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# How to Stop Procrastinating and Boost Your Willpower by Using “Temptation Bundling”

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

Ronan Byrne, an electrical engineering student in Dublin, Ireland, enjoyed watching Netflix, but he also knew that he should exercise more often than he did. Putting his engineering skills to use, Byrne hacked his stationary bike and connected it to his laptop and television. Then he wrote a computer program that would allow Netflix to run *only* if he was cycling at a certain speed. If he slowed down for too long, whatever show he was watching would pause until he started pedaling again. He was, in the words of one fan, “eliminating obesity one Netflix binge at a time.”

He was also employing temptation bundling to make his exercise habit more attractive. Temptation bundling works by linking an action you want to do with an action you need to do. In Byrne’s case, he bundled watching Netflix (the thing he wanted to do) with riding his stationary bike (the thing he needed to do).

Businesses are masters at temptation bundling. For instance, when the American

Broadcasting Company, more commonly known as ABC, launched its Thursday night television lineup for the 2014–2015 season, they promoted temptation bundling on a massive scale.

Every Thursday, the company would air three shows created by screenwriter Shonda Rhimes—Grey’s Anatomy, Scandal, and How to Get Away with Murder. They branded it as “TGIT on ABC” (TGIT stands for Thank God It’s Thursday). In addition to promoting the shows, ABC encouraged viewers to make popcorn, drink red wine, and enjoy the evening.

Andrew Kubitz, head of scheduling for ABC, described the idea behind the campaign: “We see Thursday night as a viewership opportunity, with either couples or women by themselves who want to sit down and escape and have fun and drink their red wine and have some popcorn.” The brilliance of this strategy is that ABC was associating the thing they *needed* viewers to do (watch their shows) with activities their viewers already *wanted* to do (relax, drink wine, and eat popcorn).

Over time, people began to connect watching ABC with feeling relaxed and entertained. If you drink red wine and eat popcorn at 8 p.m. every Thursday, then eventually “8 p.m. on Thursday” means relaxation and entertainment. The reward gets associated with the cue, and the habit of turning on the television becomes more attractive.

You’re more likely to find a behavior attractive if you get to do one of your favorite things at the same time. Perhaps you want to hear about the latest celebrity gossip, but you need to get in shape. Using temptation bundling, you could only read the

tabloids and watch reality shows at the gym. Maybe you want to get a pedicure, but you need to clean out your email inbox. Solution: only get a pedicure while processing overdue work emails.

Temptation bundling is one way to apply a psychology theory known as Premack's Principle. Named after the work of professor David Premack, the principle states that "more probable behaviors will reinforce less probable behaviors." In other words, even if you don't really want to process overdue work emails you'll become conditioned to do it if it means you get to do something you really want to do along the way.

## **How to Create Your Temptation Bundle**

There is a simple exercise you can use to boost your willpower and figure out your own temptation bundling strategy.

You're going to create a two-column list:

1. In column one, write down the pleasures you enjoy and the temptations that you want to do.
2. In column two, write down the tasks and behaviors you should be doing, but often procrastinate on.

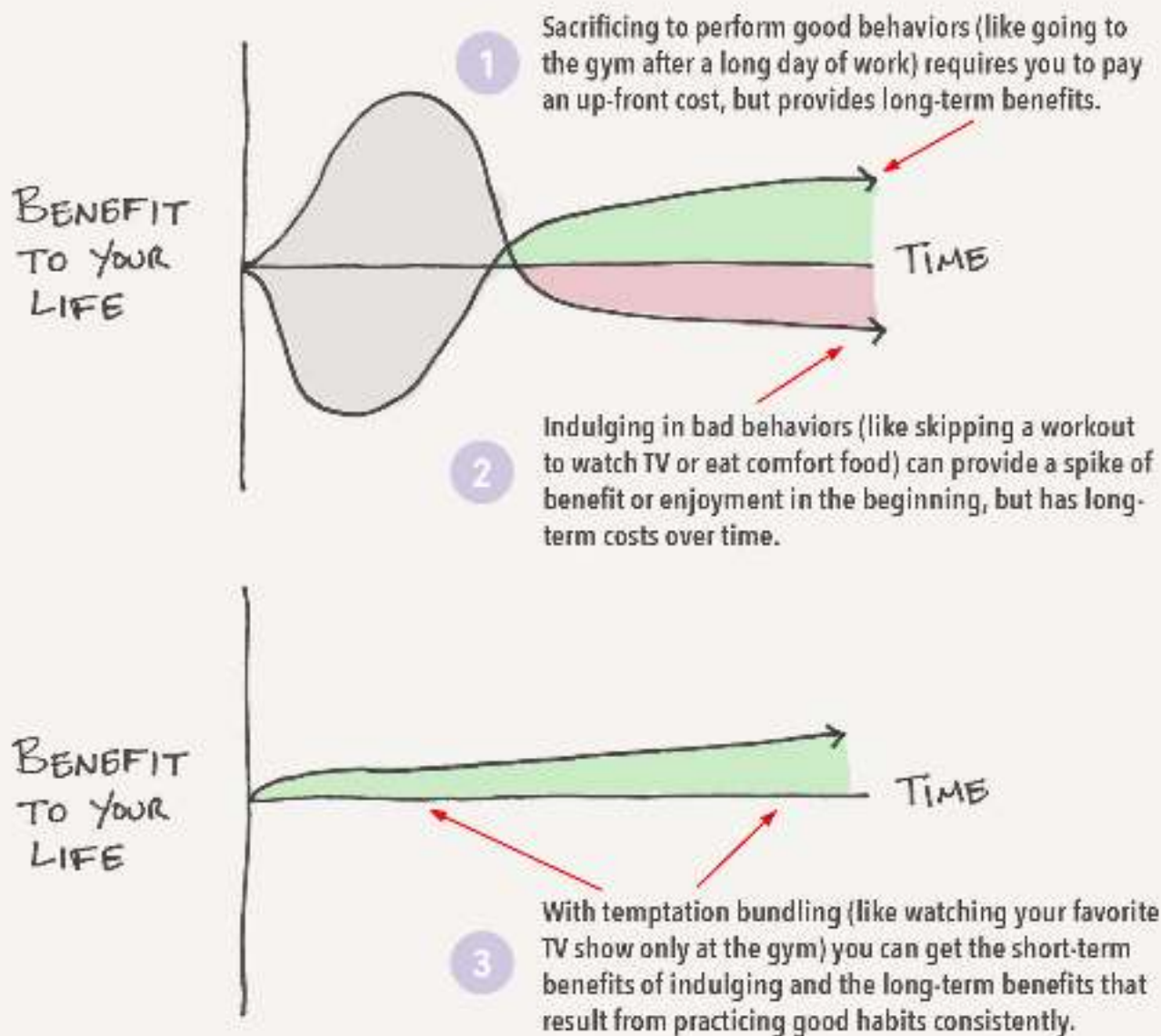
Take your time and write down as many behaviors as possible. Then, browse your list and see if you can link one of your instantly gratifying "want" behaviors with something you "should" be doing.

Here are a few common examples of temptation bundling:

- Only listen to audiobooks or podcasts you love while exercising.
- Only get a pedicure while processing overdue work emails.
- Only watch your favorite show while ironing or doing household chores.
- Only eat at your favorite restaurant when conducting your monthly meeting with a difficult colleague.

## TEMPTATION BUNDLING

[JamesClear.com/temptation-bundling](https://JamesClear.com/temptation-bundling)



Source: "Making the Manager Games: A Stage of the Gym: An Evaluation of Temptation Bundling" by Milkman, Management Science, 2013.

You can even combine temptation bundling with habit stacking (<https://jamesclear.com/habit-stacking>) to create a set of rules to guide your behavior.

The habit stacking + temptation bundling formula is:

1. After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [HABIT I NEED].
2. After [HABIT I NEED], I will [HABIT I WANT].

If you want to read the news, but you need to express more gratitude:

1. After I get my morning coffee, I will say one thing I'm grateful for that happened yesterday (need).
2. After I say one thing I'm grateful for, I will read the news (want).

If you want to watch sports, but you need to make sales calls:

1. After I get back from my lunch break, I will call three potential clients (need).
2. After I call three potential clients, I will check ESPN (want).

If you want to check Facebook, but you need to exercise more:

1. After I pull out my phone, I will do ten burpees (need).
2. After I do ten burpees, I will check Facebook (want).

The hope is that eventually you'll look forward to calling three clients or doing ten burpees because it means you get to check Facebook or read the latest sports news. Doing the thing you need to do means you get to do the thing you want to do.

## **Always Important, Never Urgent**

There are many factors that contribute to success, but you can make a strong argument that consistently accomplishing tasks which are important, but not

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urgent is the one ability that separates top performers from everyone else.

Consider how many tasks are important to our progress, but not urgent in our daily lives.

- Getting a workout in will never feel like an urgent task on any particular day, but exercising consistently will change your health and your life.
- Cleaning your office space or kitchen will rarely feel like an immediate need, but reducing clutter can clear your mind and reduce chronic stress.
- Practicing the fundamentals of your craft is often boring, but when you master these core skills you begin to separate yourself from your competitors.

The tasks that are important are rarely urgent  
(<https://jamesclear.com/eisenhower-box>).

Temptation bundling offers a simple way to accomplish these tasks that are always important, but never feel urgent. By using your guilty pleasures pull you in, you make it easier to follow through on more difficult habits that pay off in the long-run.

*This article is an excerpt from Chapter 8 of my New York Times bestselling book Atomic Habits. Read more here (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>).*

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Hackster Staff, "Netflix and Cycle!," Hackster, July 12, 2017, <https://blog.hackster.io/netflix-and-cycle-1734d0179deb>.
2. "Cycflix: Exercise Powered Entertainment (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nc0irLB-iY>)," Deborah, July 9, 2017.

KODORO, JULY 8, 2017.

3. Jeanine Poggi, "Shonda Rhimes Looks beyond ABC's Nighttime Soaps (<http://adage.com/article/special-report-tv-upfront/shonda-rhimes-abc-soaps/303996/>)," AdAge.
4. Jon E. Roedelein, Dictionary of Theories, Laws, and Concepts in Psychology (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 384.
5. Thanks to my main man John Kester III (<https://twitter.com/jk3three>) for originally telling me about temptation bundling.



**Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.**

Whenever you buy one of my books (<https://jamesclear.com/books>), join the Habits Academy



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(<https://habitsacademy.com>), or otherwise contribute to my work, 5 percent of the profits are donated to the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF).

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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## OPTIMAL HEALTH

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