

Bonus: The Psychological Role of Habits With James Clear

Susan David: Hi everyone, Susan David here with a bonus episode, a special coda to our last episode where we talked about routines and why creating them is crucial to our wellbeing. I wanted to dig a bit deeper into this, so I sat down with James Clear, the author of Atomic Habits. I love the actionable way James thinks about maintaining routines and habits and hope that you will too. Hi, James. Thanks for joining us.

James Clear: Hi, great to talk to you.

Susan David: So in the last episode, we explored how people's routines have been shattered and how people feel almost like their habits have been upended from their lives. And given that you are the habits expert, I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit about why habits, in the best of times, when things are normal, are important for us? You know, what is the psychological role of habits in everyday life?

James Clear: The question about the psychological role is interesting because usually, what people say, and this is also true, is that habits are a method for achieving results. But the psychological piece is an interesting one, and this is in Atomic Habits. I refer to this as a concept called identity-based habits—the idea that your habits are how you embody a particular identity. So, for example, every morning that you make your bed, you embody the identity of someone who is clean and organized. Anytime you write one sentence, you embody the identity of a writer. And the way that I like to summarize it is every action you take is like a vote for the type of person that you want to become. And so you know, no, doing one pushup does not transform your body, but it does cast a vote for, "I'm the type of person who doesn't miss workouts," and no, writing one sentence does not finish the novel, but it does cast a vote for, "I'm a writer."

Susan David: I think that's so powerful. And in the context of the current virus, how would you see that playing into people's current situations, especially if the identity that they had wanted to become, or that they were building towards, is an identity that is no longer available to them? So, for instance, if we are very tied into an identity of "what I mean as a professional in my professional environment," or, "I have a particular job as a sole proprietor, but now my business is going under," what are some of the ways that we can start thinking of what I can do right now to help me maybe begin to vote with my behaviors for a new maybe different identity—one that is now available to me in the current context?

James Clear: Yeah, that's a great question. They're kind of like a double-edged sword. That you

know, like your habits can either build you up or cut you down. We all have felt that, you know, like, you can either be the victim of your habits or you can be like the architect of them. And so what you're mentioning here—this concept of identity—that it not only can be a force for good, but also it can make you a little brittle if you hang on to any one identity too much, and then you lose that thing. And you hear from this from different groups, for example, in a military context. People may have a lot of pride in the fact that “I’m a soldier,” and that’s part of their identity. But then, once they leave the army or leave the military, now suddenly, “I’ve lost that thing. So what am I now?” You hear the same thing from athletes. I felt this in my own athletic career. I played all the way through college, and then all of a sudden, you graduate, and suddenly I’m not an athlete anymore. “Well, this was a huge part of my identity for 18 years. Now what?” So when you, when you lose that thing, it can feel like you’re losing a sense of yourself, and that’s very demotivating, or in the case of the business going on or whatever, there’s a lot going on there. So instead, sometimes, what I recommend is that you look for aspects of that identity that can transcend context. So, for example, if you’re a soldier, you could say, “I’m a soldier, and I lost that,” or you could say, “I’m a good teammate. I’m incredibly reliable. I follow through on what I start,” and all of those are aspects of being a good soldier, but they also don’t require you to be in the military in order for them to work. And so right now, I think that type of mental adaptability, that type of mental flexibility, is really important in your identity so that you can look for ways in this new context to still show up. And maybe the business isn’t going as well as it had, and maybe you’re not a founder anymore, or CEO, or whatever, but you could still look for ways to be a leader, or look for ways to think creatively or look for ways to be a builder who makes things. And maybe you’re not making them in the same way that you were before, but you can still find aspects of your identity in different areas. So I think that level of flexibility is one way to do it. The second thing is you don’t have to give it up entirely, right. And so, you may not be able to do the behavior in the same way, but you can still direct your attention towards aspects of that. You may not be able to meet with people face to face the way that you normally do, but you can surround yourself with similar thinkers online, whether it’s curating your social media feed or you follow on Twitter or whatever. You are just looking for ways to allocate your attention toward the same topics that reinforce your identity, even if you can’t do the thing. The way you normally would. So I think that level of flexibility and adaptability and your beliefs and identity, and also the ability to allocate your attention to something that maybe can be a placeholder for that for the time being—those are two possible strategies.

Susan David: That’s really helpful. So what we’re trying to do is we’re trying to cue our attention so that the behavior is then triggered more frequently and more predictably.

James Clear: Yeah, I think that’s a good description of it. Yeah. It’s like, “how can I set up this environment so that I’m triggered to do the right thing rather than trigger to do the distracting thing?” And I should say, no single choice like this is going to radically transform your behavior, but you can imagine the benefit of making 10 or 20 or 50 little choices like this. Suddenly now, you’re in an environment where it’s almost like you feel yourself being pulled along in a productive fashion, rather than having to fight upstream just to get something done.

Susan David: Incredibly helpful. How would you define or draw the distinction between what are maybe called good habits versus bad habits? And I think especially, you know, again, in the context of being at home, maybe being frustrated, everything feels out of control, what people are describing so much is that the basic routines, things like exercise, and eating healthily, or, you know, getting enough sleep, that these things are becoming much more difficult. And I'm just wondering how you might think about some of these baseline healthy versus unhealthy habits and how people might get unstuck or regain their foothold when it comes to these core habits that are just so critical to our wellbeing.

James Clear: Yeah, that actually is a very good question. What is a good habit and what is a bad habit because people are like, "well, okay, if this is so bad for you, why do I keep doing it?" You know, like, and I think the answer is, there's one way to think about this across time. So, for example, pretty much every behavior produces multiple outcomes across time. And broadly speaking, we could say there's like an immediate outcome or a near-term outcome, and there's an ultimate outcome. And you'll find that for many of your bad habits, the immediate outcome is actually pretty favorable. Like the immediate outcome of eating a doughnut is great. It's sweet and sugary. It's tasty. It's enjoyable. It's only the ultimate outcome. If you keep doing it for a year or two years or five years, that's unfavorable. Or smoking a cigarette—the immediate outcome might be that you get to socialize with coworkers, or they get to take a break from work, or you curb your nicotine craving. It's only the ultimate outcome that is unfavorable. With good habits, though, it's often the reverse, like the immediate outcome of going to the gym per week isn't really a whole lot like, if anything, your body's sore, you look the same in the mirror, the scale hasn't really changed. It's only the ultimate outcome—if you stick with that habit for a year or two or five—that is favorable. And so that mismatch between good habits serve us in the long run, but bad habits serve us in the moment, that is one of the...that misalignment and managing that is one of the great challenges of building better habits. As much as possible, you want to find ways to pull the long-term costs and consequences of your bad habits into the present moment. So you feel a little bit of the pain right now, and you're like, "oh no, I should avoid that." And to find ways to pull the long-term rewards and benefits of your good habits into the present moment. So you're like, "yeah, that felt good. I should repeat that again. This was enjoyable." And this is one of the things that I think is so important that I—in Atomic Habits, I call it the cardinal rule of behavior change, which is, behaviors that get immediately rewarded get repeated. Behaviors that get immediately punished get avoided, and it's really about the speed with which you feel good or feel bad about the behavior that teaches your brain, "hey, I should avoid this next time, or I should repeat it." So I think that's probably the distinction to make between good and bad behaviors. It's not that bad habits never serve you. It's just that the costs of your good habits are in the present, and the cost of your bad habits are in the future. It's like you're accruing a debt. You know, your bad habits have to be repaid at some point. And your good habits are like you're building up credit that can be redeemed in the future. And so that misalignment across time, I think, is the primary difference between the two.

Susan David: So if people are stuck in an experience in which they are finding themselves engaging in habits that are becoming bad habits, embedded and, you know, more grounded in their everyday lives, what are some ways that people can immediately like what is the, what's the,

you know, smallest biggest thing that you might advise to someone who feels like they are either stuck or that they've completely lost their foothold? When it comes to their habits and routines?

James Clear: I love that phrase, the smallest, the smallest, biggest thing. It's great because it's like, what is the thing that's going to pay off in the long run? But where's the first step to doing that now? What is the easiest way to do the thing that pays off in the future? So my recommendation is a little strategy that I refer to as the two-minute rule, and the two-minute rule basically says, "take whatever habit you're trying to build, and you scale it down to something that takes two minutes or less to do." So read 30 books a year becomes read one page. Do yoga four days a week becomes take out my yoga mat. And I think that's a much deeper truth about habits that often gets overlooked, which is a habit must be established before it can be improved. But it has to become the standard in your life before you can worry about optimizing or scaling it up. But if you can't master the art of showing up, then even your best ideas just remain a theory, and you can't optimize the theory. You need something in practice if you want your behavior to actually improve.

Susan David: So for someone who feels like they're stuck in chaos right now, it might be, you know, you get out of bed and you make your bed, or it might be that you, in the craziness of the day, are just sitting down for two minutes with a person that you love and connecting with them. Is that pretty much what that might look like in coronavirus days, our new normality?

James Clear: Yeah, I think that's right. So you know, become a meditator or do a silent meditation retreat becomes meditate for 60 seconds, or read 30 books becomes read one page, etc.

Susan David: Thank you so much, James. I wanted to just...I'm curious to hear how maybe some of your habits might have been challenged during this time. And also, how are you trying to, you know, maintain your sense of focus and clarity? You know, are you finding yourself more distractible? How are you navigating that? What are you dealing with? And almost how your learning, you know, is informing how you're navigating the situation right now?

James Clear: Yeah, you do learn a lot about yourself during experiences like this. I think probably the biggest negative change I've had in my habits is related to nutrition, eating. When you aren't supposed to leave, you stock up on all this food. So we have a bunch of extra food in the house right now, and my brain is like, "well, you could eat all of this right now instead of spacing it out over two weeks." So I definitely am like eating more than I probably should be or more than I normally would. That's kind of an interesting one. The other thing that I'm noticing is and again, this is just personal to me, how you...what your default is for coping with stressful situations. My default seems to be that I try to like somehow work my way out of it, and so I'm finding a tendency to overwork right now. I think for a lot of people, you know, I don't have kids. So, you know, if you're a parent, you got kids running around, maybe it's much harder to work than normal. But for me, it's like, well, I have to be at home. I can't go anywhere. And so then you find yourself like getting locked into this thing where you're like, actually what I need to do is a little more self care, take a break. I need to go take a walk or like stretch my legs a little bit or go get some fresh air. So I'm finding that those two—those are probably the two most negative tendencies that I'm having

right now. And it's interesting to try to think about the best way to rectify that.

Susan David: So fascinating. Last quick question, and that is, I think these kinds of opportunities can often also, in the midst of the struggle, present growth to us. And we know that this is true that when people experience challenge and trauma often in their lives, there's also accompanying with it some kind of growth. What are some ways that people might be able to use the space as an opportunity to think about their habits or to even factor in how they might want to reset their lives—what they might not want to rush back to that was a default, but that maybe wasn't working for them? And I'm wondering if you could speak to that just a little bit.

James Clear: I think just knowing that that's possible is a great first step—knowing that I can interpret this stimulus or distress as something that is growth-inducing rather than growth-inhibiting. And there are a lot of...you're right, there's a ton of evidence for this being true. The whole concept of hormesis where you like, you know, respond to a small stimulus with growth, or pretty much every reasonable strength training approach is based on this. You place a little bit of stress on your body, and you grow in response. And I think if you're willing to interpret the current situation through that frame, you don't have to discard the fact that there are many negative things going on, that this is also a sad time, and that there are some terrible things happening. But as much as possible, we can take the aspects of it and try to use it as a way to induce growth, as a way to upgrade our mindsets, as a way to seal our resilience and our resolve, and to know that you'll come out of this even stronger. I think that's definitely possible. And I think it starts with accepting the idea that you can even do it in the first place, and as long as you're willing to see this as a potential driver of optimism and of ability and skill, it can become that for you.

Susan David: James, thank you so, so much. This has been so helpful to me, and I'm sure to our listeners too, especially during these really challenging times.

James Clear: Of course. Thank you so much.

Susan David: That's all for today. If you enjoyed this episode of Checking In with Susan David, please subscribe, rate, and review the show. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.