chain, as Jerry calls it) of consecutive days. The secret behind this method is that once you have a streak, it acts as a motivating force for you to continue the habit. After all the effort you've put in, you wouldn't want to break the streak, would you?

The streak method, or Seinfeld Principle, is especially useful for turning simple behaviors into habits. It works well if you're trying to write a joke every day or get back to flossing your teeth regularly. I highly recommend measuring a goal this way if you're tackling a fairly easy behavior. In fact, I used this method to create a flossing streak that lasted for over a year! But it does deserve a word of caution, as it isn't always the best method for tracking behaviors.

When Not to "Streak"

For significant life changes in particular, tracking a streak isn't the best method for creating a habit. Here's why: By tracking a streak, you only have two outcomes each day, success or failure. You can achieve your desired behavior to continue the streak, or fail to achieve your behavior and break the streak.

Unfortunately, that leaves no room for leniency in the behavior change process. When you focus on a streak of success, you overlook the fact that setbacks are a natural part of the process of creating a new habit.

As an example, let's take what is arguably the number one life change that people want to make: losing weight. In order to lose weight, maybe you decide that you will completely eliminate sugary soda from your diet. You've been addicted to Coke for a long time, so quitting all at once is a big change in your life. You use the Seinfeld Principle and every day that you go without soda you make a big X on a calendar. However, eventually you have a stressful day at work, and, to console yourself in the evening, you go to dinner and order a large glass of Coke. And what happens next is even worse—you feel so guilty about giving in and breaking your streak, you resort to old habits to console yourself further. You may even give up on your new Coke-free lifestyle altogether.

The incident that I just described is so common that it has an actual psychological diagnosis—it's called the "Abstinence Violation Effect." In short, it's the guilt or shame that we feel after we've succeeded with a good behavior for a long time but eventually give in to temptation. The term is frequently used in discussing drug and alcohol relapse prevention (i.e., a person gives in to drug use after an extended period staying clean) but the principle certainly applies to other habits as well. When you're trying to make a serious behavior change, you can't expect to succeed all at once. Occasional setbacks are a normal part of the process of developing new habits, so you'll want to measure your progress using a method that takes this into consideration.

Living by the Streak

If you're tracking a particular behavior over time, the simplest method might be to track a streak. Just track each day that you succeed with your behavior and see how many consecutive days you can do it. However, when you're trying to change deeply ingrained behaviors, that method of tracking isn't enough, because failure is a natural part of the change process. And sometimes we fail more than we succeed! When you fail often, trying to create a streak is almost demoralizing, and you don't end up with useful information to help you change. There are plenty of examples to illustrate this idea, so I'll just use my favorite, professional basketball.

Have you ever considered that in basketball, failure is actually MORE common than success? Think about it. During a normal basketball game, most teams miss many more shots than they make. In fact, in the last 10 years, only one team in the National Basketball Association successfully made more than

50% of the shots that they took for a whole season. (It was the Phoenix Suns in 2008.⁴) Imagine if a basketball team tried to apply the streak method to improve the players' shooting ability. The coach might say, "Hey guys, what we really need is to make a LOT of shots in a row. If we can get a streak going, I just know we'll win more games." Eventually the team might have a few long streaks of shots made in a row, but they would also have long streaks of misses. Plus, it would be impossible to measure real progress over the course of the whole season. After a long streak ended, there would be no way to know whether the streak was a result of improved shooting or whether it was simply the result of the random probability of shooting a basketball.

When you're trying to adjust a complex behavior, like shooting a basketball, the streak method is laughable. Instead of tracking a streak, you need to track information about your behavior that will actually lead to improvement. To illustrate this, I'll offer two examples from well-known NBA players.

Story #1

Karl "The Mailman" Malone is in the basketball Hall of Fame and is one of the greatest NBA players ever. He earned his nickname, The Mailman, because he always delivered. But when he first came to the NBA, he was a *terrible* free throw shooter. Free throws are the easiest shots in the game, aside from dunks or layups close to the basket. On a free throw, you shoot from the same exact location on the court every time (which makes it easy to train for the shot), you don't have any defenders trying to prevent your shot, and you have plenty of time to relax and focus on your training. Free throws should be second nature for an NBA player.

Luckily, Malone was able to measure his performance by tracking the frequency of his made free throws. It's easy to calculate how many free throws he shot during the whole season, and how many of those free throws that he successfully made. During his first season, he made just 48.1% of his free throws (the average for an NBA player makes about 75%). But if you look at his free throw shooting percentage over the next several seasons, it's clear that he spent a lot of time in the gym working on his shot. By his fourth season, he made 76% of his free throws, which put him above average. He continued to improve, and, toward the end of his career, he had three consecutive seasons of 79% free throws made—not bad for a guy who started out making fewer than 50%.⁵

If Karl Malone had attempted to measure progress by the length of his most recent streak, he never would have really been able to know whether he was improving. Even when he was a poor free throw shooter, making just 48% of his

shots, I'm sure he had some streaks. Instead, by measuring how frequently he made shots (his shooting percentage or success rate) it was easy to see significant improvement.

Story #2

The best basketball player in the world right now (and a guaranteed Hall of Famer) is LeBron James. When LeBron came to the NBA, he was already pretty good at free throws—he made an average of 75%. You could say that LeBron had already developed his free throw shooting to a consistent level—so how could he improve?

Instead of focusing on his free throws, where his practice would likely yield diminishing returns, LeBron focused on his regular in-game shots. And rather than only focusing on his percentage (how many he made and missed), he began to focus on where he was when he made or missed those shots. By paying close attention to his shooting percentage AND where he was on the court when he shot the ball, LeBron has been able to improve his shooting percentage every year for 9 out of 10 seasons.⁵

The Importance of Tracking

In the examples of Karl Malone and LeBron James, it's pretty clear that certain information was necessary for them to improve. The simple streak method would not have worked by itself. They used specific measurements: success rate (frequency of successes) and location (quality of shots) to make major improvements. If you're going to track a behavior, these are two good variables to focus on: frequency and quality. When you track these two things, you'll be able to answer the key questions about your behavior: How often am I doing it and how well am I doing it?

Here's a specific example of how you would track a behavior such as exercising for 30 minutes every day. Each day you exercise, you mark that day on a chart (similar to the streak method) but instead of an X, you use a simple scale to rate how well you did. Put a 3 for "Yes, I did it," a 2 for "Yes, but I cheated a little," and a 1 for "No, I didn't exercise." At the end of each week or month, you can calculate your success rate. Out of 30 days in a month, how many did you rate a 2 or a 3? That's your success rate. After several months, you'll have very valuable information. Has your frequency improved from one month to the next? Have you started to score more 3s than 2s and 1s? By focusing on frequency and quality, you can actually measure *performance*

instead of just a simple streak on its own. You may remember that in the Kaiser Permanente weight loss study, there were no 1s, 2s, or 3s—just food diaries. But in that example, participants still captured the important information: 1) frequency — how often am I eating? and 2) quality — how well am I doing it? This goes to show that you don't necessarily need to “rate” your performance, as long as you're tracking information that will help you see how well you're doing.

There's no doubt that measuring your performance will help you improve. If you add some simple quality control to the good habits you do each day, you'll immediately begin to see results. For an easy tracking method, try Seinfeld's well-known streak principle and see how long you can make the chain. But remember—the streak method can have negative implications when you use it for complex behavior change. To tackle habits that may be more difficult, track some additional information to measure your performance. Keep things simple by emphasizing frequency (how often am I doing it?) and quality (how well am I doing it?) as the basic measurements of your performance. If it doesn't help you become a Hall of Fame basketball player, at the very least, it may help you create some new positive habits.

// Just the Highlights

1. A weight loss research study showed that individuals who tracked the food they ate were able to lose twice as much weight as those who didn't.
2. If you're trying to implement a good habit, measuring your progress can be the simplest way to do it.
3. Many corporations have stringent processes for measuring performance—think of it as quality control. You can implement a quality control process in your life.
4. A simple method of tracking performance is commonly referred to as the Seinfeld Principle. Use a calendar to track how many days in a row you can achieve a task without breaking the streak.
5. One drawback to the Seinfeld Principle is the Abstinence Violation Effect. This is when you're so disappointed by breaking your streak that you ultimately ruin your progress altogether.

6. For complex behaviors, track more than just the “streak”—focus on frequency and quality.

7. Track your behavior so that you can answer these questions: “How often am I doing the behavior?” and “How well am I doing it?”

// What Should You Do Next?

1. Choose a relatively easy task that you would like to do more regularly. Some examples: floss, read for ten minutes, write down things you’re grateful for, say “I love you” to someone close to you, spend 10 minutes meditating. Get a calendar (a real, physical calendar) and put it where you won’t forget it, like on the fridge, at your desk, or on your nightstand. Now, start streaking! See how long you can make the streak—Jerry Seinfeld will be proud.

2. Choose a slightly more complex habit that you’re trying to create, like exercising every day. Design a system for tracking this habit. Remember to focus on two questions: “how often am I doing it?” and “how well am I doing it?” Let’s say you try to go for a long walk each day. “How often” can be measured by marking the days you go (and the days you miss) on a calendar. “How well” can be measured by the number of minutes you spend walking. Decide what “metrics” you will track in order to answer those two questions about your habit.

3. Choose an app (online or smart phone) to try tracking a behavior. There are hundreds of apps that do this—some are specific to your goal, such as weight loss, while others can be used for any new habit that you’re trying to create. You’ll find a complete list of resources in my free app guide at www.maxogles.com/exclusive.

Final Thoughts

Even after I compiled the research, anecdotes, and insights in the preceding eight chapters, this book felt woefully inadequate for truly addressing the subject of habits. Granted, it is a fairly short book, but I think the sentiment of inadequacy reflects a broader principle—that the wealth of knowledge about habits and behavior change can't be contained in a single resource. First, because the billions of intricacies in human personalities make it impossible for one book, course, or program to help everyone. Second (and this is a major bummer) personal improvement never ends. Unfortunately, we can't achieve perfection, so we'll be struggling to improve for the rest of our lives. I hope that these few short pages have sparked at least one or two insights that can help you along the way.

As you know, each of the preceding chapters ends with a brief summary; it felt natural to end the book in a similar fashion. However, this time I'll rely on just one key point: Because of years of recorded psychological research and unprecedented advances in technology, we have an incredible capacity to change our habits and achieve our goals. Look to psychology and technology for help and I'm confident that you'll achieve your wildest dreams.

Max Ogles

Blog: <http://www.maxogles.com>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/max.ogles>

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/maxogles>

Learn More

You can find more essays about psychology, technology, and habits on my blog at www.maxogles.com.

I write one new essay each week and you can receive it for free in your inbox by subscribing to my newsletter at: www.maxogles.com/newsletter

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Thank you so much for reading! If you don't mind, please take just a minute to [leave a review for this book on Amazon](#). Even a brief review can be very helpful to others who might like to read the book. Thank you.

About the Author

Max Ogles is an entrepreneur and writer specifically interested in technology, psychology, and behavior change. Throughout his career, Max has helped build web platforms, apps, and other technologies to help people change their behavior. He is currently the head of marketing and a founding team member of Mobile Coach LLC (www.mobilecoach.com), a company that uses interactive text message coaching to engage and influence employee populations.

Max's writing has appeared in a variety of places online including *The Huffington Post*, *Fast Company*, *Business Insider*, and *The Next Web*.

You can read more of his essays on his website, MaxOgles.com or sign up for his newsletter at www.maxogles.com/newsletter.

Notes

Introduction

1. The brief sentence about a woman walking off a pier came from a news story found at:

<http://metro.co.uk/2013/12/18/woman-walks-off-a-pier-in-australia-while-checking-facebook-on-her-phone-4234847/>

Chapter 1

1. The story of Hamida Gulistani was first heard on the radio show *This American Life*. A transcript from that show can be found at:

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/531/transcript>

2. Information about the research study regarding distal goals was found at:

[http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-1379\(199907\)20:4%3C421::AID-JOB896%3E3.0.CO;2-%23/abstract](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(199907)20:4%3C421::AID-JOB896%3E3.0.CO;2-%23/abstract)

3. Information about the story of fashion designer Isabella Rose Turner was found in the following locations:

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3029303/bottom-line/how-a-13-year-old-got-her-fashion-line-in-nordstrom>

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/06/new-york-fashion-week-s-teen-sensation-isabella-rose-taylor-13-stages-a-sartorial-revolution.html>

Chapter 2

1. I learned about the rubber band contest for young inventors at:

<http://rubberbandcontest.org/sponsors.php>

2. News coverage about rubber band contest winner Andrew Pelham was found at:

<http://foxnewsinsider.com/2014/07/08/boy-andrew-pelham-invents-ez-baby-saver-prevent-hot-car-deaths>

3. News coverage about young inventor Alissa Chavez's car seat invention was found at:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/alissa-chavez-s-hot-seat-alarm-aims-to-prevent-child-hot-car-deaths-1.2721351>

4. In writing about triggers, I used Stanford psychologist BJ Fogg's website as a resource:

<http://www.behaviormodel.org/triggers.html>

Chapter 3

1. A news article about the crossing guard at Abbey Road was found here:

<http://news.yahoo.com/beatles-abbey-road-crossing-could-traffic-warden-105527662.html>

2. I briefly mentioned the idea of 10,000 hours, which comes from Malcolm Gladwell's book, *Outliers*:

<http://www.amazon.com/Outliers-Story-Success-Malcolm-Gladwell/dp/0316017930#>

3. I found a variety of references online to Paul McCartney's story about the song "Yesterday," but my reference comes specifically from the book *Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now*. The exact quote and reference can be found here:

<http://bit.ly/1rtDXzd>

4. A news report described the study in which people would rather electrocute themselves than sit quietly:

<http://nypost.com/2014/07/07/most-people-would-rather-get-electrocuted-than-sit-alone-and-think-study/>

5. Multiple sources were used in research about Nikola Tesla, including the

following:

Nikola Tesla's autobiography

http://www.teslasautobiography.com/the_art_of_telautomatics.html

A summary of events regarding Tesla

<http://science.howstuffworks.com/nikola-tesla.htm>

A brief biography about Tesla

http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Nikola_Tesla.html

Chapter 4

1. I used the following link as a brief resource in writing about B. F. Skinner:

<http://psychology.jrank.org/pages/461/Operant-Conditioning.html>

2. Detailed information about the research study involving teacher bonuses and loss aversion can be found here:

http://rady.ucsd.edu/docs/faculty/Fryer_et_al_Teacher_Incentives_NBER_WP18

3. An article from *The Atlantic* describes the idea behind the money-shredding alarm clock:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/06/genius-this-alarm-clock-shreds-a-dollar-bill-if-you-let-it-buzz-too-long/276923/>

4. The study about using in-home displays for homeowners to conserve energy was found at:

http://www.uvm.edu/sustain/sites/default/files/faruqui2010_impactoffeedback.pdf

5. Research about how external rewards can harm intrinsic motivation can be found here:

http://www.rug.nl/gmw/psychology/research/onderzoek_summerschool/firststep/

Chapter 5

1. Alan Deutschman wrote about his experience at the Global Innovation

Outlook conference for *Fast Company* magazine online here:

<http://www.fastcompany.com/52717/change-or-die>

2. Details from the research study about work burnout can be found here:

<http://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-04-goals-pursue-burnout.html>

3. I used two specific research studies that show the correlation between likelihood to exercise and the enjoyment of exercise. They can be found here:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12683738>

http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2006_JSS.pdf

4. The research study about willpower at Northwestern University can be found here:

http://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/beware_the_sirens_song/

5. Personal development blogger Steve Pavlina's article "How to Wake Up Feeling Totally Alert" is located at:

<http://www.stevepavlina.com/blog/2007/10/how-to-wake-up-feeling-totally-alert/>

6. My notes on simplification include the following resources:

BJ Fogg's Tiny Habits -

www.TinyHabits.com

Nir Eyal's "Minimum Enjoyable Action" -

<http://www.nirandfar.com/2012/01/your-new-years-resolution-is-bound-to.html>

Leo Babauta's quote about habits -

<http://zenhabits.net/habitses/>

7. Links to research about smiling can be found here:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/ericsavitz/2011/03/22/the-untapped-power-of-smiling/>

Chapter 6

1. Mark Zuckerberg's rank on the list of richest people in the world can be found here:

<http://www.forbes.com/profile/mark-zuckerberg/>

2. A press release from Facebook regarding Internet.org was referenced here:

<https://www.facebook.com/isconnectivityahumanright>

3. A brief quote about the number "zero" from mathematician Tobias Dantzig was found at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/97jul/zero.htm>

4. Information about the Mayans and the invention of the number zero was found at:

<http://www.history.com/news/ask-history/who-invented-the-zero>

5. I used the following website as a reference in telling the story of the Solomon Asch studies:

<http://www.simplypsychology.org/asch-conformity.html>

6. Information about the history of smoking and the Surgeon General's warning was found at:

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/reports/50-years-of-progress/sgr50-chap-2.pdf>

7. A research study about the social acceptance of smoking was found here:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1522108/>

Chapter 7

1. A quote from economist Adam Smith was found at:

<http://www.economist.com/node/3555259>

2. I referenced a Pew Research Study about social media, which I found here:

<http://www.pewInternet.org/2013/12/30/social-media-update-2013/>

3. A news article described the research indicating that heavy Facebook users are more likely to be narcissistic:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563211000379>

4. One of my favorite news stories of all time was found here:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25426263>

5. The statistic about the number of Red Cross blood donations was found here:

<http://www.redcrossblood.org/learn-about-blood/blood-facts-and-statistics#blood-supply>

6. Details from the Ohio blood donation study can be found here:

<http://www.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/IMG/pdf/may2012-paris-lacetera-macis-slonim.pdf>

7. I used the following link as a reference about the study in which people who help others are more likely to live longer:

<http://www.berkeleywellness.com/healthy-mind/mind-body/article/benefits-giving-and-altruism>

8. Both of the following links were referenced in discussing Arthur Brooks. His long quote comes from a speech he gave at Brigham Young University:

<http://speeches.byu.edu/?act=viewitem&id=1826>

<http://upstart.bizjournals.com/views/columns/2007/10/15/Charity-Makes-Wealth.html?page=all>

Chapter 8

1. Details from the Kaiser Permanente weight loss study were found at:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/07/080708080738.htm>

2. I briefly referenced a quote from Joseph Juran about measuring performance. The quote is attributed to him in a variety of locations including here:

<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/intl/195/>

3. Details for the story about Jerry Seinfeld were found at:

<http://lifehacker.com/281626/jerry-seinfelds-productivity-secret>

4. The following site was used as a reference for NBA team stats

<http://www.teamrankings.com/nba/stat/shooting-pct?date=2009-06-15>

5. Individual player stats for Karl Malone and LeBron James were found at the site below:

<http://www.basketball-reference.com/>