

## Four Laws of Behavior Change: A Brief Review of the Book “Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Make Good Habits & Break Bad Ones”

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### Background:

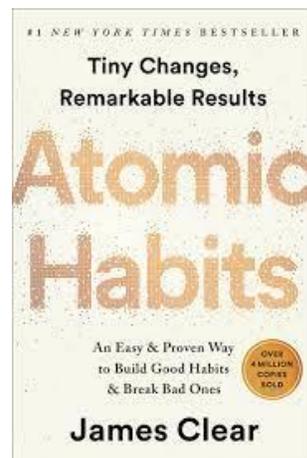
When working with persistent pain, rehab clinicians are often challenged to do more than just pure symptom modification. Many of the interventions that are given may help alleviate some pain for the short term, but to create long term success, education ultimately needs to push for some sort of behavior change.

Whether we are promoting more physical activity, a better diet, the practice of mindfulness, improved sleep hygiene, or just better routine building; educating on behavior change is hard. Heck, if it were easy, we surely wouldn't need as many health professionals and many of our jobs would be at stake.

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how you want to look at it, most people struggle to make these changes themselves and need support from medical professionals. Since we spend the most one-on-one time with patients, the education and motivation to make these changes often falls on us. After reading many different articles, books, and blogs on behavior change, I have found very few to be practical with most of them containing the same egregious messages. However, there has been one book that has made a significant impact on the how I view behavior change and often find myself reinforcing its ideas in the clinic.

The book, written by James Clear, is called [\*Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Make Good Habits & Break Bad Ones\*](#). James does an excellent job breaking down habit formation into four simple laws. The whole idea surrounding the title “Atomic Habits” was to help illustrate the fact that even the smallest particle in our universe when compounded together essentially creates all matter. Therefore, an atomic habit is a regular practice or routine that is not only small and easy to do but is also the source of incredible power, a component of the system of compound growth.

Throughout the book, James highlights the idea that creating a good habit is not necessarily about setting the right goals, or having the right motivation, but is about creating systems that will help move you towards something you value. “*The most effective way to change a behavior is not to focus on what you want to achieve, but who you wish to be.*” James provides a set of four simple laws that can help us create a system that drives change. Even though these changes may seem small and unimportant at first, the longer you stick with them, the bigger these changes will compound into meaningful results.



### Law 1:

#### Building a Good Habit: Make it Obvious

You must make your habit noticeable every single day. Write it down, post it on your refrigerator, make alerts on your phone; do whatever it takes to keep your habit on your mind. One of the best ways to build a new habit is to stack it next to a habit you perform each day. If you are diligent about dental hygiene, try to perform your

habit the same time or right after you brush your teeth. By stacking your habit next to something you already perform makes it much easier to accomplish.

### **Breaking a Bad Habit: Make it Invisible**

Contrary to building a good habit, to break a bad habit, you must try to make it as invisible as possible. The problem with most bad habits is that once a habit is formed, it is unlikely to be forgotten. Most people believe they can build the ability to resist it, however, it's much easier to avoid temptations rather than resist them.

#### **Law 2:**

### **Building a Good Habit: Make it Attractive**

The more appealing your habit becomes the more enticing it will be to accomplish it. Many habits can be reinforced through neurotransmitter-driven feedback loops. By associating your habit with something you enjoy further reinforces the motivation to act on that habit. One way you can accomplish this is through temptation bundling. By pairing an action that you want to do with something that you need to do helps create habit-formation.



### **Breaking a Bad Habit: Make it Unattractive**

The inverse to this law would be to make it unattractive. By creating an unpleasant relationship with a bad habit reinforces us to not act upon it. Most causes to habits are often due to the prediction that precedes them. The prediction therefore leads to a feeling and by associating negative feelings helps lessen the craving to perform the habit.

#### **Law 3:**

### **Building a Good Habit: Make it Easy**

The most effective form of learning is practice, not planning. Start off with something that is easy to accomplish and can be done each day. Slowly build from there and try to not retract what you have done. The amount of time you have performed a habit is not as important as the number of times you have performed it. With enough repetition, the habit then becomes more automatic.

### **Breaking a Bad Habit: Make it Difficult**

By now you should see a common theme with these laws. If you want to break a bad habit, make it difficult to accomplish. Technology nowadays is often geared at making our lives easier but commit yourself to create extra steps needed to perform a bad habit. Develop more resistance to restrict you which then reduces the automaticity of performing the bad habit.

#### **Law 4:**

### **Building a Good Habit: Make it Satisfying**

Circling back to some of the neuroscience that occurs, we are more likely to perform a behavior when we feel rewarded and satisfied. It's easier for us to prioritize immediate rewards over delayed gratification. Therefore,

you may need to pair your habit with something that is satisfying. It's best to plan a strategy that ensures what you find satisfying doesn't reinforce the bad habit (i.e., rewarding yourself with ice cream after working out all week when you are trying to lose weight). The first three laws of behavior change—make it obvious, make it attractive, and make it easy—increase the odds that a behavior will be performed this time. This law of behavior change, make it satisfying, increases the odds that a behavior will be repeated next time.

## Breaking a Bad Habit: Make it Unsatisfying

I bet you can guess what the 4<sup>th</sup> law is to break a bad habit?! You got it, make it unsatisfying. We should know firsthand about this because many of our patients stop doing things they love when they become painful. Therefore, to prevent a bad habit from repeating itself, create an environment that becomes unsatisfying. By having a good accountability partner can instantly create a course of inaction as we often don't want to disappoint someone that we value. Knowing that someone else is watching you can be a powerful motivator.

## Conclusions:

It's important to reiterate that most of these points and ideas are purely a **BRIEF** summary based on nearly 320 pages of high-quality information that has been thoroughly studied over the past few decades. Behavior changes and habit formation extends far beyond what these four points illustrate, however, just knowing what these laws are is always a great place to start. If anyone is interested in building or breaking certain habits, I highly recommend you read the entirety of this book. What's nice about the way James writes his book is that it is applicable to everyone, not just healthcare professionals.

When discussing behavior change as a health professional, it's important to seek permission from your patients first and explore what types of beliefs they have regarding their behaviors. If they are in a precontemplation phase and haven't even considered making a change, it may be best to wait for a better opportunity. However, I would argue that most individuals are at least in the contemplation phase if they have decided to seek help and come into your clinic. If that's the case and they are interested in making a change, it then becomes up to you to help guide them to make the best decisions. It's easy to tell someone what they should do, but harder to help them make that decision themselves. *"The environment we create is the invisible hand that helps shape human behavior."* It's time we start creating an environment that builds people up and helps move them closer to what they value. Only then can we truly pave a path towards long term success for the many individuals who are struggling with persistent symptoms.

