

296 - How to Lazy Genius Your Habits

Hi there! You're listening to The Lazy Genius Podcast! I'm Kendra Adachi, and I'm here to help you be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. Today is episode 296 - how to Lazy Genius your habits.

It is January, and we have that fresh start energy, right? If you missed last week's episode, *How to Start Fresh Without Starting Over*, I highly encourage that one, too. But habits are a thing. Habits make up your life whether you realize it or not. There is obviously a preeminent resource on habits, and that is *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. If you want a deep dive, it's a great one. That book is one of few productivity books that I genuinely enjoyed from start to finish. It was genuinely helpful, and I didn't get frustrated or overwhelmed or mad when I read it. The only thing I'll note if you do read it is that there are a lot of examples that were of men instead of women, and there was significant focus on the body. Habits described as "losing weight to improve your dating prospects" did not sit well with me for obvious reasons. But other than that, it's a great book. There's a reason it's sold like crazy pants, so if you want to deep dive on habits specifically, that resource is excellent.

Today, we won't deep dive because this is a podcast episode, but maybe you don't need a deep dive. You just need a reminder or two as you move into the new year. I want to offer some perspective on habits as you begin or end them, I will share James Clear's atomic habit principles, as well as some of my favorite Lazy Genius principles that apply specifically to habits. I want this episode to leave you feeling grounded and encouraged about your relationship with your habits, not super charged and anxious. We don't need more of that energy at the start of the year, so we're going to keep this as Lazy Genius as possible.

So let's start here. What is a habit? I mean, we know, but do we actually know? If you asked me on the fly to define *habit*, I would probably say it's something you repeat every day. Simple enough. Also, I have a lot of negative feelings towards the word. I don't know if you're like me, but habits are often integrated with concepts I don't love, concepts like "new year new you" and big resolutions and diet culture and things that are meant to optimize and mechanize our lives so we can become a certain kind of person. In my mind, habits have been co-opted by the productivity and wellness industries as a weapon rather than a tool. Now, is that true across the board of every person who talks about habits? Absolutely not. Not everybody who is involved in wellness and productivity is out to get us either, not by a long shot. But when I started to define habits for myself, I felt this tightness in my chest, a tightness that is absolutely connected to my experience of when habits are weaponized for something that doesn't matter to me.

You might not have that same response, but I also think it's a good idea to have a refreshed perspective on what something is, even if your current perspective isn't a negative one, especially for something as pervasive as a habit.

I looked up the official definition of habit, and good ol' Webster says it's "a settled and regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up." I want to break this down a bit.

First, settled. It's a settled and regular tendency or practice. To me, settled is a beautiful word. I know we're not supposed to settle for disengaged partners and unequal pay, but my response to the word settled, especially in this case, is positive. It's calm and soft and grounded. To have something in your life that is settled can be very positive and comforting. Now, are there things that are settled in your life that you wish weren't? Of course, and we'll get to that. But in general, when something is settled, there is quite often peace instead of trying and striving and constant evaluation. Just peace.

The next part of the definition is it's a settled and regular tendency or practice. A regular tendency or practice. The most important thing to notice here is that all three of those words - regular, tendency, and practice - are not hard and fast, all or nothing words. There is a softness in all of them. Regular is often but not always. Tendency is often but not always. Practice is often but not always. The idea of kindness and softness and smallness and ease are built into the definition of a habit, and I think that's really lovely.

And finally, a settled and regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up. Hard to give up. That phrase made me go "huh!" Why? I realized that my posture toward habits is that they are something to force yourself to do, not something you would have a hard time giving up. That also is very comforting to me.

So a habit is a settled and regular tendency or practice that can be hard to give up.

Now the difficulty in giving it up could be that the habit is so essential and lovely in your life that you wouldn't *want* to give it up, or it could be that it's so automatic and easy and even though you don't love what it does for your life, it's just too hard to stop.

Here's the part of the episode where I should offer examples, right? Like, "for example." Truthfully, I feel hesitant to do that, to offer up certain habits as "bad" or habits you want to quit because habits and choices are so deeply personal. I would hate to share one habit as an example of something you might want to change and thereby communicate that everyone should change that habit. So I'm going to stick with my own personal habits when we need a habit example. I'll just share my own stuff throughout this episode, and you can remember the essence of everything we do here... you get to decide what matters. What matters to me doesn't have to matter to you, and vice versa. So I'll just share examples, not rules or judgments or any of it. Cool cool.

So now that we have a fresher perspective on what a habit actually is, I want to give you a quick rundown of the basics of habit forming and breaking as presented in the aforementioned *Atomic Habits*. Also James Clear references a ton of research in his book, so these are pretty proven concepts. Okay, the first thing to name is that every habit has four stages. Every single habit you do, even something as simple as turning on a light when you enter a room, is made up of the following four stages in this particular order: a cue, a craving, a response, and a reward.

Here's an example. It's nighttime, and I yawn. That's my cue that it's time to go to bed. Now I want to go to bed in the most comfy way possible. Ultimately, my reward which is the last step is getting into bed happy and comfy. So I crave that. That's my craving. Next comes the response, the actual habit. I do all my nighttime things - face, teeth, hair, pjs - to get me clean and cozy. It's like getting into a bed with clean sheets but in reverse. I'm the clean thing, not the sheets. And the reward is that I feel clean and happy and settled as I climb into my comfy bed. It's what I craved. It's what I got. Now what I just described is more of a routine than one specific habit, but it is a routine made up of many habits. Brushing my teeth, going through my skincare routine where I double cleanse and put on retinol, changing out of the clothes I've worn all day, and brushing my hair... all of those actions are settled, regular practices that I find very hard to give up. I feel weird if I go to bed without doing those things. I don't want to stop doing those things. They are very rewarding to me, and that's the whole thing about habits. We do them because there's a reward at the other end.

So that's the order that every habit goes through - cue, craving, response, reward.

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Now once you understand those four stages of a habit, James Clear has two paths you can take here. One is for making new habits, and the other is for breaking old ones.

If you want to create a new habit, you need to make the cue obvious. If you want to break an old habit, you want to make the cue invisible. So obvious if you want it, invisible if you don't. What about the craving, the second stage of a habit? You're craving the reward, right? Even the tiniest habits have a reward. If you want to create a new habit, make the craving attractive. If you want to break an old one, make the craving unattractive. For the response, to make a new habit, make the response easy. For breaking an old one, make it difficult. And for the reward, if you want to keep the habit, make the reward satisfying. If you want to get rid of the habit, make it unsatisfying.

So cue, craving, response, reward. If you want to start a new habit, make the cue obvious, make the craving attractive, make the response easy, and make the reward satisfying. If you want to stop an old habit, make the cue invisible, make the craving unattractive, make the response difficult, and make the reward unsatisfying. And for breaking an old habit, even if you throw a hiccup in *one* of those four stages, it'll strongly eliminate the desire to keep the habit going.

Okay, so that's the breakdown of how James Clear presents habits, and on paper, it's actually pretty clear. The difficulty comes in actually naming what habits you want to start or stop, right? You can know how habits work, but until you apply that knowledge to your own habits, you'll keep on trucking the way you always have because that is the very nature of habits. You just keep trucking because they're so automatic. So let's do that next. So let's figure out how to apply this knowledge and figure out what habits you really care about.

I would venture to say that most habits you want to start or stop are rooted in a larger goal. Most habits are not singular in nature. Here's an example from my own life.

I love reading. Y'all know this. Reading is my favorite hobby. At the start of 2022, I named that I wanted to read even more than I already did. I shared this process in a recent episode titled "How I Read 120 Books This Year," and that happened because of habits. I had a big loose goal of "reading more" but I didn't have specifics for that. And I actually didn't want specifics. I did not make this a SMART goal where it's specific and measurable and all the other letters. I just wanted to feel like I was reading more often than I currently was. So I started the more settled and regular habit of reading instead of listening to a podcast, going on Instagram, or watching TV. Now listen, I love podcasts and Instagram and TV. With my whole heart. I didn't stop any of those completely, not by a long shot. But I had a more regular habit of reading first, and I almost doubled the number of books I read from the previous year because of that settled, regular practice. It became automatic for me to reach for a book or my Kindle or the Kindle app on my phone or to turn on an audiobook when I had any kind of free time. And it was a habit that supported a broader goal of reading more often than not.

Another example from my own life is the larger goal of having a reasonably tidy main living area most of the time. A reasonably tidy living area most of the time is something that is deeply attractive and satisfying to me. But in order for that to be something that exists in my life consistently, I need a habit to get there, right? I need some sort of settled, regular practice that happens most of the time to lead me in the direction of a reasonably tidy living area most of the time. So I've had the habit for years now of tidying before my kids' afternoon screen time. Almost without fail, my kids have screen time around 4:30pm every day. Obviously that will change as they grow older, but for now, it's where we are. And before they have that screen time, we tidy the L. If you've been around here for awhile, you know that phrase. Our main living area is in the shape of an L, and everybody tidies the L before screen time. It's become such a habit for them that I barely have to say anything before screen time to remind them to do it. Sometimes they just do because they know they'll have to. Now that took years, but at this point, it's a habit for all of us. And for the most part, that tidiness seeps into the evening because they rarely trash the place in the hours of dinner and bedtime routines. I would be devastated if that family habit went away, and it would be very hard to stop. The cue is that the kids start asking me if they can start screen time. The craving for me is a tidy house when they're off doing their own thing so I can do mine. The response is tidying one particular area with clear expectations. And the reward? They're contributing to a tidy house, they're part of a family dynamic, the space is relaxing to me, and I didn't have to do it myself. It's a great habit.

So your habits are linked to a larger goal. Kind of always. Now when we talk about larger goals, what are we really saying? We're naming what matters. Everything always comes back to that, to naming what matters.

It is imperative, you guys, imperative that you honestly and intentionally look at your larger goals that are impacting your habits and make sure those goals actually matter to you. To you, not to someone else, but to you.

I believe that the most important thing you can do to live a fulfilling life is name what matters to you. The answer to that will change across seasons and life stages, but ultimately asking and answering that question is the foundation of living a life you love to live. What matters most to you? What matters in your home, in your schedule, in your body, in your relationships, in your experiences day to day? When you name what matters most, you can identify a larger goal that you might have for your life six months or six years from now, but in order to get there, what do you do?

You start small. There it is! You start small and build one habit at a time. You slowly and intentionally make settled, regular choices - not all or nothing choices, but settled, regular choices - that lead you in a direction that matters to you. Start small is my favorite Lazy Genius principle related to habits. If we look at James Clear's research about habits, in order to have the response required, in order to do the actual habit, what do you have to do? You have to make it easy. You have to make the response easy. And the easiest steps are small ones. So start small. I've been more intentional about applying small steps to my life in a meaningful direction for the last 7-10 years or so, and I love my life. I really do. Is it perfect? Laughable, and that's not even a thing. Are there challenges and conflict and stress? Of course there are. But because of small steps over a long period of time, I have a lot of regular, settled tendencies and practices that create a structure in my life that I love, that mean something to me, that support what matters most to me and my family. It is worth it to start small. You hear me? It is worth it to start small because small steps are easy, easy steps are sustainable, and sustainable steps are repeatable, creating a habit that supports a bigger goal that really matters to you. So start small. It works. Over time, it really really works.

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So as we wrap up today, let's recap.

We need a perspective refresh on habits. At least I did. Habits are not bad. Habits are not just for geniuses. Habits are part of all of our lives, and having a more realistic, kinder definition of them - literally the definition in the dictionary - is helpful.

As you think about adding or taking away habits in your own life, remember that there is a scientific structure to how habits work. They all involve a cue, a craving, a response, and a reward. How you interact with those four steps will determine whether the habit sticks around. So if you want to start a new habit, make the cue obvious, make the craving attractive, make the response easy, and make the reward satisfying. If you want to stop an old habit, make the cue invisible, make the craving unattractive, make the response difficult, and make the reward unattractive.

But why start or stop habits at all? Habits are the building blocks of the larger vision we have for our lives. If you have any kind of goal, you need a habit to get there. And while there are absolutely ways to create and end habits, I'm here to remind you that it's vitally important that

you pay attention to that larger goal. Does it really matter to you? I mean, really? What does matter to you? What do you truly believe will bring your life great fulfillment and purpose and joy? Consider the habits that get you to those places. Don't just stop or start habits because someone else is. If you pay attention to a habit without seeing its place in the bigger picture, you're potentially wasting energy on something that doesn't actually matter to you.

James Clear says that habits are a process, not an event. I know this is a group that has a big ol' love-hate relationship with processes. We love them because we're smart enough to know they work, but processes are too slow for our liking most of the time, especially when we're stressed. So just remember that habits are a process.

And speaking of stress, one thing I didn't mention before is that in the research done by James Clear and the folks he referenced in *Atomic Habits*, the habits that people wanted to end were all rooted in being stressed or bored. Stress and boredom are the originators of habits we probably would rather release. So as you think through your own habits, remember that. I think it's a helpful lens as you name what's working and what isn't. And if you have a habit you've developed out of stress or boredom, don't just end it. Replace it. The reason you exercise that habit is because there's a reward there. You won't do something repeatedly unless there's a reward, so rather than taking the reward away, replace the response with something more beneficial to you that still offers a reward. For example, back to my reading. Podcasts, Instagram, and TV all give me great rewards of entertainment, but I prefer the entertainment of reading so I began shifting my response from turning something on on my phone to grabbing a book instead. I'm still being rewarded, just with something that generally matters more. Don't just eliminate. Replace.

And start small. Please oh please start small. Three other practical Lazy Genius principles you could apply to habits are Decide Once, Batch It, and Build the Right Routines. I devote entire chapters to those principles in my book *The Lazy Genius Way*, so if you haven't read it, now is a lovely time of year to do so. But one other principle that needs less explanation but way more practice is the final principle in my book - be kind to yourself. As you go through any sort of thinking or journaling or listening in order to name your goals or start or stop your habits, please please be kind to yourself. You're not something to be fixed. You're not a problem to solve. Your life is not a hot mess even if you think it is because hot mess is not determined by our circumstances. It's determined by our perspective and our response. If you have a posture of frustration and discontentment and *unkindness*, you won't get anywhere, not anywhere good at least. So please throughout any of this process, be kind to yourself. And at the risk of sounding like the end of a *Full House* episode, that might be the best habit of all, being kind to yourself. Gag. And also true.

And that's how to Lazy Genius Your Habits.

Before we go, let's celebrate the Lazy Genius of the week! This week it's Allison Kiboi who sent me this message on Instagram. "Hi, Kendra! I wanted to share my wintertime Decide Once act of kindness for those I love. Any time I'm making a batch of soup, I automatically double or even

triple it and give a few containers to family and friends. As the mom of two young kids it's an easy way for me to add blessing to others into my routine." This is such a lovely simple idea. I know a lot of folks will make extra of certain recipes, sometimes for their own freezers and sometimes for others. But what I love about this idea is that it's an automatic choice. It is literally something you decide one time and keep on going. And soup is such a great meal to double or triple because it's rarely that much extra work. Also I can't imagine a person who is given a container of soup being like "nah, not for me." Soup is the most comforting food in all the world, and even if it's not large enough for another family's dinner, it sure is a great lunch for some folks. This is really such a great idea that can vary depending on the person and the choice, but I'm so happy you shared it with us, Allison, and congratulations on being the Lazy Genius of the Week!

Okay, y'all, that's it for today! Thanks so much for listening, and until next time, be a genius about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't. I'm Kendra, and I'll see you next week!