

ZEN HABITS

MASTERING THE
ART OF CHANGE



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Leo Babauta

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FOR MY DAD, JOSE BABAUTA,
WHO PASSED AWAY AS THIS BOOK WAS GOING
TO PRESS. YOUR ART, YOUR PASSION, YOUR
SENSE OF HUMOR LIVE ON THROUGH ME.

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· INTRODUCTION ·

Become the Master of Change

*The art of life lies in a constant
readjustment to our surroundings.*

OKAKURA KAKUZO

Imagine you could take a magic wand and use it to instantly change something about yourself. What would you change? Would it be ending procrastination, pursuing creativity, exercising and getting fit, being more disciplined, having better relationships, being happier with yourself, being more mindful, learning new skills, getting out of debt?

Now ask yourself this: what is stopping you from making this change? The steps to make your change are likely fairly easy. Why don't we make these changes?

It's because in the deep dark recesses of our brains, unseen and unknown to most of us, our minds have been working against us.

I first discovered this in 2005, when I tried to quit smoking and start running. I couldn't figure out why I kept failing at habit changes, why I had none of the discipline I thought I had. What was wrong with me?

The discovery came when I started to watch my thoughts, like watching a film inside my head. It was totally insane, once I saw what was going on: I would resolve to go the day without smoking, and my mind would completely believe that. Then when the going got a little difficult, an urge to smoke would appear, out of habit. I didn't want the urge, but it just arose out of nowhere really.

But then another part of my mind said, "No! You said you wouldn't smoke today." And the first part, that had the urge, would say, "But just this once won't hurt. Why not make yourself happy this once? Why make yourself suffer? What are you doing this for? Is it even worth it?"

Usually this debate would happen unseen, and I'd almost immediately give in. But now I was watching, and I couldn't believe how strong my mind could become when it really wanted to escape discomfort. It would rationalize, bargain, plead, cry, ask for mercy, negotiate some more. It was a little child, doing whatever it could to get its way.

What I learned from this was not only to watch what was going on, to watch the movie playing in my head, but how to overcome it. I learned how to see the film that was playing in my mind as the root of all my problems.

The One Problem

There's a projector in our minds, and it's constantly playing a movie about how we'd like things to be, our ideals about the world, our expectations of how things will turn out, how others should be, how we should be. These images aren't based on reality, but are just a fantasy this film projector has created from nothing.

The mind, as talented and well-intentioned and clever as it is, is at the root of the One Problem. The mind seeks comfort and pleasure and control, and runs from discomfort and fear and change. That's why it plays this movie all the time—it's trying to create a perfect image that keeps the fears of discomfort and change and uncertainty away. What's the problem with that? Well, it stops us from doing what we want to do, from productive work to changing habits, because we're afraid and we procrastinate and we avoid.

Unfortunately, the real world never quite matches this movie. We have a plan for our day and things come up unexpectedly. We have expectations of how others will act, and they decide to behave differently. We have expectations of how disciplined we should be, and then we fail to live up to them. The reality of life never lives up to the movie that plays in our heads, and this causes all kinds of problems.

And as I've worked with people to help them change their habits, I've found that all of our problems come down to one problem, with the movie playing in our minds at the root of this problem.

Let me repeat that: all our problems are really just one single problem. The One Problem of the Mind Movie.

Imagine learning how to recognize this Mind Movie, and finding a method to solve the problem. You'd be able to handle anything, because you'd have a method for getting at the root of any problem.

A few things this wonderful mind leads us to do:

- Procrastinate when we have difficult work to do.
- Avoid exercise and seek the comforts of the Internet.

- Eat unhealthy food and gain too much weight.
- Become overwhelmed, stressed out, full of anxiety.
- Put off meeting new people because we're afraid.
- Avoid pursuing our dreams, building a business, finding our fulfilling careers.
- Avoid facing our debts so we can start building a stronger financial foundation.
- Put off our creative pursuits or the learning we've been wanting to do.
- Fail at new habits.
- Smoke, drink to excess, become addicted to drugs, even though we know these things aren't good for us.
- Doubt ourselves, feel bad about ourselves, compare ourselves to others.
- Become angry, frustrated, judgmental of others.

Busy mind.

Which means, if we can find the method to solve the One Problem, we'll have the keys to removing the obstacles in our lives, and our paths will be smoother.

That's what I discovered when I learned to become aware of the Mind Movie: if I turned my attention from the movie to reality, I could see how great reality was, without the movie. I could take action without the fears, being in the moment. I could go without smoking because I no longer had the ideal of needing to smoke—reality was great without the smoking. I could go for a run because I no longer had the ideal of being in comfort all the time—the reality of the discomfort wasn't too bad, and in fact I eventually learned to associate this discomfort with the wonders of growth and learning.

Learning to turn from the Mind Movie to reality, and appreciate reality for what it is, changed my life. I could now act without fear, make changes without procrastination.

What this book will teach you

What you'll learn from this book isn't how to make yourself a better person—it's how to remove the things that get in your way. When we do that, we have happiness, peace. We no longer feel anxious, we don't need to procrastinate, we let go of anger and resentment, and we can fully live in this moment, enjoying it.

That's what this book is about. Delving into the One Problem of the Mind Movie, and practicing with this method by experimenting with a small change ... and in the process, mastering the skills of discomfort and change.

With these skills, we'll learn to form mindful habits that will make us good at any change we want to make and learn the flexibility we need to stick to that change for the long term. We'll learn to deal with stress and anxiety, with frustration with ourselves and others, with procrastination and debt, and more.

We'll become masters of change. This is the Zen Habits Method.

How to use this book

The biggest mistake you'll make is skimming through this book and then putting it aside, hoping you've gleaned a few useful pieces of knowledge. The skills we'll talk about

in this book aren't things you can read about and then know. You need to practice them.

So what we'll be doing is creating change as you read the book. One small step at a time. It's the only way to truly understand the concepts of the book—put them into practice.

What I've laid out is a step-by-step plan for change, one step at the end of each chapter. You'll pick one small change to make, and implement it during the course of the book.

This means you'll be taking the first step in getting used to discomfort, and also practicing a key principle that has helped me to change my life completely: SLOW CHANGE. It's profoundly important, and yet slow change is difficult for most people because they want results right away.

Finally, this book will require a commitment: you'll need to set aside time to read and practice it. This small time investment, of just 10 minutes a day, will result in great changes in your life if you can commit to it.

THE CHALLENGE: COMMIT TO MAKING A SMALL CHANGE

I hereby issue a challenge to you: Commit to reading a chapter of this book every day (they're short chapters), and commit to making one small change in your life as you read this book. Part of this commitment will be to do the daily missions at the end of each chapter. Write this commitment down, put it in your calendar, and tell someone else about it.

This challenge is essential to this book: if you put the ideas into action, you'll truly understand them and get good at change. If you just read the book without acting (which you are probably tempted to do), you're wasting your time.

So: Are you up for the challenge? If you are, make a decision this minute to make one small change as you read this book. Don't be on the fence, or say you'll think about it later—commit right now.

❁ PART I ❁

Getting Started

This section aims at preparing you to make a habit change, setting yourself up for success, and getting started. Many people don't ever get started, because of their minds' resistance. Many of us start but don't keep going when resistance comes up. I'll show you how to overcome those common problems.

• 0 •

Why make a change?

Before we dive into how to make a change, and how to deal with change . . . we should start at the beginning, and talk about why it's important at all. Why should you put all this effort into change?

In my life, it's become very obvious what change has meant to me. I was an overweight, sedentary smoker who was broke and deeply in debt, stuck in procrastination, surrounded by clutter and disorganization, with no time for important things like my family and health and writing. I wanted to make changes, because I was unhappy with myself, but I couldn't figure out how to change. I was stuck.

When I learned how to change habits, I became unstuck. I learned about myself, and mindfulness, and enjoying the process rather than focusing on the outcome or goal. I learned that I can change things that made me unhappy, instead of being stuck in a rut. I learned to become happy with myself, not because I was now fitter or more productive, but because I trusted myself. I built that trust, one step at a time.

My life transformed, one small step after the other. I became a different person.

That said, life wasn't without frustrations. Every time I thought I knew how to change habits, I'd come across a new obstacle. I found frustrations in other areas, like relationships and working with other people and dealing with criticism. I wasn't always good at dealing with frustrations.

By creating the habit of mindfulness, I learned to see what was going on, to deal with the frustrations, and to be able to make more conscious choices.

I became calmer, more at peace, less frustrated with others and myself. My relationships improved as I became a better husband, friend, colleague, father. I'm not perfect by any means—there's no such thing as perfect—but I'm better at dealing with others and myself. I'm happier with others and myself.

Those are amazing results, though I could not have predicted nor controlled them. They emerged from learning about changes.

And that's the biggest reason to make changes and to get better at dealing with changes: you learn an amazing amount about how you work, about others, about life. This has been an unimaginable learning experience for me, and it hasn't ended and (I hope) never will.

I wish these same learning experiences for you and hope to guide you along the way.

MISSION: CHECK YOUR COMMITMENT

One very common problem people face is that they say, "Oh, I should start exercising," but then don't actually take the action needed to get started. In their minds, they haven't overcome the initial resistance to starting. You're

going to work on overcoming that in the next few chapters, but for today, just ask yourself: how committed am I to making a new change, and to actually starting it in the next week?

Create a space

For many years, I had a hard time making changes—mostly, as it turns out, because I didn't really understand how change works. I would struggle and fail and then feel bad about myself, thinking I was not as disciplined as I liked, wondering what was wrong with me.

I tried to start a new diet probably half a dozen times and inevitably failed before the week was up. I tried to quit smoking seven times and failed each time. I tried new exercise programs and gave up each time after a week or so. I struggled to get out of debt.

I didn't understand what was going on, and so I kept failing, and blaming it on myself.

It wasn't until I successfully changed a habit (quitting smoking) that I began to understand how change works. Then I applied those lessons to running, and ran a marathon; then to eating healthy, and lost more than 60 lbs.; then to decluttering, and got rid of all my junk; then to debt, and became debt free; and eventually to much more.

I learned about change through doing it. One change at a time.

The only way to truly learn about change is to do it. You have to try something, make mistakes, correct those mistakes, and increase your understanding through this process of trial and error. You can't just read about change and understand it—you need to put it into action.

Create a space for one change

The first step in that process is to pick a change. Just one. While most of us have multiple changes we'd like to make, all at once, I've learned from repeated experience that trying to do multiple habits at once is a beautiful recipe for habit failure.

The reason is that each change we make takes much more focus and mental energy than we realize. In the beginning, we have a lot of enthusiasm for changes, and we have this idea that the change will be easy, and we'll be successful and life will be great. This is not the reality of the change, but the fantasy we create in our heads (another Mind Movie).

In reality, the change turns out to take more work: making time for it each day, overcoming resistance, reporting to others if you have accountability set up, remembering to do it, dealing with it if other things come up, dealing with any negative consequences (like sore legs if you're running).

So multiple changes at once means that we're multiplying the difficulty of change, which means we're greatly decreasing our chances of success. When making change, I've found that you want to increase your odds of success as much as possible.

Imagine that your life and your attention are a small room, and in this room you wanted to put a meditation cushion, a weight set for exercise, a kitchen for healthy eating, a couch for reading, a writing desk for creating a novel, a yoga mat for doing some yoga, and a tea table for mindfully drinking tea. The tiny room would be cramped, and none of these things would have any space, and we'd not really be able to do any of them. This is what happens when we try to do multiple habits at once: we overfill the small space of our lives and our attention so that we have no room for anything.

Instead, imagine that we only had one thing in that room—let's say the writing desk. That's all that's in the room for the moment. This desk would have space, and the writing would get our full attention.

Create space for your habit change, by doing one habit at a time, and you'll do your best job on that habit.

What do we do if we have lots of changes we want to make, though? We need to let go of the ideal (the Mind Movie) that we'll be able to make all our life changes at the same time. We can't do everything at once. Let go of the idea of doing everything, and just create space to do one thing well. You'll have time to get to the other changes later: this is a marathon, not a sprint.

How do you make a choice when you aren't clear which habit would be the best starting point? Pick any one—it doesn't matter too much which change you start with. In the long run, you'll make all the changes you want, but for now, it's best to just make a quick decision and pick one, even if it's random or a complete gut decision.

MISSION: PICK ONE HABIT

Today, pick one very small, actionable habit change to make during the course of this book. What we want is a very small, very easy, specific change that you can make to your daily life. A few examples:

1. Drink a glass of water in the morning.
2. Have a cup of green tea in the afternoon.
3. Eat one fruit with lunch.
4. Do five pushups.
5. Do yoga for two minutes.
6. Meditate for two minutes.
7. Go for a five-minute walk.
8. Write for two minutes.
9. Declutter for two minutes.
10. Stretch for one minute.

As you can see, these are all meant to be exceedingly easy changes. Just pick one for now. What we'll learn as we work on making this change is the nature of change itself.

Don't actually start on the change yet. Just pick one, and write it down in a document on your computer, or on paper. This will be the start of your Habit Plan (see the Habit Plan Guide in the appendix).

Overcome the Childish Mind

When I first started to form the running habit, I had read the advice that it's important to exercise 30 minutes a day, and so I aimed for 30 minutes of running. This turned out to be a big mistake for two reasons.

First, I couldn't run that far, as I was very out of shape. Second, even if I could struggle through 30 minutes of running, it seemed like massively difficult work. My brain would try to weasel out of it. I repeatedly failed to create the running habit, because I learned that it's very easy to start big and then fail. This happens almost every time.

Remember the truth about the mind when it comes to change: it's a little child. Imagine that your brain is a child that wants pleasure and wants to get what it wants, and it really wants to get out of discomfort.

This Childish Mind will do everything it can to get out of discomfort. It will make you run from exercise, from doing difficult tasks, from new and confusing things. The Childish Mind will make excuses, rationalizations, beg to quit. It's very, very good at what it does, and it's constantly working against our best intentions.

I learned how to overcome this Childish Mind Syn-

drome: I made my running habit ridiculously easy. I told myself all I had to do was go out and run for a few minutes. My Childish Mind couldn't object to that, because it was so easy! And when you make your habit change easy, I've learned, the Childish Mind actually doesn't work against you in the beginning.

What I learned from this was to always lower my barrier to entry for habit change. I started meditating by just doing two minutes a day. I started eating healthier with one small change (vegetable at dinner). I started decluttering with just one small surface that only took a few minutes. I paid one small debt. The smallest step you can possibly take is the best way to start.

Eventually I started running for seven minutes, and then 10, then 15, and soon I was doing 30 minutes and then a 5K race. Over the course of a year I gradually built up to a 10K race, a half marathon, and then a full marathon, which was a huge triumph for me.

This taught me that from such humble beginnings as running for a few minutes, you can gradually build the habit up to a marathon. Any habit. If you want to lose weight or get out of debt, don't try to climb the whole mountain in one bound—take one tiny step.

Don't give your Childish Mind excuses to get out of discomfort. Learn to watch the Childish Mind in action and to take away its excuses.

MISSION: MAKE YOUR
HABIT CHANGE EASY

Take a few minutes right now to take the habit you chose in the last mission and make it ridiculously easy. What is

the smallest step you can take to get started? It should be so easy you feel like you're making it too easy on yourself. Write down the easy step—this will be your habit for the first week.

Make a Vow

When I finally successfully quit smoking—again, after trying and failing seven times—one of the best things I did was make a Vow.

I made a vow to my wife and daughter that I would quit smoking and make the quit stick. I decided that I was making this change not just for myself, but for them. This felt more powerful than just doing it for myself.

In previous attempts, I didn't have a good reason—I just thought it was something I should do, and so I would jump into the habit change without a powerful motivator and then give up when things got difficult.

Remember the Childish Mind: when things are uncomfortable, it wants to quit. When the urge to smoke got really strong, my Childish Mind would make up a million reasons why it was OK to smoke. If I was unprepared with a powerful reason why it wasn't OK, I would easily give in.

But when I made a vow to my wife and daughter, it wasn't so easy to give up. The dozens of times I felt like giving up ... now felt like I was failing them. I made the vow to my wife because I knew that if I was smoking when

her pregnancy was over, she would start smoking again, and that wasn't good for her. So I wanted to protect her health, out of love for her. I made the vow to my daughter because I knew that if I kept smoking, she would probably smoke one day—the statistics show this. I wanted to quit to protect her health, out of love.

This was the deeper reason: I was doing it out of love for my wife and daughter. And this is an incredible motivator when the Childish Mind starts to rebel.

What will your Vow be? You're making a change, but is it just because it seems like a nice change? Are you doing it for vanity or selfish reasons? Be honest with yourself. See if you can find a deeper reason, to do it for the benefit of others, out of love or compassion.

Some good reasons: you want to set a good example for others, or inspire them and show it's possible, or learn something that you can then share with others, or be stronger so you can later help others. You do it out of wanting to help, to ease the suffering of others, to protect them, to show them they're loved.

On not wasting this dewlike life

You might also make your change so that you're making the most of your life and not wasting the gift of the days you've been given on this earth. Our time here is wonderful but limited, and therefore precious and valuable.

About 2,000 years ago, the Stoic philosopher Seneca said something that moves me to this day:

“You are living as if destined to live for ever; your own frailty never occurs to you; you don't notice how much time has already passed, but squander it as though you

had a full and overflowing supply—though all the while that very day . . . may be your last.”

Thinking about the limited life we have, the fleetingness of it all, helps me to appreciate that we have to make the most of it.

Seneca also said:

“Putting things off is the biggest waste of life: it snatches away each day as it comes, and denies us the present by promising the future. . . . The whole future lies in uncertainty: live immediately.”

And 1,200 years later, in feudal Japan, the great Zen master Dogen wrote:

“Students today should begrudge every moment of time. This dewlike life fades away; time speeds swiftly. In this short life of ours, avoid involvement in superfluous things and just study the Way.”

Avoid wasting time, and just study the Way—which, incidentally, is a study of the nature of change.

So make a Vow not to waste this dewlike life, to not act as if you have an unlimited supply of life. Make this small change you’re committing to as if it were the most important change of your life, as if your head were on fire.

Make the time

If you have a powerful reason and have made a Vow, you need to make it a priority. Schedule the time for your change, so that it doesn’t get pushed back.

When will you make the change? Be specific: is it right when you wake up, or after breakfast, or after you shower, or when you arrive at work? Visualize the time and place you’ll do the change.

If you don't make the time, you won't do it. So figure out when you're going to do your new habit, whatever it is: your writing, your studying, your stretching, your meditation.

MISSION: PICK A TIME & A VOW

Pick a time you're going to do your habit each day and block off 10 minutes on your calendar and in your mind for doing the habit. Block off this time even if you're only going to start with two minutes—you don't need to take the full 10-minute block, but it's best to have a cushion. Choosing a time is proof to yourself that this is a priority.

Now choose a reason why you're doing the habit. Think about what motivated you to do the habit. Who benefits? Can you do it for someone else? Write down the reason in your Habit Plan with a Vow to yourself or someone important.

The rhythm of your heartbeat

There's an invisible mechanism in action when you're creating a habit, one that most people never notice.

I figured this out when I was trying to quit smoking, and I started to become more aware of my urges to smoke. I soon noticed a pattern: my urges would come after certain events—eating, waking, having coffee, stress, other people smoking. These events would *trigger* my urge to smoke.

This taught me a key concept when it came to building habits, and I learned to apply it to every habit. Every habit must be tied to a trigger. When the trigger happens, ideally, the urge to do the habit comes up and you do the habit immediately after.

It's like the rhythm of your heartbeat: ba-PUM, ba-PUM, ba-PUM. A double beat, the music of a pulse. The trigger is the “ba” to the habit's “PUM.”

Unfortunately, most people just try to do the new habit any time they like. I've seen it so many times: someone wants to form the habit of exercise, but they do it at any time that's convenient. This might work for a little while,

but what it means is that there's no real habit forming, because it's missing the trigger. It's missing the first part of the heartbeat. If no true habit forms, you're constantly just relying on willpower, instead of the automaticity of habit.

The way a habit forms is this: if you do two things together, one after the other, enough times, they fuse in your brain like a one-two punch combo. They become the iambic heartbeat rhythm, one-TWO, ba-BOOM, da-DUM! It becomes automatic, so that when the trigger happens, the urge to do the habit arises without the need of willpower.

Form the heartbeat rhythm.

How do you do that? Pick a trigger that's already in your daily routine. Something you do once a day, ideally: waking up, going to bed, eating breakfast, drinking the first cup of coffee, arriving at work, etc. You could pick a trigger that happens more than once a day (getting to your desk, drinking water) or less often (sleeping in on weekends, seeing your friends every once in awhile at the bar), but those are harder to remember and fuse to a habit.

Once you've picked a trigger, you have to do everything possible to remember to do the habit immediately after the trigger happens. Set up reminders, put notes around where the trigger happens . . . make this your top priority.

When the trigger happens, do the habit. Without fail. Over and over. Until they fuse into the heartbeat rhythm.

MISSION: PICK A TRIGGER

Open up your Habit Plan and write down a trigger that's already in your daily routine. If you decided to do your habit first thing in the morning, think about what you do every day at that time: get out of bed, drink some water, make coffee, brush your teeth, use the bathroom, put the teakettle on, check your mobile phone, etc. If you want to do it later in the morning, think about what you normally do then (open up laptop, eat breakfast, get to work, leave for work, take a shower, get dressed, etc.). The habit could also be in the evening, but often this becomes harder to form if you get busy around this time. Write down the trigger and start thinking of it as the start of your heartbeat.

Create your groove

Imagine yourself as a kid who wakes up after a night of heavy snowfall. There's a thick layer of snow on the ground, clean and without a path.

The first time you walk through this snow, you have a very wide array of choices for what path to take. You can walk to the left, down the middle, to the right, zig zag, walk over that hill, and so on. Not only do you have many choices of paths to take, but each one will be very difficult, because there's a foot of snow everywhere.

Now picture walking to school the next day ... the snow from the previous day is still there, but now there's a bit of a path you created from yesterday's walk. You can still create a new path, but the one you created yesterday will be a bit easier. So you take that one.

Each day, you decide to take the path already created. This is a groove in the snow that gets easier over time, until you're probably not going to take any other path.

Creating a new habit is a lot like that: you're creating a groove in the snow. At first, you can go anywhere, and it's difficult going ... but once you've created a groove, it's much easier, and you don't have to forge new paths anymore.

But here's the twist: let's say that the child walking in the snow is actually your Childish Mind. You want to guide the Childish Mind to choose a new habit path. You want it to take a new direction, to create the groove you've chosen. You want to decide which habit forms.

So instead of giving the Childish Mind a wide variety of paths to take, you want to encourage it to choose the path that will create the habit groove you've chosen.

Here's how: put things in the way to block your Childish Mind mind from straying from the path you've chosen. You could put spikes everywhere else or big roadblock barriers that force the Childish Mind to take your chosen path. Maybe place some delicious chocolates along the path to entice the Childish Mind to stay there.

You can set up your new habit so that it becomes the groove. You just need to put up roadblocks and incentives so that the right groove is created.

How to create your groove

The first thing you can put in the snow to make the groove you want is a series of incentives:

- Create little rewards for doing the habit each day
- Enjoy the ability to tell accountability partners that you did it
- Make the habit enjoyable
- Do the habit with a friend

Even more important than the incentives are the roadblocks. It's hard to get off the path if you've set up some good roadblocks that keep the Childish Mind on the right path.

Good roadblocks:

- Public accountability (not wanting to report that you failed)
- An accountability partner who pushes you to succeed
- Embarrassing consequences if you fail (e.g., having to donate money to an organization you can't stand)
- Lots of reminders so you can't forget
- The Vow you've made, the deeper reason for doing the habit

By setting up the roadblocks and incentives, you'll create an environment that is much more likely to create the habit groove you want.

I've learned that if you want to create a habit the right way, you set up the right environment, and you don't rely on willpower alone to overcome the Childish Mind. Willpower inevitably fails in the face of constant resistance.

MISSION: CREATE REMINDERS

In the next few chapters, we'll take actions to create the groove for our new habit. For today, let's take a small action: set up reminders, so you're more likely to start creating the habit groove you'd like to create. Open up your Habit Plan and write down what reminders you're going to set up. Physical reminders are often best, like big notes around where the trigger occurs (a sticky note on your laptop, a meditation cushion next to the coffee maker, running shoes next to your bed, etc.) Next would be digital reminders, like phone and calendar alarms.

Now set those reminders up, so when the trigger happens, you absolutely won't forget.

We'll set up the rest of your habit environment in the next few chapters.

Create commitment

When I started running, I ran a 5K race, and it felt amazing. The day I finished the 5K, I got it in my head that I was going to run a marathon a year later. After all, if I could run a 5K then I could run a marathon, if I just kept training, right?

I decided to set the goal of running a marathon and to continue my regular habit of running. But I knew that I'd lose motivation when the training got harder, so I decided to create a big commitment: I signed up to write a twice-monthly column in my local newspaper about training for my first marathon.

Tens of thousands of people were reading this column, and so I knew I wouldn't back out. I did struggle with training at times, but I couldn't weasel out of the commitment, and neither could my Childish Mind. I ran my first marathon (slowly, with difficulties) a year after the idea entered my head.

I learned the power of public commitment from this. It was a huge motivator, and this large commitment didn't let me off the hook when I wanted to quit.

By contrast, the times when I unsuccessfully tried to quit smoking, I would make absolutely no commitment.

I'd just say to myself, "I'm going to quit smoking today," and then throw away my cigarettes. But later in the day, when the urge got really strong, I would buy a new pack, and I'd be smoking again. The problem was that I wasn't committed—in my mind, this attempt at quitting smoking wasn't a big deal. It was as small a thing as taking out the trash, something that could be put off until later when other things came up.

I've used big commitments to form many habits now:

- I committed to changing a few diet habits, and told my friend Tynan he could throw a pie in my face if I failed and put the video on the Internet (unfortunately for Tynan, I succeeded).
- I committed to my friend Jesse that I'd write and publish this book by the end of 2014, or I'd have to eat a burger (I'm vegan, so this is a big motivator).
- I blogged about getting out of debt when I first started Zen Habits.
- I created my blog as a public accountability tool for a bunch of habits I was trying to form.
- I once made a list of all my personal possessions as a way to motivate myself to simplify.
- I've publicly shared my workout and eating logs in the past.
- I signed up to run my second marathon to raise money for a good cause.
- I've had online accountability groups, habit trackers where friends could see my progress, and other tools that would make it obvious if I wasn't doing the habit.
- I've had competitions with friends, including my friend Toku, to try to stick to a habit we'd committed ourselves to.

The Greased Slope

In the last chapter, we talked about creating a groove in the snow. Let's switch metaphors now, and think about a slope that keeps you on a certain path. If it's easier to stay on the path, you'll probably do it, and having a hill or slope on either side of the path makes it likely you'll not stray.

But what if that were a greased slope? Even if you wanted to get off the path, climbing up a greased slope would make it really difficult. By greasing the slope, you are taking away your escapes—or the escapes of the Childish Mind.

So grease the slope that would allow you to get off the habit path.

How? By creating a big commitment—create accountability and consequences for not doing the habit, so you'll be much more likely to stay on the habit path. This is a much more powerful tool than most people realize.

Types of accountability & consequences

Here are some ideas for accountability and consequences you can create for yourself:

- Publicly commit to doing a habit every day, on social media, to your friends and family.
- Write a daily blog, with short updates.
- Commit to friends and family via a mass email, and promise them weekly updates.
- Create a public log of your habit, and share it with people.

- Join an accountability group and commit to them.
- Find an accountability partner and create consequences for each other if you fail.
- Make a big pledge to do something embarrassing if you fail.
- Make a pledge to give money to someone or to a political candidate or non-profit organization you don't like.
- Pledge to ban yourself from your computer, or cell phone, if you fail; or not eat sugar or drink coffee or drink wine, or whatever would motivate you most.
- Issue a public challenge to friends to join you in a month-long habit (like writing every day, or exercising each day).
- Get a coach or join a small class.

MISSION: MAKE A
COMMITMENT TO OTHERS

Add your commitment to your habit plan: what kind of accountability and consequences will you set up to grease your slope and keep you on track? Many of you might be tempted to skip this step, but that would be a mistake. Don't give yourself an escape. Be all in.

Now actually make that commitment to others today, online, via email, or in person. Don't start on the habit yet, though. That's your next mission.

Take the first small step

I have a writing habit that works miracles to overcome writer's block and procrastination: I tell myself I just need to open up a document and write a few words.

I can write anything: my name, a few brief ideas, an outline, a sentence.

The act of taking this first small step is incredibly powerful. Once I start, I often keep going. If I don't start, I can procrastinate for hours, days, trying to avoid doing something difficult and uncomfortable.

I learned that this trick works for so many other habits: to start meditating, just get your butt on the cushion. To run, just get out the door. To learn a language, just press play on the tape.

Tell your Childish Mind you don't have to do any more than that. Just the first, really easy step. And the easier the first step, the better.

There's an old line from Bugs Bunny cartoons (and the movie *Groundhog Day*) that goes something like, "Watch out for that first step: it's a doozie!" Unfortunately, that's how our minds see the first step—it's a lulu. It could lead to trouble, maybe even disaster, but certainly at least difficulty.

We need to reverse this idea: that first step is a cinch. It's ridiculously easy. If we make that first step a cinch, we can get started, and then the rest is easy.

Movement begets movement. I've found this out in every habit I've attempted—when you get started, continuing is much easier. All you need to do is get moving.

Remove the barrier to starting that your Childish Mind fears by making the requirements of starting almost nothing.

Want to work out? Just do a few pushups or lift one weight. Want to eat healthier? Take one bite of a fruit or vegetable. Want to drink tea every afternoon? Just put some water in the kettle. Want to write a book? Just open a document and jot down a few notes.

Movement begets movement, so just take the smallest first step.

MISSION: DO THE HABIT ONCE

Today (or tomorrow, if it's too late today), you should do the habit for the first time. When the trigger happens and you see your reminders, do the first small step. You don't need to do the whole habit, just the first part. Do it once, and consider that success. If you want to keep going beyond just starting, that's fine, but don't go until the habit gets hard. Quit while it's easy, for now.

And plan to do the habit tomorrow and keep the streak going. This is where the learning about change truly begins.

❧ PART II ❧

Mindful Change

We'll move from starting a change to using mindfulness to understand how change works. Mindfulness is a powerful tool for creating lasting change and for enjoying the change. In this section, we'll start to solidify the change you've started and overcome obstacles that might come up.

Tangled in feedback loops

I have a relative I love very much who over the years became addicted to drugs and alcohol, and it caused him (and his family) all kinds of problems. No matter how harmful the drug addiction, no matter how much it hurt his health, finances, job and relationships, he couldn't stop. Addiction is an incredibly powerful thing, and it's also unbelievably difficult to overcome.

But drug addiction can also teach us a powerful lesson about creating (or breaking) habits: the power of feedback loops.

Let's think about the drug user, when he first starts using the drug. First, he tries it, and immediately he gets an extremely pleasurable high. This is very strong positive feedback, so he very quickly wants to do the drug again. Every time he uses the drug, he gets a strong dose of pleasure. This is a positive feedback loop.

But every time he stops using the drug, he feels terrible. So *not* using the drug gives him a negative feedback loop.

Think about what kind of behavior this combination of positive and negative feedback loops encourages: it drives

him to use the drug (because of the positive feedback), and to avoid *not* using the drug (where he gets negative feedback). It's the combination of these two feedback loops that really drives us to do the behavior.

Now think about another habit: exercise. What's the typical feedback loop for someone who doesn't exercise much? When she does the exercise, she gets discomfort, sweatiness, tiredness, maybe even soreness. That's negative feedback for doing the exercise.

Not doing the exercise is much more comfortable, because she's on the Internet doing easy, mildly pleasurable tasks. That's positive feedback for not doing the exercise.

The combination of these two feedback loops is why — at first — it's so hard to form the exercise habit. People are up against much more than they realize, because no amount of willpower can overcome a setup of feedback loops that go against the behavior they're trying to create. And it works like that for every single habit: eating junk food and shopping and playing games are easy habits to create and hard to break, while exercise and meditation and eating vegetables and learning languages are much harder. All because of the feedback loops.

So what are we to do?

Reverse the feedback loops to get the behavior we want.

We want positive feedback for the habit we're creating: rewards, praise, physical pleasure, spending time with a friend, getting stars on a chart, continuing a streak, a feeling of accomplishment, enjoying the activity with a smile.

We want negative feedback for not doing the habit: embarrassment of people knowing you didn't do it, losing a bet, enduring some embarrassing consequence, losing

the streak you've created, experiencing some kind of difficulty or loss.

Grease the slope. Create public accountability. Set up rewards and consequences. The smarter you've set up your feedback loops, the better you'll be at doing the habit.

We've already talked about some ways to give yourself negative feedback for not doing the habit—making a commitment to others. Once you make a commitment, you're more likely to do the habit to avoid the negative consequence of having to admit failure, as long as you care about the opinions of the people you've made a commitment to. Later, we'll add some other consequences to increase the negative feedback loop.

What about positive feedback? A commitment to others can also give you positive feedback for doing the habit, if you get to report your successes to them. And you can set up rewards, like giving yourself a treat or a massage or some relaxing tea, or whatever would be rewarding to you personally. In the next chapter, we'll look at mindfulness as a way to set up positive feedback.

One way to set up positive feedback that I've found extremely rewarding is to make the change social. If you want to run, get a running partner. Go for a walk with a friend. Join a writing group or meditation group. Join a yoga class. Get a coach or a personal trainer or a Mandarin teacher. These kinds of social setups make it more rewarding to do the habit, because we start to enjoy the company of the people we're doing the activity with.

MISSION: CREATE POSITIVE
FEEDBACK LOOPS

Today, come up with a way to make your habit more social, if possible. Look at the suggestions above, put the social idea in your Habit Plan, and take action today to make the social setup start to happen. It might not happen immediately, because it can take awhile to find a partner or group or coach, but get the ball rolling. If there's no way to make it social, think of small rewards you can give yourself immediately after doing the habit each day.

Don't forget to continue to do your habit, in as small steps as possible, each day.

The spotlight of mindfulness

When I first started creating habits, I set up rewards for myself: treats, massages, buying myself books. These rewards were great, but honestly, I didn't feel that motivated by them. I found that they were too far away from the actual habit, and not directly linked in my mind to doing the habit.

So I looked for other ways to reward myself, from social accountability to socializing with others. Those worked really well.

Then I hit on something that was far more effective: enjoying the task itself.

If I could go for a run and enjoy the run, the task became the reward! What a breakthrough this was for me. The task started to have positive feedback built in.

This, of course, is easier said than done. How do you enjoy something that you don't normally enjoy? You can't necessarily turn a painful task into a joyful one, can you?

I found that I could, if I kept an open mind about it.

I found that I could enjoy the unenjoyable habits, if I could learn to appreciate the habit and let go of wishing it were different.

I found that the secret that unlocked all of this was mindfulness.

Shining some mindfulness

I would go out for a run and practice mindfulness—pay attention to my body and my breath as I ran, pay attention to the ground beneath my feet, the wind rushing past my bald head, the light through the leaves, the beauty of the moment. Sure, I was uncomfortable, but with mindfulness I could see my mind trying to run from the discomfort, and instead, loosen up and allow myself to feel the discomfort. This discomfort, once I actually paid close attention to it, wasn't so bad! I could even find things in the uncomfortable moment that I could appreciate.

So the mindfulness became a powerful tool for shining a spotlight on what was going on: paying attention, seeing the beauty of the moment, loosening up with my discomfort, accepting it, and appreciating everything I could.

I think of this as the spotlight of mindfulness, putting some light on the darkness of what we usually don't see. We often are unaware of our urges, our shying away from discomfort, our negative thoughts or things that we aren't appreciating. Having a spotlight of mindfulness brings all of those out into the light.

How do we develop this spotlight? This is my process: instead of thinking of other things as I run (or do any kind of activity), I turn my attention to my breath. I try to pay attention to it, feel the qualities of it, follow it as it comes in and goes out.

Then I turn my attention to my body and feel what's going on with it, what sensations I can notice. I scan my body from toes to head, though in the process of this, my

mind might start to wander. When I notice this, I turn the spotlight of my attention to my thoughts and see that they want to move away from the present moment to think about something else. Often this is because the present moment is uncomfortable or in some way different from what I want.

That's when I turn the spotlight of mindfulness onto my discomfort and the way I wish this moment were. I think about my ideals, the Mind Movie that I've been playing, and I think about how it's causing me to not enjoy the current moment.

Then I turn back to the current moment, perhaps to my breath and body again, or maybe to my surroundings. I've found that these things aren't different: the breath, the body, the surroundings are all sensations, all things to notice. My feelings and thoughts are also sensations. So I just turn the spotlight on all of these sensations.

Finally, I start to appreciate everything that the spotlight shines on: my breath, how wonderful it is! How lucky I am to have it! My body, what a great thing, flab and warts and hairs and all! How lucky I am to have this body to experience this world of wonders. The things around me: how awe-inspiring! What kind of a miracle is a leaf, or a field, or a bird? I'm overwhelmed by the joy of being alive.

The spotlight of mindfulness can be quite an experience, if you pay attention.

The positive feedback of mindfulness

This miraculous spotlight helps us to find the intrinsic reward of doing the habit. If you can be mindful, and appreciate the moment as you do the habit, you can enjoy

the activity more. You can enjoy yourself as you do the activity.

Going for a run becomes a mindful break from the chaos of the world. Writing can become an enjoyable mindful practice. Even healthy eating can be a pleasurable, mindful eating exercise.

When you enjoy the activity mindfully, there is positive feedback as you do the habit. It's not something that comes later; it happens immediately and is inextricably tied to the habit itself.

And so mindfulness becomes a way of setting up a positive feedback loop.

MISSION: DO THE HABIT AGAIN,
MINDFULLY

Today, for the two minutes or so that you do your habit, practice the spotlight of mindfulness. Turn the spotlight on your breath, then your body, then your surroundings, then all the other sensations associated with the movements of doing the activity. Appreciate everything about doing the habit that you can. Enjoy those wonderful things about the habit so that the habit itself becomes your reward.

The mirror of change

One of the most powerful tools for change I've ever created was my blog, Zen Habits. And I'm not the only one who has experienced this, either: I've helped many people start blogs as a journal for changing their habits and their lives.

I started Zen Habits in 2007 as a way to share some of the things I'd been learning about changing habits and simplifying my life ... but also to hold myself accountable for other habit changes I was still making, like training for my first triathlon and continuing to get out of debt. I thought if I had some people reading my habit reports, I'd be more likely to stick to the changes. Even though I'd had a number of habit successes to this point, I knew that public accountability was one of the reasons I'd done so well, and I wanted to give myself the best chance of continuing my success. Being good at habits means not forgetting what got you to good.

And that was true—the more readers I had, the more motivating it was. But I found something even more powerful than the accountability: reflecting on what I was doing.

Self-reflection has turned out to be one of my most powerful tools in changing my life. It becomes a mirror that helps you see what's going on in your life, that keeps you from making the same mistakes over and over again, from being on autopilot and failing to course-correct. Having a blog with readers is like having a journal on steroids—it forces you to reflect on what you're doing in your life, because if you're going to share what you're learning with other people, you first have to reflect on what you've learned. Self-reflection is built into blogging.

Why is self-reflection so important? Imagine trying to put on clown make-up, but you have no mirror. You can't see whether you're applying the make-up in the right areas, or ... well, you can't tell whether you're doing it right at all. If you're messing up, you'll probably just keep messing up.

Now imagine there's a mirror in front of you. Putting the make-up on is now much easier, because as your hand goes off course, you can course-correct. You can do it better each time you make a mistake. You can see what kinds of mistakes you're making, and make fewer of those with some practice. All because you have the feedback of the mirror helping guide your actions.

Self-reflection is this mirror. It's absolutely necessary for making changes and not just giving up in self-disgust.

The mirror of self-reflection does a few things, in my experience:

1. It makes you remember what you've done, which means you're living more consciously instead of just on auto-pilot.
2. It helps you see when you've made mistakes and see

what kind of adjustments might help overcome those obstacles in the future.

3. It gives you positive feedback when you are doing things right, so you'll keep doing those things right.

As you can see, the mirror of self-reflection is a crucial tool for feedback loops, and we've already seen that feedback loops are the key to sticking to (or failing at) a habit change.

So how do you set up this mirror of self-reflection? I have a few suggestions:

1. Start a short habit journal, and just do one to two sentences each day. Perhaps commit to sharing this daily with your accountability team or partner.
2. Do a habit review each week, reflecting on what you did, what went wrong, how you'll overcome those in the future, and what you did right. If you do this weekly, you'll get better each week.
3. Start a short daily or weekly blog, and share this blog with everyone you know.
4. Post updates to social media, but not just bragging updates—share what went wrong as well as what went right.

MISSION: START A ONE-SENTENCE JOURNAL

Commit in your Habit Plan to doing a daily one-sentence journal or blog. If you don't think you can keep up with a daily journal, commit instead to writing a weekly review of your habit, or to blogging weekly on how you're

doing with the habit. Tell your accountability partner or group that you'll share this with them either daily or weekly—whatever works best for you and them. The feedback loops you'll get from this self-reflection will be worth the effort.

Be mindful of your movie

When I decided to follow up my successful first marathon by doing a triathlon, I had an idea in my head of how great that triathlon would be. In my mind, I was already doing the triathlon, and I was leaner (like most of the triathletes I'd seen) and strong and fast and gloriously finishing the three-sport race. What an amazing story.

Of course, the story was just in my head—I hadn't even started training yet! It took me a long time to understand that what I was doing with this triathlon visualization was what was going on behind the scenes of most habit failures. We have a story in our head—the Mind Movie we talked about earlier—and it's amazing, but the habit hasn't even started yet.

What's wrong with that? Doesn't this Mind Movie motivate us to get started and accomplish things? Well, yes, it does motivate us in the beginning. It's fine to let ourselves get motivated to start by fooling ourselves with the Mind Movie. The problem comes when things don't turn out as we'd envisioned.

With the triathlon, I started training for the swim and bike portions of the race, as I was already decent at the

run. I got a swimming coach and committed to practices three times a week. I went to my first swim session, and within 15 minutes of training, Mr. Marathon Man was exhausted and nauseated. I couldn't believe how hard swimming was.

Cycling wasn't much easier for me. I found that I was afraid of the drivers on Guam, who do not want cyclists on the road slowing them down. So every cycling practice was an exercise in fear and self-preservation. I'd be riding down the four-lane main highway, with drivers zooming past me, often honking and giving me the finger as my life flashed before my eyes. I'd get home and swear that walking would be the only form of transportation I'd ever need for the rest of my life.

The entire span of my triathlon training continued in the same way—I would envision myself as gloriously fit and successful, and then go out and train and it was miserably hard. I finished my first short triathlon, and it was way harder than I thought it would be, and I wasn't leaner or stronger really.

Many other habits don't even get that far. When we envision ourselves as happy and successful and disciplined, and then the habit turns out to be much harder than we'd imagined, it can be discouraging. The story in our heads—the expectations and ideals—can make the reality seem dismal in comparison. And then we often quit or dislike the habit.

So what should we do? Be mindful of your story. Start using mindfulness to see the Mind Movie playing in your head about this habit. Shine the spotlight on your vision, the thing that motivated you to start but might discourage you from continuing.

What ideals do you have about the habit? What expectations do you have of yourself and others? How does this match up with the reality of yourself and this habit?

Mindfulness can help us turn our attention to all this, and then turn our attention on reality, to see it as it is. Reality as it is is wonderful, if it's not compared to a Mind Movie—we just need to see it as it is, appreciate it as it is, be grateful for it as it is.

Practice this: before you do your habit, and as you do it, turn your attention to your story. See this story as something that's getting in the way of appreciating the reality of the habit as it is, as the source of frustrations and disappointment.

Now see the reality of the habit: be curious about the reality, try to notice everything about it, and appreciate it for what it is. Really pay attention, and find things about each moment to be grateful for.

Having a story, an idea, a Mind Movie, a fantasy about your habit can be motivating at the start, but frustrating, disappointing and discouraging once you get going and things don't live up to the fantasy. It's been the biggest cause of failure for many of my habits and for thousands of people I've worked with. Don't let it stop you from making a change.

MISSION: JOURNAL YOUR STORY

As you write your journal for today, briefly describe the story you see as you think about your habit. What does this story look like? Now, as you do the habit next time, be curious about the reality of the habit and find things to appreciate about that reality.

Grow a plant—don't attach to results

I was coaching a woman who constantly struggled with her eating, and consequently, with her weight. She wasn't as interested in creating the healthy eating habit as she was in seeing the pounds come off.

That's great, except that when the pounds didn't come off so quickly, she would get discouraged. Weight loss is a slow process, and you can't control it completely. Some weeks the weight actually went up—and when that happened, she would feel like a failure. What was she doing wrong?

The problem was that, like most people, she was focusing on the results. That's pretty normal—we're a very results-oriented society. When we try to make changes in our lives, and create new habits, we focus on the results.

That model is a lot like sculpting a mound of clay—you have something that needs to be shaped (your behavior, your weight, your finances) and an idea of how it should look when you're done, and you try to shape it to meet that idea. You know you're doing it right when you've got the finished sculpture, and it looks great.

Unfortunately, this way of making changes very often

leads to failure. Sometimes we get the sculpture right very quickly, and all is well, and we're successful! But more often, we get it wrong at first, or it takes awhile to shape things, or the shape turns out all wrong . . . and then we feel discouraged. When we don't get good results quickly, the sculpture way of making changes ends up in a mess of clay.

What's a better model? I like to look at it like growing a plant. You don't control the results of growing a plant—it will grow however it grows, because we don't have god-like powers that can control how a plant will grow. You don't control the outcome, but you do control the inputs. You can water it, give it more sunlight, feed it some nutrients, give it good soil, make sure bugs aren't eating it. You control the inputs and environment, but not the outcome.

So Grow a Plant when you're making changes: you don't control the outcome, so you can't get fixated on it. Don't attach too tightly to the results of a change. Instead, focus on creating a good environment. Focus mostly on the inputs: what are you bringing to the change? What is your intention? What is your effort? What is your enjoyment and mindfulness?

If you do this with weight loss, then you don't focus on the weight loss itself. You focus on the input: what kind of food are you eating? Are you eating mindfully? Do you have a compassionate intention when it comes to your eating? Are you exercising mindfully? Are you giving yourself a good environment to support these changes?

If you focus on the inputs, you don't know what the plant of your weight loss change will result in. Maybe it will mean a slimmer version of you, maybe a healthier

one, maybe a stronger one with more muscle. You don't know exactly, because you can't sculpt your body like clay. What you can do is water it, give it sunlight and good nutrients, and see how it grows.

MISSION: GROW A PLANT

As you do your habit today, and journal about it, consider what your intention is. Are you doing the change to make a difference in the world, to make the most of your time on Earth, to be compassionate toward yourself or others, to make someone's life better, to nurture your health? Now, as you do the habit, be mindful of your attachment to outcomes of this habit, and see if you can focus instead on the intention, on the effort, on enjoying the process.

Shine a light on invisible urges

I remember when I tried to take on the habit of procrastination (to reduce it, not increase it), and I couldn't figure out why I kept failing. Procrastination was an ages-old habit for me, going back for as long as I could remember, and I didn't understand why it had such a strong grip on me.

I would tell myself that I had to write an article, or work on my book, and then I'd almost immediately check email or go read something online. I'd find excuses to clean, or start playing an online game, or watch videos. Anything but what I needed to work on.

It was like I had no control over myself. I felt horrible, of course, because then I felt like I had no self-control, no discipline. This is the cycle of urge-act-guilt that we've all felt.

How do you overcome this cycle? The first part of the cycle is actually invisible to most people. The urges act in the dark. And so the most important step in breaking the cycle is to take away the invisibility. Shine a light on the darkness. See what's going on, so you can consciously change it.

That's what I did with procrastination. I would stop myself before going to check email (for example), and just pause for a second. Then I'd watch this urge to switch from my writing to another task. What was this urge like? It was a strong feeling that seemed to come from nowhere, and I'd feel it in my chest, rising up my neck into my head. What a strange sensation!

Then I'd watch what would happen if I just sat and didn't follow this urge. It would get stronger, and I'd sometimes panic a little, like I needed to act on this urge immediately! But then it would go away, and I'd calm down.

I was shining the light of mindfulness on these invisible urges. They are incredibly powerful when they're invisible, and we just act on them without thinking. But with this mindful spotlight, I could turn them from invisible to visible, and watch them in action. When they're visible, these urges lose their power. Now they're just ordinary feelings, that come and go.

Amazingly, this works on any habit. Every habit seems to come with unbidden urges to procrastinate on the habit. If you want to write, read more, wake early, meditate . . . you'll also have the urge to go do something else, to put the habit off. And when you use the spotlight on mindfulness on these urges, you can take their power away and rationally decide what you'd like to do.

MISSION: WATCH YOUR URGES

Today as you do your habit, mindfully watch any urges that come up. Do this every day, if you can remember, and

then journal about these urges. Be curious about them: what do they feel like? What happens if you don't act on them? Can you delay for just a minute or two when they come up?

The Habit Sprint: Get better and better at habits

One day an early manuscript, not even proofread, arrived in my mailbox for review. I don't review books, but this one was called "Scrum" and it was about running your business and managing projects using ideas from the method Agile software developers use to create software. I was bored of the book I was reading at the time, so I started reading Scrum.

I'm really glad I did. I never used any of the ideas to change my business, but I learned a concept that changed the way I look at habit change.

I learned about the Sprint.

In short, it's a pattern of planning that involves mapping out what you're going to do on a project for the next week (a week's worth of the project is a Sprint), then executing the plan. At the end of the week, you do a review of how you did and what got in the way. Here's the part that changes everything: you figure out what you're going to do for the next Sprint that will overcome the obstacles.

If you keep doing this, you'll get better each week. There's more to the Scrum method, but this simple method of reviewing what your obstacles were in the

previous Sprint, and planning to overcome them the next Sprint, you'll get better and better over time.

From this, I created the Habit Sprint.

The Method

Here's how it works:

1. Put together a Habit Plan and focus on executing it for a week.
2. At the end of the week, review how you did—how many days did you do the habit?
3. Review your obstacles for days you missed or struggled with the habit. Add solutions to overcome those obstacles to your plan.
4. Repeat for the next week.

Each week, you'll get real-world information about your habit environment that you didn't have before you started the week. You'll get better each week as you find methods that allow you to overcome the obstacles.

Did you mess up this week and not do the habit at all? No problem—as long as you do the review and figure out what your obstacles and solutions are, it's a success because you learned something. The only failure would be if you didn't review and improve the plan.

This illustrates a deeper concept about change we'll discuss soon in Chapter 16: mistakes are crucial feedback when you're making a change. When you fail, you should realize that, and change direction. You don't keep going in the same direction.

The Habit Sprint is a way to systematize that concept:

once a week, you make sure you review the mistakes you've made and use that feedback to adjust course. You improve the method based on the new feedback you got in the past week.

At the end of each week, you do a quick review—how did you do, what got in the way, what solutions can you add to the plan to improve it for next week.

And you repeat that, getting better at the habit each week.

Optimal learning

The Habit Sprint helps solidify a few principles that will help you learn the habit skills we're working on in this book. The way that most people practice skills is suboptimal: they practice sporadically, get frustrated by mistakes, focus on the parts they're good at.

Instead, research has shown a few ideas that help us learn skills in a better way. These strategies will help you as you learn habit skills:

1. **SPACED REPETITION.** Instead of cramming for a test by studying all at once, it's best to learn in small doses at regular intervals. That helps with long-term retention of knowledge and skills and makes learning easier. So we practice our habit skills daily: once a day, for just a few minutes a day.
2. **LEARN FROM FAILURE.** It's important to learn by trying to do something on your own without knowing what you're doing and getting it wrong. Then correct yourself and focus on getting it right. The Habit Sprint method helps you to find where you got things wrong and to correct yourself. If you don't do this

regularly, you won't get better. Focus on the areas where you need improvement, and you'll improve a lot faster.

3. **PRACTICE REGULARLY.** By setting up a habit practice environment where you practice regularly, and are motivated to keep practicing, you're going to get a lot better over time. The mistake most people make is not continuing practice when things get hard. We're setting up a habit environment to keep you on track to continue your practice.
4. **PRACTICE DELIBERATELY.** Practicing mindlessly is largely a waste of time. The best musicians in the world, for example, practice very deliberately. They focus for the entire time they're practicing, and they focus on doing it right. They find weaknesses and work on them with concentration. That's what we're doing with our mindful practice of our habit.

The method of forming habits we're learning in this book is not just a series of ideas to try out. It's designed to help you learn the essential habit skills in a smart way. So don't skip the reviews at the end of each Habit Sprint—they're absolutely necessary for improvement.

MISSION: ASSESS YOUR HABIT CHANGE

Today, assess the progress you've made with your first week of habit change. How many days did you do the habit this week, and how many days did you miss? What have the main obstacles been? What can you do to overcome those obstacles and improve going forward? Add those obstacles and solutions to your Habit Plan.

Watch the plum blossom fall

I was walking down a hilly street in San Francisco, when a small pink plum blossom fell in front of my face. For some reason, this startled me out of my reverie, and I stopped where I was and watched this blossom descend gently to the sidewalk.

The sidewalk was covered in blossoms, beautifully fading into death like snow melting into the ground. I was captivated by the beauty of this scene, by how gorgeous each blossom was in the moment of its falling to death. The height of their beauty is a transient, impermanent, evanescent moment, fading as soon as it peaks.

I took this impermanence to heart, and this image has helped me to deal with the transience of life and with changing my habits. I promise, we'll find a key lesson about habits in a moment, but indulge me as we talk about the nature of change.

Lesson about life & change

In this impermanent nature of plum blossoms, we can learn a lesson about change. Everything comes and goes.

Arises and then passes. Nothing is permanent, but instead of being scary, this changing nature of everything can be seen as beautiful.

The plum blossom is more beautiful because it is impermanent. You enjoy it more because it won't last forever. Each moment of life is also more beautiful because it doesn't last. Your spouse, your child, your mother, your friend ... they won't last forever, and so each moment with them is more precious.

The basic truth of life is impermanence, and if we come to peace with that, we can find lasting peace with all changes.

Any change can happen at any time. You can fail at a habit, or get injured or sick, or lose a loved one, or lose a job, or hear a song that moves you, or find true love.

I've learned to embrace this change and impermanence as beautiful. Growth isn't possible without change, because growth is change. Without change, the blossom wouldn't have grown, and neither would the tree have grown from a sapling or seed. The seed would stay in the cold, unchanging ground if change weren't the defining characteristic of life.

We lose loved ones, but they wouldn't have become our loved ones in the first place if it weren't for change. Love wouldn't be possible without change, because a relationship grows into love by changing.

Change is beautiful. Change is growth. Change makes love possible.

By embracing change and impermanence, we find peace. Think of all the things that upset our peace of mind: feelings of irritation, grief over the loss of a loved one, a difficult situation, worry about an upcoming meet-

ing, trouble in a relationship. These are all just passing clouds, not permanent states but temporary ones.

Life is a constantly flowing stream, always changing, floating by us—and we can't try to grasp at the passing water. You can't be attached to one particular drop of water that's flowing downstream, because it will be gone soon.

Habits & flexibility

What does this have to do with changing habits? If everything is changing, what does this mean if we have a fixed plan (to change a habit, or to do anything)?

Everything changing means that our fixed plans are bound to fail. We plan on something going the way we think it will go, and then things change and the plan doesn't work.

Now, we can respond to the failed plan in two ways:

1. We can get upset or feel bad that the plan failed, and that might cause us to quit; or
2. We can adjust.

I suggest that we adjust. All the time, as things change. Habits shouldn't be fixed plans, but a continual readjustment. We should adopt a flexible mindset that adapts to the changing circumstances that life throws in our way.

The plum blossom is a visual reminder of the impermanent, ever-changing nature of things ... and that includes our path to forming a new habit or making any kind of change.

If we embrace impermanence and change, we can be more flexible, because we know things will change. We expect it. We love change. And as things change, we adjust.

MISSION: SEE THE IMPERMANENCE

As you write your journal entry today, reflect on how your habit has turned out so far compared to how you imagined it would go. Has it gone exactly to plan? What changes happened to cause the plan to fail? What adjustments have you made, or what adjustments could you have made? Did the changes cause you to mess up and feel bad? How will you adjust more effortlessly to future changes that disrupt your plans?

Don't miss two days in a row

Not long ago I was coaching a woman who struggled to stick to any habit—I could definitely relate—and I was trying to understand the root of the problem. Sometimes she wouldn't write back to me after failing, so I asked about this.

It turns out that what would happen is any time she would miss a day (often for a good reason), that would trigger a downward spiral. She would feel bad about missing a day, and those bad feelings would actually make it more likely that she'd miss a second day, and then she'd be even more likely to miss a third day. Eventually she was feeling so bad about it she wouldn't even open my emails checking on her.

This downward spiral is what we want to avoid.

What finally worked was getting her to commit to some big, embarrassing consequence—not if she missed a day of the habit, but *if she missed two days in a row*.

Her rule was: it's OK to miss one day, but never miss two days in a row.

And the corollary was: when you miss one day, do everything you can to figure out why you missed, and

solve it so you don't keep missing. Use the missed day as feedback that your habit method needs to be adjusted.

Mistakes as positive feedback

This idea of mistakes as feedback is a crucial lesson in creating habits. Visualize yourself crossing a shallow river, stepping across a path of large stones that someone has strung across the river. You have to step on one stone after another to get across.

Now picture closing your eyes and trying to get across. You take a step into the water by accident. At this point, you could beat yourself up about stepping in the water, and then keep going in the same direction until you've fallen into the water completely and are totally off the path.

That wouldn't make any sense. It's much better to stop going in that direction once you take the first step into water, and adjust. Get back on the path. Change direction. Use the water as feedback, not as a sign that you're horrible and should get even wetter.

When you're creating a new habit, you're kind of like that—blindly crossing a river. You don't know the optimal path, the best method for creating this habit. All you can do is take the first step, and then the next, and if you step into water (or miss a day of the habit), use that as feedback and adjust. Don't keep going in the same way.

What does this mean for making changes?

1. First, use mistakes as feedback. They're not signs that you're a bad person or have no discipline. They're signs that you need to adjust.

2. Figure out what caused the mistake and write down an adjustment to your plan. If the problem was travel, adjust the plan so you know what to do when you travel. If the problem was a change in your schedule, adjust the plan for that contingency. In this way, you'll get better at the habit over time.
3. Create a barrier for missing two days in a row, like an embarrassing consequence, so missing one day won't be the end of the world, and you'll be forced to adjust so you don't keep missing days.

Create a positive feeling about change

Most of us do habits completely backwards: when we make a mistake, we feel bad about it. This bad feeling makes it much less likely that we'll stick to the change, because now we feel guilty every time we even consider the habit. We feel like bad people.

We have to avoid this bad feeling, because it gets in the way of habit change. Consider popular phone apps that are addicting: social media and photo sharing apps. Every time you open them up, they give you a dose of pleasure, because you're not bored anymore and you're seeing something interesting, or someone likes your photo. Every time you use the app, you feel good.

Habits are often set up like a really bad app: if you make a mistake and miss a day or two, you start to feel bad every time you open up the habit app. It makes you feel like a bad person. That's the opposite of what we want to get you to stick to the habit.

Instead, try to keep a positive mindset about the habit. Miss a day? No problem, learn from that and try not to miss a second day. Miss a week because of a family crisis? Great, this is a wonderful opportunity to learn how to get back on track after a disruption. See every mistake as an opportunity to learn, a thing that you can get better at, positive feedback that's so crucial for improvement.

And smile as you open yourself up to this improvement.

**MISSION: CREATE A CONSEQUENCE FOR
MISSING TWO DAYS**

Add to your plan an embarrassing consequence for missing two days in a row and commit to this with your accountability partner or team. If you do miss a day, quickly figure out what happened and establish a way to overcome that obstacle next time. Adjust your method so that it's better. Write all of this down in your plan, and remember to see the misstep as good feedback for that crucial continual adjustment.

✿ PART III ✿

Facing Resistance

In this section, we'll explore the resistance that we face as we make changes. How do we deal with this resistance with peace and calm, and how do we avoid letting it derail us?

Watch for the noisy children

When I was living on Guam (which is where I'm from), I started meditating at home in my living room. I'd wake up early, before Eva and the kids were awake, and enjoy the quiet and soft light of the early morning. I'd just sit on the couch and pay attention to my breath, trying to learn a little about mindfulness.

This was never an easy habit for me, but it got more difficult when someone would wake up early, or I'd start later than usual and people would start waking up. I'd be trying to meditate, and a kid would wake up and start making noise, and it would disturb my meditation.

"Why do they have to make so much noise?" I'd find myself thinking, involuntarily. "It's disturbing my peaceful meditation!"

Then I learned to turn to this feeling of resentment, this resistance to what was happening. I looked at this feeling, and I wondered about it.

The big breakthrough for me came when I realized: this is a wonderful thing, having this noisy child in my home. Sure, they're making noise, but this doesn't have

to be a disturbance—it can be music, it can be a gift, a reminder of something wonderful I have in my life.

So I accepted the noise, and instead told myself, “Yay! I have a noisy child nearby!”

This turning point became so important as I learned to make habit changes and deal with changes in life in general. The noisy child became a symbol of things I was resisting—resistance as I did my habit, or resistance to anything in life.

Let’s say I was trying to form the habit of running: I would inevitably find resistance to the discomfort and want to stop running or not go for a run one day. This resistance would normally keep me from sticking to my habit, because most often we give in to this resistance. It wins almost every time.

But now I learned to watch the resistance. The resistance to the discomfort of running became my “noisy child,” and I turned to it and saw that it wasn’t that bad. In fact I could accept it. A little discomfort from running is acceptable once you loosen up on wanting things to be comfortable all the time.

Then I found a way to be grateful for this noisy child (the discomfort from running). It’s wonderful to have some discomfort in your life, because it reminds you that you’re alive! It makes the habit worth doing, because if everything were easy and comfortable, it wouldn’t be an achievement. And in fact, I came to enjoy the exertion of running.

I learned to do this for situations other than forming new habits: if I became irritated with someone, or angry at rude drivers on the road, or started procrastinating

... I would turn to the noisy child I was resisting and find acceptance and even gratitude for it.

This practice has made me better at sticking to habits and happier with any situation in my life.

As you work on making changes in your life, see the noisy child in each change and find acceptance and gratitude for it.

MISSION: JOURNAL ABOUT RESISTANCE

As you do your habit and journal entry today, watch for any resistance. Or see the resistance you've had recently and journal about it. What did the resistance feel like? Is there a way to accept the thing you're resisting and find gratitude for it?

Just lace up your shoes

When I was trying to form the running habit, there were some days when I just didn't feel like it. I wasn't in the mood. And so I'd lay on the couch, too lazy to go for my daily run.

Then I read a tip somewhere that changed my life: just lace up your shoes and get out the door.

That's so easy! In fact, it was so easy I couldn't say no. There was no reasonable objection to lacing up my shoes and stepping out the front door.

Once I got out the door, I inevitably felt like running at least a little. And then once I got moving, I felt great and wanted to keep running for awhile. All I had to do was overcome that initial resistance, the laziness objection, and the rest was easy.

I learned a few key lessons about forming habits here:

1. Never let your mood determine whether you should do something or not. Mood is a bad indicator of the worthiness of any activity.

2. Resistance can be overcome by doing the smallest possible step.
3. You can overcome objections by making the proposition unobjectionable.

Our mind faces objections and resistance all the time, and we usually just give in to them. “I’m too tired.” “I don’t feel like it.” “It’s too hard.” “I deserve a break.” Those are all true, but these objections can be overcome.

Just lace up your shoes.

In Chapter 7, we talked about taking the first small step to get started . . . but what if you’ve done that and still face resistance some days? Have an even smaller version of the habit—a Minimum Viable Habit—that you can do even when you don’t feel like doing the habit. Most days, do the “Small Step” that you figured out in Chapter 7 . . . but if you’re not even feeling like doing that, tell yourself you just need to do the Minimum Viable Habit (lace up your shoes).

I used this method for lots of other habits:

- For meditation, I just had to get my butt on the cushion.
- For writing, I just had to open up a document and write a few words.
- For cooking healthy food, I just had to get out a knife and an onion.
- For studying a language, I just had to press “play” on the audio lesson.
- For yoga, I just had to get into child’s pose.

- For blogging, I just had to open up the form for writing a new post.
- For flossing, I just had to floss one tooth.
- For reading, I just had to open up the book and read a sentence.

I think you get the point. Find the minimum viable habit. The smallest increment of doing the activity. The least objectionable version.

And the resistance is overcome.

MISSION: CHOOSE YOUR MINIMUM
VARIABLE HABIT

Add to your plan, and tell your accountability partner/team, what your minimum viable habit is. It should be the smallest possible start for the habit you're doing. Your version of "just lace up your shoes," for when your mind resists. When you find resistance, just tell yourself to do the minimum viable habit.

Turn from the story to the moment

One day I was in Dolores Park in San Francisco with my 9-year-old son, and we were enjoying the sun, lying in the grass. I'm not sure why, but I happened to check my phone for email, and then probably clicked on a link, and soon went down the rabbithole of reading online.

What I remember clearly is being stressed out a little as I was reading on my phone, and then feeling the sun on my face. Looking up, I realized I was missing an incredible moment with my son in the sunshine-filled park.

I turned from the screen to the moment in front of me. It was an instant shift in mindset, from being stuck in a virtual story to being in the reality of the moment. Instead of missing a moment with my son, I was now present with him and fully experiencing it.

Even when we're not on our phones or computers, we're in danger of missing the actuality of the moment. We get stuck in our heads: recall the Mind Movie that we see playing inside our heads, that we discussed in the Intro of this book. This Mind Movie captivates us, occupies our attention, creates a story that we get attached to.

As we focus on this Mind Movie—the story playing in our heads—we become attached to it and want it to be real, somehow. When it's in our heads, this story begins to seem real. We envision our goals as almost real, if only we could get there. We see our ideals as almost real, if only everyone around us would meet these ideals, if only we ourselves could meet the ideals. We expect our story to come true, even if it doesn't.

The problem is that when reality clashes with the story, we get frustrated, upset, bothered, angry, disappointed. These bad feelings can get in the way of our peace of mind and happiness. They can cause us to be less likely to stick to a habit. They can make us behave badly and harm our relationships with others.

This mismatch between the story in our heads, our Mind Movie, and reality causes a lot of our problems, including the resistance to our new habits.

The answer is to mindfully turn from the story to the reality of the moment.

Turn from the story to the sunsoaked moment in the park.

Turn to the moment, and see it as it is—even if it's not a sunsoaked park, but a rainsoaked muddy field or a gloomy afternoon in your office. Turn from the story, and see the moment.

Learn to accept the moment, appreciate everything about it, find gratitude for it.

Otherwise, not only will you find resistance and frustration, but you'll miss the beautiful moments of your life.

MISSION: PRACTICE SEEING
THE MOMENT

As you do your habit next, mindfully see the story you're playing in your head. Then practice letting it go and turning toward the reality of the moment. This is a form of meditation—use your habit as meditation, practicing seeing the moment as it happens, as it is, appreciating everything about it.

Let the clouds go

One of the key realizations that hit me when I was trying to quit smoking, that helped me with every single subsequent habit change, was learning to watch my urges—the ones we shone a light on in Chapter 14—and not be so attached to them.

Until that realization smacked me in the face, I was powerless against my urges. I'd get an urge to smoke, an urge to eat some sweet or fried food, an urge to buy some new shiny thing, an urge to procrastinate . . . and I'd just act on it. It felt like I had no self control.

But then I learned that I am not my urges, and I learned a trick to handle these urges: I see them as clouds floating in the sky. Like floating clouds, they are separate phenomena, something passing in the distance.

When I had the urge to smoke, I would feel the urge and mindfully notice it. Then I would watch it arise in me, get stronger, and then go away. Like clouds floating past me. I didn't have to immediately act on the urges—I could just watch them.

This wasn't easy. The urges would get really strong, and I'd get a panicked feeling inside, like I needed to act

on the urge or something horrible would happen. But I learned the panicky feeling is just another cloud that I could watch, and it too would float away. The urges and the panic would float into view, from nowhere, and then float away, over and over, until my sky was nice and clear and I could get on with life.

When we procrastinate, it's because we have an urge to run from the difficult, uncomfortable task. We don't want to do the hard work, or be in confusion, or fail at something, so we get the urge to run. It stems from the fear of failure, of not being good enough. The urge comes up, and we follow it! But we don't need to follow it.

We can watch the urge to procrastinate, like a cloud, but not act on it. We can just let it float by, and get to work.

When we face resistance with a habit, we want to run. We get the urge to quit, to procrastinate. This is just a cloud in the sky that will float on by.

Let the cloud float away, because it doesn't control you. The cloud isn't you. It's just a passing phenomenon, one that arises and floats away.

MISSION: WATCH YOUR URGE

As you mindfully do your habit, see the urge to quit or put it off. See the resistance. Then just sit and watch it arise and float away. Don't act on the urge. Let the first urge to quit (or postpone) pass like a cloud. Then when the second urge comes into view, let it float away as well. Finally, when the third urge floats into view, go ahead and act on it. Let two pass, and act on the third. With this kind of practice, you can get good on not acting on every urge.

Work despite discomfort

In December 2013, I woke up at 3:30 a.m. in the freezing rain of the early morning to go run a 50-mile ultramarathon race with Scott, my friend and running partner.

I'd been training for months, and yet I felt completely unprepared. I was nervous, cold, and shivering.

I started out on the 50-miler excited, and went at an easy pace, chatting with Scott and others on the course. For the first 30 miles, everything went smoothly, and I felt great!

Then the pain kicked in. My right toe started hurting badly with each downhill step, a stabbing pain that made me want to quit. At 40 miles, I was cramping and sore and really tired. It started to turn cold again, and I wanted to lie down and take a nap and not run anymore.

But with Scott's neverfailing encouragement, I kept going, despite all the discomfort. I watched my mind try to run from the discomfort and didn't let it. I pushed through and crossed the finish line—one of the most triumphant moments of my life.

I will forever be grateful for Scott's persistent support, but I also realized that I had provided myself with

an internal support system, too. After all, I'd been training my mind to be OK with discomfort for years. I'd quit smoking, run several marathons, focused on giving up sweets and other foods I loved, overcome procrastination ... all of this wouldn't have been possible if I'd let my mind run at each sign of discomfort. My training had paid off.

What I've learned over the years, through some difficult habit changes, is that you don't have to listen to your Childish Mind, and you can work despite the discomfort.

If you meditate, you can sit in discomfort, even if the Childish Mind wants you to get up and go do something else. If you run, you can keep running even when things get uncomfortable and hard. Same thing with any physical activity—there's a difference between actual pain, which is a warning sign that something's wrong, and physical discomfort, which is just a sign that you're not used to doing the activity this hard.

You can work despite fears (e.g., a fear of failure), despite being confused (taxes are a good example for me), despite not being good at something. These are all uncomfortable feelings, and yet you can still work while these feelings are occurring. It's not the end of the world if you're feeling uncomfortable, and you don't need to run from discomfort.

Practice working in discomfort a little at a time—don't start with ridiculously uncomfortable situations. I couldn't have done the 50-miler if I tried it nine years ago. When I started, I was simply trying to run for a *few minutes* despite discomfort. Repeated and gradual practice gave me the discomfort skills I needed for the more challenging tasks.

Get out of your comfort zone a little at a time, and expand your discomfort zone with gradual practice. Then you'll be ready for anything.

MISSION: PRACTICE WITH DISCOMFORT

Today as you do your habit, work a little longer on the habit than usual, to see what it's like to be uncomfortable and still be OK. Don't push deep into your discomfort zone—just dip your toes in and let yourself feel it in a safe way.

Also assess your second Habit Sprint in your journal: How many days in the last week have you done the habit? Did you face any obstacles? What can you do to overcome those obstacles in the next week? Add those obstacles and solutions to your Habit Plan.

See the mountains: Working with gratitude & appreciation

In November 2011, I went through one of the most grueling physical challenges I'd ever faced—the Goruck Challenge, a 13-hour military-style physical challenge with non-stop pushups, running, carrying huge logs, carrying teammates on your back, doing bear crawls and crab crawls in the sand and cold ocean water . . . all with about 60 lbs. of bricks in my backpack.

I'd voluntarily signed up for it, with the idea that doing it was going to make me feel like a badass. Instead, it made me feel like I had entered hell with a backpack on. At two different points, I was so exhausted and miserable that I wanted to quit.

Every time I found my mind wanting to get away from the discomfort, I would focus on the ground in front of me. I would try to get back into the moment, rather than the comfortable place I wished I was in (that was playing in my Mind Movie). I would see the ground, the grass, the sand, the bugs in front of me. I tried to notice it all, to soak it in and appreciate every detail.

And then I'd look up at the sky—the brilliant, bright, multihued sky that was the symbol of the gloriousness of life for me. And I'd be overcome with gratitude.

Are we almost there yet?

A metaphor I've found useful is a family road trip where you're driving and the kids are riding in the back seat. You're driving by some beautiful mountain scenery, and the kids are impatiently saying, "Are we almost there yet?" They're focused on the destination, and so they miss everything—the scenery, the conversation—along the way!

Our minds often work in the same way: we want to get to the finish line, or to that comfortable place, and that means we're missing out on the miracle of the present moment. When you notice that your mind has become that impatient kid in the backseat, missing the mountains outside and focused on how long this darn trip is taking, pause instead. Be compassionate with that little child, and then redirect its view to the mountains. Appreciate the mountains.

This little mind trick has helped me in every kind of situation I can think of: in arguments with my wife, in times when I lost patience with my kids, in workouts when I felt too tired to stick with it, in times of doubt about my writing or business.

I turn from the resistance and the doubt and the frustration and the discomfort, and instead try to notice and appreciate everything about the moment, the person in front of me, myself. And find a way to be grateful.

Each time, the resistance melted away, and I was happy to be doing what I was doing:

- An argument with my wife was only possible because I have a wonderful wife to disagree with.

- Losing patience with my kids is only possible because I have incredible kids who love me.
- Feeling tired in a workout is nothing compared to the fact that I'm physically able to do a workout, healthy enough, alive enough!
- Doubt in my writing is a part of the beautiful process of creation, which I'm lucky enough to be able to do for a living.
- Doubt in my business is a part of the joy of owning my own business, being my own boss.
- Illness with a loved one is difficult, but I often find myself grateful that I have that loved one in my life, sick or not.
- The death of my grandfather was terribly sad, of course, but I also found gratitude that I had him as such a profound influence in my life and for the great laughs he gave me.
- Losing my job a few years back was terrifying and demoralizing, until I found gratitude for being able to reinvent myself and to create a new chapter in my life.

And so on. Every moment has something to appreciate and be grateful for. I learned that finding this gratitude is a surefire way to melt away the resistance that plagues us all.

Once you're in that place of peace, you're free to act without fear, without anger or procrastination or frustration. You can now approach a situation with clear eyes, come from a place of curiosity, act with mindfulness and compassion. Melting away the resistance with gratitude is always a good idea.

MISSION: APPRECIATE THE HABIT

Today, as you do your habit, turn from the resistance and the desire to be finished or in a place of comfort ... and find things to notice, to appreciate and to be grateful for. See the beauty of the mountains and appreciate that beauty. Journal about your gratitude.

Turn toward the fear

I remember very clearly how I would treat my bills when I was deep in debt: I wouldn't even look at them. Just stuff them in a drawer and try to pretend they weren't there.

It wasn't that I didn't want to pay my bills—I just couldn't. I didn't have enough money. This prospect of not being able to pay my bills was terrifying, and even looking at the bills would fill me with a sweat-drenched fear. So I would try not to even think about it, even if in my heart I would have to admit I did think about it, too much. The fear was still there, but I would try to drown it out with beer and TV and sweets and fried food and shopping and the Internet and other distractions.

The same thing happened with my weight problems: I would try not to look too long in the mirror. I knew I was getting way too overweight, and that it wasn't healthy and didn't make me feel good. But I didn't want to face this problem, because it seemed insurmountable, too overwhelming.

But the truth is, these problems are not made better by ignoring them, by turning away from the fear. They are

solvable, if you tackle them a little at a time. I'm proof of that, because I solved the debt and weight problems despite years of struggle.

With my debt, the turning point came when I finally took a deep breath and pulled all the bills from the overstuffed drawer. I took them out, and one by one, I made a list of the things I needed to pay. This wasn't that hard a step—it's just making a list. But with this one little step, I was taking control of things and facing my fear and starting on the path to recovery.

The first step to recovery was turning toward the fear.

The same thing happened with my weight: the recovery came when I finally faced the problem and decided to take some positive steps. I started running, then doing pushups. I started eating more fruits and veggies and less of the sweets and fried foods. I started looking at the scale (something I hadn't done in years) and eventually even taking pictures of myself, so I could see the difference over time.

What I learned is that the little child inside us, this Childish Mind, doesn't want to face the fear. It's too overwhelming. So it hides, and runs, and avoids.

But we do not need to be ruled by this little child. We are not our Childish Mind. We can be the adult that takes the little child in our arms, and gives it a hug, comforts it, accepts it as it is, and then helps it take action.

I learned not only to turn toward my fear, but to accept it as a phenomena inside me, just another passing cloud. It was only a feeling, and it would not go away if I tried to avoid it. It went away when I turned toward it and accepted it and comforted it.

Try this the next time you find yourself turning away from the fear inside you. Turn toward it, and see the cowering little child that doesn't want to face its fears. Comfort the child, accept the fear. And then take action, despite the fear, doubt, discomfort and frustration.

MISSION: JOURNAL ABOUT A FEAR

As you do your habit today, be mindful of any fears you have. See that they are passing clouds that won't drown you in their thunderstorm forever. Turn toward the fears, accept them, comfort them, then do the habit anyway, with gratitude. Journal about the fear.

Flowing around disruptions

In 2008, I signed my first book deal and hunkered down to write what would end up as my first print book, *The Power of Less*. It started off fairly well, with me outlining the book quickly and writing on a regular basis. I was happy and felt great about my anti-procrastination writing abilities.

Then the plans got derailed when Eva and I had our second wedding (this time in church) and went on our honeymoon in Thailand. It was a breath-taking trip, but the writing I'd planned on getting done didn't go as I'd imagined. My plan was to get a bunch of writing done in the early mornings, but I have no idea what I was thinking. It just didn't happen.

It actually made me feel pretty bad during parts of our honeymoon, as I kept putting off the writing to be present with my honey, and enjoy our vacation in a beautiful new country. This went on for almost three weeks: putting off writing, enjoying the trip, but feeling bad about myself.

When I got back from the trip, I was tired and I'd missed the kids so I wanted to spend time with them ... and I kept putting off the writing. I still felt really bad about my

procrastination, and my self-image as a disciplined writer was shattered. I felt guilt, I felt a lack of self-control, and I avoided all these bad feelings by continuing to avoid writing.

Why we get derailed

This process of getting derailed from my good habits and routines has happened a bunch of times for me, and it's one of the most common habit problems of the thousands of people I've coached.

The most common reasons we get derailed from habits:

1. Busyness with work.
2. Travel.
3. Illness.
4. Family crisis.
5. Exhaustion or lack of sleep.
6. We forget (if the habit is still young).
7. Procrastination or distraction.

This happens to everyone at some point or another. But why? Because plans are just ideals, not reality. Because we're overly optimistic about how much we can do, and in reality we can usually only do about 20 percent of that. Because things change, and yet we expect habit plans to stay the same, and we feel bad about it.

And because once we get a little derailed due to a change, we feel bad about that and then are actually less likely to get back on track.

Water vs. train tracks

The problem is that we see these habit plans as train tracks: we are the train, and we've laid out a track (the Habit Plan), and we expect things to go smoothly as we ride nicely along the track. Unfortunately, if the tracks get bent, we go off the rails and crash. This is a bad model for habits, or plans or expectations in general.

So what's a better model than train tracks? The flow of water.

Let's say water is running down a hill (because of, you know, gravity) ... and it encounters a rock in its path. Does the water get thrown off its path and crash, never to recover? No. The water flows around the rock, as if it had planned that all along. It finds a new path, and when it hits a tree, it flows around that, and then it flows around a little hill, never flinching or pausing to bemoan its fate.

We need to be like that water. Flow, adjust, find a new path as the landscape changes. Plans are just directions, not tracks. We are going in that direction, and we'll be damned if we're going to be stopped by a little bump in the road.

What this means in practice is that if you get derailed for some reason ... well, don't say you're "derailed." Say you're "reflowing." Notice that things have changed since you made your plans, forget about the original plan, and adjust what you do based on the new landscape.

That means if travel stops your exercise habit, don't feel bad. Adjust by finding a new kind of workout you can do anywhere and make time to do it before you go out of the hotel room for the day.

If sickness stops you from doing your writing, that's OK. Focus on getting better, because that's your priority at the moment, and then when you feel better, adjust by making a new writing Habit Plan.

You might also reassess whether you want to be doing the habit at this time, given what has changed, what your priorities are at the moment. If you are on your honeymoon, and you decide it's more important to be with your honey than stick to your book-writing plan, perhaps it's time to assess whether the writing on your trip was a good idea in the first place.

Take disruptions in stride and adjust as you go along. This is an amazing skill that will help you from getting derailed by an interruption.

MISSION: MAKE A FLOW PLAN

Take a moment to consider whether you've gotten disrupted from your current habit yet. If so, what can you do to flow around this disruption? What can you do to adjust your plan to the new circumstances? If you haven't been disrupted yet, think about the things on the list above that are most likely to disrupt you in the near future. What can you do to adjust if one of those things happens? Start adopting a flow mentality today.

❁ PART IV ❁

Mastering Change & The Heart of Any Problem

In this section, we'll go beyond the habit change we've been creating and learn to master habit change, and change in any form. As we do so, we'll learn to deal with the heart of any problem: attachment and clinging.

The heart of any problem

We've explored the resistance and other obstacles that cause problems with habit changes, but I'd like to go a little deeper and look at all of our problems, not just habit change.

We face lots of problems in life—frustration with others, unhappiness with ourselves, procrastination and distraction, self-doubt, being stuck, financial problems, and more.

What I've learned is that pretty much all of these problems are really just one problem—the One Problem we talked about in the Introduction. And if we can get to the heart of that one problem, we can learn to deal with any problem.

All our problems are One Problem

Let's first look at the kinds of problems most of us face:

- Distraction.
- Procrastination.
- Self-doubt.

- Unhappiness with ourselves.
- Anger at our spouses or kids.
- Frustration with a co-worker.
- Anger at other drivers in traffic.
- Failure at habit change such as exercise.
- Unhappiness with our bodies.
- Indecision or self-doubt.
- Being held back by fear.
- Relationship problems.
- Annoyance with people who make bad choices.
- Loneliness.
- Difficulty forgiving yourself or others.

In Buddhist terms, these are all forms of “suffering.” I know, it’s not the kind of suffering you might normally imagine, like someone dying of a painful disease or being tortured by captors. But it’s a form of suffering, in that we are unhappy or dissatisfied or feeling bad in some way. It’s a low-grade but constant suffering, like a toothache that makes you cranky and hard to be around.

What’s at the heart of all these forms of suffering? It turns out, we’ve already seen it in our explorations of habit change: it’s the Mind Movie, and our attachment to this story, this image in our heads.

As Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron has said, it’s not the things that happen to us that cause us to suffer, “it’s what we say to ourselves about the things that are happening.” So the suffering isn’t created by the other person’s actions, or our failure to stick to a habit, or bad external circumstances . . . but by the Mind Movie we’ve made up about those things.

Let’s look at some examples:

1. Matt is upset that his business isn't doing as well as he'd planned. The problem isn't in the business, which after all is just the market telling him what it thought of what he had to offer at that time. The problem was that he had an ideal about the business's success (and his own success) that the reality of the business was failing to meet, so he became upset. His Mind Movie is about him succeeding as a businessperson, and he has attached his self-worth to this image. The loss of this image is devastating to him.
2. Sarah is frustrated because she can't stick to a diet. The problem isn't in the foods she's eating or her level of "discipline," but in her feeling bad about the reality of her eating not meeting her ideal, and this feeling of guilt and self-hatred leads to her wanting to comfort herself with food. The problem also lies in Sarah's not wanting to deal with the discomfort of eating a different diet than she's used to—the reality of this discomfort doesn't meet her expectation or ideal of being comfortable and enjoying her food.
3. Kayla is tired of working out and just wants to play video games. The problem isn't the difficulty of the workouts, but that the discomfort of working out doesn't meet her ideal of being comfortable. She'd rather quit than face this reality.
4. Chris is stuck in his job, unhappy, and afraid to start the business he's always wanted to create. The problem isn't his job, which after all is fine but doesn't meet his ideal of owning his own business and working for himself. The problem isn't that starting a business is too scary, but that it's not full of certainty that he'll know what he's doing and succeed at it. He has

an ideal of complete comfort and success, and his fear is that it won't come true.

5. Julie procrastinates on writing her book and goes to her usual distractions. The problem isn't that she's lazy, but that she also has an ideal of success and comfort, and she procrastinates out of fear of facing an uncomfortable task that has uncertainty and the possibility of failure.

We all face this One Problem of the Mind Movie, over and over, every day. In many forms. We cling to the Mind Movie we've made up and suffer when it doesn't meet up with reality. It's not that we have created the Mind Movie—it's that we're attached to it, and we cling to it tightly.

This is the heart of all our problems, and if we can learn to deal with this heart, we can cope with any life change, any frustration, any suffering.

Why we cling

Let's go a little philosophical for a moment, and look deeper into why we cling to the Mind Movies we've created.

If this attachment to our Mind Movies causes so many problems and suffering, why do we even do it?

We cling to the Mind Movie because it seems nice, and safe, and comfortable. Having an image of ourselves as a successful person, a good person, with comfort and happiness ... this is comforting. Thinking of ourselves as having no security, no comfort, no certainty ... this is scary.

So we fear not having this Mind Movie, the uncertainty and insecurity and discomfort of it. This fear drives us to cling.

But life is not secure, nor certain, nor comfortable all the time. It is everchanging, impermanent, unpredictable. We fear this impermanence. We fear the change.

So this is the central problem: life is impermanent, and we fear that. We want security, certainty, comfort, not impermanence and uncertainty. This is the central conflict, the tension between what we'd like (our ideals) and the impermanence of reality.

The solution, of course, is to embrace the impermanence. Embrace the reality of each moment. We'll go further into that in the next chapter.

MISSION: SEE THE SUFFERING

As you go through your day today, try to notice times when you're frustrated, angry, fearful, irritated, procrastinating, feeling bad about yourself. These are all forms of suffering. Learn to recognize them, and then see if you can find the Mind Movie playing in your head that causes the suffering. This takes practice, but it's there. Journal about it.

Dealing with the Heart

It was one of a number of days when I was in an argument with a loved one—I won't name names, to protect the innocent—but this time was a little different. I caught myself in the middle of frustration and anger with this loved one, and I thought, "What am I doing?"

I was mad because I wanted the person to be the way I wished them to be. Why couldn't they just be that way? Then I realized how crazy that was, to expect other people to be the way I wanted them to be. To expect the world to behave the way I wished it would. To expect reality to match up to my ideals, as if my ideals were more important than anything else.

This was the trap of the Mind Movie we discussed in the last chapter. We explored how this is the heart of any problem . . . but how do we deal with that heart?

In my argument, I was lucky enough to be able to pause. I saw the Mind Movie that was causing my anger, and saw how it was unrealistic and unhelpful. I thought, "What if I let go of this ideal (how the other person should act) for a minute, and just look at them as they are?"

Then I realized that I had two choices: I could either

wish they met up with my ideal, and be frustrated, unhappy, and harm my relationship with them . . . or I could melt into who they are and accept who they are, and see the beauty in who they are. And in the process, be happier, less frustrated, and a better friend.

How to melt

The choice was easy, of course: it's much better to accept the other person as she is. My problem was that I didn't want to accept her. I wanted her to meet my ideals. I resisted letting go of my ideals, and as we've seen, resistance can be difficult.

What worked for me was to melt my resistance. I imagined my resistance as a hard substance that created tension in my body, that was tightly holding onto my ideals, that resisted what the other person was doing. I had to melt away that tightness, that tension, and that resistance. This melting is literally a softening of yourself: your body relaxes, your jaw unclenches perhaps, your mind softens to the idea. It's not always easy, and it takes me some deep breaths.

In this argument, it took some melting, but it worked. I felt better, I apologized, I saw the beauty in this person, and I gave thanks for it.

See the plum blossom

It turns out that the answer for dealing with the heart of every problem is something we already dealt with as we worked on changing a habit: the Plum Blossom.

As the blossom reaches the peak of its beauty, it is

about to die. Think about this for a moment: as we behold this astonishing beauty, we might wish it would last forever. This wish is a Mind Movie: a desire, an ideal, for this beauty to stay with us longer. This desire, this wish, this ideal . . . it will only result in heartbreak, as the reality of this blossom is that it is dying and will soon be gone. Reality doesn't match our Mind Movie, so we will suffer.

Instead, we might breathe in the beauty of this blossom, but accept its impermanence. We might accept the reality of the situation, which is that the beauty is here for a moment but fleeting, soon to be gone. We might see the beauty in that reality—that the blossom is even more beautiful and poignant because it is transient.

This is how to deal with the One Problem: let go of the Mind Movie, and instead see the beauty in the reality of the situation. Appreciate it.

I let go of my expectations of my loved one and saw the beauty in who they actually were. And I was grateful for it.

If we can learn to appreciate others, or ourselves, or external situations, just as they are, we will be happier, more at peace. We can deal with any situation in peace, if we accept and appreciate the reality of the situation.

We can accept the Noisy Children and find gratitude for them.

We can accept ourselves for the beautiful people that we are and appreciate the wonderful qualities we actually have.

We can accept the illnesses that befall our loved ones and appreciate those loved ones while they're here, more poignant because of their impermanence.

We can embrace that impermanence, embrace the reality, and be grateful it is as it is.

MISSION: ACCEPT SOMEONE TODAY

As you go about your day, be mindful of your expectations and frustrations with other people or yourself. See the frustration, irritation, anger arise, and see that your Mind Movie (ideals, expectations, wishes) is the cause. Instead, see the beauty in the Plum Blossom of the person: they are who they are, and that is beautiful. Accept and appreciate them (or yourself). Journal about it.

Forget the Self

One day I was running in Golden Gate Park, and I lost myself.

I had been purposely putting my attention on my body, my feet touching the ground, the trees and air and light around me, and I expanded my attention to include all of this at once.

As I immersed myself in the moment, a funny thing happened: I disappeared.

Not literally, of course—my body was still there. And I didn't have an out-of-body or some other mystical experience. It was just that I lost focus for a moment on the idea that there is a Self called "Leo." I stopped thinking about myself, and it was really strange, because apparently I think about myself in some form or another all the time, in the background.

Of course, as soon as I realized that my idea of Self had disappeared, it came back. But the funny thing is, I've found that place again, numerous times, the more I practice being in the moment.

Who cares? What's the point of forgetting the Self? Well, if you consider that we spend a lot of our time suf-

fering in various ways because we're worried about failing or being rejected or not being good enough, you can see that all this fear and suffering is a result of worrying about the Self.

And if we can forget about the Self for a few moments, we're free of that worry.

Picture someone walking along, thinking to himself, "I'm special!" and seeing an image of himself in his head of how special he is. And then he runs into a tree, because he's so busy looking at that mental image of his specialness that he forgets to watch where he's going.

We're walking into trees all the time, thinking about our specialness. This is the Childish Mind we talked about earlier, wanting to be special and important and get attention and have everyone love it. The Childish Mind demands protection from scary things and comfort and pleasure. It doesn't care about other people as much as getting its way, not being attacked or criticized, not being in discomfort. And it gets angry if any of this is threatened.

An example: I want my book to be great, and everyone to think I'm a great (and special) writer ... and so I fear that it won't be received well, and people won't think highly of me (won't think I'm special). As a result of this fear of not being special, I procrastinate on the writing. I don't want to fail at being special.

Another example: I want to lose weight and get into shape, and so I'm motivated by this desire to be awesome and sexy (and special). But then not eating all the food I love, and having to do hard exercise, is uncomfortable—and I shouldn't have to be in discomfort if I'm special! So I put it off until later. Also, when I exercise, I

might feel awkward and ugly and clumsy and weak and sweaty and gross, which doesn't support our specialness. And so we put it off.

All of this suffering because of my Childish Mind's desire to be special. To be someone unique, honored, respected, loved. Which is a very normal desire, to be sure ... but what if we could let go of this need to be special? What if the Self that we put above all else could be forgotten for a minute, and we could just be in the world and enjoy the world and not worry about the Self?

Then doing the exercise habit would be easier, because you just do it and mindfully experience the exercise, as it is, without worrying so much about yourself.

Then writing would be easier, because you know you're doing it for someone else, not for your own glory, and so doing it becomes a pleasure, a way of helping, a way of giving rather than something that might result in you not being raised on a pedestal.

Do it for the love of others, not yourself. Do it to help others end their suffering, not to prevent your own.

We also don't have to be defensive when we think someone is criticizing us, because there's no special Self to defend. We don't have to be attached to finding pleasure and comfort for ourselves, because there's no special Self to build a comfortable nest around. We can let go of the defensiveness, selfishness, worry about rejection, worry about judgment.

How to forget the Self

It turns out you don't need to focus on banishing the Self, or erasing or destroying it. You simply forget about it for

a moment or two, maybe a little longer, by focusing on other things.

Let's say you're meditating. The Self, the Childish Mind, starts to assert itself, grumbling about being uncomfortable, worried about something you have to do later today, replaying a conversation you had earlier that was frustrating or embarrassing.

You see all of this, and you acknowledge the Self and its fears and desires. Watching this, you realize it's nothing new, same old Self, same old Childish Mind, and that it will pass.

Now you turn your attention on your breath, and stay with it for a moment. As you're experiencing the breath, *you forget the Self.*

In that moment, the Self is gone.

You can't simultaneously be fully immersed in the moment and also worried about the Self. You can switch back and forth, but you can't do both, or you're not really immersed in the moment.

So you focus on the breath, the body, the full range of shapes and colors and sounds all around you in the room you're in, and you are immersed in the present moment. In this instant, you have forgotten the Self.

Then the Self comes back, as urges and thoughts arise in your head, and you acknowledge these but know they will pass. They do, as you turn back to the present moment, and forget the Self again.

This is the process: acknowledge the Self but know that it will pass, return to the moment and forget the Self, repeat.

This is what we do when we meditate. We practice forgetting the Self.

We can do this in other parts of our lives. As we go for a walk or a run, we can immerse ourselves in that activity and forget the Self for a few moments. We can play a sport, ride a bike, wash dishes, take a shower, and be completely at one with those activities, and forget the Self. It's harder when the activity is more mental, like writing or talking, but even in those activities, there's the thought you're trying to express or process, and you can be completely at one with that thought.

Forgetting the self is as simple as putting oneself completely into the present moment.

MISSION: FORGET THE SELF

As you do your habit today, practice putting your attention on your breath, then your body, then on every detail of your physical surroundings, from light to textures to sounds to small things your eyes can notice. If your Childish Mind, your Self, tries to re-assert itself, smile, and then return your attention to something physical around you. Keep doing this process the entire time you do your habit.

Zen in the middle of chaos: How to get good at change

For about eight years, I worked in the newsroom of a medium-sized newspaper, covering sports and then later politics and then crime. This newsroom started out quiet in the mornings but would usually be thrumming in the late afternoons as the pace of news picked up.

Some days, chaos would break out. A huge disaster, like a plane crash or a storm, would send everyone scrambling, tensions would rise, everything would change. I would be in the middle of this chaos, and I was completely stressed out.

What I realized during one of these chaotic episodes was that my stress came from my natural order being disrupted, plans being thrown out and new information coming at me all at once. The situation wasn't stable, but constantly changing, and I wanted stability.

So I decided to let go of that ideal of stability and embrace the constant change. Be happy with the flux. I took a breath, smiled, and let the flurry of activity soak into me, and I embraced it. Then I took action, doing a task and focusing on that, not on all the other things I had to do. When something new would come up, I'd embrace

the change, let go of the task I was working on, and be entirely with the new task.

I smiled. I'd found Zen in the middle of chaos, without realizing it.

Whenever things get a little crazy, and my stress levels rise, this newsroom episode is the model for how to find peace despite the chaos of change.

I think of myself as a river: constantly flowing, continually changing, with new water and debris (events and information) flowing through it all the time. I could try to bottle it all up and keep things the same, but that wouldn't work because there's always new water flowing through. I can hope that my plans stay fixed and try to freeze everything, but the water flows too quickly to freeze.

In other words, all my attempts to control things should be abandoned, and I should just accept the ever-changing, everflowing nature of my life as a river.

It turns out that this model can bring me peace no matter where I am, no matter what's happening. If plans get disrupted, my day gets interrupted by a sudden crisis, information starts coming at me from everywhere, the pace of events starts quickening ... I just picture myself as a river, with all of this stuff flowing through me. I don't try to hold it, control it, freeze it, but I embrace the flow.

I smile, I breathe, and I focus on one thing. Then the next. Not holding tightly to any of them, or wanting the river to be any certain way.

Letting go of control

When we let go of the need to control our ever-changing lives, we also let go of the idea that we'll know how things

will turn out, or even that we know how things really are right now.

We have a need to know, but the reality is that we don't actually know how things will turn out. Plans and goals and ideals are just fantasies, perhaps predictions of the future but not the actuality of the future.

A couple of examples:

1. When I go on a trip, I like to plan out as many details as possible, including not only my flight but hotel or apartment where I'll be staying, a list of restaurants I might eat at, transportation, an itinerary, what I might need to pack, and more. This makes me feel in control, like I know how things will turn out, but the truth is that no trip has ever gone as I've planned. Things always come up, things change, the destination is not what I'd imagined, and new opportunities for exploration inevitably present themselves. This can be frustrating if I try to stick to my plans or expectations of how things will go. So instead, I could let go of the illusion of control, and the idea that I know how things will go, and plan as minimally as possible. Be open to what might happen, and be happy with however things turn out. I might even be curious to what this trip will be like, instead of thinking I already know.
2. When I have guests over, I do the same kind of planning, imagining how the visit will go, planning out meals in detail and maybe even a plan of what we'll do, preparing the house and the kids for the visit, and so on. Again, I get a feeling of control, and I think I know how things will go—but again, it never turns

out that way. I could end up frustrated by this, or I could let go of these ideas I have of how things will happen and be open to unpredictable events. There's no way to know how things will turn out when people get together. We simply don't know.

What I've found useful is telling myself I don't know what will happen. I don't even know the full nature of reality at this moment—how can I know what will come in the future?

I replace this feeling of not knowing with curiosity: instead of dreading something, complaining about it, being frustrated by it, fearing it . . . I can be curious about it.

It takes some time to become comfortable with not knowing—it's not something most of us have learned to be comfortable with. It takes conscious practice.

But once you're a little more comfortable with this idea of not knowing, you can see that curiosity is a more open stance, once that says, "Hmm, I wonder. I'd like to see what things are like, how they'll turn out. It could be really interesting!"

And so you approach each moment this way:

- with openness, not fixed plans
- with curiosity, not knowing
- with freedom, not control
- with trust, not fear
- with good intentions, not expectations of outcomes

This is the method for dealing with the constantly changing nature of reality. This is the way to become a master of change.

Building trust that you'll be OK

Let's say that you're going into a meeting, and you're nervous. You've planned and prepared, you have your objectives and goals, you have visualized how this meeting will go, but you are afraid. You think you might fail or are worried about what they'll think of you.

In this situation, you are afraid and nervous because you want things to go a certain way: you have a vision for what it will be like to succeed at this meeting, including how people should think of you. You have goals, expectations, fixed outcomes. You are trying to control this event.

Instead, try this: let go of this control. Sure, prepare, but don't think that it will go a certain way. Don't feel the need for people to think of you in a certain way, because in truth you can't control how people will think of you. Let go of your need to know how things will turn out.

Be open to what happens in the meeting and curious about how things will turn out. Instead of worrying what people will think of you, be curious about what kind of people they are. Be curious about what conversations will emerge.

If you do this, you'll deal with the relentlessly changing nature of the situation with calm, because no matter how each moment of this meeting turns out, you're OK with that. You didn't need it to be a certain way, and you were curious about how it would go. No matter what happens, *you learned something*. And that's a wonderful outcome.

In my life, the need to control still arises in me, but when I become aware of it, I'm much better at letting it go now than I used to be. I'm much better at accepting things as they come, rather than needing them to be under my control.

In this way, we become masters of change. Life will never go as we expect, but we become OK with that, we accept things as they come, we are open to them, we are curious. In the end, we have trust in the moment, which brings calm and peace as we flow through life.

MISSION: PRACTICE WITHOUT CONTROL

As you do your habit today, practice mindfulness during the activity, and envision yourself as a river that life is flowing through, not controlling the water but experiencing the flow of it. Practice embracing the change, the chaos, the flow.

Also assess your third Habit Sprint in your journal: How many days in the last week have you done the habit? Did you face any obstacles? What can you do to overcome those obstacles in the next week? Add those obstacles and solutions to your Habit Plan.

A note on your plan: Don't take this as a fixed plan, but rather a way to reflect on what environment works best for you, and a way to put in writing the adjustments and flows you're making along the way.

Progress gradually, change normal

When I first started trying to eat healthier, about nine years ago, I hated the taste of kale. I read that kale was very healthy, so I excitedly went to the grocery store and bought some, fantasizing about how this vegetable was going to change my body into a health machine.

Then I put some in a salad, and made a face. It was bitter! It was way stronger-tasting than the lettuce I was used to, so I didn't like it. And I didn't go back to kale for several months, the memory of my first kale experience leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

A funny thing happened, though . . . I gave kale another chance, and just added a little to the stir-fry dish I was making. It wasn't my favorite, but it wasn't too bad. A little at a time, I kept adding kale to various dishes, and I gradually came to think of it as normal, even tasting good. Now it's one of my favorite vegetables, and I eat it almost every day.

How does this change in my taste buds happen? Some new changes are so drastic that they create a shock in our brains, but smaller changes are more palatable. And eventually, over time, our minds adjust so that this new change becomes not different, but normal.

This happened to me so many times I lost count: I learned to like quinoa, brown rice, tofu, soymilk, tempeh, and so many vegetables. I learned to enjoy running, meditation, decluttering. All by making a small change, and then adjusting to it, then making another small change and adjusting to that, and so on.

This is the process of gradual change, and it's powerful. Our minds reject large changes when we try to undergo them, and yet we often take on big changes with enthusiasm only to fail after a few days or a week. Our minds are OK with small changes, and soon those changes become the new normal.

Think of it like this: if you plunge into really cold water, you'll be shocked, and you'll hate it. But if you go into water that's only a little colder than room temperature, it won't seem too bad. After awhile, it'll feel pretty normal. Then if the water's temperature drops a little more, it won't seem too bad, and soon that will become normal. You adjust.

When it comes to changing your life, don't plunge into the freezing water. You'll soon get out of the water and be afraid of going in again.

Instead, take a dip in slightly cool water. Make a very small change. Adapt to that, then make another. Gradually, through a series of small changes, you'll see amazing progress.

When I started running, I couldn't run for 10 minutes, so I ran for five. Then that became easy and I ran for seven. Through gradual improvement, I eventually ran a 5K race, then a half marathon, then several marathons. Last year, I ran a 50-mile ultramarathon. To me, that was amazing, but I would have failed miserably if I'd tried to

do that from the beginning. I'd come a long way, through gradual progression.

MISSION: TAKE ANOTHER SMALL STEP

If you've been doing your habit for a few weeks, you'll be pretty used to it by now. See if you can make a small increase in how long you do the habit today. Nothing too much, just a barely noticeable increase. Let yourself adjust to that for a week, then increase a small bit again. Gradually adapt and create a new normal, then gradually add a little more.

❁ PART V ❁

Habit Troubleshooting

If you're ever having trouble with a habit, feel free to come back to this section as a reference. If you haven't faced these problems yet, let's go through this section just to prepare you for possible bumps in the path ahead. Everyone has troubles sometimes—here's a practical guide to dealing with those troubles.

When others don't support our changes

I'm incredibly lucky—my wife Eva is not only drop-dead gorgeous but also supportive of my habit changes. Sometimes she even joins me! What fun that is: doing a workout challenge together, encouraging each other to stick to a new diet change, doing pushup challenges with the kids.

But I haven't always been so lucky. Early on, sometimes Eva would be resistant to some of my changes (though she was usually great). Other times, the kids didn't like our ideas of paring down or changing our diet. More often, the resistance came from other friends or family members who didn't understand why we were home-schooling or becoming vegetarian (then vegan).

Unfortunately, that's the reality we all have to deal with if we have other people in our lives. They often resist changes we make, or their possibly unhealthy habits stand in our way.

You're trying to eat healthy, whole foods, and yet your daughter eats goldfish crackers and pizza and Oreos. And she doesn't seem to want to munch on asparagus instead!

So what's a habit changer to do? Abandon all attempts at change? No. Force change on family members? Tempting, but not effective.

The answer is that there is no simple answer. This can be one of the toughest obstacles, because we don't have complete control over it. We can't force other people to be supportive.

What works? Let's take a look at some strategies. Try one, try two, or try them all, and figure out what works in your life.

Getting others on board

Here's a common scenario: you've read about some interesting change someone else has made, or perhaps saw a cool challenge you want to take on, and you've been giving it some thought. After a little natural resistance to the change, you've overcome that resistance and have arrived at the decision to make the change . . . and then you spring it on your significant other or entire family. They somehow aren't as enthused as you'd like.

That's because you have gone through an entire thinking process to arrive at the decision to change, and they are being asked to come in only at the end—after the decision has been made. That's not fair to them, because they haven't had time to overcome their resistance to this change, to go through the same thinking process, to consider the reasons, to find the motivation, to be included in the decision.

I've found a more effective method is to get all the people who will be affected by the change in on the thinking process as early as possible. Don't talk to them about it when you're near the decision-making point . . . talk to them when you first hear or read about the idea. Talk about why it's appealing to you. Get their input. Ask

whether they'd consider that kind of change. Talk about your motivation. Include them every step of the way, until the decision is made, and even after.

What people don't like is being forced to change against their will. So try never to make people feel that way. Don't ask them to change; ask them to help you change, once you've gotten to the decision. Say that their support is really important to you, and explain that while they are welcome to join you, they don't have to change. You just need them to help you make your change. Ask them to be your accountability buddy, someone to call on when you're having trouble, someone to report problems and successes to.

Accepting others as they are

The problem is that when you make a change, others in your life might unconsciously see this change as threatening. If you're going to quit smoking, aren't you saying that their smoking habit is bad? If you're going to stop eating fast food and sodas, aren't you saying that their diet of fast food and sodas is wrong?

We all like to think that we're good people, and when someone implicitly criticizes our way of doing things, this threatens this good self-image we have of ourselves. So your habit change might be taken that way, as a threat to their self-image ... and they're likely to react defensively, or might even attack you in some way. This isn't a good situation, obviously.

A helpful approach is to make it clear that you're not criticizing what they do, but rather trying to reduce your own suffering with this change. Try to make it clear that

you accept what they're doing—and if you don't accept what they're doing, you might reconsider your non-acceptance, as it is the real cause of conflict here.

How can you accept the bad habits of others? Well, put yourself in their place. Have you ever had bad habits? (Of course, we all have.) Did you like it when others criticized you or tried to force you to change? You didn't like being attacked, and you appreciated being accepted. This is how the other person feels, and if you don't accept their bad habit, you're not accepting them as they are. And they're likely to resent you and not support your change.

So instead, breathe, and let go of the Mind Movie you have of how they should be. Your ideal for them (no bad habits) doesn't match reality, and will only cause you suffering, so let it go. See the reality of the other person as they are and find something to appreciate about them.

Once they feel accepted, they're much less likely to be defensive and much more likely to support you.

Setting the example

While not everyone will be instantly on board with your ideas for change, I've found the best method of persuasion is being a good model for change.

When I started exercising, most of my family wasn't doing it. I tried to convince people, but I wasn't as good at persuasion as I thought. When they saw me exercising, at first they thought I was a bit kooky. Then they saw the changes in me, and how much I enjoyed it, and I would share how great it was, and over time, it inspired some to think about it.

That's what you can do—inspire people to consider something they wouldn't normally consider, just by setting a good example. No one else will do yoga with you? That's OK... keep doing it, and share your experiences. Do it nearby as they watch TV. Try not to be annoying, though.

Making changes on your own

If others won't get on board with your changes, ask for a minimum amount of support: ask that they give you the space to make the change on your own, without their help. This isn't a small thing sometimes—often people are threatened when someone in their life makes changes, or they don't like the disruption of their routine of doing things with you (eating junk food together, for example). You doing something on your own is a big change for them.

Ask for the space to do it alone, and ask that they not criticize or otherwise make it hard on you. If they are resentful, this makes it more difficult, but you'll have to make an effort to show that this is something that will make you happy, and you will do your best not to disrupt things for them. If that means you don't spend mornings together because you are out running, then try to create other time together, like in the evenings or on weekends.

When you make changes on your own, without the support of others, it's more difficult. You need to find other encouragement—I've joined running groups online, a smoking cessation group, and other similar groups. Facebook and other social networking tools can also be

helpful in finding online support. Often there are groups in your area where you can meet people in person who are going through the same changes.

Educate, with patience

When others opposed my changes, it was often because they didn't understand it. My extended family, for example, didn't understand why we were deciding to homeschool the kids. And that's understandable, as homeschooling isn't the usual way of doing things and isn't widely understood.

What has helped is patient education. When they ask questions or criticize, see that as an opportunity to talk about the change, to help them understand. This is a great gift, this opportunity, so talk with them in a way that isn't pushy or trying to prove that you're right, but shows how excited you are and how you'd like to share what you're learning about. If they seem put off, don't drone on and on.

You might also want to share books and websites and blogs you're reading about the topic, not in a way that insists that they change, but just to show what you're interested in and how they might learn more if they're interested. Documentaries, podcasts, magazines, and other good sources of information are helpful as well. You can't force people to read or watch, but you can make information available.

Have patience. Don't expect others to understand immediately just because you get it. Don't attach to the result of getting their understanding, but focus on the intention of being patient and helpful. The important

people in your life might not get quite as excited about this change, because it's not coming from them. They might not want to learn about it as deeply as you have. They might not want to support your change at all, at first ... but later, they might come around. Again, don't push or be obnoxious about it, but instead be patient, encouraging, with an attitude of sharing what you're learning and excited about.

Group challenges

One of my more successful strategies is creating challenges for my family. They aren't required to do the challenges, of course, but sometimes people like the opportunity to rise to a challenge. And they like making changes with others.

My wife and I have created eating challenges to do with each other (we call them Lean Out Challenges, usually after we go on a trip and gorge ourselves on unhealthy food). With the kids, I've challenged them to do push-ups, handstands, running, vegetarian experiments, daily drawing, and more.

Challenges are fun if you do them together. It can be fun to do it as a competition, or to offer rewards for people who complete the challenge.

Supporting their changes

If you want others to support your changes, you should also support theirs, even if you're not interested in joining them. When my kids or wife express a desire to make some change, I do my best to help them achieve that:

- I share my experiences and what worked for me, and how I overcame some obstacles.
- I share websites and books that help with that change, and often will buy books to help them.
- I'll do a project with them, or create a challenge we can do together.
- I run and workout with my wife, and created a workout log to help her track her fitness.
- I share vegetarian recipes with my wife (who is now vegan), and with my daughter, who one month decided to try vegetarianism.

There are more possibilities, but these are a few examples. When they see you supporting them, they now have a model for how to act when you want them to support your own changes in the future. It's not an overnight change that you'll see in your family, but slow gradual long-term changes.

MISSION: EXPLORE YOUR
CHANGE WITH OTHERS

Today, take a few moments to consider who your changes are affecting, who might feel threatened by your changes, and whether you accept them as they are. Think about how you might involve them in the change process in a non-threatening way, and whether they might be interested in a challenge. Take a few minutes to talk to them about your change and how they feel about it.

Guilt from failing

I was coaching a woman named Debbie who was struggling with her habits, and I'd given her a Habit Plan to follow. Basically, we decided to start with a simple habit of walking after work.

The walking habit was going great for her, and she was reporting her successes to me daily with great enthusiasm. She loved the change in her life and really looked forward to her walks.

Then one day she stopped emailing me. I didn't hear from her for a couple of days, which was unusual, so I sent her a message to check on her. I didn't hear back for almost two weeks, so I wrote to her again. She finally wrote back, and her email was full of shame. She'd failed, for various reasons, including not feeling good, and having visitors, and work getting hectic.

She felt extremely guilty about her failure, and the guilt stopped her from getting back on track. It stopped her from reporting to me, because she felt too embarrassed to report her failure. She felt horrible about herself.

It's impossible to overstate how common this downward spiral of guilt is when people try to form habits. I got

stuck in a quagmire of guilt for years, failing and feeling guilty, not wanting to admit it to anyone, not starting again because I felt so bad about myself.

The guilt, for Debbie and for me, was more harmful than the failure. The guilt stopped Debbie from doing the habit for a couple weeks, which is much worse than the several days of failure she experienced for various reasons. The guilt compounded the failure many times.

Guilt is a tough one, because it's one of those insidious feelings that we barely notice but that has such a strong effect on us. You have to learn to be aware of it, then let it go and counter it with something more positive. Tell yourself that when you slip and fall, it's just another lesson that will teach you to be better at change. I certainly wouldn't be as good at habits as I am today if it weren't for countless failures. So instead of letting failure make you feel guilty, make an adjustment and try again.

So what I told Debbie, and what worked for me, is to take a longer view of things: a failure is just for a day or two, or perhaps a week . . . but that doesn't matter in the long term. Missing a few days makes almost no difference in the course of a year. And the long term is what really matters, isn't it? Are we trying to be healthy and fit on one day, or for a lifetime? Over a lifetime, one day means nothing, but what you do on the vast majority of days is what counts.

Guilt is short-term thinking. Brush yourself off after falling down, learn from the mistake, and get going again as soon as you're able. Get back on track, and you'll feel great.

MISSION: SEE THE LONG VIEW

If you've missed the habit at all, and feel any guilt, try seeing the habit in the long view. What difference will the days you've missed matter over the course of a year? What harm can your guilt cause? What can you learn from the times you've missed, to help yourself in the long run? Journal about this.

Feeling tired, stressed, overwhelmed, or lacking time

When I started my habit journey, I was working long hours and coming home exhausted. And then I wondered why I couldn't find the motivation to stick to new habits!

It wasn't until I started to manage my energy better that I found the strength to really stick to changes. I think a lot of people are like that: they are tired and stressed out and don't know how to get themselves into a habit change.

All the habit strategies in the world will not work if you're too tired, stressed out, or overwhelmed by all the work and information that's coming at you. Our willpower only lasts for so long in such conditions before we give in to exhaustion and quit.

When your stress levels are high or energy levels are very low, it's hard to maintain any kind of discipline. You just want to be lazy.

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome this.

1. **FIRST, BE AWARE OF THE PROBLEM.** Take a moment to assess your level of exhaustion and stress. If you think this is the reason you're putting off the habit, then there are ways to deal with it.

2. IF YOU'RE TIRED, CAN YOU GET MORE REST?

This is the best way to deal with exhaustion. Many people simply don't get enough sleep. They're running on high octane all day, then stay up late and don't have enough rest before starting another high-energy day. You can do this for a little while, but eventually the lack of rest will affect you—you'll start dragging, feeling lazy and burnt out, and you want to procrastinate. You might even get sick. The best thing is to get more sleep at night, so start going to bed earlier. A good nap also helps a lot. Even just 30 minutes, though an hour is better, if possible.

3. TAKE BREAKS. Get away from the computer, and take a walk. This is the best way to deal with stress—find ways to de-stress during the day. Stretch. Move around. Massage your neck and shoulders. Get some fresh air. Talk to someone in real life. Take a hot bath or shower if that's available.

4. EXERCISE. I've found exercise to be one of the best ways to reduce stress. Ironically, it can be hard to start exercising if you're tired and stressed, but I've always felt a lot better after exercise, so it's worth putting some effort into starting. A fast walk, a good run, some strength exercises, a swim or bike, playing a sport. Not only does exercise reduce stress, but it helps you to sleep better at night. While it's good to exercise regularly, it's also best to have at least one to two rest days a week.

5. GET THE OVERWHELM UNDER CONTROL.

Sometimes you're stressed or overwhelmed because there's too much going on in your life or too much information coming in. There are ways to

deal with this. First, make a list of all you have going on right now. Now see if you can eliminate or put a hold on a few of them—simply send an email or make a call and tell people you can't work on this right now. Make a short list of three to five tasks you can actually work on today, and focus on the first item only.

6. **REDUCE THE INFLOW.** If you have information overload, see if you can reduce or eliminate some of the information coming in. Unsubscribe from things in email, RSS, Twitter, Facebook. Limit your time in these communication mediums to certain periods a day, so you can disconnect and focus.
7. **BREATHE.** Focus on your breath as it comes into your body and then goes out. Relax your jaw. Smile. Slow down for a minute. Return your mind to your breath. Let your tensions go out with your breath. Remind yourself that all that you have going on . . . doesn't matter that much. At the end of the day, life will go on. This breathing exercise is available to you at any time of day.
8. **MAKE YOUR TASK YOUR MEDITATION.** Just as the breathing exercise can help calm you down and return you to the present moment, so can working on a task. Close all programs and devices and notifications not necessary for working on your task, and be mindful as you work on the task. Notice your thoughts, breath, fingers tapping away on the keyboard, body as it becomes stressed or relaxed. This is a form of meditation, and you can do it for each task.

Not enough time, or having other priorities

We're busy, so we put off starting a change until later ... or start it, but then it gets sidetracked because we get busy. The best solution is something we've already discussed a couple of times: make the change smaller. If you just do two minutes a day, you'll have the time.

Note that this solution helps overcome a number of habit obstacles: not having enough time, not having enough energy, being overwhelmed or afraid of the change—which is why small changes are so incredibly important for overcoming obstacles.

But let's say other things take priority in your life for a little while. You're excited about a change, but then other projects or events take priority, pushing your change to the backburner. This happens quite often. There are a couple of approaches here:

1. Take a break from the habit if necessary, but make it a defined break—three days, seven days, etc.—and set up a commitment to someone else to start once the break is over or face an embarrassing consequence.
2. If you can, don't take a break, but instead learn to make your habit change a priority at all times. Go back to your Minimal Viable Habit (the smallest version of your habit) for a week, if things are getting overwhelming.

As you can see, these obstacles are common, but solvable. The most important thing is not to let your Childish Mind talk you out of the change, because of fear or

discomfort. Often the mind will rationalize not doing the habit because it's tired, or doesn't want to face discomfort, and instead it wants some kind of comfort. Be prepared for this by anticipating its objections and using one of these techniques to answer them.

MISSION: GAUGE YOUR ENERGY
& COMMITMENT LEVELS

Today as you journal, take an assessment of your levels of stress, tiredness, and energy for doing the habit. Assess your commitment to the habit and see if anything needs to be adjusted. If you're tired or stressed or other things are taking priority, put a solution to that in your Habit Plan and tell your accountability partner or team about it.

Quitting bad habits

By now, you've learned most of what you need to form a new habit like exercise or meditation or writing daily ... but what if you want to quit a bad habit?

Luckily, most of the concepts are exactly the same, but there are some additional complexities. It's because of this that I don't recommend learning about changing habits by starting with a bad habit. Start with the easiest version of the new skill, and only progress to harder versions after practicing for awhile. So start with small, daily, positive new habits for at least your first few attempts with this habit method before trying to quit a bad habit.

That said, pretty much all of the skills are the same, just with the added difficulty of having a really strong urge to do the bad habit. Quitting smoking turned out to be the hardest habit I've ever changed, because overcoming the urges to smoke was so difficult I almost didn't make it. Be ready to face similar urges with your bad habit.

But it's doable. I'm living proof that anyone can change their bad habits, as are thousands and thousands of others who've done it. I overcame those strong urges, and all the rationalizations for smoking that I used for years to justify the habit. If I can do it, you can. I'm not special.

Why make a change

Why quit cigarettes or all those sweets you've been eating? Isn't life short and meant to be enjoyed? Don't you deserve a treat?

Yes, these are the justifications I gave myself too. And they're a load of bull.

Life is short, so why waste it on pure junk? Those things don't make you happy—if anything, they made me less and less happy about myself. I've been happier once I gave up those habits and learned to be healthy and trustworthy to myself.

Eating healthy food is a treat. Living smoke-free is pure bliss.

But the biggest reason to change is that you love yourself. You don't need to harm yourself to find happiness and contentment. Taking care of yourself is a form of self-compassion, and the sooner you start, the sooner you'll feel good about how you're loving yourself.

The steps to quitting a bad habit

So let's say you're ready to quit . . . what do you do?

Try these steps:

1. **HAVE A DEEPER WHY.** When things get tough, you'll ask yourself, "Why am I putting myself through this?" And you should have a good answer. Be ready with answers for all your mind's weaseling. For me, quitting smoking was for my kids—if I didn't quit, they'd probably smoke as grown-ups. So I didn't want them to be plagued with bad health.

That was a powerful motivator for me. For others, you might do it to support the health of other people you love, or yourself.

2. **MAKE A COMMITMENT.** If you're ready to quit, commit to starting your quit 3-7 days from now. Mark it on your calendar and tell everyone about it. Make this a big deal in your head, so that you're fully committed. One of the biggest mistakes I used to make was thinking it would be easy, so I didn't fully commit. Tell the world, and count down the days.
3. **GET SOME ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT.** Tell all your friends to hold you accountable and to ask daily for updates. Create a blog just for this change, and share it with everyone you know on social media and elsewhere. Join an online forum about quitting this kind of habit, and ask for their support. Get an accountability partner who you give regular updates to, and who you have to call if you are getting a really strong urge (no smoking until after you call them). The accountability will cause you to pause before you give in to an urge, and the support is there for when things get tough.
4. **UNDERSTAND YOUR TRIGGERS.** Every habit is triggered by some event. For me, I would smoke after stress, eating, drinking coffee, a meeting, drinking alcohol, or being around other smokers. I found this out by carrying around a notebook and pencil for a couple of days and making a tally mark in the notebook each time I smoked. Then I wrote down the triggers in the notebook for a day or two—if I smoked, I'd look at what happened just before

the urge to smoke. This helped me to be more aware of the triggers, some of which you don't realize you have. The same applies to eating junk, shopping, chewing your nails, playing video games, watching videos or TV, etc. . . . each of these habits is triggered by something else. Write those down in a document titled, "Quit Plan." Put the date of your quit, your accountability system, your Why, and the triggers on this document. (Note: I've created a Quit Plan template—see the Appendix for the book's online resources.)

5. **KNOW WHAT NEED THE HABIT IS MEETING.** We have bad habits for a reason—they meet some kind of need. For every trigger you wrote down, look at what need the habit might be meeting in that case. For stress, obviously the habit is helping you cope with stress. Same thing for smoking after a meeting. For some of the others, it was helping me socialize. A bad habit can help you cope with bad feelings, such as sadness, loneliness, feeling bad about yourself, being sick, dealing with a crisis, needing a break or treat or comfort. Write these needs down on your Quit Plan, and think of other ways you might cope with them.
6. **FIND REPLACEMENTS.** For each trigger, find a replacement habit. For me, I had meditating and doing pushups for stress, taking notes after a meeting, reading with my coffee, talking with my wife as I drank wine (or friends if I were having beer), journaling after I ate. These replacements should meet whatever need the bad habit was meeting, ideally, for that trigger. Write these on your Quit Plan.

7. **HAVE REMINDERS.** What will you do to remember to do your new habits? Put up visual reminders everywhere, especially around where the trigger happens.
8. **TRY GRADUAL REDUCTION.** When I quit smoking, I went cold turkey and didn't allow myself a single cigarette. But more recent research supports the idea of gradually reducing your bad habit: instead of drinking beer all day, cut back by a beer or two for a few days, then another beer or two. Try eliminating one trigger at a time. This method of Slow Change lines up well with the gradual method of creating a new positive habit.
9. **LEARN FROM MISTAKES.** If you do mess up (and we all do), be forgiving, and don't let one mistake derail you. See what happened, accept it, figure out a better plan for next time. Write this on your Quit Plan. Your plan will get better and better as you continually improve it. In this way, mistakes are helping you improve the method.
10. **WATCH THE URGES AND DELAY.** You will get urges to do your bad habit. These are dangerous if you just act on them without thinking. Learn to recognize them as they happen, and just watch them rise and fall, without acting. Delay yourself, if you really want to act on the urge. Breathe. Drink some water. Call someone for help. Go for a walk. Get out of the situation. The urge will go away, if you just delay.

That's a lot to do in one habit change, which is why you don't start learning by quitting bad habits. If you've

formed several new positive habits, you'll already be good at some of these steps, so you'll be more prepared to take this on.

There are two areas of importance that we should discuss a little more—negative thoughts, which we'll talk about in the next chapter, and the need that the bad habit is meeting, which we'll discuss in this next section.

How to cope

Why is it that it's so difficult to break the bad habits that stand in our way?

Most people aren't aware of the simple reason: We don't know how to cope with stress and boredom in a healthy way.

The bad habits we've formed are often useful to us, because they help us deal with stress and boredom. Consider some of the bad habits that fit this bill: smoking, procrastination by browsing the Internet, eating junk food, drinking, addiction to TV or video games, compulsive shopping, biting nails. All of these habits fill a strong need: they are ways to cope with stress and/or boredom. We have formed them as coping mechanisms, and they stick around because we don't have better ways of coping.

So if we replace them with healthier ways of coping, we get rid of the problems of these bad habits, and start getting the benefits of better habits.

Some ideas for dealing with stress and boredom:

- Walk/run/swim/bike.
- Do pushups, pullups, squats.
- Practice yoga/meditate.

- Play with friends/kids.
- Create, write, play music, read when we're bored.
- Learn to enjoy being alone, instead of being bored.
- Take a daily walk and enjoy nature.
- Deal with finances, clutter, paperwork immediately, in small steps, so that it doesn't get stressful.
- Take control of a situation: make a list, get started in baby steps
- Learn to be mindful of your breathing, body tension, stressed-out thoughts.
- Get some rest.
- Learn to savor healthy food that you find delicious.
- Slow down.
- Take a hot bath.
- Learn to live in the present.

Each habit above will help you cope with or prevent stress or boredom. If you replace the bad habits with these, your life will be less stressful and healthier. You'll have less debt, less clutter, less fat, less disease.

But perhaps a more important tool for coping is to sit with the pain of dissatisfaction, boredom, stress. See that it is a passing cloud, and accept that the pain actually isn't that bad. You can sit with it without running away and give it some mindful space. You can stay with this discomfort, and wait for it to pass.

It's OK to have painful or uncomfortable feelings. If we realize that they're not horrible and that they're impermanent, we don't have to cope with them in unhealthy ways. We don't have to add to our suffering by using bad habits to avoid the pain.

MISSION: ASSESS YOUR COPING

I don't recommend you start tackling a bad habit yet, but it is worthwhile to consider what you use to cope with stress or boredom. If you have a negative coping mechanism, think about other ways to cope that you might try, and pay attention to what you do the next time you get stressed or bored.

Negative thoughts—I can't do it

Whether you're creating a new positive habit, or quitting a bad habit, there are some hidden obstacles that it's helpful to illuminate with our spotlight of mindfulness: negative thoughts.

When I was forming the running habit, lots of negative self-talk would go through my head: "I can't do this. I'm not strong enough. I want to quit. It's not worth it!" I would watch these thoughts, and I would imagine squashing them like bugs. These days, I wouldn't recommend squashing the thoughts, but it was helpful to be able to visualize them.

I learned to watch these negative thoughts when I was quitting smoking, and the negative self-talk would build up to a roar. If I didn't notice the thoughts, they'd have tremendous power over me. If I did see them as they happened, I could take action: squash the thoughts or rebut them with pre-prepared counterarguments ("You've done it before, so you can do it," or "You deserve to treat yourself with respect.")

Staying positive when things get uncomfortable is tough. But I've found it to be critical—as in, life or death

to a habit change. The right mindset is everything, because if you allow yourself to listen to negative self-talk, you'll fail.

See the negative self-talk, but don't believe it. It's your Childish Mind trying to get out of something difficult.

An overly optimistic mindset isn't necessarily helpful, because not everything is going to go perfectly. If you say, "This is going to be awesome, and I won't have any problems!" but then things don't go well, you'll stop believing yourself and feel bad about being wrong. Instead, be realistic: just tell yourself that you're strong, and you can do this. And that is true. Be realistic by telling yourself that things might not go as planned, but those are learning opportunities. In the long run, you're going to make it, because you're worth the effort.

You'll learn with practice that you can still do the habit even when your mind objects. You'll be fine even in discomfort. You don't have to believe the negative self-talk—instead of attaching yourself to these negative thoughts, see them as clouds that are passing and will soon be gone.

MISSION: PREPARE FOR NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

If you're not having negative thoughts about your habit today, you probably have on another day, and you will again. Start to watch for the self-talk, and spend a few minutes today preparing yourself for the negative objections. What will you say when your mind says that things are too hard, that you can't do it, that you deserve a treat

or a break, that you shouldn't torture yourself or put yourself through this? Have answers written down for every common objection you can think of. And be patient and compassionate with your Childish Mind, which just wants to be comfortable.

Automation & your second habit

One of the mistakes I made early on, as I started learning about how to create habits, was juggling multiple habits at once.

I was still trying to figure out how to quit the smoking habit when I started running. And in the middle of starting the running habit, I started massively changing my diet, then decluttering, then waking up early. That all went fine until I started to falter with one habit ... and it all came crashing down like a house of cards.

Don't build a house of cards like I did. It took me a little while of feeling bad about myself and my newly failed habits before I got back up and started to rebuild everything from the ground up. This time, I built a more solid foundation, because I learned that you have to get one habit firmly established before starting on the second one.

So I now recommend doing four successful Habit Sprints with one habit before moving on to the next. At this point, you start to get good at the habit, and it starts running on autopilot.

Running on autopilot isn't always a good thing—if you're stuck on autopilot and keep doing things that are

harmful (smoking, eating junk food, being angry), it's much better if you're mindful and consciously make a change for the better. But if you consciously make a helpful change and you stick with it for awhile, it starts to become automatic.

The automation process

In Chapter 4, we talked about triggers and tying them to habits in a heartbeat rhythm ... this one-two combination becomes automatic after a bunch of repetitions. They become bound in your brain through repetition, so that when the trigger happens, the urge to do the habit comes up automatically.

If you've ever driven home from work without thinking about it and arrived home not fully remembering having driven there, you've seen the power of triggers and habits. Driving home has become a series of trigger-habit responses for you, because you've done it so much.

The first few times you drove home on that route, you had to do it very consciously, taking note of when to turn and where ... but after a few times, it becomes a little more automatic, and after 50 times, you can do it without thinking. Visual signals (that oak tree, that church, that house) become triggers that automatically signal for you to make a turn, and you just go through a series of them on autopilot.

That's how habits become automated. You'll see this after doing a series of four Habit Sprints where you had a decent success rate (say 70-80 percent). So if you barely did the habit the first sprint, don't count that ... but if you got better the second sprint and did the habit five out of

seven days, that sprint helped you get to automatic. Do a few more sprints like that, and you will start thinking about the habit less.

That doesn't mean you can just forget about it completely. After about four successful sprints, it should be automatic, but you can't just abandon the plan and accountability you've been using. I'd say it takes about 10 good sprints in a row before things are fully on autopilot.

Starting a new habit

That said, after four good sprints, you can safely start a second habit and have the first habit be in maintenance mode. What's maintenance mode? It's where you keep an eye on the habit, keep up accountability, but don't need to remind yourself about the habit as much as it becomes more automatic. Instead of daily accountability, you might have weekly or semi-weekly check-ins. You should still have a big consequence for missing two days in a row.

If you have not done well for four sprints, don't start a second habit. Stay focused on improving your consistency on the first habit, or toss out the first habit and try something new, but don't take on two habits at once if you haven't done well for four sprints.

If you're ready, start the second habit the same way you did the first, with a habit plan and accountability and everything else (see the Habit Plan Guide in the Appendix). It will take just as much focus for this second habit, so don't take it lightly.

But the advantage now is that you should be a little better at creating habits. You've learned a lot from your first habit attempt, and the adjustments you made each week

with your first habit will help you take on potential obstacles with this second habit. With each new habit, you'll get better and better at change.

MISSION: ASSESS WHETHER TO
START A SECOND HABIT

Today, assess your fourth Habit Sprint in your journal: How many days in the last week have you done the habit? Did you face any obstacles? What can you do to overcome those obstacles in the next week? Add those obstacles and solutions to your Habit Plan.

Are you ready to move on to a new habit? If so, what will you do to put your first habit in maintenance mode? And what have you learned about habits that you can apply to the next habit?

The Zen Habits Game

Last year, I stuck to an eating habit challenge because my friend Tynan put on some pressure to keep me accountable: if I messed up with my challenge, he would throw a pie in my face . . . and we'd get it on video, and he'd put it on his blog. *And* he would be free to give any reason for my lapse that he wanted (and he could be creative), and I'd have to publicly acknowledge that reason.

Obviously, I was motivated to stick to the challenge. We kept a shared online spreadsheet where I had to log my progress and he could check on me. We had a rule where I could ask for exceptions in advance, to account for kids' birthdays and anniversaries and things like that.

One day, I opened the spreadsheet, and my heart sank at the message I saw: "FAILURE! You've violated the rules!" I couldn't believe it for a second, because in my mind I hadn't violated the rules. But in truth, I had. I'd taken one of my exceptions (my daughter's birthday) and split it into two half days . . . but I'd forgotten to ask if that was OK.

I bowed my head in defeat, and said I'd take my punishment (while protesting that I hadn't meant to violate the rules). Tynan, though, asked a panel of friends to make a ruling, and they ruled in my favor. I was spared!

I've had other fun challenges like that, and they're quite motivating. I've had group challenges with Eva and the kids, where we all get a big reward if we succeed as a group. We all did multiple sets of pushups—even our daughter Noelle, who was seven at the time—three times a week for a couple months, collapsing on the floor after our final set each time. We did it because group challenges get your butt in gear.

One habit game I really liked is one I did with my friend Toku (a mindfulness coach and blogger at Mind-FitMove), that he called HABITS. It's based on the basketball game HORSE, in which players get a letter of the word HORSE if they can't match a shot by another player. So if you mess up, you get the letter "H" the first time, then "O" the second time, and so on, until you spell the word "horse" and you lose.

HABITS is a similar game for creating a habit, where you commit to a habit partner or group to doing a habit for a month. If you miss a day, you get a letter from the word "habits" (so "H" for messing up once, then "A", and so on). You lose if you spell the entire word, and you have to do an embarrassing consequence like posting a video of yourself singing country music on Youtube.

The twist is that if you miss two straight days, you get two letters instead of one on the second day. And three letters on the third day if you let the streak of missed days continue. So if you missed one day, you get the letter

“H” ... but if you missed the next day (your second in a row), you get two more letters, so you’ll have “HAB”. And of course, if you miss three straight days, you’ll have the whole word “HABITS” spelled out, and you lose.

This twist that Toku created is great, because we all miss a day or two of habits in a month, but with this game we’d put some extra effort into not missing a second day in a row. I played it for a month with Toku and it was fun, and apparently he’s played it with several accountability groups he’s in.

Putting these ideas together with the Habit Sprint we talked about earlier in the book, I’d like to propose a new habit game.

The Zen Habits Game

Here are the rules of the Zen Habits Game, best played with a group of friends or family:

1. **COMMIT:** At the start of each week, make a commitment to at least one other person, or a group of up to 10 other people, to do a Habit Sprint. Commit to a habit, create a Habit Plan, with rewards and an embarrassing consequence, and share it with them.
2. **TRACK:** You start with five points. During the week, if you miss a day, you subtract one point. If you miss two days in a row, you lose one point for the first day, and lose two for the second day, so you’ll lose three points total if you miss two straight days. And three more points if you miss a third straight day. Keep a shared online document or spreadsheet, or use a

- group on a forum or your favorite social networking site, to keep track of how everyone is doing.
3. **STREAKS:** If you do five straight days, you get a bonus! Add one point. If you get your streak seven straight days, add two more points.
 4. **REVIEW:** On the seventh day, after doing your habit, do a Habit Review and share it with your habit partner or group. How many points did you lose? What got in the way? What will you do next time to overcome those obstacles? Put the solutions on your Habit Plan, and the plan will get better with each sprint. You get two points for doing the review.
 5. **SCORE:** So the best possible score is the original five points, plus three for a seven-day streak, plus two more for the review—for a total of 10 points. If you do that, you were perfect! Give yourself a reward and bragging rights. The worst possible score is 0, if you missed a few days in a row and didn't do the review. If you ended up with 0, do the embarrassing consequence.
 6. **LEVEL UP:** Do the Habit Sprints each week, and start your score back at five each week. Aim to get a better and better score each week. If you get better this week than last, or remain at 10, give yourself a reward. If you get two or more points worse than last week, give yourself the embarrassing consequence.

So basically, you get points for keeping a streak going and doing the end-of-the-week review, and you lose points for missing days, especially if you miss two or more straight days.

You get rewards for having a great week or for improving each week, and you get embarrassing consequences if you miss a lot of days and don't do the review.

This is a fun game to play with a group. You can each have a different habit, but hold each other accountable. Try to encourage each other to stick with it—if you can all average a score of 30 after four Habit Sprints, maybe give yourselves a big group reward, like a group day trip somewhere or some kind of party.

FINAL MISSION: SET UP
A ZEN HABITS GAME

Today, pick one or more friends to join you in the Zen Habits Game. Share the rules (also available at zenhabitsbook.com/game) and challenge them to do this with you. This could be a great way to finally stick to those habits you've all been wanting to form!

This is the final mission of the book, so if you've done all the missions through today, consider yourself a winner of the challenge I issued at the beginning of this book. Congratulations!

❁ PART VI ❁

The Change Process & Life Problems

The ideas in this book are useful not only in creating new habit changes but also in dealing with any change: major life changes, frustrations when things go wrong, frustrations with other people, procrastination, stress and being overwhelmed, finances and health and fitness issues. We'll take a look at how to apply these ideas in different areas in life.

The Zen Habits Method

Recently my family had to move from San Francisco to Davis, California because of an illness that Eva's father has been dealing with. This led to some major life disruptions: we had to find a house, buy a used car, move to a new city, adjust our lives to this new place, all while Eva (along with the rest of us) was struggling to cope with the illness of a close loved one. I also had a pretty major workload and a lot of logistical things to deal with on top of all this, and a family trip coming up.

In the middle of these major changes and struggles, I found myself calm. Sure, these were all new things to deal with, but somehow I wasn't panicked, sad, angry, or otherwise suffering too greatly.

I realized why: I was dealing with everything one thing at a time, as much in the present moment as I could, with acceptance rather than wishing things were different. I let go of the Childish Mind that wanted things a certain way and just re-adjusted as things changed.

This gave me peace. Sure, I missed San Francisco. And of course my father-in-law's illness, and Eva's grieving that

resulted, made me sad. But I saw all of these life changes as a part of life and that helped me cope much better.

As you've worked through this book, you've been learning one concept at a time about change, as each concept applied to habits. Today we'll look at how they all come together, not only for habit change but for living a life that's filled with change. For coping with life changes, small and big.

We're going to call it the Zen Habits Method: a method for creating and dealing with change. It will pull together ideas from previous chapters.

The Zen Habits Method

Here's the method in short—we'll go into each item in a little more detail.

1. **SPOTLIGHT:** Be mindfully in the moment.
2. **PLUM BLOSSOMS:** See everything as change (impermanence), and embrace it.
3. **CREATE A SPACE:** Deal with things as they come, one at a time.
4. **MIND MOVIE:** Don't be attached to expectations and ideals.
5. **GROW A PLANT:** Focus on Intentions, without attachment to Outcomes.
6. **CHILDISH MIND:** Let go of the Self that wants the ideals.
7. **SEE THE MOUNTAINS:** With Appreciation and Gratitude.
8. **DEWLIKE LIFE:** Don't waste a moment.

With these interrelated ideas, we can take on anything: illness, loss of a job, unhappiness with someone else, being overwhelmed, procrastination, financial problems, and more. We'll go into a little more detail in upcoming chapters.

I think of this method in a little (unrhyming) poem:

*Be in the moment, embracing life's impermanence
Deal with things as they come, without expectations,
without ego
With good intention, appreciation and gratitude
Without wasting a moment*

OK, I'm not a great poet. Let's go a little further into the method before seeing how it's applied to various areas in our lives in the next few chapters.

1. Spotlight

Recall the Spotlight of Mindfulness we discussed in Chapter 9 that makes everything else in this method possible. Without mindfulness, you won't be able to see your Mind Movie or Childish Mind, you'll forget to have appreciation and gratitude, you won't remember to have good intentions, you won't see your attachments to outcomes or ideals.

Be mindfully in the moment, as much as you can. You won't be able to be mindful all the time, but when you are dealing with a frustration, a major life change, stress or any other type of suffering, turn on the Spotlight of Mindfulness.

2. Plum Blossoms

In Chapter 15, we contemplated the impermanence of the plum blossom, and everything else around us. If we can see that everything in life is change, that everything is impermanent . . . we can either hate that change or embrace it.

I say embrace change. Love impermanence. It makes growth possible, life possible, love possible. Let the possibilities of change fill you with a sense of wonder. See everything as change and impermanence and embrace it.

3. Create a Space

In Chapter 1, we talked about Creating Space for your change and doing one habit at a time. Well, whenever we have new changes coming at us, give each one of those their own space. You can't focus your attention on 10 things at once anyway—all you can do is switch between all of them, either giving them the full space and focus they deserve, or switching quickly and giving them insufficient focus.

We can't plan and prepare for everything, because we can't predict the future, and as things change, plans will be disrupted. Instead, be prepared for anything by dealing with things as they come, one at a time, giving each one the space it requires.

4. Mind Movie

One of the central themes of this book is the Mind Movie: the stories and images playing in our heads that

we become attached to. These are our ideals, our expectations, our fantasies of what life should be or could be.

As we've seen, attaching ourselves to these ideals and expectations is the cause of frustration and suffering. It can cause us to abandon a habit change and also to be unhappy with ourselves, unhappy with others, unhappy with our life situation. All because of a made-up Mind Movie.

Instead, don't be attached to expectations and ideals, and accept reality as it is.

5. Grow a Plant

In Chapter 12, we discussed the idea of how a plant grows: you focus on giving it the right inputs (intentions and effort), like water and sunlight and nutrients ... but you don't control the outcome of the plant. It grows how it will grow. All we can control are intentions—we don't control outcomes.

As we approach any situation, we should focus on intentions, without attachment to outcomes.

6. Childish Mind

Another central theme of this book has been the Childish Mind—that young child inside of us that wants its way. It doesn't like discomfort or uncertainty, and it wants comfort and the Mind Movie it has created. This causes us all kinds of problems, not only by creating the urge to quit habits but also by building frustration throughout our lives.

Instead, let's not listen to the Childish Mind. Let go of

the Self that wants the ideals, and we can live life more consciously.

7. See the Mountains

In Chapter 22, we talked about the passenger in the back seat of the car who is so focused on getting to the destination, repeatedly saying “Are we there yet?” while missing the scenery of the beautiful mountains the car is passing. Instead, don’t miss out on the miracle of the present moment.

See each moment, and each person in your life, with Appreciation and Gratitude. There’s something to be appreciated, and to be grateful for, in everything.

8. Dewlike Life

In Chapter 3, I shared Zen master Dogen’s ideas about “this dewlike life” fading away and how we should “be-
grudge every moment of time.”

If we remember the fleetingness of this life, we can appreciate each moment for the precious gift that it is and spend each moment on something important: being compassionate to others, improving our health, creating something amazing, improving our habits, not being angry with others. Don’t waste a moment.

Dealing with major life changes

When I moved my family of eight (Eva, me and the six kids) from the tiny tropical island of Guam to the relatively big city of San Francisco, I was full of optimism. And scared beyond belief.

While I was mostly sure this would be a great move for our family, I was nearly frozen by doubt. My kids were in tears, because we'd left behind everything and everyone we'd ever loved: an extended family network of literally hundreds of people who were our best friends, our support, our home. It felt horrible to see their broken hearts.

After a couple weeks of staying in my cousin's apartment and house-hunting, we finally spent the first night in our new house in San Francisco. It was freezing. We spent the night with barely any blankets, because we hadn't thought to buy very many, and I woke in the early morning numb with cold. When I discovered that we had central heating that worked (unheard of in hot and humid Guam), I was overjoyed!

Our new home warmed up then, but it took the kids months to warm up to our new city, and even longer to call it home. Eva and I had to make new friends, as we had

none, and we had to learn our way around this strange new place.

This was one of the biggest life changes we ever faced, and yet we survived. We now love San Francisco and will always think of it as one of our dearest homes.

The lessons I learned while dealing with this major life change, and helping my family through it, taught me a lot that I now use in any life change.

You might be facing such a life change now:

- Loss of a job, or starting a new job.
- Starting a new business or venture.
- Starting a project that scares the crap out of you.
- Loss of a loved one (see next chapter).
- Being diagnosed with a major illness.
- Suffering a major injury.
- A loved one getting a major illness.
- Moving to a new home.
- Losing your home.
- Losing everything in a natural disaster.
- Going to a new school.
- Transitioning to a new role in your job.
- Transitioning to a new phase in life.
- Becoming a parent.
- And so on.

The list of major life changes could stretch several pages, but basically it's anything that takes a major shift in mindset, that gets you out of your comfort zone in a drastic way, that scares and confuses you and fills you with uncertainty.

In any of these changes, your idea of who you are is forced to shift. If you move to a new place, you're no longer "Annie from Ohio" but now "Annie who is a newcomer in New York City." If you lose your job, you're no longer "Tim the accountant at Deloitte" but now "Tim the unemployed accountant who was fired."

This shift in your identity is often the hardest to deal with, greater than the actual loss in income or difficulties finding your way in a new city. We get used to who we think we are (our Mind Movie of ourselves), and our Childish Mind doesn't want the change.

Luckily, we have the Zen Habits Method for dealing with this shift.

Let's walk through my move from Guam to San Francisco.

How to deal with a move

When we moved to San Francisco, we had to shift from thinking of ourselves as "Guam people" and "having lots of friends and family" to "newbies in a city" and "barely knowing anyone." This was difficult, especially for the kids.

Let's apply the Zen Habits Method to this change:

1. **SPOTLIGHT:** Try to be in the moment as we walk around and live in San Francisco, seeing our suffering with this new change as it arises.
2. **PLUM BLOSSOMS:** See that this move is a part of the change-nature of life, but even if you didn't move, there would be change every day, just less

pronounced. Embrace the change in your life, as something new, exciting, full of learning and growth opportunities, an opportunity for reinvention.

3. **CREATE A SPACE:** This major life change is filled with lots of smaller changes, from having to make new friends, to finding a new house, to figuring out who you are now. Deal with each of these things one at a time, as they come, giving each their own space.
4. **MIND MOVIE:** See that you have a Mind Movie for what your life should be—which is what you liked about your life before—and that attachment to this ideal might be causing you suffering. Finding compassion for yourself, let go of the attachment to this ideal, and see what the reality of your new life has to offer.
5. **GROW A PLANT:** As you deal with each change, focus on the Intention of being mindful and of not being attached to your Mind Movie, but don't be attached to the Outcome of being unattached. You can't completely control your mind's attachment, but you can practice the Intention of letting go, and see what happens. Don't be discouraged if you don't get the Outcome you want.
6. **CHILDISH MIND:** Your mind wants to go back to what it was comfortable with and wants to hold on to the idea of yourself that you're used to. This Childish Mind wants to get what it wants and thinks that it is all-important. Instead, let it complain, but don't take it seriously. It's not important.
7. **SEE THE MOUNTAINS:** Instead of focusing on what you've lost, look at what is in front of you right now. Find things to appreciate about your current

reality, about the change you're undergoing, about the opportunities that come with this change. Find gratitude in the midst of this change.

8. **DEWLIKE LIFE:** Life is precious, so don't waste a moment of it wishing things were different, focusing on the past, wallowing in self-pity. Instead, make the most of each moment and appreciate each one for the wonder that it is.

As you can see, there's a lot of overlap in these steps, because they are interrelated. Each step is another way of seeing the same thing:

1. Mindfully see your ideal and the Childish Mind that wants the ideal and the suffering that results.
2. Now let go of that attachment and focus on what is in front of you: embrace the changing nature of life, appreciate what you have, and find gratitude for every moment of this dewlike life.

This is the basic method of dealing with major life changes.

Dealing with loss

For most of my life, I'd never had anyone close to me die—not a parent, sibling, aunt, uncle, cousin, grandparent, good friend. Then in 2009, my grandfather died. Joe Murphy wasn't just my grandpa ... he was my hero, and he was one of the biggest reasons I became a writer. I named my publishing company that published this book, Pipe Dreams Publishing, after his column that ran in the Guam newspaper for four decades.

This was a man who had been a major part of my existence for all my life, someone I loved dearly, and suddenly he was gone.

It was a shock to me, this loss, so great I couldn't hold it in my head, nor wrap my heart around it. I sat dazed as I watched my mom and her siblings sobbing with grief and wished I could take this pain from them and carry it away.

I didn't know how to grieve, having never done it, and so instead I did what I do best: I found gratitude that I ever had this man in my life, that he shaped me in so many ways. I'm not saying this is how everyone should deal with profound loss, but that's what I found comfort in at the time.

Perhaps the most difficult life change to deal with is when we lose a loved one. How can the Zen Habits Method help?

I'm not going to promise that the method will heal all wounds and take away anyone's grief. We're human, and we grieve when we lose someone we love, and that's OK. There is nothing wrong with grieving at all, and in fact I think it's necessary for the living.

The problem comes when we don't know how to move on from the grief and don't know how to cope. I'd like to talk about how to cope.

How to cope

First, let yourself grieve. Don't block it out, don't think that you shouldn't. Just accept your grief as a part of your experience. This grief, too, is impermanent, and will pass like everything else, but it's here for now. See it as a stormy cloud over you, but accept the showers of pain that wash over your upturned face.

Next, turn mindfully toward your grief. See the Mind Movie that you hold—that this person should be alive, a part of your life, not dead, and that you should be your old Self, the person who still had a father or mother or whomever it is you've lost. Perhaps almost as painful of the loss of your loved one is the loss of your old Self. This old Self has died and can't be recovered. See the ideal you have that this Self should still be alive (but isn't).

The suffering comes from wanting the Mind Movie to be true, even though it can't possibly be true. You wish things were different from how they really are, and you can't make your wish come true.

So see if you can hold less tightly to this ideal and turn to the reality in front of you. Your life is still pretty great, if you notice and appreciate everything about the current moment and find gratitude for what you have.

See if you can embrace the impermanence of life: yes, you've lost someone great, but the fleetingness of your time with anyone makes that time more valuable, something to be cherished, more sweet because of its evanescence. This ever-changing nature allows for reinvention, which means you can decide who the new you will be, what your new life will be. Because reinvention is possible—actually a fact of life—you were able to be influenced by this loved one while they were with you, as you couldn't have been if you always stayed the same.

Finally, let this death be a stark reminder of the impermanence of life, and let that reminder spur you to make the most of what you have left of this dewlike life. In this light, if the loved one's death is a lesson on making the most of life . . . then wasting life on wishing things were different would be a waste of your loved one's death.

Again, I don't pretend that this method will dissolve your grief, but perhaps it will help you to cope.

Other losses

Death of someone you love is just one kind of loss, though it is often the most severe. There are many other kinds of losses, both small and great:

- Loss of a job.
- Loss of a home or car.
- Loss from disaster.

- Loss of a limb.
- Loss of your youth.
- Loss of a romantic relationship (breakup or divorce).
- Loss of a family (if your parents get divorced).
- Loss of your health.

We'll talk more about illness and relationships in the next couple of chapters, but I just wanted to point out that the process of dealing with these losses is the same as coping with the death of a loved one.

Let yourself grieve and accept that grieving process as a part of life, though a temporary condition.

See the ideal, that the thing you lost should still be in your life, that you should be your old Self, and see how your Childish Mind wants that ideal and is causing your suffering because it can't have the ideal.

Hold less tightly to the ideal and turn to your reality, appreciating everything about it, finding gratitude for what you have. See the opportunity for learning, growth, reinvention, and embrace the impermanent nature of life in all its glory. Reinvent the new you, and let your loss be a reminder to make the most of what life you have left.

Dealing with health issues

The day comes when we all must deal with the loss of our good health—and we never know when that day will be.

For many people, dealing with major health issues can be perhaps the most difficult struggle we ever face. There's no way to overstate how difficult health problems can be, because they can change everything about your life, destroy your way of life, drastically affect your job and your relationships and your ability to do many of the things that you're used to doing.

The range of health issues is too wide to make a list, but you know them already: cancer, diabetes, dementia, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, paralysis and amputation, Lupus, bipolar disorder and OCD, and on and on.

How are we to cope with these nearly unsolvable problems? And what if a family member has one—how do we cope with that difficulty?

I won't go into ways to treat the diseases, to exercise or eat healthy or get medical treatment. This isn't a book about that.

I also won't pretend that this short chapter will dissolve all your problems if you're dealing with an illness,

or a loved one's illness. All I hope to provide is a strategy for coping.

First steps

One of the most important steps as you get started with coping is to take care of yourself. Comfort yourself and give yourself compassion, and take steps to form healthy habits that will put you in a good position to deal with the changes that are happening. Use the habits method in this book to form healthy eating habits, one at a time, along with regular exercise and perhaps yoga or meditation. Consider this a part of taking care of yourself.

Finding support from family, close friends, or a support group is also an important part of taking care of yourself. Talking to people about what you're going through, and learning to communicate your feelings, is an important coping mechanism. It's also crucial to be able to communicate with people in your life about your feelings about how the illness is affecting your relationship, without blaming any of them. Try to direct feelings at the disease and not the other person.

Finding others who are going through similar experiences, perhaps in an online support group, can help you feel less alone.

Finding Zen

Dealing with your resistance, frustration, and emotional suffering is one of the most important strategies you can use for coping with an illness. We'll take a look at how the Zen Habits Method can help.

Mindfully turn to your feelings and accept that they are a part of your experience, though each feeling is temporary, only a passing cloud. See the suffering that you're experiencing, and see the ideal that you are attached to that is causing the suffering: the ideal of being the Self that is healthy and free of pain, which is a Self that no longer exists in reality. See that your Childish Mind, which wants its way, really wants this ideal to be true, and is angry, frustrated, depressed, upset that it can't have this ideal.

Loosen your attachment to this ideal, which is causing you suffering on top of the actual physical pain and discomfort from the disease. Let your tightness around this attachment melt a little at a time. Let go of your previous identity, which no longer exists, and see your current Self for who you are, and your current reality as it is.

Embrace the changing nature of your Self, which was never an unchanging statue but always in flux, always learning and growing and renewing. This changing nature is beautiful and means that you can reinvent yourself now and in the coming months. Know that the disease isn't your identity, but a part of your environment, just a phenomena that is happening around you.

See the changing nature of your life, and appreciate this life you have in front of you—in reality, not in some ideal. Find gratitude for this life.

How can you find gratitude when you are sick and in pain? That's extremely difficult, but there are things to be grateful for: that you have others in your life who love you, that you can still experience music and food and art and film and books and nature, that you can still learn and create, that you are alive.

Finding gratitude and appreciating the reality of your life isn't easy, but this process will help during this difficult time in your life. And perhaps you'll find a way to make the most of what life you do have left.

Dealing with frustrations with others

I'll admit, a few times over the course of being a father, I've gotten upset with the kids. OK, if I'm being really honest, it has been more than a few times.

What did they do to upset me? Behaved badly, hurt one of the other kids, treated me disrespectfully, didn't clean up their messes.

But something I learned from Charlotte Joko Beck, author of *Everyday Zen*, helped me respond with a bit less frustration: *The other person is never the problem.*

The kids aren't the problem. They're going to behave imperfectly. The problem is my Mind Movie, my ideal, that they should behave considerately and quietly, not make mistakes, never make messes. In other words, I somehow have an ideal that they won't behave like human beings.

It's the nature of dealing with other people that we all get frustrated and angry from time to time. We take offense at the other person's actions. But the other person's actions aren't the problem—it's our attachment to the ideal we have of how they should behave, which of course is unrealistic, and the real problem is the Childish Mind wanting so badly for that ideal to be true.

Isn't the other person wrong?

It's difficult to accept that the other person isn't the problem because it really does seem like the other person is wrong. But consider this: other people will act in less-than-ideal ways every day, often multiple times a day. This is the reality. If we get angry every time someone else behaves imperfectly, we will constantly be angry.

That's not a prescription for happiness.

However, while we can't control the other person's actions, no matter how much we try ... we can change our own reaction through a change in perspective.

Consider these two cases:

1. Someone insults Sean's mother. Sean is understandably insulted, as his mother is very dear to him, is a very good person, and doesn't deserve to be insulted. Sean might say something, retaliate, or maybe he just gets angry and doesn't talk to the person.
2. Someone insults Jojo's mother. Jojo hears the words, and takes them as a sign that the other person is suffering (the low-grade kind of suffering), which is normal. We all suffer at some level. Jojo feels compassion for this suffering being, and wants to help reduce the suffering. He expresses a kind wish, internally and then externally, for this person. Perhaps tells the person a joke, or gives him a hug. Jojo might even reach out to his mother, if she's aware of this insult and has been hurt by it, and give her a hug.

Of course, Jojo seems to be an exceptional man, and perhaps we can't all be that saintly. However, these cases illustrate that the same exact external circumstance

(another person insulting a mother) can have different internal reactions, depending on how we view the external circumstance.

In the first case, Sean viewed the words as an attack on something he holds dear, and found it offensive because his mother doesn't deserve this kind of treatment. That's his ideal: that others should treat his mother with respect.

In the second case, what Jojo holds dear isn't the issue—Jojo makes the suffering of the other person the main issue and focuses on what he can do to help.

The first case is how most of us react to the external offenses of life and leads to anger. The second allows the person to be more at peace.

This shows us that the problem isn't the external circumstance, which we can't control—the problem is holding tightly to our ideal of how people should behave, which we can control. We cannot stop others from being rude—but we can loosen our grip on our ideals.

If we can react in a calmer, more peaceful manner, we will be happier. We will then act in a more compassionate way, smile, and perhaps the other person will be transformed just a little bit by this act of compassion.

Responding appropriately

But what if people you rely on are careless or irresponsible? Aren't they the problem, then? Sure, the other person is careless or irresponsible. This is reality—there will always be irresponsible people. You can't change that.

And so the question is, how will you deal with it? You can rage and get mad at them ... or you can let go of

expectations, breathe, and respond appropriately within this reality.

Responding appropriately can mean a lot of different things: talking to them calmly about the situation, taking the opportunity to teach them a better method, acting with compassion, letting go of trying to control the person and focusing on your own business, setting up a system that works even if people are careless. We might also figure out a way not to rely on careless people, while still including them and caring about them. We can also love and accept them as they are.

What's missing from all of the appropriate responses is anger and frustration, which only make the situation worse. Inappropriate responses are caused by anger. We always respond better when we remove the anger, and respond calmly.

There's a Zen story that I've found useful:

Picture yourself in a rowboat, rowing across a smooth, foggy lake. Out of the mist comes another rowboat, and the person rowing that boat rows his boat so that it bumps right into yours. "Why didn't he watch where he was going?" you ask yourself in frustration. Anger arises in you at this inconsiderate action.

Now picture the same scene, except this time *the other rowboat is empty*. The boat comes floating out of the mist, without a pilot, and bumps into yours. This time, you simply steer your boat around the empty boat and move on.

The first time, you became angry because you believed the other person to be inconsiderate. But the second time, you dropped your story about how the other

person *should have* acted, because there was no person in the boat. Without this story, you were free to simply respond to the event appropriately.

The second case shows us how we can respond appropriately once we drop our stories about how people should behave or how things should be.

Always act as if the rowboat is empty.

Don't assume bad intentions. Just respond appropriately.

The method for frustrations with others

What can we do when we're frustrated with someone? Let's try our Zen Habits method.

Start with awareness—to change our reactions, we must first be aware when these reactions happen. You can't change them if you're in automatic mode. Be mindful of your feelings, and of your ideals that you're holding onto that are causing these feelings. What do you expect of the other person? Does your Childish Mind not want to let go of those expectations? See how this is true.

Next, loosen up your attachment to the ideal you have for the other person and how they should act. Turn instead to see the person as they are in reality—see their suffering, their weaknesses, their imperfections, but also their love, their greatness, their strengths, their kindnesses. We are all—including you and me—a wide range of ever-changing qualities. Not perfect, not even all good, but a mixture of various characteristics, a mixture that is always changing.

Now, embrace the changing and wide-ranging nature

of people, including yourself and this person in front of you. Appreciate the person in front of you, good and bad, and find gratitude for having this person in your life.

Also, imagine yourself when you're suffering—have you ever behaved badly, or in a way that others didn't like? How did that feel? Did your frustrations ever come out in the wrong way? Imagine yourself suffering, and wish yourself happiness. Now do the same for the other person, who is also suffering in some way. See their suffering, wish them happiness.

Finally, vow to spend the time you have with this person in love, kindness, compassion, even when they're suffering and acting badly.

Relationship problems

How do you cope with relationship problems?

First, apply the same method to yourself when a problem with a relationship comes up—whether that's with a significant other, your kids, friends, other family, co-workers. This relationship problem is a life change, and as such you need to cope with it by seeing the ideal and the Childish Mind that wants the ideal (to have a great relationship, or to have the other person be a certain way) and loosening your attachment to this ideal, mindfully seeing the relationship as it is and finding things about it to appreciate and be grateful for.

Next, you can apply the method to the other person, as in the section above, seeing their good and bad qualities and finding gratitude for them, seeing their suffering and wishing them happiness.

Once you come to a place of peace about your relationship and the other person, you can now respond appropriately. How? There are many ways, including:

- Being compassionate with them.
- Talking to them (without blame) about what you're going through.
- Talking openly but without blame about the problem in communication and trying to resolve it so that you're both happy.
- Admitting to your contribution to the problem.
- Helping them feel accepted and not attacked.
- Swallowing your pride and admitting you're wrong.
- Giving them a hug.
- Writing them a letter, if talking becomes too hard.
- Fixing the mistake, apologizing, mending the relationship, figuring out what went wrong and how we can prevent the mistake in the future.
- Doing our best to help.

Those are just some ideas, of course. There are endless possibilities, but you can see that these are all reasonable, calm, peaceful actions that are appropriate to the situation.

Once you find a place of peace, the appropriate response becomes much easier to find. If you're having trouble, imagine a friend is in a similar situation, that it's not happening to you, and try to think of what advice you'd give him or her in that situation. This allows you to get a little distance between you and the situation so you can see it a little dispassionately.

Dealing with relationship problems and frustrations with others can be a struggle, because we can't control how the other person sees us, understands the situation, or behaves. When things aren't going well, it can drastically affect our happiness. But with practice, and not a small amount of breathing, you can get better at letting go of your story about the other person and responding to the situation with calmness and peace.

Why we're unhappy with ourselves

After I quit my job and decided to be a freelance writer in 2005, I would wake up, say goodbye as Eva and the kids headed off to work and school, and tell myself I was definitely going to hustle and do my work today.

That optimism would last for a good 20 minutes ... before I would flop down on the couch and watch some TV. "I'll do my work in a minute," I'd say, though I don't think I ever really believed it.

Over and over, I would break promises to myself. I doubted myself, felt horrible about myself, didn't think I had any self-discipline, felt like a slob. I was overweight, flooded in debt, and I couldn't make myself do anything I knew I should do.

What was going on?

I was unhappy with myself. This unhappiness—another form of that low-grade suffering we've discussed—caused me to not take action, because I didn't really believe I could do it. I procrastinated, didn't stick to habit changes, didn't take care of myself. This only made me feel worse about myself.

More common than we realize

I've found this is the hidden obstacle that so many people face. I've coached thousands of people in my habit program, and even if I give them a perfectly workable Habit Plan, many people don't do it. Why not? I couldn't figure it out for a couple years, until I started to dig deeper. The problem wasn't that my plan was bad—it was that they didn't really trust that they were going to do it. Just like I didn't when I was unhappy with myself.

This unhappiness causes us not only to doubt ourselves, but to seek comfort from our bad feelings in unhealthy ways: junk food, TV and video games and the distractions of the Internet, shopping, smoking, alcohol, drugs, emotional dependency.

Here's part of an email from a reader, Helena, who describes where she was in life not too long ago:

“I was stuck in my emotions, always feeling bad for myself, always feeling wrong and unhappy. I was unable to realize all the things I have and be grateful for them. I only think about how I am a little overweight. I felt bad in my body, ugly and unloved.”

Helen decided to make small changes, one at a time, and formed healthy habits and began a journey of self-knowledge that has changed her life in so many ways. I'm inspired by her story, because it shows that unhappiness with yourself can be overcome.

Many of us don't trust ourselves to stick to a new habit change. We have messed up many times in the past and fully expect ourselves to mess up again and again, even if we don't admit it to ourselves. We don't trust ourselves.

We don't think we're disciplined enough or good enough.

This turns out to be more common than I'd realized. In fact, almost everyone seems to have some level of unhappiness with themselves—definitely including me. I spent many years not admitting this problem, instead blaming it on outside factors, like a job that kept me too busy, or social situations that led to me eating junk food or smoking, or being in debt because I had to pay for the great expense of having kids.

The truth is, none of those things was the problem. The problem was that I didn't trust myself. I didn't feel worthy.

We all are down on ourselves from time to time, and sometimes much of the time. This isn't a judgment. There's nothing wrong with feeling bad about yourself. It's not a comment on us as good or bad people, having this unhappiness with ourselves. It's part of the human condition.

Unhappiness with ourselves

I was coaching a woman, Lizel, who was overweight and couldn't control her eating habits and couldn't stick to an exercise regimen. Her case is extremely common, because the underlying problem turns out to be extremely common. As I worked with her, I began to understand that she wasn't happy with herself.

Think about it for a second: the solution to her weight and health problems are pretty simple. She just needed to start eating healthy food and stop eating junk food, and start a program of walking every day. Maybe eventually add in some bodyweight strength exercises. A few

simple steps that she could take and eventually the problems would be solved.

Why couldn't she take these simple actions? Because she kept sabotaging herself, with negative chatter in her head: "You're not good enough. You can't do this. You should just give up." Or, "This is too hard. You shouldn't make yourself suffer. You deserve a treat." She didn't believe in herself, because she didn't think she was good enough. She didn't like who she was, nor did she trust herself.

The solution has to start with learning to be happy with ourselves, learning to trust ourselves.

Why are we unhappy with ourselves, at some level? Because we don't meet our own ideals for who we should be. The reality of who we are doesn't match up with our Mind Movie about who we should be.

We all have these ideals playing in our heads, that we should meet some standard of perfection. What kind of perfection? Some of the things we want to be include being productive, mindful, happy and content, disciplined, fit and attractive, generous and charitable, creative, successful in some way. We have lots of ideals for ourselves, actually.

So we have these ideals, but inevitably, we fail to meet them, in lots of ways, all the time. We constantly fail ourselves, constantly fall short of what we hope we'll be, what we think we should be.

Think about that for a second: we live in constant disappointment with ourselves. We don't think of it that way, of course, because we want to think of ourselves as good people, as happy and amazing, but if we're being totally honest, each and every one of us fails to meet some of our

ideals, every day, and probably many times during the day.

So, at some level, we're always unhappy with ourselves. This affects everything we do.

We're afraid we're going to fail at things, because we're afraid we're not good enough, and so we procrastinate from fear of failure. We're afraid we're not disciplined enough or strong enough to make it through discomfort and difficult tasks. We're sometimes afraid we're not good enough for other people, and so we are insecure in relationships, sometimes jealous or afraid of being abandoned.

There are many other ways this unhappiness with ourselves causes us problems, but they are all variations on these instances.

So this unhappiness causes us harm, and it stems from ideals. It's nothing to feel bad about, and in fact becoming aware of this unhappiness is the key to unlocking our freedom.

Being OK in this moment

So what's the answer, for Lizel, for other people I've coached, for all of us? How do we address these ideals we have for ourselves that are causing unhappiness and difficulty in making changes? How do we deal with the Mind Movie that's causing us to see the reality of ourselves as unworthy and disappointing?

We learn to really see ourselves, without the filter of the Mind Movie, loosening our hold on that ideal. In some ways, all of our fears boil down to the root fear that we are not good enough, that we will not be OK. We fear failure because we don't think we're good enough, we fear

missing out because we don't think we're OK right where we are, we fear losing something because we don't think we'll be OK without it.

In truth, we are OK, right now. We can learn to trust this moment, and ourselves, by sitting still and just seeing this OK-ness. In this very moment, you have all you need to be happy, there are miracles all around you, and life is OK. Not ideal, not filled with fantasy wonderland, but good enough.

With practice, you can learn that you are good enough. Perhaps not good enough to achieve some fantasy success, but good enough for yourself, in this moment. Sit for awhile without going to check on anything, without doing anything useful, just sit and notice everything around you. Sit and notice yourself. See that you're sufficient, right now.

Once you learn this basic truth, a lot of the fears can start to loosen their grip on you, and start to float away. The fears might come back, as they always arise unbidden, but they can float away if you acknowledge them and don't engage them too much. You don't fear failure so much because you're already good enough right now. You don't worry about uncertainty because you're already OK, right now. You don't fear discomfort because you know you'll be fine.

The Empyrean, our journey's end

At the end of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante enters the final region of heaven, the Empyrean. He is encircled in light so bright that he can't see through its veil of radiance. He tries to put together all of the previous spheres of heaven into one understanding, but can't quite do it . . . until in a flash of understanding, he comes to see that the universe is bound together by Love.

“But already my desire and my will
were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed,
by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.”

We are at the end of our journey, and I could try to tie together all the previous chapters for you, but it's a task so hard that perhaps it's “not a flight for my wings.”

Instead, I would like to talk about Love.

Our journey

We started this journey talking about my struggles in life, with health and finances and stress and habits. These struggles are no different than the struggles everyone faces in some form: we all struggle with major life

changes, with frustrations with others, with changing our habits, with illness and loss. These struggles are painful and difficult, and it's hard to see the way out.

We started out by picking one small change and taking one small step. We took one at a time and examined the Resistance we face. We talked about the problem of the Mind Movie and the Childish Mind and talked about mindfulness and appreciation and gratitude. We learned to embrace the impermanence of life and see the beauty in it. We learned to make the most of life.

These can all be used to make a small habit change and grow that into gradual progression. And these tools can be used to deal with any life change, any frustrations and struggles.

But the missing substance that binds all this together is Love.

A boundless love

Like Dante at the end of his journey, I've had a flash of understanding. It's nothing mystical, as I don't believe in that.

It was simply a feeling: I love everyone in the world.

I've actually had this feeling a number of times now, and it's truly amazing. Try it yourself: imagine everyone else out there in the world as a sea of humanity, and let a feeling of love spread from your heart and envelop this entire sea.

That might take a little practice, but don't worry—you get better the more you try it.

What does all this mumbo jumbo matter?

In the end, after letting go of my ideals of perfection,

after letting go of my striving for goals, after wanting things to be a certain way . . . what am I left with?

I'm left with Love. This feeling of boundless love, not for one specific person and not even limited to human beings, can motivate me to get up in the morning and write. It motivates me to be vegan, because my love extends to animals. It motivates me to work out, because my love extends to me, and to my kids for whom I'm setting this example of an active lifestyle. It motivates me to let go of my attachments that lead to frustrations, because why fight with someone you love?

Love can move you to be mindful, to appreciate the reality of this current moment, to appreciate and embrace impermanence as something beautiful, to be grateful, to make the most of this dewlike life.

Love can move you to overcome struggles.

Love can transform bitterness into softness, anger into kindness, self-hatred into self-compassion.

Love is both the path, and the mover.

Love moved me to write this for you, and I hope that you will pass it on for me.

*"We will develop love, we will practice it,
we will make it both a way and a basis . . ."*

BUDDHA

Appendix

This appendix is a quick reference of the key concepts in this book, along with an outline for the Habit Plan I've asked you to create in this book.

Key Concepts

MIND MOVIE: The story, ideals, expectations, plans, goals, fantasies that are playing in our minds most of the time. This movie is something we're often unaware of, but comparing reality to this movie (and having reality come up short) is a major cause of our frustrations, stress, procrastination, and fears. Try to see your Mind Movie: what ideal do you have of the new habit, and how realistic is this?

CHILDISH MIND: The part of your mind that wants things to be easy and comfortable, and will try to avoid change, get out of discomfort, procrastinate on difficult tasks.

CREATE SPACE: Pick one small habit, and give it focus in your life.

MAKE IT EASY: Make your habit ridiculously easy—just take one small step.

MAKE A VOW: Find a deeper reason for making your change, such as out of love for someone else, or not wasting this dewlike life, so that you won't give up so easily when your Childish Mind rebels against discomfort.

RHYTHM OF A HEARTBEAT: Attach your habit to a trigger, which is an event in your regular routine that occurs right before the habit. You're going to develop a heartbeat rhythm over time, a double pulse, so that when the trigger happens, you'll immediately do the habit.

CREATE A GROOVE: Set up roadblocks and incentives to keep yourself on the new habit path you've chosen. These include little rewards, enjoying the habit, having an accountability partner or group, setting up consequences.

CREATE REMINDERS: Set up physical and digital reminders so that you don't forget to do the habit once the trigger happens.

THE GREASED SLOPE: Create accountability for your habit, and consequences for not doing your habit, so that you'll stay on track.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP: A small step that's easy, because movement begets movement.

CREATE POSITIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS: Make your habit social, and be mindful as you do the habit.

THE SPOTLIGHT OF MINDFULNESS: It helps us see things that are normally in the dark—our discomfort, our resistance, the beauty of the moment as it is.

THE MIRROR OF CHANGE IS SELF-REFLECTION: It deepens our learning and helps us to correct our course when we've made mistakes. This adjustment based on feedback is crucial. Start a one-sentence journal to create the tool of self-reflection.

GROW A PLANT: Don't attach to the outcomes of your habit, but focus on the environment you create, the effort and intention you put into it and enjoying the process.

SHINE A LIGHT ON INVISIBLE URGES: These urges act in the dark recesses of our minds. Use mindfulness to watch these urges and not be beholden to them.

NOISY CHILDREN: The things that we're resisting, that are irritating or frustrating us ... these are things to be appreciated, just like noisy children when we're meditating. See every frustration as a noisy child, something you can find appreciation and gratitude for.

LACE UP YOUR SHOES: When you're not feeling like doing the habit, find the smallest possible version of the habit (like just lacing up your shoes when you don't feel like running). This is your Minimum Viable Habit—just do that on the days you feel resistance and call it a success.

PASSING CLOUDS: Our resistance, our frustration, our feelings of loss, our urges, our anger ... these are all

passing clouds. You can watch them float by and know that they will eventually pass completely. They are separate from you and temporary.

PLUM BLOSSOMS: A reminder that everything is impermanent . . . and that this is beautiful. Embrace the transience of everything in life, including yourself, your relationships, your life. See the beauty in change. Let go of holding onto the way you want things to be.

THE BEAUTY OF THE MOUNTAINS: A reminder not to be focused on the destination, while missing out on the beauty of the present moment.

FLOW OF WATER (VS. TRAIN TRACKS): Instead of letting yourself get derailed when things change, adopt a flow mentality, and flow around changes. When an obstacle gets in your way, just flow around it.

HABIT SPRINTS: A method for improving your Habit Plan over time (see Habit Plan Template below), by doing the habit in week-long stints and then doing a review at the end of the week. The review is the key to the method. If you review your week and you had obstacles, add potential solutions to those obstacles to your habit plan, and the habit will then evolve to be better and better over time.

THE HEART OF ANY PROBLEM: Every problem we face is essentially the same—it's our Childish Mind clinging to the Mind Movie. If we can loosen up on this attachment, and accept and appreciate reality as it is, we can deal with any situation (see Zen Habits Method below).

The Zen Habits Method

For dealing with any life changes, loss, illness, frustrations with others, unhappiness with ourselves:

1. SPOTLIGHT: Be mindfully in the moment.
2. PLUM BLOSSOMS: See everything as change (impermanence), and embrace it.
3. CREATE A SPACE: Deal with things as they come, one at a time.
4. MIND MOVIE: Don't be attached to expectations and ideals.
5. GROW A PLANT: Focus on Intentions, without attachment to Outcomes.
6. CHILDISH MIND: Let go of the Self that wants the ideals.
7. SEE THE MOUNTAINS: With Appreciation and Gratitude.
8. DEWLIKE LIFE: Don't waste a moment.

The Habit Plan Template

BASICS

- Start date:
- Specific habit:
- Trigger:
- Reminder(s):
- Review dates:
- Accountability:
- Commitment:
- Asking for support:
- Potential obstacles:
- Log:
- Who will you share the plan with?

MORE ADVANCED (you can add these later)

These aren't necessary to put in the plan right away, but if you have any problems, be sure to address these in your reviews.

- Ensure that you start:
- Mindful reward:
- Make sure you don't miss 2 days:
- Deal with disruptions:
- Cope with stress, boredom, loneliness, tiredness, sadness:
- Socialize the habit:
- Rationalizations:
- Removing temptations:

Online Resources

The Habit Plan Template, Quit Plan, and other resources can be found at <http://zenhabitsbook.com/resources/>

About the Author

LEO BABAUTA writes about simplicity, habits, and mindfulness on Zen Habits (zenhabits.net). He has helped thousands of people change their habits and their lives.

He and his wife Eva, and their six kids, live a simple life in northern California. He prefers reading novels: Tolstoy, Joyce, Cervantes, Vonnegut, Fitzgerald, Lethem, Douglas Adams, Chandler, Ishiguro, Murakami, Rowling, Nabokov, William Gibson, Ann Patchett, Terry Pratchett.

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