

James Clear: Sticking to any particular habit, good or bad on any given day does not feel like a whole lot, but you turn around, 5 or 10 or 20 years later and you realize, oh, wow, that daily choice really did add up.

(Intro Music)

Robert Glazer: Welcome to Elevate, a podcast about achievement, personal growth and pushing limits in leadership and life. I'm Robert Glazer, and I chat with world class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity, and helping others do the same.

Lenox Powell: This episode was previously recorded and published on the Outperform Podcast

Robert Glazer: Today's quote is from John Dryden and it is, "We first make our habits, and then our habits make us." Our guest today, James Clear, knows quite a bit about how building good habits and eliminating bad ones can produce remarkable results in our lives. He's the author of The New York Times best-selling book Atomic Habits, and also the author of a weekly newsletter that features interesting productivity experiments and ideas. Welcome James. It's great to have you on Outperform.

James Clear: Hi, yeah, great to talk to you as well.

Robert Glazer: I know that baseball has been a significant part of your life both in the positive and in terms of a formative accident when you were in high school. Can you tell us a little bit about that story?

James Clear: Sure. Final day of my sophomore year of high school I was hit in the face of the baseball bat. It was an accident, but it ended up being a very serious injury. I've shattered both eye sockets, fractured my nose and the bone behind my nose, your ethmoid bone, which is fairly deep inside your skull. And pretty quickly it became apparent that things were not going well. I was able to answer questions for about 15 minutes, but I was answering them incorrectly and then the swelling in my brain got to this point where I could no longer answer questions or talk.

And then pretty soon after that I start going downhill. I had multiple seizures. I wasn't able to breathe on my own, struggled with basic functions like swallowing and then I was taken to the hospital, local hospital and they realized they weren't equipped to handle the situation. So I had to be flown to a larger hospital and underwent surgery and was placed into a medically induced coma overnight. When I woke up the next morning kind of the process of recovery began, but it was a very long, arduous process.

I couldn't drive for the next eight or nine months. I was practicing basic motor patterns like walking in a straight line. I was in physical therapy. I had double vision, multiple seizures. It was a long road back and the injury was formative

for me, not just because it was a challenge that I had to overcome, we all sort of have challenges that we Face throughout life, but it also set me back on the baseball field and that was a big part of my life at the time.

My dad had played professional baseball in the minor leagues for the St. Louis Cardinals. And so growing up I wanted to be like him as well and baseball was a large part of my life. And my return to baseball was not very smooth. I was cut from the team the next year. So I had about a year off because the injury and when I came back I got cut, and then I ended up playing just one year of Varsity High School Baseball and barely got in that year. For whatever reason I decided that this was hard, but if things are going to change I was the one responsible for that.

At that moment, I was like faced with a decision because I couldn't just flip a switch and radically transform my life. I couldn't have some kind of like epiphany or overnight success or rapid transformation. I had to start small and this is where my story sort of bleeds into the concepts that I write about in Atomic Habits, which is that that was the period in my life where I was forced to practice the ideas. I didn't have a language for them at the time. I wouldn't have said something like, "Oh, I'm just trying to get 1% better." Or, "I'm just trying to build small habits each day."

But it was those small habits like making my bed every day or carving out an hour to study to make sure I was prepared for class or going to bed early each night while my friends were staying up late. Things like that gave me a sense of control over my life after feeling like I didn't have much control dealing with the injury, and slowly they rippled into other areas as well. So I started strength training consistently and it bled into these other areas of life.

And gradually, over the course of about five years I went from being in that medically induced coma to becoming an academic All-American and on the baseball field and doing well in school. I don't think there's anything legendary about my story or radical or amazing. We all deal with struggles, but I do think that small habits allowed me to fulfill my potential despite the challenges that I faced. And that was ultimately one of the core reasons for writing the book, which is that I believe that if you understand habits and how they work and how to master those daily routines, you can fulfill your potential as well, whatever challenges you happen to face or processes or achievements you're looking to achieve in your life. So that's a little insight into my background and why I felt like it was important to write the book.

Robert Glazer: Were you a walk-on onto the college team?

James Clear: Yeah. So I played Division III and Division III does not have athletic scholarships. So everybody's a walk-on in that sense.

Robert Glazer: Got it. With baseball in particular, what were some of the habits that you learn from baseball that you think helped you outside of baseball?

James Clear: Responsibility, and that's not a habit in itself, but it looks like habits like showing up early for example. So habit of being on time. One of the very first things that our coach told us when we showed up for my first practice freshman year was, 5 minutes early is 10 minutes late. And so this idea that when practice starts at 6:00, you need to be fully dressed, ready to go on the line at 6:00. You're not like there at 6:00 in the dugout getting your cleats on or something like that. So punctuality, responsibility, things like that.

But the other thing that's great about baseball and particularly being a pitcher, which is what position I played is that you get a lot of feedback. Giving game you may throw like 100 pitches or so. So that's 100 little lessons to learn like what I did right with this motion or what I did wrong and how to adjust. And so you really start to learn and internalize the value of accumulating small improvements, of making those little ... If I could just improve my motion, improve my form 1% each practice through those little 100 iterations, then you around, after a bunch of games or whole season you end up much better. So it was a way for me to kind of internalized that process as well.

Robert Glazer: In addition to baseball and habits, you write a lot of different topics on your website jamesclear.com. You talk about mental toughness, goal-setting, better health. At what point did you decide that you wanted to write for a living?

James Clear: I don't know if I've decided that yet still. The back story is a little bit like this. I was a science guy. So I was into chemistry and physics and hard sciences, biology. That was what I majored in undergrad and then I went to business school. I was interested in business and entrepreneurship and so on. And at no point in their did writing really play a central role. And I don't think if you went to any of my professors or teachers in high school or college, any of them would have said, "Oh, he's a good writer." They probably just would say, "Yeah, he's fine, average, whatever."

So I finished graduate school and I launched my first company and nobody bought anything. Nobody would sign up for anything, it just flopped. And I was like, what's going on here? And eventually I realized the reason nobody is signing up to the email list or buying products is because I don't know how to market. I don't know how to like spread the word about what I'm working on. So I started writing. I started a blog and an email list as a way to build the company. I just did it because that was part of what the work was, of building a business.

Surprisingly to me and to the people who read I think, I really liked it. I enjoyed sharing my ideas and getting my thoughts on the page or on the screen in this case. I didn't know it at the time, but writing is like thinking. Writing is thinking for me. A lot of the time I don't know what I actually think about something until I write about it. I sort of stumbled into it in that sense, like it was a

requirement to build the business. But as I did it more I was like, oh, this is the thing I'm actually enjoying.

At first I was writing for business stuff. I was writing about small business marketing or products we were launching and things like that, but then gradually I started writing more about habits and things that I was just interested in, self-improvement, performance, decision making, productivity. And I just kept my own notes on that stuff. I didn't publish it at first but then I had a Word document and it was like 60 pages long. It was just like James' thoughts on habits.

And eventually I was like, okay, I have all this writing on this. I'm writing about in my free time anyway, I should publish this at some point. And so I published it and it grew faster than anything else that I had done. For whatever reason my thoughts on that topic or the way that I approached it or framed it took off and that was when I kind of went at it with full steam and decided, this is what I'm going to do for a few years and see what happens.

Robert Glazer: I was talking with someone about this the other day. I think writing is one of these things and I've seen a similar thing with being on Medium or Friday Forward. Just somehow the universe requires rewards doing the long work and you do the same thing every day for 180 or 360 days and then it sort of tips at some point. So what did the curve of that look like? I mean, how long did you have to do that before you started really seeing traction?

James Clear: Yeah, that's a good question. I'm six years in now. I launched jamesclear.com six years ago and I'm still seeing some of those long-term rewards. There was an article that I wrote for years ago that was picked up by the New York Times a few months ago. It just sat on my site for like four years, but for whatever reason it struck a chord with one of the editors of The Times now. So that work that didn't ... I wrote it and then it seemed like it didn't do anything for three years, it would have been easy for me to dismiss that as not being worthwhile, but I think the rewards are still accumulating from that. And that is the value of committing yourself to quality and writing about Evergreen topics that seem to last, is that you don't know what the next 10 years holds for all that work that you've already done.

Robert Glazer: I've heard that consistently. Seth Godin talked a little bit about it too. If you're going to do this, you have to create the most value possible for the user with no expectation in return and then kind of sit back and let it go, rather than I think a lot of people are writing to get something out of it sooner rather than later.

James Clear: Yeah, yeah. I think that commitment to quality and writing things that are useful and valuable, it's gonna pay off at some point. Now, it may not pay off as fast as you would like, but it's really worth it. And that kind of circles back to your original question, which is how long did it take to get results. So when I started jamesclear.com I at least knew what to do. I didn't have any readers there, but I had built a different website up to about 20,000 email subscribers. So I knew

where to put the forms. I knew to make email, the like most important call to action on each page. I knew just all the like back-end basic stuff, like how to set up an email list and all that.

There wasn't as much technical learning that I had to do. I just had to focus on the content and so that helped me a lot because I went all in on that. I just made sure that I wrote two good articles a week, every Monday and Thursday and I did my very best each time. I knew that if I did that, I would get to the end of the month and I would have two or three articles that were decent out of those eight or nine that I had written that month. I didn't know which two or three it would be, but I knew that they would be there.

So because of that I was actually able to develop some partnerships relatively early on. Some of my articles would get syndicated on CNN or Business Insider or Life Hacker or Forbes, places like that. So that helped me build up a little steam early on. I think the first year, day one I had zero subscribers. A year in I think it was at like 34,000 or so. Two years in I was over 100,000. The third year I think there were like 225 to 250 and then now it's like 500 or so. It felt like it was growing at a quick pace even early on, but it just kept compounding and accumulating and like I said, I'm still seeing a lot of the rewards from that upfront work even today.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, and just to be clear for everyone that's listening. I mean, 500,000 subscribers organic growth weekly email is definitely putting you in probably the top 10 in the world in terms of people who have weekly newsletters and the readership. That's incredible and it's just built on the quality of the product. I know there's a lot of syndication and now you have the book obviously, but you've done no other marketing to the list itself, right?

James Clear: Right. I don't know. Some people know a lot about like paid advertisements and things like that. We've experimented with it and I don't know anything about it. For whatever reason organic is the way I do marketing.

Robert Glazer: Just write good content. Yeah.

James Clear: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Robert Glazer: You mentioned consistency and I know everyone out there has got stuff they want to write. It's probably people's biggest regret. I want to start a blog. I want to write a book. I want to do stuff. To the aspiring or struggling or stuck writers out there, what are the best habits that you have in terms of becoming a writer and then getting that writing out there?

James Clear: Yeah, good question. I think there are probably two or three. The first one is just cataloging ideas and I'm saying that in a sense that's like different than writing about them. In this conversation, if something comes up that sparks a thought or you mention a story that I hadn't heard before or an interesting idea I want

to chase down, we'll get done and I'll just dump that idea into Evernote and it might just be one sentence. It might just be a title for a potential article or a note to follow up on a story about something, but I dump it all in there.

I think it's important to have like a central holding ground for your ideas so that you can get them out of your head when you have them, that way you don't lose it once it's gone. So I do that throughout each day. I'm just dumping things into that central holding ground that's just like one notebook. And then when it comes time to sit down to write an article, I can go through there. And I think right now it's probably 6 or 800 different little ideas that are in there and some of them will never turn into anything, but as I go through that list I can start to collect ideas that are related to one another.

Let's say I sit down to write one morning and I browse through and there are five ideas or six ideas about sleep. Well, then I can start to collect those into one larger note and an article about sleep starts to take shape. They're like, there's a couple points I want to make here and maybe there's a story that I found about it that could kick things off and things like that. And that's when the process of actually writing kind of begins for me.

So the first habit, it would be cataloging ideas. The second one is when I do what I just said, when do I sit down to look through that list and start writing the next article. For a long time what I did was, and I still do this when I'm ... It's been a little bit different working on the book recently, but when I write articles is still how I do it. I do it first thing in the morning or late at night. For whatever reason I seem to write best when everyone else is either asleep or-

Robert Glazer:

Not emailing.

James Clear:

Yeah. Yeah. There aren't other things competing for my attention. So in the morning, I wake up I get a glass of water, I sit down in my home office and I start writing first thing. I like to refer to this as the decisive moment. It's not just for writing. There are decisive moments throughout your day for many things. Like for example, there's one in the evening when my wife gets home from work. It's like 5:15, and there's this decisive moment where either we change into our workout clothes and we go to the gym or we sit on the couch and order takeout and watch like reruns of The Office or something.

And really the moment that determines what's going to happen in the next two hours is do we change into our workout clothes or not. If we change into our workout clothes, everything else is already decided. We'll get in the gym. We'll drive to it. We'll get on the bar. All that stuff's already determined. There's a similar decisive moment for my writing habit where I sit down and either I open up Evernote and I start writing the next article or I go to ESPN to check the latest sports news out there. And what happens in the next hour is really determined by what happens in those first like 45 seconds.

I mentioned that just to say that the idea of like, oh writing for 20 minutes every day seems like a lot to me. There actually isn't that much to master. You don't need to master those 20 minutes at first. What you really need to master is that like 20 seconds where you get started on the first sentence. So if you can come up with a simple routine to get into the work, then you'll often find it's easier to extend and continue doing it.

So I would say those two, cataloging ideas, mastering that decisive moment when you first sit down. And then the last thing that I'll add to the writing habit is that I found that I was very perfectionist when I was started writing and so to get over that hump I told myself, "You have to stick to the schedule. Limit the scope and stick to the schedule." So a new article was going to get published on Monday or Thursday, Monday and Thursday. I had two a week for the first three years.

It didn't matter how long or how short it was. It didn't matter how good or how bad it was. It didn't matter how I felt about it. Even if I didn't really like it something had to get out and maybe that was only one paragraph and that was all I could write that day, but something was getting published. And the determination to stick to the schedule rather than to master the perfect quality article really helped me a lot, helped me hone the voice, helped me build the audience, helped me maintain consistency and momentum. So I think those three things would be helpful things to consider if you're trying to build a writing habit.

Robert Glazer:

Yeah, I have a very similar habit because the ideas come in and out and they're gone and getting them, emailing in myself, getting them into Evernote. I actually just convert everything to OneNote which I'm finding has a little better organization. One of the things, if you're trying to write in there too, is that similar, sometimes I'll connect a few ideas together or I had something there for a while and then a current event thing happens that really ties to that concept and that's always a good formula in writing an article, is like something happens and then you tie it a theme. So I have happened in that process and I agree. It's like just get the sentence down on the paper before you forget it and then you can come back to it

James Clear:

It's also worth mentioning that good writing is effortful. There's maybe this mystical thought or feeling that like authors and professional writers, that they've somehow figured out how to make it easy, but like it's not. I don't know a single author who it's easy for. So that doesn't make the work easier, but it does maybe reset your expectations a little bit where you realize like the process of writing is effortful just like the process of like doing a heavy set of 10 squats, it's requires work.

You can make some of those other things that I mentioned like the on-ramp, the ritual of getting started. You can make that stuff easy, but it helps to know that like when you feel like you're struggling, when you feel like oh, this is hard. This

how it's supposed to feel that's how you get to writing something good because you're putting effort into it.

Robert Glazer: That sounded like my speech that I give to my kids. They're getting older, they've got writing for school. They asked me to help. They see that I write. Like, have you printed it and edited it? I was like, or are you asking me just to do the work? I said, "Look, it's hard. I have to edit my own stuff. It takes a long time. I print it. I edit it. I print it. I edit it. There's no magic. It's just, you got to do the work on it. But if you do it, it gets better."

All right. Well, let's jump into Atomic Habits. It's really, I've always been a fan of the book, Charles Duhigg's book, The Power of Habit, and I think you talk about that a little bit and your book is a really great complement to that. I've suggested it to a few people and they've all thanked me for it. Atomic Habits is designed around five core parts. Will you start by outlining those for us?

James Clear: Sure. So the first part is what I just called the fundamentals and it's basically talking about the philosophy of change and how to approach habits. And then the last four parts are each focused on what I call the four laws of behavior change. It's basically a framework or a toolkit that you can use for building a good habit or breaking a bad one. I think Duhigg's book, for example, Power of Habit, does a great job of explaining what I have it is, how it works from a scientific standpoint, but I wanted to write a book that also explains how to apply those ideas. So Atomic Habits is meant to be a guide for what do I actually do? How do I actually implement this if I want to shape a new habit or break a bad one?

Robert Glazer: Let's dive into a few themes that I thought were interesting. You alluded first to the, when you were talking about baseball and your history. It was a compounding power of the 1% gains. I thought that was one of the most powerful takeaways. Will you dive into that a little bit more and then also the math that you did on that?

James Clear: Sure. So the basic idea, think about saving for retirement, right? You have like compound interest where you put away 10 bucks or 100 bucks today and it doesn't feel like much, can't retire on that so it's easy to dismiss it. But if you do that consistently, you turn around a decade or two or three from now and you hit that hockey stick portion of the curve and you've got this like really radical growth. And habits are not exactly like that, but they are somewhat similar to that. The process of building a habit feels a lot like that.

For that reason, I like to refer to habits as the compound interest of self-improvement. Sticking to any particular habit, good or bad, on any given day does not feel like a whole lot. What's the difference between eating a burger and fries for lunch today or eating a salad? Not very much. Your body basically looks the same in the mirror at the end of the night. The scale doesn't really change that much. It's really easy to dismiss that choice as being relatively insignificant, but you turn around, 5 or 10 or 20 years later and you realize, oh,

wow that daily choice really did add up. It's the difference between being fit and healthy or having an extra 40 pounds.

There are a lot of things that are like that. What's the difference between studying a language for an hour tonight or not studying at all? Not very much. You probably haven't learned the language either way, but the only way to learn a language, to master, then become fluent in something new is to study for a little bit every night. So habits have this kind of similar type of curve where in the beginning it feels like nothing, doesn't feel like it's making very big difference and then you get a couple years down the line and you end up in a radically different place, kind of how compound interest takes off from saving for retirement.

So for that reason I like to kind of utilize this idea of, well let's focus on getting 1% better each day. And if you look at the math on that, it's kind of surprising because if you get one percent better each day, so 1.01 to the 365th power. So 1% better each day for a year, you end up 37 times better at the end of the year. And if you get 1% worse, so .99 to the 365th power, you drive yourself almost all the way down to zero. And again, on any given day, 1% better or 1% worse is easy to overlook, but you end up in a very different place.

Again, it's not that habits follow that mathematical formula exactly, but it's a great way to illustrate the importance of those daily decisions that we often overlook and why habits compound over time and don't just add up. They can lead to surprisingly powerful results if you're willing to commit and focus and practice them on a daily basis.

Robert Glazer:

Yeah, one of the things that a lot of people say is, they want to write a book, they don't have time to write a book. I did the math on it and I said, "Look, if you were to just trade 20 minutes of going through people's lives on Facebook every day into writing you would have a book draft after about four months." It's just that small time of doing versus what did you learn in those 20 minutes about what other people were eating over four months. The people who are productive and get stuff done, they don't have more time. I think that they just figure out how to use it smartly and you're right, they get that compounding advantage that other people can't seem to keep up.

James Clear:

Yeah, that particular example illustrates another concept that I've been thinking about more recently, which is the importance of saying no. Saying no to something is only saying no to one thing, to that one opportunity that you were offered. So for example saying no to browsing Facebook for 10 minutes. The only thing you're saying no to there is browsing Facebook. Saying yes, however, is like saying no to everything else.

So saying no is a choice. Saying yes is a commitment, because if you say yes to browsing Facebook for 20 minutes, then you have decided how to spend that block of time. You lose all optionality with those 20 minutes. You said, "This is where I'm going to focus my attention." So for that reason, I feel like we should

be much more liberal with our nos and much more careful with our yeses because nos retain optionality whereas yes reduces it. That's something that I have to learn to practice more as well. I certainly don't have that mastered, but I think that the example you gave their illustrates why that's an important concept as well.

Robert Glazer: Another concept you alluded to before but I was going to try to hold off until we got into here because I think it's a really powerful concept, and that's habit stacking. So can you explain sort of definition of that and how that can work for someone. I think it sort of builds on Duhigg's keystone habit or sort of philosophy, but really more practical in terms of how you combine some of these.

James Clear: Yeah. I first learned about what I call habit stacking from BJ Fogg, who's a professor at Stanford University. He kind of refers to this as tiny habits recipe, but the idea is the same. The basic concept is you take the habit you're trying to build, the new habit you're working on. So let's say you want to start meditating each day and you stack it on top of something you already do, a habit that's already part of your normal daily routine.

So let's say that each morning you wake up and you make a cup of coffee. So your habit stack, the formula to follow is after current habit I will ... new habit. So after I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for 60 seconds. And one thing that habit stacking does that's incredibly useful is it makes a very precise statement for where a new habit is going to live in your life. You know, a lot of the time people wake up in the morning and they kind of have this general feeling of wanting to change like, "Oh, I hope I feel motivated to write today" Or, "I hope I feel motivated to go to the gym today."

But habit stacking forces you to say specifically when and where that habit's going to live in your life, and by doing that you also increase the amount of attention that you give to a certain thing like. If you come up with that rule, that habit stack of after I make my morning cup of coffee I will meditate for 60 seconds. Well, now making your morning cup of coffee means something new to you. When you make that cup of coffee you're reminded, oh, this is when I'm supposed to meditate.

In the early stages of the habit, before it's been automated, before you've done it so many times that you can do it without thinking, those kind of reminders are really helpful. So that's the basic idea of habit stacking, and once you get it down, you can use it for a variety of things. I just gave the meditation example, but you could also do something like, okay, I want to have a safety habit where I when I'm running I text my friends or family where I'm going.

So you could say, "After I put on my running shoes, I will text a friend or family member where I'm running and how long I'll be gone." Or I had one for a while where I wanted to build a push-up habit. And so I said, "After I close my laptop for lunch each day, I will do 10 push-ups." And so that was the cue, closing the

laptop, for inserting that new habit into my life. And then if you get good at it, you can kind of extend the stack.

So you could come up with like a morning productivity routine and maybe it's like, "After I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for 60 seconds. After I meditate for 60 seconds, I will write down my to-do list for the day. After I write down my to-do list for the day, I will prioritize those items in the order of their true importance and work on the first one right away." So now you've got a little for 5-step routine, one stack leading into the other, that kind of builds on the momentum of these small habits and lets you kick your day off with a nice productive habit stack.

Robert Glazer: And are there any ones that you'd recommend putting at the bottom of that pyramid or ones that just work better as that starting habit?

James Clear: There are a couple recommendations I have that I would just say are kind of general ways to start. First of all, I believe that most of these habits should adhere to what I call the two-minute rule. The two-minute rule essentially says, "Take whatever habit you're trying to build and scale it down to just two minutes or less." So, read 30 books year becomes read one page. So rather than saying, "After I make my morning tea, I will read a book." You say, "I will read one page." Or, "Do yoga for days a week," becomes take out my yoga mat.

And the point there is you want to scale it down so that similar to talking about the writing habit earlier when we talked about the importance of that decisive moment, of the moment when you get started, you want to make it as easy as possible to start. And then if you have the energy that day or the time or the space, you can let it extend longer if you like, but you're really trying to master the art of showing up and that's incredibly important in the early run, in the process of building a new habit, because ... And this is a key insight people often overlook.

A habit must be established before it can be improved. So often we're focused on finding the best diet plan or the ideal workout program or the perfect business idea and we get caught up in this lofty ambition and drive and the ideal outcome that we're looking for, and we never become the type of person who just does the most basic thing, which is show up and do a second of work. So the two-minute rule kind of helps you adhere to that a little bit more.

And then the second little suggestion I have for habit stacking and refining it is it generally works better if you ask yourself to do something after the current habit than before the current habit. For example, you could say something like, "Before I close my car door, I will check to make sure I have my car keys in my pocket so that I don't lock them inside the car or whatever," which is a good idea, but it's requiring you to just remember which is kind of what you're just trying to do now, is like just remember to have your keys on you. Whereas after gives you like a physical signal in the real world to check that.

"After I turn off the car, I will put my keys in my pocket." So that guarantees that they're in your pocket before you get out of the car, which is more tied to a physical habit than just remembering. And I think that's generally true for other habits as well, that rather than saying, "Before I leave for work each day, I should write down my to-do list." It's better to say like, "After I make that cup of coffee, I'll make the to-do list."

Robert Glazer: That's really interesting. I think that's very practical example of what people can do and again, how do you encourage the energy for the things that you want to do and then you can probably use that in the reverse too, to make things harder that you don't want to do.

James Clear: For sure. You can use habit stacking for basically what I would call inserting space between you and the bad behavior. So like a rule like, before I drink ... Say you want to curtail the amount of soda you're drinking each day. So you could say, "All right, I'm allowed to drink soda, but my habit stack is before I drink a soda, I will drink one glass of water first." And so then you're you're allowed to drink soda, but only after you've had a glass of water. And often you'll find that what you really wanted was something to drink and the craving for soda decreases once your stomach is full with that glass of water. So things like that can be useful as well.

Robert Glazer: There was another principle in the book that I thought was fascinating and it'd be enlightening for everyone, but it actually reminded me of a story a few years ago, which was General David Petraeus had highest ranking, one the highest ranked people in military, one of most disciplined, ended up having an affair with the ghost writer of his book or the author he chose for his book, who had embedded with him for a year or two while he was serving in I believe it was Iraq. And I remember reading about it at the time. One of the takeaways was like wow, how could the most discipline guy in the military sort of let this happen?

And it got to this takeaway of like don't put yourself in situations ... There are situations where there are more likely bad things to happen. A key part you have in the book, which it just brought that story up for me right away was how environment matters more than willpower and it's just, it's the first recall I had. So I'd love to hear other examples of that and just a little bit more about what exactly that means.

James Clear: Yeah. I mean, the military is an interesting example because I would argue that we often look at people in the military as examples of extraordinary willpower and grit. And certainly they work incredibly hard, but there's a reason they all appear that way. It's because there are product of the system. They're in an environment where those types of actions are designed. So willpower is actually maybe a little less of the equation than it appears from the outside. So the lesson to take away from a lot of that is not that you need more grit or willpower or perseverance.

Even though certainly all those qualities and mental toughness are great. The lesson is how can we design a system that's as reliable as what the military has. I think one effective way to do that is with what I call environment design. One of the stories just as an example of this in the book I tell is about a hospital which the researchers who were from Harvard, this was at Massachusetts General Hospital. The question they had was, can we change people's behavior without even talking to them? Can we shift what people eat and drink each day without actually trying to motivate them to eat better or something like that?

They went into the hospital cafeteria and redesigned it so that previously the refrigerators that were by the cashier only had soda in them and juice and things like that. They just added water to that. So now water is available in every refrigerator and they added some of those little rolling carts around by the buffet tables and things that had water. And lo and behold what you find six months later is sales of water increased by like 25% and sales at soda decreased by like 11%.

And what's interesting is that had you gone up to someone, either then or six months prior and ask them, "Why are you drinking water?" Or, "Why are you drinking soda?" They would have said, "Oh, it's because I wanted that. I wanted a coke or I felt like having water today." But the truth is a good portion of the people in that room drank it simply because it was the most available that was presented to them. And this is true for so many of our behaviors, that we are responding to what is obvious and available and frictionless and easy within the environment.

So this is why I say that you want to make the cues of your good habits obvious. Like when I was trying to build the habit of flossing I realized that one of the issues was that I had floss tucked away in a drawer in the bathroom and so I just wouldn't see, it was invisible. So I bought a little bowl and put it right next to my toothbrush and then put the floss in that bowl, and that was basically all I had to do to build the habit of flossing because now I brush my teeth, put the toothbrush down, pick floss up. It's right there. It's visible and easy and obvious now, similar to the water being increased in the hospital cafeteria.

So that's one way of improving your good habits. And then the same thing is true for reducing your bad ones. A lot of people feel like they watch too much television, but walk in pretty much any living room in America, where do all the couches and chairs face? They all face the TV. So what is that room designed to get you to do? What is the most obvious and frictionless behavior in that room?

And this comes back to your original question about willpower, which is that if you walk into a room after work each day and all the couches and chairs face the TV, it's possible that you could resist that and not watch TV for a day or a week or whatever, but at some point it's really hard to stick to that behavior when the environment is designed for it. And this is true for almost every other habit we have, that I have never consistently seen someone stick to a positive behavior in a negative environment.

If you want to increase your willpower, the most effective thing you can do is redesign the space that you're living and working in so that you're presented with the cues of your good habits and those are more frictionless and easy and the cues to your bad habits are hidden and invisible. And suddenly you'll find that doing the right thing becomes a much easier choice.

Robert Glazer:

Yeah. Another thing that I took away from that was that your environment, geography matter and the people you ... Jim Rohn, five people you hang around with matters too in terms of thinking intentionally about where you want to be and what those people are doing. I mean, my wife and I love Park City. We go out there a couple times a year and we're out there in the summer, we're hiking and biking and walking every day and eating differently. We can do all that stuff in Boston. It's not that we can't do. It's just that kind of is what everyone is doing in there and that's what the environment is doing and it just leads itself towards that. I'm curious have you looked into geography and community at all and in the context of environment and habits?

James Clear:

Yeah. It's a huge factor. So chapter, I believe it's chapter 9 or chapter 10 in Atomic Habits is about the influence of social environment. The examples I just gave were about physical environment, but the social environment, which you're mentioning here, also plays a huge role. This makes sense from like a deep primal need. Our ancestors lived in tribes and if you were abandoned by the tribe, it was a death sentence. So we are all wired to want to belong, to want to fit in, to want to be part of the group so that we're protected and taken care of.

So we all come into the world without inclination and because of that we care about what others think of us, because if others think well of us, if they feel like we fit in, then it usually benefits us, the tribe, the group takes care of us. And you can see this kind of behavior in all kinds of daily habits that we do. Some of them are simple. If you step onto an elevator, for example, most people will turn around to face the front or if you have a job interview, then you'll wear a suit and a tie or a dress or something nice.

There's no reason that it has to be like that. You could face the back of the elevator or you could wear a bathing suit to a job interview, but you don't do that because it violates the expectations of that tribe, of the group of people in that room. And this is one of the core lessons about habits and the social environment, which is that when habits go with the grain of the expectations of the group, they're very attractive to form. They help you fit in, they help you belong.

When habits go against the grain of the people in the tribe, they're very unattractive. They make you stand out and feel like you don't fit in. They run the risk of getting you Outcast from the group. And so the lesson here, I think the practical takeaway is that you want to join a group where your desired behavior is the normal behavior because if it's the normal behavior in that group, then

the habit actually helps you fit in it. So you have like a really good reason for doing it.

Not only do you get the benefit of the habit you're trying to build, but you also get the additional benefit and perhaps the even more important benefit of signaling to those around you, to the other people in the tribe, "Hey, I get it. I fit in. I'm one of us as well." One common example of this would be exercise. A lot of people feel like when they go to the gym, they're trying to get in shape for the first time, they feel like they don't fit in, they feel out of place, they feel uncomfortable.

So one thing to focus on is not necessarily what the workout is like or what kind of results you're getting on the scale or on the barbell, but instead focus on building friendships at that gym so that you have a reason to show up because it's like, "Oh, I get to see Lisa." Or, "I get to see Jason," or whatever, "and I get to hang out with them. And because I get to hang out with my friends. I have a good reason to go and be part of that community."

And the more that those relationships are formed, the more deeply embedded you become in the community, the more likely you are to keep performing that habit because your friends also do it each day as well. I think a useful way to do that is to try to look for mutual areas of overlap other interests outside of in this case exercise, outside of fitness that you share and then bond over those common interests and then you'll pick up the exercise habit along the way.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, that's interesting and I'm sure that will cause a lot of reflection for people and thinking about again, who are they hanging out with, what are they doing and whether they're making things easier or harder for themselves.

James Clear: And I want to just add to that, a lot of the time when we talk about social environment the average of the five people you hang out with, all that kind of stuff, the natural response from people or maybe the pushback is like, "Well, do I have to fire my friends then? Do I have to stop hanging out with my family?" And I mean, the extreme answer is yes, you're going to be shaped by the people that you're around. It doesn't mean you need to get rid of everybody in your life. It doesn't mean you need to stop hanging out with those people entirely, but if you're trying to build a habit that the people around you, either the people you work with or the people in your family, at home or your close friends, if you're trying to build a habit that doesn't resonate with them that they're not on the same page with and they don't want to build, it's going to be hard for you to do that in the same environment as them.

So while you may not need to get rid of them entirely and abandon those relationships, you may need to carve out an hour or two each day where you have a safe space to build that, where you have like, you are surrounded by a tribe of people who are into that thing. That could be as simple as going to an exercise class or some kind of ... Joining a book club or some new group that has

the Habit you want to build, but I do think it's important to be in a space that accelerates the growth of that habit rather than hinders it.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, if you're trying to drink less and your group goes out to the bar three nights a week, that's probably not going to help you drink less. You're going to need to find a different activity.

James Clear: Right, right.

Robert Glazer: All right. Flip it around here for the last question. What's been a bad habit that you've had and how did you break it?

James Clear: Yeah, good question. I'm actually still struggling with one right now. I don't have trouble with my sleep habit, but I do struggle with the power down routine. And so what I would say is like there are a lot of nights when I find myself around 9:00 or 10:00 PM. It's like, am I getting a second wind right now? Do I jump back in and answer emails or do a little work? And the conversation is always, "Well, I'll just do it for like 30 minutes or something." But then 30 minutes turns into two hours or three hours, then I find myself it's midnight or 1:00 AM. It's like, oh, I need to go to bed.

That's the one that I'm struggling with and the way I'm trying to resolve it, there are a couple things I'm testing and trying out. First one is I'm actually starting like on the other flip side for waking up. So I used to have blackout curtains and I really like that because it led to really good sleep, but for the last couple weeks I've been trying it without those so that when the sun rises the room gets bright and I tend to wake up earlier. So by forcing myself to wake up earlier I am basically much more tired by the time I get to 9:00 or 10:00 PM at night. I'm like ready to go to bed. And so that curtails some of that second wind feeling of getting into the work.

And then the second idea that I had which I love solutions like this. I haven't implemented it yet, but a friend of mine Nir Eyal, he wrote about habits as well as. He has a book called Hooked. He uses this device to cause an outlet timer. Well, it's called an outlet timer, and you can get it on Amazon for, I don't, 10 bucks or something. And you plug it into the outlet and it's kind of like an adapter and you plug your device into the timer and you can set that outlet timer to kill the power at any particular time.

So what Nir did was he plugged his internet router into the outlet timer and set it to kill the power at 10 PM each night. So it gets to 10 PM, the internet's off, you can't stream Netflix, doesn't work on your laptop anymore, it's time to go to bed. And I love little technological solutions like that that kind of force your hand or shape you into the more productive behavior. So those are two solutions that I'm playing with right now.

Robert Glazer: All right. We will look up that product and find a link to it. Well James, I appreciate you joining us on Outperform today. I 100% percent agree with the saying that your habits are either the best of servants or the worst of masters, which is why your book is so profound. It really offers action-oriented and research-backed strategies for helping us build better habits for what we want and destroy the bad ones. So thank you very much for writing it and all the writing that you continue to do each week.

James Clear: Yeah, thank you so much. I appreciate the opportunity.

Robert Glazer: All right. To our listeners, thanks for tuning into the Outperform podcast this week. We'll include links to James' site and book on the episode page on our Acceleration Partners website. Until next time keep outperforming.