

Final Week of the 3-Week Series, “ATOMIC HABITS”

HOW TO MAKE RESULTS LAST

Feb. 9, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: I want to ask you three things. Number one – the first one: can you think of a bad habit you have that you either have tried to break or want to break? First, think of that. Secondly, think of a good habit you do that you know is good for you that you want to continue doing. And now think of a habit that you'd like to add... and you know by adding it and doing it consistently, it will improve the quality of your life.

You know, habits are very powerful. The seemingly simple, consistent actions that we take over time literally have a profound, compounding beneficial impact on our lives. It actually makes the trajectory of our lives move in a greater direction. James Clear – the author of the book we're looking at, *Atomic Habits*, and an expert in habits – says that the greatest indicator of your success is not your vision or your goal or anything, except what are the daily habits you are doing consistently right now. That is what projects your success more than anything else!

The amazing thing about habits is that, as habits get automatic, your brain doesn't have to think as much. So what it does is create these automatic behaviors that, when they are good, are not only helping your life, but liberating the cognitive load and freeing mental capacity and creative energy and resources to actually make you more effective and more efficient in your life and more capable of doing more. So there are actually multi-layers of benefits that help by a good habit.

Habits are very powerful. John Dryden said that first we make our habits, and then our habits make us... Because they are so habitual; that's why they are so hard to break! They become a part of our life, our mind, our mental and physical patterns for living. So when you work them well, they can take us far. And when we don't work them well, they can take us to places for our lives that we did not intend or want them to go.

So we are in week three – the final week – of our three-week series on “Atomic Habits.” And James Clear says that he calls it “atomic habits” because – like the atom is a building block for molecules – habits are really the building block for improving and having a better life. These small changes really do make a big difference.

Today we are going to talk about how we create lasting results in breaking bad habits, and also lasting results in creating and sticking with good and new habits. I just want to review the last couple of weeks.

The first week: we talked about how Cleary said the place to start is awareness. Most of us are not aware of what habits and what things we are doing on a regular basis: what our habitual actions are. So he said the best thing to do is to write down what it is that you do. Wake up; look at my cell phone; eat a bowl of ice cream...

[Congregation laughs]

Whatever it is – all the way from beginning to end. And just the awareness of what we do will begin to show you and reveal to you what things are helping you and what things are not helping you to create the kind of life that you want. Ice cream for breakfast may seem good in the moment... but you have to

look at the trajectory of these things: of where is that going to lead you in the next several years. Having a smoke might feel relaxing in the moment, but in years to come, is it going to lead you to where you really want to be?

The second thing is that we live in such an *"I want it and I want it now!"* society that we really need to get to a place of understanding that progress takes a process that requires patience and persistence. We seem to always want it yesterday: the fast track to this, the fast track to that. But that really isn't the way that ongoing and lasting success takes place. We always think... Anybody ever like, really work hard towards something and weren't really getting results? Anybody ever have that? And most think we are wasting our time. We are not! We are just building up momentum in a critical mass that will spring forward. Like a seed planted: there needs to be a growth spurt before we can actually have a harvest. I mentioned about the bamboo tree. You cultivate it for five years. Nothing seems to happen! But your watering and fertilizing makes a difference, because then suddenly, in six weeks it grows 90 feet. While that is an extreme example, it is relatable in the fact that we know that, sometimes when we put out effort, the results don't appear immediately. And you're not wasting your time; you are just building up a momentum... Building up the energy to actually break through to greater things.

The final thing we talked about the first week is that habits have ripples and create a momentum in our lives. Again, I'm always astounded that making up your bed is considered one of the best habits to have a positive impact in your life. Because what happens is: your brain sees disorganization go to organization. And it begins to want to make all those things in our lives that aren't in order into order. And then, just getting up and doing that actually makes you feel more productive, more confident that you've got control and command of your life and your environment. It helps you be more productive in your work. So those things absolutely have ripple effects and benefit.

Last week, we talked about how Cleary said that the reason most – why we can't break habits and they don't work in starting them – is that we try to change the wrong thing and change it the wrong way. (Which is what we will look at a bit today, as well.) But last week: the way we go is we tend to want to just get the results changed. We focus on the outer, you know? And he says that creates the phenomenon, like New Year's resolutions. We always want to overhaul our whole life at New Year's. *"I want to change this, I want to change that..."* We all want these outer results. And what happens is that – two weeks later – we are not only not working on them anymore, we sometimes cannot even remember what our resolutions were! Because when it is just outer change, it doesn't give the impetus for the habit.

But, he said, the way you have to do it is to work on your identity. Who do you want to become? What would a person who would create a million dollar business – what kind of mindset and consciousness would they have? Joel Goldsmith that if you want to become anything, you can! But first you must become it in consciousness. To have a consciousness of a leader or of a wealthy person or a great partner... whatever it is that you want. What's the consciousness?

Cleary said that habits connected to who you want to become and your identity have a much greater likelihood of sticking than just creating an outcome. Because sometimes you can just get the outcome, but then you backslide and go right back to the old behavior. And why? Because we haven't changed. New Year's things don't change, because we don't think we need to change; we just want the outer circumstance to change.

Then, the other thing he said is that it's not a lack of motivation why things aren't working for you; it's just you don't have a good system. Do you remember the Great Britain cycling group: mediocre for 100 years and how they became dominant? He said they always had their goals; they were always motivated. But it's when they got a good system: that the strong system with everything supporting the intention and goal of what you want to become and transform your life is what's going to work. With that cycling club, they looked at things like what kind of seat they are sitting on; what the fabric of their uniforms were; getting massages afterward; washing their hands so that they don't get colds; what kind of pillow they used. Looking at a whole system of how to improve and benefit in little ways, but overall towards their goal of improvement.

And today we're going to look at how we change the right way: the right way to break bad habits and the right way to start good ones. The anatomy of a habit is four things. It requires a cue (something that triggers us); craving (the desire for it); the response (the actual action or habit); and then the reward (the benefit that we get).

Cues can be anything that triggers us towards a particular habit. Like, at 3 o'clock – break time – could be the cue that makes us walk down to the cafeteria and have a donut. Having stress could be the cue that makes us feel like I need to have a cigarette. The cue – *“Oh, I just woke up; time to make up my bed!”* A cue could be the time; it could be a location; it could be a feeling; it could be an event. It is anything that triggers you into doing a particular habit or activity. And cues can help make your habit pattern easier or it can make it harder. It depends on how we structure them.

When somebody wants to become a meditator, that's one thing. But when you say that I'll create a cue – that I will meditate at 7 a.m. in my kitchen every morning after I pour my cup of coffee – that gives some cues. Just to say, *“I want to be a good meditator”* doesn't get you that way. Another one could be, *“I study Spanish for 20 minutes at 5 p.m. every Wednesday,”* or whatever it is. But when you have an “implementation intention” with your cues, things begin to happen. You use the cues to trigger you or not trigger you to do something.

Here's an important aspect of cue that I didn't think of: is that your environment plays a huge role. They call it a “choice architecture.” That the environment has a huge impact on our behavior. Let me give you an example. Let's say you keep a tray full of cookies on the island in the kitchen in your house. Or at work there is a common area for the employees that has donuts and bagels and cookies. You are way more likely to have a cookie, even if you didn't want to, by the fact that the environment is conducive. And if you planned on having one cookie for the day, you are more likely to have a lot more than one cookie a day if it's that accessible. Does that make sense?

The environment is huge. This is why grocery stores... You think that it's a coincidence that 45% of Coke sales are from the end aisles? Because when you are turning, it's easy to grab one and go. They say that we pick a lot of things, not for what they are, but where they are. That when things are that convenient and easy in the environment, it can support habits... even ones we don't want!

They did a study of this hospital cafeteria and the main fridge only had sodas. So, what they did was – without telling anybody – it was mainly sodas; they added a little bit of water. But then also at the sandwich area, they put some waters there. And at the coffee area, they put some waters there. They

put some waters in five locations without saying anything. In three months, soda sales went down by 11%, and water sales went up. Because environment makes a difference, without saying anything.

Here's an even wilder one. In Amsterdam, all the houses are the same with very few exceptions. And they noticed that certain houses were using 30% less electricity. One thing they noticed: in some of the houses, the electric meter is in the hallway. And some of them, they are in the basement. The ones that were in the hallway saw and were aware of how much was being used, and they used 30% less. And the ones in the basement – didn't go there often – and they used 30% more. Isn't that amazing? Your environment is contributing and supports doing good and not so good habits, depending on the kind of environment.

One of the things about it is, do you ever buy some apples or peaches or avocados and you put them in the drawer in the fridge? And you forget about them, and you find them a little while after, because they have gone bad? So the opposite is what you can do: you put a bowl on the island, instead of the cookies, and put those there. And you are more likely to eat those.

Environment makes a difference. It's setting ourselves up for success. Because sometimes we set ourselves up for failure, depending on what we set up in the environment is. And do you know that one of the greatest things for the environment – which makes it – is vision? Vision is one of the greatest cues. You know, half the brain is dedicated to vision. I did not know that! So, if you want to play your guitar, don't put it away in the closet; put it where you can see you. Anybody ever use post-it notes and write affirmations on it? Visual: you see it; you remember it. It's an important thing to help yourself with a good setup environment to do the things you want to do and not do the things you don't want to do.

Sometimes with environment, it's about your relationship to the object. Like, for some people their couch is the place that they read and nap. For some people the couch is where you watch TV and eat ice cream. For some other people it's where you do paperwork and check your email. What happens is, sometimes we cross the functionality of the different places. My bed used to have files and books; it looked like half desk and half bed. So sometimes going to sleep isn't easy when you mix it up that way.

James Clear said when he had a small place, he didn't have an office. He would work on the couch and the kitchen table. And he couldn't tell when his personal time was off and when his business time was on, because they were so mixed. So, making distinct places for certain activities is important. And changing your environment – to be a little harder for the things you don't want, and a little easier for the things you do want – is an important thing. And he says that sometimes you need to find a new environment, because when it is so instilled in a particular environment, you've got to find a new environment. For instance, if you have a temptation of going to the grocery store and buying all the goodies and the junk food – you didn't intend to but you do – they say go to a new grocery store.

[Congregation laughs]

Because you don't know where anything is in a new grocery store! And it's a lot harder! Again, when it's harder, you are less likely to do it. This sounds funny because we relate to it. This sounds funny, but it is powerful and it makes a huge difference.

And sometimes certain habits can be so ingrained by the environment that – even if you have been away from it for a long time and go back to the environment – it will still trigger. Some of those don't go away as easy. We have to change our environment.

Anybody ever – after living away from home for a long time – go back to your familiar home? Maybe sleep in your old room? And then a lot of things start being the way they were over there. Apparently I'm the only one that has that phenomenon, but that's okay.

[Congregation laughs]

It's like someone with an addiction or anything else. If they go back to the same neighborhood – or go back to the certain areas – it can trigger, because it's in there. And those cues last, so we have to be very conscious of our cues.

Another thing is: they did some studies on people with strong will power. They found that they don't have that much strong will power! What they do, however, is they are better at structuring their environment so that they are exposed to temptation. You don't have to demonstrate a lot of self-control when you are not putting yourself in a place of temptation.

My question is: what are the cues in your life that you could change for the bad habits you want to break? To make it a little harder? How can you change that environment? What are the cues that you can change in your good habits – and the ones you want to add – to make it easier for you? Because those environmental changes set yourself up for success... or set yourself up for failure. If you want to get more work done, leave your cell phone in the other room for a couple hours. If you want to stop feeling like you are not enough, stop looking at social media that triggers feelings of jealousy and/or envy. If you want to watch less TV, take it out of your bedroom... or if you want to sleep better, take it out of your bedroom. There are all kinds of things! If you're spending too much money on electronics, stop looking at the top 10 new electronics lists all the time!

[Congregation laughs]

It sounds silly, but those things make a difference! Because they are cues: trigger yearning, trigger curiosity, trigger spending that money. If you are playing too many video games, when you finish playing them, put it back in the closet. Those things make a difference! So, cues that set us up for success – that help us break or start better habits – is making sure the environment is set up for you to succeed.

The other one is: habits are hard. How many people ever start out on something you want to achieve? You started working towards it, and then it was way harder than you want to do, and you just gave up? Anybody ever do that?

[Congregation laughs]

What we do is with hard stuff is: we either quit or we keep going and keep complaining about it. Keep moaning: *"Oh, God, I've got to do this. It's such a burden."* Even the things we want to do! It's like, *"God, I hate going to the gym..."* You know, *"I hate lifting weights and that spinning class..."* I mean, we just whine about it! Yeah; we know we want to exercise regularly, yet the language ain't helping the cause.

[Congregation laughs]

There's all kinds of things that we do. Meditation: *"God, I have no idea what I'm doing; my mind's running all over the place."* It's like, *"God, now I have to go to my in-laws and act like I really like them."*

[Congregation laughs]

I mean, all kinds of things. Just playing... Just playing...

Here's the point I am trying to make is: when you already trying to create something that takes some work and effort – that is hard – we undermine our own success by complaining and whining about it and having resistance. We need to make sure our attitude and our words begin to support and be in alignment with the intention, rewards and goals that we are trying to achieve. Instead of whining about going to the gym because you hate it say, *“Hey; going to the gym is going to increase my energy! It’s going to make me stronger and healthier, so I can do more and enjoy more of my life~”* You know, watching less TV: *“Hey, watching less TV is actually going to free me up to hang with my friends, and do some activities that I haven’t done, like go dancing and doing this and that.”*

We need to look at how we are speaking to ourselves. When we hate saving money – having not to buy this – we need to say, *“Hey, I’m securing my future. I’m securing a life where I will have all the money that I need when I need it.”* When your mind wanders in meditation, instead of getting angry about it, we could just say something like, *“Distractions are a part of the process of inner peace. These distractions are actually helping me become a better meditator.”* Do you see how just changing the language and words softens it? That's an important thing for us to do.

Here's where it gets even worse, or where we can be worse with our words. Do you ever try and go on a diet or exercise program and then you slide back to the old way, and you get angry at yourself? You beat yourself up? You shame yourself? You judge yourself? You criticize yourself? Do you know what that does? It actually harms us more than we realize. Because if we're trying to not eat junk food, and we eat a piece of chocolate cake then berate ourselves, we feel bad. And when we feel bad, we end up eating for comfort! And we actually do the opposite of the thing by the words and thoughts and the way we judge ourselves. Does that make sense everybody?

Whether it's watching TV – *“I’m such a slug; blah, blah, blah.”* Then, guess what? We feel sluggish. We don't feel like getting up. We end up watching more. It sounds ridiculous! Even judging ourselves because we had a cigarette, we feel all stressed out, and we think: *“Ugh, I want a cigarette.”* It sounds ridiculous. We do it to ourselves. We undermine it. It's not about motivation. It's not about anything! It's about us being harsh and speaking more positively and affirmatively to support us doing the things we do... even if you ate a piece of cake! You know? *“I had a bad day. I know tomorrow I am going to be better. Tomorrow I will get right back at it. There’s some ups and downs. I’m going to ride with it, and I’m going to better and better.”*

There are always ways to soften it a little bit, to not be as harsh. One of the things we need to do more than anything else is be our own best friend. Be our own best supporter and encourager. That's hard. I come from the “beat myself and shame myself” school of self-improvement.

[Congregation laughs]

It's not a good school. I actually have a PhD there, and that's not a good thing.

[Congregation laughs]

We got to love ourselves, and have some more compassion when we are on and when we are not on our “A Game,” which is not all the time. It doesn't mean that you are missing progress. It's just part of

the journey. Everything didn't stop; the world didn't end. You just had a moment and a bad day. We just have to keep going.

Coach yourself in whatever way you need it. If you need a Mastermind partner or someone to encourage and get on the phone with, find that for yourself.

There was a guy; he was a young kid: 23 years old. He was in a stock broker company; nobody expected anything from him. He thought to himself that he was going to need a little help to make all the calls. He got a full cup with 120 paper clips and an empty cup. Every time he made a phone call, he put the paper clip in the cup and he did not leave the office until he made 120 calls. Within 18 months, he was bringing \$5 million into the company. He coached himself to come up with little strategies to help him, and that's what we need to do for ourselves. Environment and your own attitude and self-talk and support.

The last one is: do you know studies show that it doesn't matter how long you do an activity or habit? What's more important? How often. Repetitiveness and consistency is actually boss when it comes to memory work, space repetition or any kind of learning. Repetition, repetition, repetition. Because it's about practice, not planning. It is about repetition, not perfection. The more we do it, the things will begin to connect. Things will be able to improve. It will become more consistent.

There was a doctor and he's got a beautiful line. He says that neurons that wire together, fire together. It's for real! There's a neurological pathway as we do something more and more and more, and it will just fire and fire. The more we have to do it, more and more consistently.

How many people love the Eagles. Eagles fans? Yeah! I saw an interview with Don Henley many years ago; as a matter of fact, not that long ago. He said they were playing their music better 40 years later than they did when they were hits. I always think of that. Wow! Forty years later, playing that. You know why? That repetition! After a while, you hear and feel different levels of perspective and connection with each note and sound and the spaces in between. You invest more of yourself, because you are more calm, more relaxed. You're more open, and you get more, and you become one with it. Only repetition – only consistency of that experience – can bring that level of wisdom and insight, that level of awareness, that level of genius and mastery.

How do you think Tiger Woods gets to be that good? Repetition of putting. Repetition: over and over and over again. How do you think Thomas Edison came up with the filament for the electrical light bulb? He tried 1500 times. Here's the other thing: not just the repetitive nature, but he was engaged. He was failing, and it was onto the next one, on to the next one. It is a matter of repetition – with the intention and being engaged in what you are doing – that will make huge differences and benefits in your life. They might seem boring at times, but it's powerful. That repetition will stick deep in you and make it a part of our life, and you will get better and better at it.

In 1955, shortly after Disneyland opened, a 10-year-old boy went and asked to get a job. The only thing they could find for him was to sell these little guidebooks for 50 cents. He was so engaged and excited about it that, within the year he was working in the magic shop. And other employees taught him these tricks. He started doing these tricks with visitors. He realized at that young age – 11 or 12 years old – he wanted to become a comedian. In his teens, he started playing at little clubs and only doing two-minute sets. He didn't have a lot of material, but he did it. People weren't even listening to him half the time,

but he kept doing it and doing it. He grew up to five minutes of routine; 10 minutes. He had a 20-minute one, but it was reading three poems to get it to 20 minutes. But he kept working and working. He ended up spending the next decade refining, experimenting, improving. In the '70s he got a job writing for a TV show and, by the mid '70s he was a regular on *Johnny Carson* and *Saturday Night Live*. Of course, it's Steve Martin. Everybody knows.

Here's the thing: Why is it that some people stick to their habits, are motivated and see it through? Why is it that some don't? Is it motivation? What is it? They did some analysis, and they found out it is people who find the balance point between what they call "the zone of optimal difficulty." When something is too easy, we get bored, and we quit. When something is too hard, we struggle, and we quit. But finding that place to challenge ourselves so that we grow – so that we succeed and that we are transformed and energized by it – is hugely important. And we have to monitor that. The brain, by its very nature, likes challenge. How many people when you are bored or whatever, play Sudoku, crossword puzzles or Words with Friends? Any of those things? Notice what we are doing? We are challenging the brain.

Notice: if it's too easy, we don't want to play that thing. If we get our butt kicked all the time... No, no, no. We don't want to go there, either. We find that zone of optimal difficulty, because we like a level of challenge. I believe that, innately in us, there's this impulse to grow... This evolutionary impulse that wants to have the best be brought out of ourselves and challenge the way we do it.

For us to succeed in anything, we have to find that place for ourselves: that isn't too boring or easy, but that isn't too hard. We need to monitor it. And that's what keeps us engaged and excited. We need to want the thing, but we need to want to go through the process to get to the thing.

In the gospel of Thomas it says this: *"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth, will destroy you."* Every one of us has genius, talent and beauty and love and creativity in us. Our job is to bring it forth! And it will save us in the sense that it will make us more joyful, more excited. We will feel more meaning and depth and fulfillment in our life. More connected to Spirit, with our purpose. When we don't, it will wither our soul, our joy and our creativity.

The bringing it forth is what expands, blesses and brings good. Withholding it and letting it die within us stunts us and limits us. Habits are the way to help us bring out the best in ourselves. Habits are the way to touch levels of genius and greatness and magnificence and joy and success and health and wealth and all the things we can desire, if we are willing to program it in the right way.

The overall picture is this with habits: we don't have to struggle with it the way we do. It starts with awareness. Are you aware of what you are doing? Keep track and a record of it. Notice which ones are helping, and which ones are not. Have patience. Change is a part of a process. You don't need it yesterday, but the more consistently you do it, the greater the impact it is going to have later on. If you want to really have them stick, connect first with your identity. Who do you want to become and what would you need to become to develop a great person? Develop a system of many things that will help you, which includes environment, a positive attitude and a supportive mindset towards yourself. And repetition. That will bring out the best in ourselves. The more we are aware and tune in to the truth in ourselves, the more that cycle will work, and the more we can bring out the very best. We can break bad habits that take us away from where we want to be. We can create great habits that can move towards where we want to be. That is how you create a great life and results that last.

God bless to everybody.

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Thank you to volunteer Kara Marshall for transcribing this message