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How to Make Your Future Habits Easy

This article is an excerpt from Atomic Habits (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>), my New York Times bestselling book.

While researching Atomic Habits (<http://atomichabits.com>), I came across a story that immediately struck me with its simplicity and power. It was the story of Oswald Nuckols, an IT developer from Natchez, Mississippi, and his simple strategy for making future habits easy.

Nuckols refers to the approach as “resetting the room.”

For instance, when he finishes watching television, he places the remote back on the TV stand, arranges the pillows on the couch, and folds the blanket. When he leaves his car, he throws any trash away. Whenever he takes a shower, he wipes down the toilet while the shower is warming up. (As he notes, the “perfect time to clean the toilet is right before you wash yourself in the shower anyway.”)

This might sound like he's just “cleaning up” but there is a key insight that makes his approach different. The purpose of resetting each room is not simply to clean up after the last action, but to prepare for the next action.

“When I walk into a room everything is in its right place,” Nuckols wrote. “Because I do this every day in every room, stuff always stays in good shape . . . People think I work hard but I’m actually really lazy. I’m just proactively lazy. It gives you so much time back.”

I have written previously about the power of the environment to shape your behavior (<https://jamesclear.com/power-of-environment>). Resetting the room is one way to put the power back in your own hands. Let's talk about how you can use it.

The Power of Priming the Environment

Whenever you organize a space for its intended purpose, you are priming it to make the next action easy. This is one of the most practical and simple ways to improve your habits.

For instance, my wife keeps a box of greeting cards that are presorted by occasion—birthday, sympathy, wedding, graduation, and more. Whenever necessary, she grabs an appropriate card and sends it off. She is incredibly good at remembering to send cards because she has reduced the friction of doing so.

For years, I was the opposite. Someone would have a baby and I would think, “I should send a card.” But then weeks would pass and by the time I remembered to pick one up at the store, it was too late. The habit wasn’t easy.

There are many ways to prime your environment so it’s ready for immediate use. If you want to cook a healthy breakfast, place the skillet on the stove, set the cooking spray on the counter, and lay out any plates and utensils you’ll need the night before. When you wake up, making breakfast will be easy.

Here are some more:

- Want to draw more? Put your pencils, pens, notebooks, and drawing tools on top of your desk, within easy reach.
- Want to exercise? Set out your workout clothes, shoes, gym bag, and water bottle ahead of time.

- Want to improve your diet? Chop up a ton of fruits and vegetables on weekends and pack them in containers, so you have easy access to healthy, ready-to-eat options during the week.

These are simple ways to make the good habit the path of least resistance.

The Path of Most Resistance

You can also invert this principle and prime the environment to make bad behaviors difficult.

If you find yourself watching too much television, for example, then unplug it after each use. Only plug it back in if you can say out loud the name of the show you want to watch. (Which prevents you from turning on Netflix and “just finding something” to watch.) This setup creates just enough friction to prevent mindless viewing.

If that doesn't do it, you can take it a step further. Unplug the television and take the batteries out of the remote after each use, so it takes an extra ten seconds to turn it back on. And if you're really hard-core, move the television out of the living room and into a closet after each use. You can be sure you'll only take it out when you really want to watch something. The greater the friction, the less likely the habit.

Whenever possible, I leave my phone in a different room until lunch. When it's right next to me, I'll check it all morning for no reason at all. But when it is in another room, I rarely think about it. And the friction is high enough that I won't

go get it without a reason. As a result, I get three to four hours each morning when I can work without interruption.

If sticking your phone in another room doesn't seem like enough, tell a friend or

family member to hide it from you for a few hours. Ask a coworker to keep it at their desk in the morning and give it back to you at lunch.

It is remarkable how little friction is required to prevent bad behavior. When I hide beer in the back of the fridge where I can't see it, I drink less. When I delete social media apps from my phone, it can be weeks before I download them again and log in.

These tricks are unlikely to curb a true addiction, but for many of us, a little bit of friction can be the difference between sticking with a good habit or sliding into a bad one. Imagine the cumulative impact of making dozens of these changes and living in an environment designed to make the good behaviors easier and the bad behaviors harder.

Where to Go From Here

Whether we are approaching behavior change as an individual, a parent, a coach, or a leader, we should ask ourselves the same question: "How can we design a world where it's easy to do what's right?" Reset your rooms so that the actions that matter most are also the actions that are easiest to do.

When you master habits of preparation, habits of execution become easy.

*This article is an excerpt from Chapter 12 of my New York Times bestselling book *Atomic Habits*. Read more here (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>).*

FOOTNOTES

1. Oswald Nuckols is an alias, used by request.
2. Saul_Panzer_NY, "[Question] What One Habit Literally Changed Your Life?" Reddit, June 5, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/getdisciplined/comments/6fgqbv/question_what_one_habit_literally_changed_your/



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With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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