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Identity-Based Habits: How to Actually Stick to Your Goals This Year

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

Change is hard. You've probably noticed that.

We all want to become better people — stronger and healthier, more creative and more skilled, a better friend or family member.

But even if we get really inspired and start doing things better, it's tough to actually stick to new behaviors. It's more likely that this time next year you'll be doing the same thing than performing a new habit with ease.

Why is that? And is there anything you can do to make change easier?

How to Be Good at Remembering People's Names

My wife is great at remembering people's names.

Recently, she told me a story that happened when she was in high school. She went to a large high school and it was the first day of class. Many of the students had never met before that day. The teacher went around the room and asked each person to introduce themselves. At the end, the teacher asked if anyone could remember everyone's name.

My wife raised her hand and proceeded to go around the room and accurately name all 30 or so people. The rest of the room was stunned. The guy next to her looked over and said, "I couldn't even remember your name."

She said that moment was an affirming experience for her. After that she felt like, "I'm the type of person who is good at remembering people's names."

Even today, she's great at remembering the names of anyone we come across.

Here's what I learned from that story: In order to believe in a new identity, we have to prove it to ourselves.

Identity-Based Habits

The key to building lasting habits (<https://jamesclear.com/habits>) is focusing on creating a new identity first. Your current behaviors are simply a reflection of your current identity. What you do now is a mirror image of the type of person you believe that you are (either consciously or subconsciously).

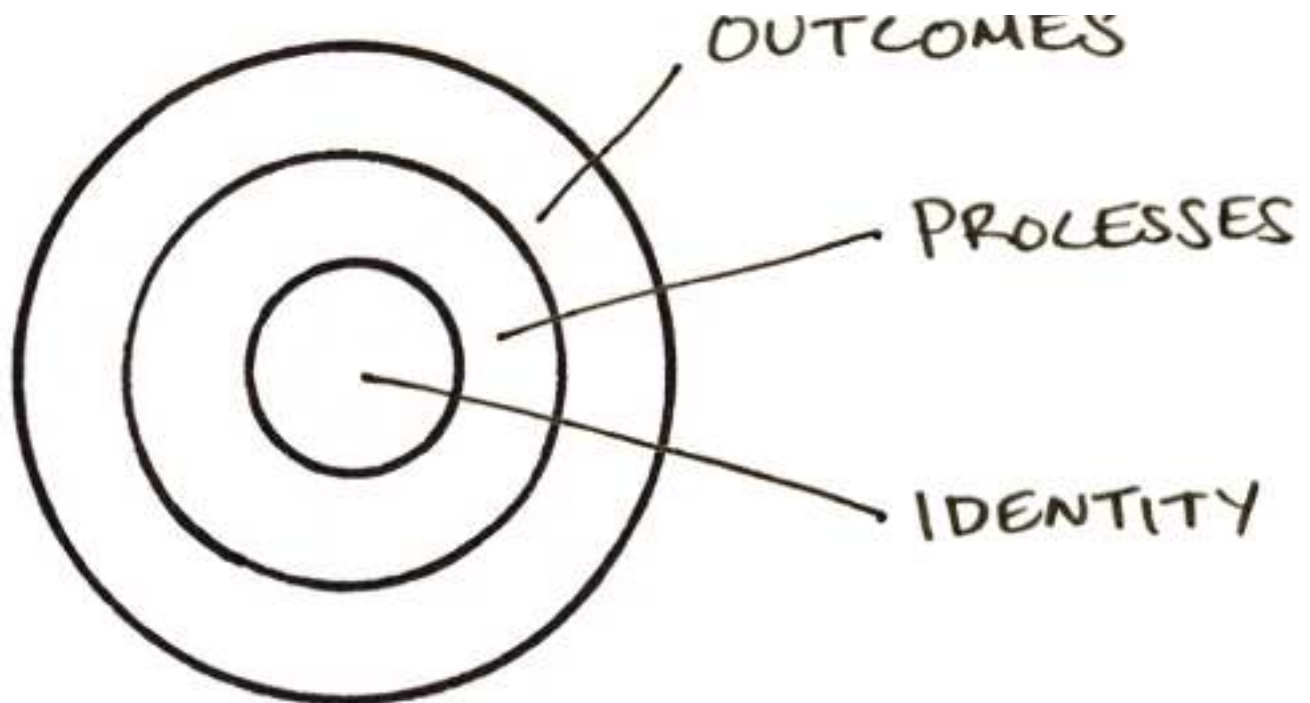
To change your behavior for good, you need to start believing new things about yourself. You need to build identity-based habits.

Imagine how we typically set goals. We might start by saying “I want to lose weight” or “I want to get stronger.” If you're lucky, someone might say, “That's great, but you should be more specific.”

So then you say, “I want to lose 20 pounds” or “I want to squat 300 pounds.”

These goals are centered around outcomes, not identity.

To understand what I mean, consider that there are three levels at which change can occur. You can imagine them like the layers of an onion.



There are three layers of behavior change: a change in your outcomes, a change in your processes, or a change in your identity.

The first layer is changing your outcomes. This level is concerned with changing your results: losing weight, publishing a book, winning a championship. Most of the goals you set are associated with this level of change.

The second layer is changing your process. This level is concerned with changing your habits and systems: implementing a new routine at the gym, decluttering your desk for better workflow, developing a meditation practice. Most of the habits you build are associated with this level.

The third and deepest layer is changing your identity. This level is concerned with changing your beliefs: your worldview, your self-image, your judgments about yourself and others. Most of the beliefs, assumptions, and biases

you hold are associated with this level.

Outcomes are about what you get. Processes are about what you do. Identity is about what you believe. When it comes to building habits that last—when it comes to building a system of 1 percent improvements—the problem is not that one level is “better” or “worse” than another. All levels of change are useful in their own way. The problem is the *direction* of change.

Many people begin the process of changing their habits by focusing on *what* they want to achieve. This leads us to outcome-based habits. The alternative is to build identity-based habits. With this approach, we start by focusing on *who* we wish to become.

The Recipe for Sustained Success

Changing your beliefs isn't nearly as hard as you might think. There are two steps.

1. Decide the type of person you want to be.
2. Prove it to yourself with small wins.

First, decide who you want to be. This holds at any level—as an individual, as a team, as a community, as a nation. What do you want to stand for? What are your principles and values? Who do you wish to become?

These are big questions, and many people aren't sure where to begin—but they do know what kind of results they want: to get six-pack abs or to feel less anxious or to double their salary. That's fine; start there and work backward from the results

you want to the type of person who could get those results. Ask yourself, “Who is the type of person that could get the outcome I want?”

Here are five examples of how you can make this work in real life.

Want to lose weight?

Identity: Become the type of person who moves more every day.

Small win: Buy a pedometer. Walk 50 steps when you get home from work.

Tomorrow, walk 100 steps. The day after that, 150 steps. If you do this 5 days per week and add 50 steps each day, then by the end of the year, you’ll be walking over 10,000 steps per day.

Want to become a better writer?

Identity: Become the type of person who writes 1,000 words every day.

Small win: Write one paragraph each day this week.

Want to become strong?

Identity: Become the type of person who never misses a workout.

Small win: Do pushups every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Want to be a better friend?

Identity: Become the type of person who always stays in touch.

Small win: Call one friend every Saturday. If you repeat the same people every 3 months, you'll stay close with 12 old friends throughout the year.

Want to be taken seriously at work?

Identity: become the type of person who is always on time.

Small win: Schedule meetings with an additional 15-minute gap between them so that you can go from meeting to meeting and always show up early.

What is your identity?

In my experience, when you want to become better at something, proving your identity to yourself is far more important than getting amazing results. This is especially true at first.

If you want to get motivated and inspired, then feel free to watch a YouTube video, listen to your favorite song, and do P90X. But don't be surprised if you burn out after a week. You can't rely on being motivated (<https://jamesclear.com/motivation>). You have to become the type of person you want to be, and that starts with proving your new identity to yourself.

Most people (myself included) will want to become better this year. Many of us, however, will set performance- and appearance-based goals in hopes that they will drive us to do things differently.

If you're looking to make a change, then I say stop worrying about results and start worrying about your identity. Become the type of person who can achieve the things you want to achieve. Build identity-based habits now. The results can come later.

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 2 of my New York Times bestselling book Atomic Habits. Read more here (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>).

FOOTNOTES

1. Hat tip to Simon Sinek. His “Golden Circle” framework is similar. For more, see Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (London: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013), 37.





Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

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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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