

A Psychological Perspective on Behaviour Change: A Critical Analysis of Atomic Habits

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ABSTRACT

A psychologically comprehensive and useful guidebook for comprehending how minor, regular actions may culminate in major human transformation is James Clear's *Atomic Habits*. The book offers the 'Four Laws of Behavior Change,' which have their roots in behavioral and cognitive psychology, as a straightforward and practical framework: make it clear, make it appealing, make it simple, and make it fulfilling. These rules are consistent with important psychological concepts including social learning, reinforcement theory, implementation intention, and operant conditioning. This review critically analyzes Clear's contribution to behavioural psychology, emphasizing the book's ability to make complicated ideas understandable to a broader audience while also recognizing its shortcomings in addressing more complex structural or cultural influences on behavior.

Keywords: Habit formation, behaviour, review, atomic habits, James Clear

“Be the designer of your world and not merely a consumer of it.”

BOOK CITATION

Clear, James. 2018. *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. New York: Avery.

Atomic Habits by James Clear is a motivational self-help book that reflects on the idea that how tiny changes can lead us to *remarkable results*. James Clear, world-renowned habits expert, is an American writer and speaker focused on habits, decision making and continuous improvement. The central question he explores through his work is “*how can we live better*”. James Clear has offered very practical advice through this book.

Purpose of review: The purpose of this review is to critically evaluate *Atomic Habits* by James Clear through a psychological lens, to examine and discuss its theoretical foundations as well as its practical applicability.

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SUMMARY

'Atomic' means an extremely small amount of a thing. The author utilizes atomic habits to generate enormous and outstanding results. Even though, we do not see the results immediately, we practice these atomic habits regularly as they multiply and inculcate in us. Clear asks us to repeat these actions regularly and consistently but he does not just advise it, he, in fact, provides us with incredible techniques that we can apply in our lives for self-improvement. James Clear has brought together theories and ideas from numerous scientific and behavioral fields which makes this book truly extraordinary. He himself refers to his book as an "*operating manual*".

In the book, the steps of habit formation are laid into a framework that schemes for building better habits.

The book, *Atomic Habits* discusses the proposition that we do not need to take massive action to achieve our goals but progress made through tiny improvements made daily can also result in great long term outcomes. It is often heard that big transformations are required to become the ideal versions of ourselves but achieving such transformations can be tough, primarily due to lack of clarity on how and where to begin, or even when initiated change, individuals often revert back to the old behavioral patterns that seem more comfortable to us. Fortunately for us, this book offers valuable insight into this very notion. James Clear has outlined the importance of small, consistently followed habits stating that the outcomes of our habits multiply as we repeat them. The book teaches us practical and achievable strategies to transform bad habits into good ones, how to discontinue bad ones and the math behind getting 1% better each day. The book is divided into four parts, delving into the four components of a habit. These steps are then transformed into an actionable foundation for creating good habits and eliminating bad ones. The foundation is referred to as "*the four laws of behavior change*". James Clear claims that the key to changing any habit in any field are found in these four laws.

BOOK OVERVIEW

The division of the book into the four laws of behavior change is quite captivating. The first law '**make it obvious**' discusses the application of implementation intention and habit stacking methods in making very obvious cues for desired habits. Through this law the author talks about the importance of environment designing. The chapter advocates for designing environments that make desirable actions more apparent and accessible. For breaking a bad habit we inverse this strategy by eliminating any exposure to the cue. As the point is implied; you can eliminate a habit but you are not likely to forget it. Clear contends that making the triggers of a cue of a bad habit is a more reliable strategy than depending on will power and self control.

The second law '**make it attractive**' discusses that the more appealing an opportunity is, the more certain it is to become habit forming. For example, the number of likes we get on social media is not the number of people that praise us at work or home. This is the unrealistic and supernormal stimuli of the modern world; and when such features are exaggerated, our instincts tend to go wild. The second law also highlights the importance of mindset and seeks to convince us to alter our perspective towards the tasks that we execute. It states that either way we have to do certain things so we might as well change our approach towards it. Its inverse version highlights the benefits of keeping away from a bad habit to make it not much to look at. It underlines that we lose nothing when we stop practicing certain habits.

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The third law talks about making a habit easier in order to develop it. It includes the philosophy of least effort, fitting habits into our flow of life and the use of the two-minute rule. The law promotes the design that action, however small it may be, is more valuable than inaction driven by idealism. This part of the book has laid emphasis on redesigning life structures thus the measures that matter the most are furthermore those that are most effortless to take. Correspondingly, the author makes a suggestion to increase friction and the number of steps an individual takes toward unfavourable behaviours.

The fourth law '**make it satisfying**' operates as a contemporary application of B.F. Skinner's Theory of Operant Conditioning. The author articulates that a behavior is more likely to be repeated when it is rewarded promptly, directly aligning with the principles of reinforcement in Skinner's theory. The chapter talks about providing certain positive reinforcements after the performance of a desired activity, while the true reward comes later. The chapter effectively highlights the crucial elements of habit tracking and accountability contracts serving as mechanisms for incorporating progress and commitment.

Winners and losers have the same goals; this topic emerged as particularly impactful and transformed my perspective on several issues. This particular chapter talks about how there is no distinction between others and yourself if you just claim to have a goal and not work towards it in a systematic way. Through this topic James Clear tells us how there is absolutely no difference between a winner and a loser in terms of goal making. It is the system that differentiates you. Building a system of self-improvement and consistency that is going to lead you to your success. Building a system instead of working on goal-to-goal you tend to implant your positive habits into your personality over time. Goals are temporary possessions. When all our hard work is focused on a goal, there is nothing to motivate us after that goal is achieved, therefore, we start falling back to our old patterns.

Psychological Terminologies Mentioned in the Book

Although there are significant major psychological theories mentioned in the book, namely, Operant Conditioning, Classical Conditioning and Social Learning Theory, certain psychological terminologies that really caught the eye have been discussed below.

Implementation Intention by Peter M. Gollwitzer

When individuals struggle to get started on the achievement of their goals by not taking any action, they might rely on automatic behaviours in an attempt to attain their goals. This can be achieved by the principle of Implementation Intention that connects an expected behaviour with goal-oriented actions. (eg. "if situation x occurs, I will perform action y"). This principle lays focus on environmental cues that control our desired action. When the situation arises, our desired behaviour is automatically triggered. Research has shown that the method of Implementation Intention promotes goal-oriented behaviours notably.

The Premack Principle by David Premack

The theory is named after its originator, psychologist David Premack, this principle basically says that an individual can be encouraged in engaging in a less-preferred behaviour, by allowing them to engage in a more preferred activity subsequently. It's like a grandma's rule who says you have to eat your vegetables or you will not be rewarded with dessert. This principle is often used to promote better habits.

Along with this psychological principle, James Clear has also provided us with a strategy called **Temptation Bundling**. This term was coined by Katherine Milkman, who was a

behavioural economist at the University of Pennsylvania. Temptation bundling is a technique that is done by combining an activity that we have to do with another activity we like to do to increase our motivation. The activity we want to do acts as a temptation. It makes boring activities seem more enjoyable for individuals. Example: if an individual is expected to clean their room but they want to listen to music. In this case, they set up their music playlist while cleaning the room which also makes the task enjoyable and they attain the goal as well.

Difference between the Premack Principle and Temptation Bundling: Now the difference between these two ideas is that the Premack Principle includes a reward-like arrangement in which the reward is provided after the completion of the desired task, whereas in temptation bundling, you perform the two tasks simultaneously.

DECISION FATIGUE

James Clear has frequently talked about the value of repeating our atomic habits time and time again that it builds into our system eventually. He also debates that the effects of a habit proliferate as we repeat them. Small habits may not display results immediately but they last important outcomes in due course. By building systems of positive habits we automate our fundamental activities, for example, a healthy morning routine, through this we no longer spend our mental capacity over insignificant day to day tasks. An individual who pays most of his cognitive thinking over smaller tasks won't be able to concentrate on his creative growth.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NORMS

Social norms guide our behavior invisibly. We tend to imitate the habits of our social group. We are constantly scrutinizing our environment to check what others are doing. If we are part of a group that values fitness, productivity, or reading, we are more likely to adopt those habits ourselves. Social norms create invisible scripts for behavior. We are more likely to stick with habits that are socially rewarded — like praise, inclusion, or acceptance. This ties into positive reinforcement from our environment. This reflects principles from social learning theory (Bandura), where people model behavior seen in others. In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear shows that social norms shape our identity and behaviors more than motivation or willpower. By aligning ourselves with communities that embody the habits we want, we make those habits feel natural, desirable, and sustainable.

ENVIRONMENT DESIGNING

James Clear has laid emphasis on the importance of the environment in his book. He has explained to us the strategies that we can practice to promote better habits by controlling our environment. Environment designing is a core strategy mentioned in *Atomic Habits*. James Clear advocates that self-control is a temporary solution to a problem. Instead of relying on self-control, willpower and motivation he advises us to design our environment in such a manner that aligns with our desired habits. Environment design helps us by reducing a step, instead of making a decision to do something or not if you build or design your environment in a way that does not give us a choice to either do the right thing or the wrong thing, it makes it as the default thing.

EXPLORE/EXPLOIT TRADE-OFF

Explore/exploit trade off is a strategic decision-making phenomenon that describes the dilemma between exploration and exploitation. The trade-off is between acquiring new knowledge that assists you in the long run and getting the best outcome out of something

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you are already familiar with. In a strategic way, an individual goals to balance both of these circumstances.

STRENGTHS

True to his name, James Clear writes with simplicity and clarity. The theories have been simplified to make it understandable for readers of all sorts. The *Four Laws* provide an actionable framework. The originality of the book lies not in introducing new concepts but how it synthesizes existing behavioural science into a practical framework, making complex ideas useful for daily activities.

WEAKNESSES

The book tends to repeat key concepts throughout different chapters which some may find unnecessarily prolonged. Furthermore, James Clear overemphasizes on the idea of individual responsibility ignoring systematic barriers, mental health issues and other socioeconomic limitations of an individual. The book largely assumes a Western, individualistic context, which may limit its relevance in collectivist cultures and societies where behavior is influenced more strongly by social/family expectations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Grounded in psychological principles, *Atomic Habits* distills complex ideas into a practical action plan that can be applied through various spheres of life. James Clear challenges the conventional pursuit of radical transformations as he advocates for sustainable and consistent progress. Ultimately, the author has succeeded in reinforcing the idea that meaningful change is a product of incremental improvement. It is recommended for inclusion in studies related to habit formation, motivation and self regulation. While the book is written for general audience, its content draws on empirically supported principles. The book has potential for further exploration of its concepts through empirical study. It can act as a supplementary text for scholars in behavioural and cognitive science. Educators can use this book for demonstration of application of psychological theories in real world context. Furthermore, those working in employee development or productivity training may find the book's framework valuable for implementing behavior change strategies within organizations.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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