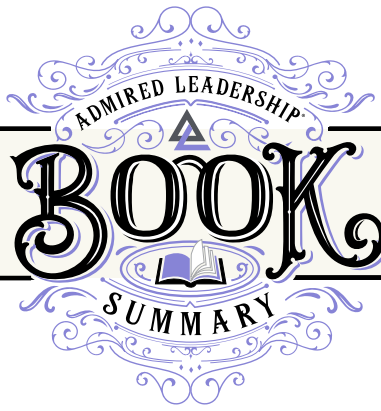




Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



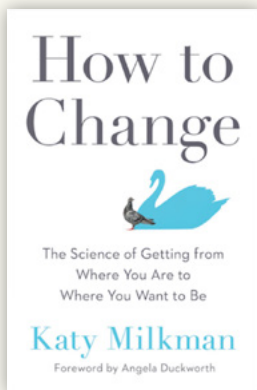
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How to Change

The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be

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In Katy Milkman's most recent book, **How to Change**, she identifies the internal obstacles to success, explains how these obstacles stand in the way of change, and describes different methods to overcome them. Using impactful research from renowned scientists, economists, and professors, **How to Change** offers advice, backed by relevant studies, on forming positive habits.

Key Quote

"By diagnosing the internal obstacles you face and consistently using solutions customized to help you succeed, evidence and experience show that you really can get from where you are to where you want to be" (p. 201). — **Katy Milkman**

Key Concepts

Getting Started. Timing is a big part of making real change, and "an ideal time to consider pursuing a change is after a fresh start" (p. 26).

Impulsivity. People naturally prefer short-term gratification to long-term gains, and this gets in the way of change. Two strategies can help overcome this tendency: "temptation bundling" (tying a pursuit to a pleasure) and "gamification" (making a pursuit feel like a game) (p. 59).

Procrastination. Several strategies Milkman calls "commitment devices" help override human nature's tendency to give in to temptation (pp. 85-86).

Forgetfulness. Timely reminders, specific "cue-based plans," and checklists help prevent people from losing track of or forgetting good intentions for change (p. 114-115).

Laziness. Following the path of least resistance can get in the way of making lasting change, but identifying this and implementing several methods can help turn change behaviors into new habits. These methods include: setting new “defaults,” rewards, flexibility, tracking new behavior, pursuing “streaks,” and “piggybacking” (pp. 141-142).

Confidence. Make use of your relationships to help seek and give feedback and positive encouragement, allow yourself “emergency passes” for missed goals, and operate with a “growth mindset” (pp. 167-168). [See also previously summarized book, **Mindset**, by Carol Dweck.- <https://explore.admiredleadership.com/program/book-summaries/mindset>].


Conformity. Understand the positive and negative power that group influence has on people and make the most of relationships by seeking peer groups where the desired behavior is the norm, mimicking those who have achieved what you are seeking, speaking up in group about “upward trends,” and avoiding both shaming and being wrongly coerced.

Changing for Good. It is possible to find a path for lasting change if you understand that you are in it for the long term. Some obstacles simply are “human nature and require constant vigilance” (p. 197).


TACKLING THE OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

Why is it that the tools and techniques designed to spur change so often fail? Not only is change hard, “we often fail by applying the wrong tactics in our attempts to change” (p. 6). To give yourself the best chance at successful change, it’s important to understand there is no one-size-fits-all strategy to change behavior. Instead, one must identify the particular obstacles in the way of progress and develop a personal strategy tailored to overcome them.

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Milkman identifies six internal obstacles to successful behavior change: impulsivity, procrastination, forgetfulness, laziness, confidence, and conformity. But first, timing can be key.

GETTING STARTED

The most effective time to influence behavioral change is when the person is not yet set in their ways. They are motivated to change, as opposed to already being entrenched in a routine. Milkman calls this “The Fresh Start Effect” (p. 18). When new parents are educated about the dangers of SIDS just as they are embarking on the huge life change of becoming a parent, behavior is easily influenced and, subsequently, new behaviors are adopted. SIDS is now uncommon as new parents were effectively taught the “back to sleep” principle. However, public health campaigns to decrease smoking rarely influence smokers who are already well settled into their behavior and not as open to change.

New beginnings and unforeseen disruptions can be fertile soil for change. Instead of “perceiving time as a continuum, we tend to think about our lives in ‘episodes’” (p. 19). Because of this, we’re more likely to pursue change on dates that feel like new beginnings, such as New Year’s Day, because these moments help us overcome our past failures. The disruption to our lives triggered by physical transitions can be just as powerful as the fresh starts spurred by new beginnings. For example, The London Underground Strike of 2014 was a disruption that forced commuters to discover new travel routes, resulting in positive changes to commuter habits “in roughly 5 percent of Underground riders” (p. 25).

But we must be aware that fresh starts can also work against good habits. Though “fresh starts are helpful for kick-starting change, they can also be unwelcomed disruptors of well-functioning routines” (p. 30). Hengchen Dai, a UCLA professor, examined the effects of fresh starts in Major League Baseball trades. When players are traded within their league, their statistics go with them. However, when traded across leagues, players are presented with a blank slate. Research showed players who performed badly got a leg up when they switched leagues, while top performers suffered from resets because their successes felt farther in the past.


IMPULSIVITY

Doing the “right” thing is often unsatisfying in the short term. This is referred to as “present bias” (p. 39). In an effort to impact commuter health and combat present bias, Volkswagen turned Stockholm’s Odenplan metro station stairs into working piano keys. Result? “66 percent more Odenplan metro visitors chose the stairs over the escalator after the piano keys appeared” (p. 38).


When tackling change, people “typically focus on the benefits they expect to accrue in the long-run without regard for their short-term pain” (p. 41). Unfortunately, we tend to be over-confident in our self-discipline and struggle to accomplish long-term goals. People “can make more progress if we recognize that we struggle to do what’s distasteful in the moment and look for ways to make those activities sweeter” (pp. 42-43).

“Bundling” temptations with positive behaviors that we sometimes dread can increase long-term persistence on the things we know we should do, as well as short-term persistence. However, not all activities can be bundled. A cognitively or physically demanding task can’t easily be paired with another demanding task.

Another tool for making change immediately satisfying is “gamification. It is “the act of making an activity that isn’t a game feel more engaging and less monotonous by adding game-like features such as symbolic rewards, a sense of competition, and leaderboards” (p. 52). Wikipedia utilized gamification to increase engagement among its volunteers, allocating symbolic awards such as accolades, recognition on the Wikipedia website, and star ratings to top performers. Volunteers who received recognition for their efforts were 20 percent more likely to volunteer for Wikipedia again. Gamification can be unhelpful and hurt productivity if employees feel their employer is forcing them to participate in “mandatory fun,” so participation must be voluntary.



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PROCRASTINATION


There are active steps we can take to help overcome procrastination. For example, Omar Andaya, president of Philippine's Green Bank, believed his customers were not saving enough money and wanted to increase Green Bank customers' savings rates. Researchers he consulted explained that people can see temptation coming from a mile away, and it's important to take steps to prevent our bad impulses. They advised Omar to offer an opportunity for customers to put their savings in a "locked" bank account, which they were forbidden to access until a specified date or until a self-selected balance was reached. Green Bank customers found that "by opting into constraints – on when they could access their money, on how much they could procrastinate – they were making it harder to give in to future temptations and easier to reach their long-term goals" (p. 66). Those offered "locked" accounts at Green Bank saved 80 percent more than those not offered the account.

These self-imposed restrictions that reduce your own freedom in the service of a greater goal are referred to as "commitment devices." Commitment devices vary between "hard" and "soft" commitments. Examples of a hard commitment device are cash commitments. Among the most effective, this device utilizes cash to accomplish goals by imposing fines for unwanted behavior. This differs from a soft commitment, which comes with only a "psychological price tag for failure" (p. 67, 78). This psychological price is referred to as cognitive dissonance and describes internal contradictions when your behavior does not match your values.

Milkman describes two types of people seeking change: "sophisticates" and "naïfs." Sophisticates are people who have come to terms with their impulsivity and are willing to take steps to rein it in. Naïfs are overly optimistic about their ability to overcome their self-control problems through sheer willpower. Due to the presence of naïfs, managers should "set up systems that impose costs and restrictions on employees whenever temptation could stand in the way of wise long-term decisions" (p. 83). Examples of these systems include automatically deferring a portion of employee income to a pension plan or restricting certain websites while at work.



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FORGETFULNESS

Forgetfulness – Milkman uses the phrase "flaking out" – is a common deterrent to change. Studies show that "the average adult forgets three things each day" (p. 92). One way to prevent forgetfulness is to create reminder systems. Companies such as Evive use a reminder system to influence immunization rates, which "reduces flake out by an average of 8 percentage points" (p. 93). Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, hypothesized that forgetting follows an exponential decay function, so reminders are most effective when we can act on them immediately.

A certain kind of effective planning can short-circuit the tendency to forget. Making a plan for achieving a goal and linking it to a specific cue that will remind you to act is called an "implementation intention" (p. 97). When forming cue-based plans, consider the how, when, and where: "How will you do it? When will you do it? Where will you do it?" (p. 113). Cues can also be a specific time, place, or action. "When ___ happens, I'll do ___" (p. 97). It turns out that "the more distinctive the cue, the more effective it would be at driving recall" (p. 100).

Planning forces you to do the critical work of understanding what achieving your goal actually entails while breaking your goals into manageable, bite-sized chunks. However, creating too many cue-based plans for competing goals can be very difficult and discouraging. When all else fails, a formal checklist is a great way to increase productivity and effectiveness.

LAZINESS

Humans tend to avoid the harder road. “The human tendency to take the path of least resistance – to be passive and go with the flow – has downsides” (p. 119). However, it also prevents us from wasting unnecessary energy. We can actually use this tendency to foster change.

Relying on people’s tendency to take the path of least resistance, an IT consultant added a simple checkbox to the prescription software used by Penn Health physicians. The new system worked in such a way that “unless a physician checked that box, whatever drug they prescribed would be sent to the pharmacy as generic.” Physicians checked the box only 2 percent of the time, increasing Penn’s generic prescription rate from 75 to 98 percent (p. 120). By changing the “default,” physicians ended up making the best decision without serious thought.

Habits are the behaviors and routines we’ve repeated, consciously or subconsciously, so many times that they’ve become automatic. Experiments by psychologist B.F. Skinner tested the impact of habits, repeatedly providing rats and pigeons opportunities to engage in behavior followed by a consistent reward. Results found the mammals developed a habitual response. This proves that “the more we repeat an action in response to consistent cues and receive some reward (be it praise, relief, pleasure, or even cold, hard cash), the more automatic our reactions become” (p. 126).


Being flexible can help keep us on the path to change. “Too much rigidity is the enemy of a good habit” (p. 135). If you can find a way to be flexible under whatever circumstances you find yourself in and reward yourself for getting it done, your habit will become stronger.

It is important to note your own successes. “Don’t break the streak” (p. 138). Research suggests that tracking your habits will increase the chances of changing your behavior. Tracking a behavior helps you avoid forgetting to do it and acts as a way to celebrate success and hold yourself accountable.


CONFIDENCE

To enact change, we have to believe in our own ability. “Self-efficacy” (coined by Stanford psychologist Al Bandura) is “a person’s confidence in their ability to control their own behavior, motivation, and social circumstances” (p. 148). A lack of self-efficacy can prevent us from setting and attaining goals. “When we don’t believe we have the capacity to change, we don’t make as much progress changing” (p. 148).

By the same token, we can stymie the progress of others who are seeking to make change. When giving unsolicited advice, we may be inadvertently conveying that we don’t think someone can succeed on their own. However, asking someone “to share their wisdom conveys that they’re intelligent,



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capable of helping others, a good role model, and the kind of person who succeeds” (p. 149). Psychologist Lauren Eskreis-Winkler found that “prompting goal seekers to offer advice left them to feel more motivated than when they were given the very same caliber of advice” (p. 150).

To spur on each other’s progress, consider forming an “advice club” of friends, colleagues, or people who share similar aspirations and can regularly consult one another for advice. “As you provide and receive (solicited) advice, you’ll boost one another’s confidence and unearth ideas that help with your own problems” (p. 153).

Our expectations alone are powerful tools for change. “Our expectations shape our outcomes.” Scientist Alia Crum notes four key ways our expectations influence our results. They change our emotions, redirect our attention, change our motivation, and affect our physiology. Great leaders instill positive beliefs in their employees by expressing their confidence in them, empowering them to grow and flourish (p. 156).

And failure is not the end of the road. “The way we interpret failure has a lot to do with future success” (p. 163). In dozens of studies with students and adults, Stanford’s Carol Dweck showed that “having a ‘growth mindset’ – the belief that abilities, including intelligence, are not fixed and that effort influences a person’s potential – predicts success” (p. 163).


CONFORMITY

Our natural human tendency to conform can also be a tool for change. Behavioral scientists have learned that “norms create pressure to conform so we won’t experience social discomfort or sanctions but can instead enjoy ‘fitting in.’ They often also convey information about how to acquire ‘payoffs’ that we might otherwise overlook” (p. 172). Scott Carrell tested the impact of peers on academic success and found the people you spend time with subconsciously shape your behavior.


Real-life examples make a difference. In fact, often, “we’re more influenced by observation than by advice” (p. 177). Watching peers who have managed to achieve a goal you hope to achieve and then deliberately imitating their methods can lead to success. However, there can’t be too big of a difference between role models and emulators.

Creating social accountability can dramatically change our behavior and act as a commitment device. In a 2013 experiment to boost sign-ups for a green initiative, researchers found when homeowners signed up by name on a public bulletin board, “the popularity of the green energy program tripled” (p. 189). To successfully capitalize on the effects of public accountability, participation must be voluntary.

Social groups can be useful to making progress, but humans do have a general tendency to incorrectly assume that other people see and react to the world the same way we do. This is known as the “false consensus effect” (p. 176). Katie Mehr discovered in an experiment that it was more helpful for people to find strategies to integrate into their current habits, rather than the strategies coming from someone else. This led people to find tips that best fit their own lifestyles.



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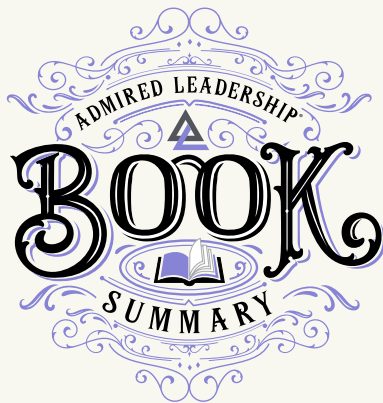


CHANGING FOR GOOD

Lasting change depends on a lifelong commitment. “The work we do to facilitate behavior change often has enduring positive benefits. But if and when our efforts stop, we should expect to see ourselves and others begin to relapse” (p. 198). As economist Kevin Volpp suggests, “the key is to treat change as a chronic problem, not a temporary one” (p. 198).

As time goes on, sometimes the obstacles to change will shift. But just as you would face an opponent in a game, you may need to alter your approach from time to time. If you’ve tried to achieve a goal but still aren’t seeing results, it’s a good time to consider new ways to reach the same end goal.

Milkman, K. (2021). *How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.



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After reading a good summary, we believe leaders are able to make better choices as to what to ignore, what to peruse and what to make the time to read closely.