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How to Stick With Good Habits Every Day by Using the “Paper Clip Strategy”

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

In 1993, a bank in Abbotsford, Canada, hired a twenty-three-year-old stockbroker named Trent Dyrsmid. Abbotsford was a relatively small suburb, tucked away in the shadow of nearby Vancouver, where most of the big business deals were being made. Given the location, and the fact that Dyrsmid was a rookie, nobody expected too much of him. But he made brisk progress thanks to a simple daily habit.

The Paper Clip Strategy

Dyrsmid began each morning with two jars on his desk. One was filled with 120 paper clips. The other was empty. As soon as he settled in each day, he would make a sales call. Immediately after, he would move one paper clip from the full jar to the empty jar and the process would begin again. “Every morning I would start with 120 paper clips in one jar and I would keep dialing the phone until I had moved them all to the second jar,” he told me.

Within eighteen months, Dyrsmid was bringing in \$5 million to the firm. By age twenty-four, he was making \$75,000 per year—the equivalent of \$125,000 today. Not long after, he landed a six-figure job with another company.

Good Habits That Stick vs. Habits That Fail

When I asked Dyrsmid about the details of his habit, he simply said, “I would start calling at 8 a.m. every day. I never looked at stock quotes or analyst research. I also never read the newspaper for the entire time. If the news was really important, it would find me from other ways.”

Trent Dyrsmid’s story is evidence of a simple truth: Success is often a result of committing to the fundamentals over and over again.

Compare Trent’s results to where you and I often find ourselves. We want to be consistent with our workouts (<https://jamesclear.com/start-working-out>), but struggle to make it into the gym. We know we should write more Thank You notes (<https://jamesclear.com/say-thank-you>) or eat healthier meals (<https://jamesclear.com/eat-healthy>) or read more books (<https://jamesclear.com/read-more>), but can’t seem to find the motivation to get it done. We’d like to achieve our goals, but still procrastinate on them.

What makes the difference? Why do some good habits stick while others fail? Why did Trent’s paper clip strategy work so well and what can we learn from it?

The Power of a Visual Cue

I believe the “Paper Clip Strategy” works particularly well because it creates a visual trigger (<https://jamesclear.com/habit-triggers>) that can help motivate you

to perform a habit with more consistency. I've heard from readers who have employed it in a variety of ways. One woman shifted a hairpin from one container to another whenever she wrote a page of her book. Another man moved a marble from one bin to the next after each set of push-ups.

Making progress is satisfying, and visual measures—like moving paperclips or hairpins or marbles—provide clear evidence of your progress. As a result, they reinforce your behavior and add little bit of immediate satisfaction to any activity.

Here are a few reasons visual cues work well for building new good habits...

Visual cues remind you to start a behavior. We often lie to ourselves about our ability to remember to perform a new habit. (*"I'm going to start eating healthier. For real this time."*) A few days later, however, the motivation fades and the busyness of life begins to take over again. Hoping you will simply remember to do a new habit is usually a recipe for failure. This is why a visual stimulus, like a bin full of paper clips, can be so useful. It is much easier to stick with good habits when your environment nudges you in the right direction (<https://jamesclear.com/choice-architecture>).

Visual cues display your progress on a behavior. Everyone knows consistency is an essential component of success, but few people actually measure how consistent they are (<https://jamesclear.com/measuring>) in real life. The

Paper Clip Strategy avoids that pitfall because it is a built-in measuring system. One look at your paper clips and you immediately have a measure of your progress.

Visual cues can have an additive effect on motivation. As the visual evidence of your progress mounts, it is natural to become more motivated to continue the habit. The more paperclips you place in the bin, the more motivated you will become to finish the task. There are a variety of popular behavioral economics studies that refer to this as the Endowed Progress Effect (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endowment_effect), which essentially says we place more value on things once we have them. In other words, the more paper clips you move to the “Completed” bin, the more valuable completing the habit becomes to you.

Visual cues can be used to drive short-term and long-term motivation. The Paper Clip Strategy can provide daily motivation, but you start from scratch each day. However, another type of visual cue, like the “Don’t Break the Chain” Calendar that I described in my article on the Seinfeld Strategy (<https://jamesclear.com/stop-procrastinating-seinfeld-strategy>) can be used to showcase your consistency over longer periods of time. By stacking these two methods together, you can create a set of visual cues that motivate and measure your habits over the short-run and the long-run.

Creating Your Own Paper Clip Strategy

There are all sorts of ways to use the paper clip strategy for your own goals.

- Hoping to do 100 pushups each day? Start with 10 paper clips and move one over each time you drop down and do a set of 10 throughout the day.
- Need to send 25 sales emails every day? Start with 25 paper clips and toss one

to the other side each time you press Send.

- Want to drink 8 glasses of water each day? Start with 8 paper clips and slide one over each time you finish a glass.
- Not sure if you're taking your medication three times per day? Set 3 paper clips out and flip one into the bin each time you swallow your pills.

Best of all, the entire strategy will cost you less than \$10.

1. Grab a box of standard paper clips (here is a cheap set (<https://jamesclear.com/go/paperclips>)).
2. Get two standard paper clip holders (here you go (<https://jamesclear.com/go/paperclip-holder>)).
3. Pick your habit and start moving those bad boys from one side to the other.

Trent Dyrsmid decided that success in his field came down to one core task: making more sales calls. He discovered that mastering the fundamentals is what makes the difference.

The same is true for your goals. There is no secret sauce. There is no magic bullet. Good habits are the magic bullet.

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 16 of my New York Times bestselling book Atomic Habits. Read more here (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>).

FOOTNOTES

1. I was introduced to Trent Dyrsmid through my friend Nathan Barry (<http://nathanbarry.com/>).

The quotes in this article come from an email exchange I had with Dyrsmid on April 1st, 2015 and April 2nd, 2015.

2. Related article: “Everybody already knows that” is very different from “Everybody already does that.” (<https://jamesclear.com/checklist-solutions>)
3. On a related note, visual cues can also be used to provide fear-based motivation. I have heard of weight loss clients moving glass marbles from one jar to another for each pound they lose. Once you move a marble over, you definitely don’t want to move it back.



Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

Whenever you buy one of [my books](https://jamesclear.com/books) (<https://jamesclear.com/books>), join the [Habits Academy](https://habitsacademy.com) (<https://habitsacademy.com>), or otherwise contribute to my work, 5 percent of the profits are donated to the [Against Malaria Foundation \(AMF\)](https://www.amf.org/).

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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