

THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE

The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work

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In allowing himself to be swept along this path, Ted had become ensnared in a series of very bad habits. In his case, these all involved procrastination, which got me thinking: Could the psychological mechanisms that were derailing Ted's productivity also explain why I had failed to follow my regimen of guitar playing? Had the path of least resistance led me astray? I thought back to that initial experiment. I had kept my guitar tucked away in the closet, out of sight and out of reach. It wasn't far out of the way, of course (my apartment isn't that big), but just those 20 seconds of extra effort it took to walk to the closet and pull out the guitar had proved to be a major deterrent. I had tried to overcome this barrier with willpower, but after only four days, my reserves were completely dried up. If I couldn't use self-control to ingrain the habit, at least not for an extended period, I now wondered: What if I could eliminate the amount of activation energy it took to get started?

Clearly, it was time for another experiment. I took the guitar out of the closet, bought a \$2 guitar stand, and set it up in the middle of my living room. Nothing had changed except that now instead of being 20 seconds away, the guitar was in immediate reach. Three weeks later, I looked up at a habit grid with 21 proud check marks.

What I had done here, essentially, was put the desired behavior on the path of least resistance, so it actually took less energy and effort to pick up and practice the guitar than to avoid it. I like to refer to this as the 20-Second Rule, because lowering the barrier to change by just 20 seconds was all it took to help me form a new life habit. In truth, it often takes more than 20 seconds to make a difference—and sometimes it can take much less—but the strategy itself is universally applicable: Lower the activation energy for habits you want to adopt, and raise it for habits you want to avoid. The more we can lower or even eliminate the activation energy for our desired actions, the more we enhance our ability to jump-start positive change.

Sleep in Your Gym Clothes

The 20-Second Rule isn't just about altering the time it takes to do things. Limiting the choices we have to make can also help lower the barrier to positive change. You may recall how Roy Baumeister's willpower studies showed that self-control is a limited resource that gets weakened with overuse. Well, these same researchers have discovered that too much choice similarly saps our reserves.

Their studies showed that with every additional choice people are asked to make, their physical stamina, ability to perform numerical calculations, persistence in the face of failure, and overall focus drop dramatically. And these don't have to be difficult decisions either—the questions are more “chocolate or vanilla?” than they are *Sophie's Choice*. Yet every one of these innocuous choices depletes our energy a little further, until we just don't have enough to continue with the positive habit we're trying to adopt.

One of the life habits I wanted to create was exercising in the morning. I knew from numerous research studies that exercise in the morning raises your performance on cognitive tasks and gives your brain a “win” to start a cascade effect of positive emotions. But information is not transformation, because every morning I would wake and ask myself, Do I want to exercise? And my brain would reply, No I do not.

If you've ever tried to start up the habit of early-morning exercise, you have probably encountered how easy it is to get derailed by too much choice. Each morning after the alarm clock sounds, the inner monologue goes something like this: Should I hit the snooze button or get up immediately? What should I wear to work out this morning? Should I go for a run or go to the gym? Should I go to the nearby gym that's more crowded or the quieter gym that's slightly farther away? What kind of cardio should I do when I get there? Should I lift weights? Should I go to kickboxing class or maybe yoga? And by that point you're so exhausted by all the options, you've fallen back asleep. At least that's what would happen to me. So I decided to decrease the number of choices I would have to make in order to get myself to the gym.

Each night before I went to sleep, I wrote out a plan for where I would exercise in the morning and what parts of my body I would focus on. Then, I put my sneakers right by my bed. Finally—and most important—I just went to sleep in my gym clothes. (And my mom wonders why I'm not married yet.) But the clothes were clean, and I had essentially decreased the activation energy enough so that when I woke up the next morning, all I had to do was roll off my bed, put my feet (which already had socks on them) into my shoes, and I was out the door. The decisions that seemed too daunting in my groggy morning state had been decided for me, ahead of time. And it worked. Eliminating the choices and reducing the activation energy

made getting up and going to the gym the default mode. As a result, once I ingrained a lifetime positive habit of morning exercise, I now don't have to sleep in my gym clothes anymore.

Subsequently, in talking to athletes and nonathletes worldwide, I hear the same from both: Something weird happens in the human brain when you put your athletic shoes on—you start to think it is easier to just go work out now than to “take all this stuff back off again.” In reality, it's easier to take off the shoes, but your brain, once it has tipped toward a habit, will naturally keep rolling in that direction, following the path of perceived least resistance.

This isn't just about getting yourself to exercise. Think of the positive changes you want to make at your job, and figure out what it would mean to “just get your shoes on” at work. The less energy it takes to kick-start a positive habit, the more likely that habit will stick.

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