A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Habits That Run Themselves

Nine simple, research-backed ways to build habits that keep going after the motivation fades.



www.forwardstepsblog.com

Motivation comes and goes.
A good system stays.

Small, repeatable steps that work even on days you don't feel like it.



HOW MUCH RUNS ON AUTOPILOT

43%

of everyday actions in one diary study were habits: done almost daily, usually in the same place

Wood, Quinn & Kashy, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2002



THE REAL SECRET OF SELF-CONTROL

2,274

people in six studies. The most self-controlled fought temptation less and leaned on good habits.

Galla & Duckworth, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2015



BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF

18 to 254

days for people to make a new daily habit close to automatic. Missing one day didn't derail it.

Lally et al., European Journal of Social Psychology, 2010



HOW THIS GUIDE WORKS

Three parts, nine habits

PART 1

1

Start small

Why you stall, tiny steps, keystone habits.

PART 2

2

Build a system

Triggers, easy starts and a helpful space.

PART 3

3

Keep it going

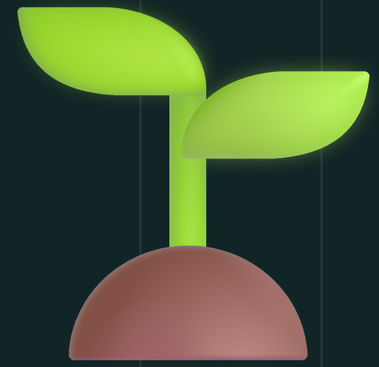
Tracking, good company and something new.



1

Start small

Tiny wins teach your brain that change is safe.





HABIT 1 · START SMALL

Why you stall

Your brain loves the status quo. If life is okay, it whispers "stay on the couch." That's not laziness, it's wiring, and you can work with it.

INSTEAD OF



Waiting until you feel ready to change

→

TRY



Expecting resistance and starting with something tiny anyway

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Expect a little resistance. It means you're changing.
- ✓ Face one small hard thing today instead of putting it off.



1. ⏱️ Pick a task that takes about two minutes
2. ✅ Do it right now, start to finish
3. 💬 Tell yourself: that's better than before

HABIT 2 · START SMALL

Start tiny

Pick something that takes two minutes, do it right away, then notice the result. Stack up small wins before you tackle bigger ones.

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Say it out loud: "That's better than before."
- ✓ Add a slightly bigger task once the small ones feel easy.



HABIT 3 · START SMALL

Keystone habits

Some habits lift everything else. Making your bed first thing gives you a win before breakfast, and that sense of order spills into your day.

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Choose one keystone habit, not five.
- ✓ Do it at the same time every day so it sticks.



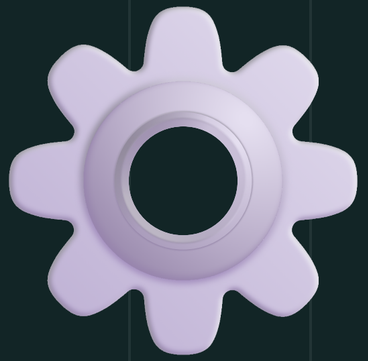
One small win that spills into the rest.



2

Build a system

Let structure do what willpower can't.





HABIT 4 · BUILD A SYSTEM

Set a trigger

Don't wait to feel motivated. Tie your new habit to something you already do every day, so the cue reminds you for you.

AFTER I...	I WILL...
Pour my coffee	→ Plan my top task
Get home	→ Walk for 20 min
Brush my teeth	→ Read 5 pages

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ The more consistent the cue, the more automatic the habit.
- ✓ Write your trigger down where you'll see it.



HABIT 5 · BUILD A SYSTEM

Cut the friction

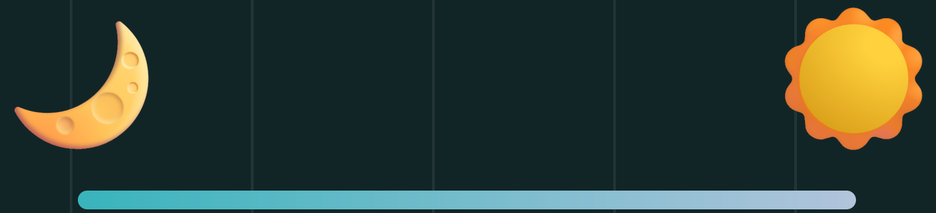
Cut the friction before you need to begin. Lay out your workout clothes tonight, or open your document before bed. Tomorrow, just start.

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Prep the night before, while it feels easy.
- ✓ Make the habit specific: "500 words before email."

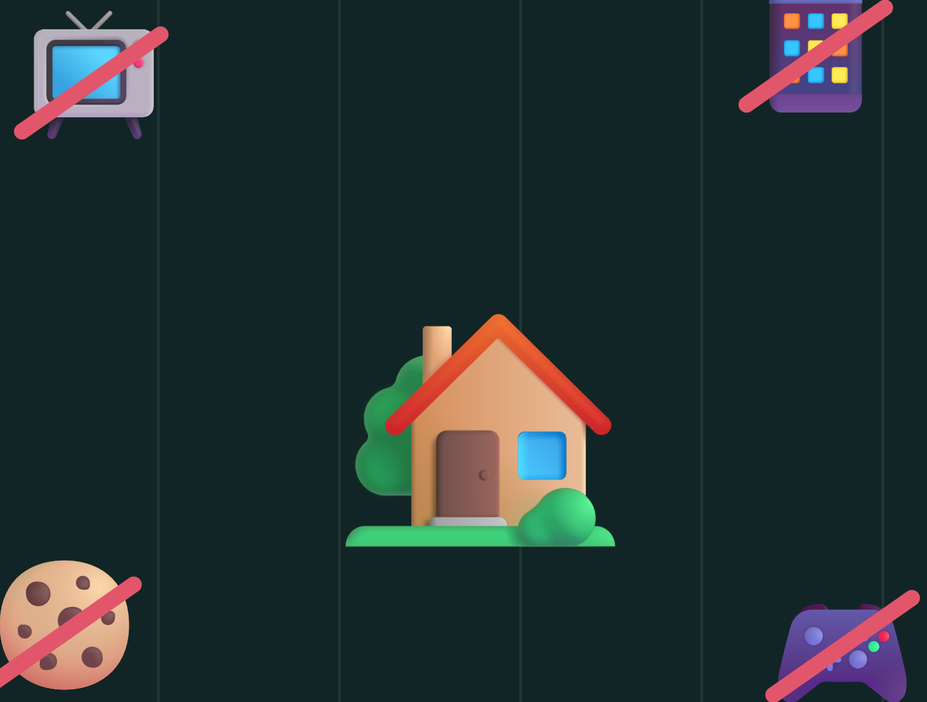
Zero hassle

Clothes out, file open, ready.



Tonight: prep **Morning: go**





Out of sight, out of reach.

HABIT 6 · BUILD A SYSTEM

Use your space

Set up your space so good habits are easy and bad ones are a hassle. Hide the distractions and put reminders of your goal in sight.

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Move the TV remote and snacks out of reach.
- ✓ Leave your book, mat or guitar where you'll trip over it.

YOUR SETTING RUNS THE SHOW

Stale

Cinema-goers with a popcorn habit ate stale popcorn just like fresh. The setting drove the habit, not the taste.

Neal, Wood, Wu & Kurlander, PSPB, 2011



3

Keep it going

Track it, share it, and keep it fresh.



HABIT 7 · KEEP IT GOING

Track progress, not perfection

Mark each day you show up. A simple tick on a calendar keeps you honest, and it shows you what's working so you can adjust.

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
✅	✅	✅	💤	✅	✅	🎉
Done	Done	Done	Missed	Back on	Done	Review

Count the days you showed up.

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Count the days you showed up, not the days you missed.
- ✓ Review your system weekly and tweak one thing.



🤝 Habit buddy

📚 Book club

📅 Weekly check-in

🏃 Running group

🧭 Mentor

🎯 Goal group

HABIT 8 · KEEP IT GOING

Find your people

We pick up the habits of the people around us. Spend time with people who already do what you want to do, and set up a weekly check-in.

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Tell one friend about your new habit today.
- ✓ Join a group, class or club built around your goal.



HABIT 9 · KEEP IT GOING

Shake it up

Routines can turn into ruts. Keep your daily habits, and add one new thing each week: a class, a new trail, an instrument, a reading group.

TRY IT TODAY

- ✓ Plan it ahead so you have something to look forward to.
- ✓ Invite someone new. Fresh people bring fresh ideas.

> **Keep the routine. Add one new thing a week to look forward to.**



WHY IT HELPS

Brighter

On days people went to more varied places, they reported feeling more positive.

Heller et al., Nature Neuroscience, 2020



YOUR PLAN

Pick two to start today

- ⏱️ Do one two-minute task right now
- 🛏️ Make your bed tomorrow morning
- 👟 Lay out tomorrow's gear tonight
- ✅ Tick a calendar each day you show up
- 📅 Book a weekly review with yourself
- 🔑 Choose one keystone habit
- 🧉 Link a new habit to a daily cue
- 📺 Move one distraction out of sight
- 🤝 Tell a friend about your new habit
- 🎉 Plan one new thing for this week



BONUS

Your 7-day habit tracker

Print this page and fill it in each evening. Showing up counts more than doing it perfectly.

DAY	MY HABIT	MY TRIGGER	DONE? (Y/N)	HOW IT FELT
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				



KEEP GOING

When a habit slips

🌱 Make it smaller, so small it feels almost too easy to skip

🔁 Missed a day? Just show up the next. One miss doesn't erase progress.

🧩 Check your system: is the trigger clear and the start easy?

🤝 Talk it through with a friend or someone who's done it

If low mood, stress or exhaustion keeps getting in the way, talking to a counselor or your doctor can help.

This guide is general information, not professional advice.



YOUR NEXT STEP

Start today with one tiny habit.

Pick the habit that feels easiest, tie it to something you already do, and do it once before the day is out.

Choose your first habit now



SOURCES

The research behind this guide

Wood W, Quinn JM, Kashy DA. Habits in everyday life: Thought, emotion, and action. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2002.

Galla BM, Duckworth AL. More than resisting temptation: Beneficial habits mediate the relationship between self-control and positive life outcomes. JPSP, 2015.

Lally P, van Jaarsveld CHM, Potts HWW, Wardle J. How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. European Journal of Social Psychology, 2010.

Neal DT, Wood W, Wu M, Kurlander D. The pull of the past: When do habits persist despite conflict with motives? Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 2011.

Heller AS et al. Association between real-world experiential diversity and positive affect relates to hippocampal-striatal connectivity. Nature Neuroscience, 2020.

