

Habits from Simple to Atomic Propel Big Life Changes – BJ Fogg & James Clear – #850

Dave Asprey:

BJ, welcome to the show.

BJ Fogg:

Dave, I'm happy to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

Dave:

People who don't know about your work are going to want to read your book.

BJ:

Well, the title is Tiny Habits. In this book, which, oh, I bring together almost 20 years of research, I explain a specific method for creating habits. The Tiny Habits method that makes the building of habits really easy and fast. The book does two things at once. It defines what behavior design is and gives the models and methods of behavior design, then more specifically, it walks people through step-by-step tiny habits so people can create habits quickly and easily.

What surprises people, is how much, how effective the right tiny changes can be. If you pick the right tiny change, you can wire it in quickly and if you follow the method, you can have a big outcome from that. That is, I can't say like it's magic, because I'm a scientist, so I don't use those words, but it really is surprising to people that how quickly you can form habits. There are certain habits that have this transformative impact on you.

James Clear:

The reason we do bad habits is because the immediate outcome is often favorable. The immediate outcome of eating a donut is great. It's sweet sugary, it's tasty, it's enjoyable. It's only the ultimate outcome if you continue to eat donuts, that is unfavorable. Similar with smoking a cigarette, the immediate outcome of smoking a cigarette might be that you get to socialize with friends outside of the office, or you get to reduce a little bit of stress or you curve your nicotine craving. It's only the ultimate outcome two or five or 10 years down the line that is unfavorable.

With good habits, it's often the reverse, especially in the beginning.

Dave:

Right.

James Clear:

The immediate outcome of going to the gym is you're sore the first workout, your body looks the same in the mirror, you don't have really anything significant to show for it. It's only if you show up two or five or 10 years later that you get this outcome that you want. There's sort of this valley of death in the beginning when you're building any habit that you need some kind of external validation or some way to show up.

Now, once the habit has been built and it starts to become part of your identity, then actually you can... I just went to the gym a couple of hours ago before we do this call and that was actually quite enjoyable for me. My body, again, does not look really different in the mirror, scale has not really

changed, but I enjoy it because going to the gym is now part of who I am. I get to reinforce being the person I want to be. I do get some immediate satisfaction now, but I don't think that usually shows up for people when they first start to build a habit. That's how I would define the quality of habits, how they differ. I would usually define it by the ultimate outcome, not the immediate outcome.

Dave:

Do you ever worry that people might use Tiny Habits to enforce habits that they think are good for them, but aren't good for them?

BJ:

Oh yeah, for sure. The behavior model, that's a way of thinking about behavior that is powerful. Tiny Habits is a way of creating habits quickly and the way people use and apply those things, I try to promote the good uses of it, but I don't have complete control over who accesses it or how they do it. Certainly people could use the Tiny Habits method to wire in habits that aren't healthy for them.

There was a time in my own life, Dave, when I thought popcorn was a healthy snack for me. I thought it was healthy for me. I was trying to do the right thing and had a popcorn habit that became a popcorn addiction. I know people are laughing at me, you're laughing at me, but from my perspective, it got to be a serious problem, but I thought it was healthy.

Then later, and now it's very, very clear to me what the problem was, but you can wire in habits that you think are healthy, but they end up not being. In Tiny Habits, you create what I call a recipe and you find where it fits naturally in your routine. The recipe has... There's a phrase and mine is "After I turn on the first light at night, I will put on my true dark glasses." I know exactly when I'm doing it. As soon as I turn on any light in the evening, that becomes my prompt or my cue to then put on my TrueDarks and that's what I do.

Dave:

Are you just saying this, because you're on the show or do you actually do this?

BJ:

No, I do. Do you know how many pair of TrueDarks I have Dave? I give them away as gifts.

Dave:

Okay, I didn't realize that. That's awesome.

BJ:

I travel with them. I have two different pair with me here. Yeah I have them and it's just part of my morning routine. Even though I'm a behavior change expert, I look to you and others to tell me what are the behaviors? What are the habits that are going to make me happier and healthier and live longer?

Dave:

How do you know when it's time to reevaluate a habit that you think is working, that you're bought into emotionally and psychologically and socially?

James Clear:

My broadly speaking answer is we need to close the feedback loop. The only way you can close the feedback loop is to choose the right form of measurement. In the case of your first example, the measure was, "Am I going to the gym or not?" That was how you were measuring is the habit a success. It was like, I will always go. As long as I show up, I know that's a success.

But in order to know, if a habit is serving you in the way that you want it to, and again, this entirely depends on what am I optimizing for, it sounds in that case, what you were optimizing for his knee health and weight loss. You wanted to not be 300 pounds. You wanted to not blow your knee out. Actually, maybe the signal of progress, the measurement that we needed to look at was not, "Am I showing up at the gym, but is my knee getting healthier, are the loads or forces on my knee reducing, is the scale moving down?"

This is actually a really important question to ask yourself. I think the first is, "What am I optimizing for you?" You need to be clear about that because just because there are a lot of goals and outcomes and results in life that we inherit from the people around us. Many people are chasing a borrowed goal. They look at what other people do or what society tells them to do, and they pick that up. That first question is like, "What am I optimizing for? What is genuinely important to me here?" Not, "What does society tell me I should be doing about this problem."

Once you've decided that, then the next question is, "What is the best measurement to determine if I'm moving toward the thing that I'm optimizing for?" The measurement really matters, because in some cases, the measurement can be... In many cases with habits in particular, the measurement is too slow to get people to... You're not getting signals of progress consistently enough. When signals of progress decline in frequency, motivation declines as well.

What you find is that in many areas, if people are working very hard, even if it's a really challenging situation, if they're getting signals of progress, usually their motivation stays fairly high. Even if they're having to work hard because it's like, "Well, I'm getting the results I'm looking for."

BJ:

For me, let's take, there was a device and I won't mention the brand name. Let's take it out surfing. I got really curious. How far do I surf every morning?

James Clear:

Okay.

BJ:

I wore a device that tracked how far you go. They actually had a mode for surfing. I did that for, oh a couple of weeks, and found that I surf about two miles every morning.

James Clear:

Wow.

BJ:

What it did for me, Dave, is it took the fun out of surfing.

James Clear:

Yeah.

BJ:

I was more interested about, "Am I keeping pace? Where am I?" It really changed surfing from being this spirit, I'll just say it, a spiritual experience of connecting with nature and the power of nature and learning. There's scary times and there's beautiful times when you see sea creatures. Tracking that turned out to be a bad idea for me. I stopped. The thing that wires a habit is not repetition. People that say that haven't read the research carefully, or they're misleading you. It's the emotion you feel when you do the behavior.

Dave:

Now, how would I go about doing something like that? How do I bring out that sense of power or joy or whatever the thing is that you describe as the emotional motivator? How do you turn that on?

BJ:

I have a chapter, I entitled it, Emotions Create Habits. Be really clear emotions create habits. What you can do is you can actually hack your emotion through a technique that I call celebration. Celebration is anything you do that helps you feel immediately successful. For a lot of people, doing a fist pump Tiger Woods and saying, "Awesome," helps you feel successful. Other people it's raising your arms in victory. Other people do a little dance and people literally give themselves a high five.

Dave:

Lana totally did that fist bump, by the way, after her blender thing.

BJ:

Fist bump.

Dave:

Yeah.

BJ:

Okay, good.

Dave:

She would actually do that. I was laughing at her.

BJ:

The way to find what works for you is this, well in Tiny Habits, I give a hundred different celebrations. You can go there and look at the list and try them. But one way is to imagine that your favorite team is in the super bowl and the last five seconds they're behind, in the last five seconds they score and they win. What do you do at that moment? That then tells you what a natural celebration is for you.

Whatever you did, then you can bring that in and when you do a behavior that you want to become a habit, immediately after the behavior, while you're doing it, do the celebration. Fire off that positive emotion. That's what makes your brain take note. It's like, "Whoa, what just happened? I want to do that again." You're deliberately firing off a positive emotion in order to hack your brain and the wire in the habit.

Now this to a lot of people sounds wacky. I don't think it will be in five or 10 years, but right now this is new. Nobody's ever advocated that you do this. But what I found and I loved what you talked about with the knot, and there's some things we know that works. We don't know why it works. That's what happened with me in celebration. I found that looking in the mirror when I was flossing and I said, "Victory," it was a time in my life, Dave, when I was playing around with the habits and my life was just... Oh my gosh, a startup was failing. I was doing a huge conference at Stanford. I had a nephew that died from a drug overdose. My life was unraveling and I thought, "Okay, floss one tooth." I looked in the mirror and I would think everything else that could be terrible. This would be like 2010. Everything else could be terrible, but I got one thing done. You did one thing right today, BJ victory.

Doing that, I didn't read studies. I just did it. I was like, "Oh my gosh," that had an impact. I developed it and then I started teaching it to others and it worked for them as well. I didn't know the brain chemistry or why it worked. I just knew it worked. Later, I put the other pieces together. This is why it works. But the hack of celebration came first, before understanding the mechanism of why it worked.

Dave:

That makes a lot of sense. People read the book and go through and say, "All right, here's the motivating reward for me," that sense.

BJ:

Yeah.

Dave:

You're consciously triggering an emotion.

BJ:

Yes. There's a name to that emotion now. This emotion of internal success has not been named. In the book, I give it a name and I call it shine.

Dave:

Nice.

BJ:

Shine is now the name of the emotion when you feel successful. When you see you aced an exam and you feel awesome, that's shine. When you make that awesome three point shot, "I did it," that's shine. Now there's a name for it. That's the emotion that in Tiny Habits, you learn to hack to wire in the habit. What's exciting about that to me, there's a lot of things, but one is, now you know what you're shooting for, for wiring in habits, but also to help your spouse, your kids, your colleagues, the people around you wire in habits. Help them feel shine. There's other ripple effects from feeling shine, but one of the things in what you're doing here is you're deliberately wiring in the habit.

James Clear:

You asked about the best place to insert. I have two answers, the first general one, this doesn't always work, but generally speaking earlier in the day is better. Particularly if you don't have kids, if you have a four year old running around, they don't really care that you're...

Dave:

You're morning is screwed, agreed?

James Clear:

Yeah. They don't care that you're trying to meditate at 7:00 AM, right? They're just running around in their underwear. But broadly speaking for most people, the earlier in the day, the less likely it is that you are responding to everybody else's agenda. The more likely it is that you have control over that time. Everybody has the same 24 hours, but not every hour is under your control to the same degree.

Generally speaking the hour from 6:00 AM to 7:00 AM is probably more under your control than say the hour from 2:00 PM to 3:00 PM when you're in the middle of the workday.

Dave:

Yeah.

James Clear:

Broadly speaking earlier tends to be better. Then the second thing is that habits by definition are a behavior that gets tied to a particular context. That can mean a lot of different things. Like for example, the habit of tying your shoe could just mean the context of I have an untied shoe on my foot.

Dave:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

James Clear:

But you could also say something like, a lot of people, for example, say that you watch, what's an example? Say you watch TV, okay. You're watching Netflix at 7:00 PM and that's your kind of normal habit. You get done with work, you come home and then you watch television for an hour or two. You want to build a journaling habit or an exercise habit, take whatever you want.

You come home tonight and it's 7:00 PM. You sit down on the couch and you open up your journal to journal, or you get ready to start doing pushups on the living room floor. Even if you don't say it specifically, or think it consciously, you're non-consciously being pulled to picking up the remote and turning on Netflix. It's like you have a behavioral bias in that environment because that's what usually happens in your living room at 7:00 PM. My second suggestion is first do it earlier in the day if you can, second do it in a new context where you don't have a previous habit already tied to that environment.

For example, you could leave work, go to a coffee shop you don't normally go to, and that space becomes the journaling coffee shop. You walk in, you turn your phone off. The only thing that happens is you journal for 20 minutes there and then you go home. Because you don't have that same behavioral bias, because you don't have this body of habits that you're trying to turn the ship against. It generally is easier to build a new habit in a new, like a blank slate, a new environment.

Dave:

I really like that idea of just changing it or saying this is the habit associated with the physical space, but that's pretty important.

BJ:

I teach a lot of product innovators. They come to my two day bootcamp, which is not about helping them personally. It's helping them understand how to design for behavior and engagement and so on. One of the big things is the first time somebody uses your product or service, that's a huge opportunity. If you don't get it right, if you frustrate them, or if you make them feel stupid, they're probably not going to use it again. But if the first time, if they feel like you've given them a superpower, if you've helped them feel successful in a way that's like, "Wow," they're going to keep using your product or service.

Dave:

It makes so much sense. You want that immediate reward.

BJ:

Yeah.

Dave:

We talked about [inaudible 00:16:05] we talked about the behavior self, how you choose the good behavior. Hopefully you have a good expert you're following. The motivation we talked about. Now what about ability? That's a part of the equation in Tiny Habits. Do you have to be trained in it, or what is the ability mean?

BJ:

Oh yeah. I have two models for ability. One of them defines what ability is, and there's five components. I describe it as a chain model. There's five links in the chain. If any one of them is broken, you don't have the ability. The links are for any given day, how much time does it take? How much money does it take? How much thinking or mental effort? How much physical effort? The fifth one is a little harder to grasp. Does it fit into your routine? For any good [inaudible 00:16:51] behavior, say shopping at the farm market every Saturday morning. Well, do you have the time to do it? Do you have the money? Do you have the mental capacity? Do you have the physical capacity and does it fit in your routine? If any, one of those... If you can't afford the farm market, then you don't have the ability to shop at the farm market.

Or maybe you don't have the time. That's one way to think about ability. When you're troubleshooting a behavior, if a behavior is not happening and you get to the step where you say, "Well, how do I make it easier?" You're trying to figure out what's your weakest link. "Oh, I have to think too much through this behavior." Well, then that's a signal you may need to skill up so you could do it without thinking much. That's one model is really defining what the ability is.

The other model is if you want to make something easier to do you have three options. One is you can train yourself. If you want to cook healthy, fresh produce the evenings, you can take lessons and train yourself. You skill up so it becomes easier. In that case, you're changing yourself. You're changing the person.

Next, you can modify the context or environment. You can get tools and resources, get cookbook, get steamers, get knives. Now that's not changing your skill, but it's putting tools in your environment that make it easier. The third and final way to make something easier, it's to take the action and scale it back. Instead of cooking a whole healthy dinner, maybe you just do one dish. Instead of flossing, all your teeth, just one tooth. Instead of 20 pushups, maybe two.

Dave:

Okay.

BJ:

When you come to making it something easier to do, you have those three options and that's all you have, and that will always fit into one of those. Sometimes you do both at once.

Dave:

Okay. There's your ability.

BJ:

Yes.

Dave:

Those are straight forward when you explain them the way you might've explained them a hundred times in lectures.

BJ:

Well, but I know it because I've taught it a lot, but Dave, figuring out those models took years.

Dave:

Yeah.

BJ:

Okay, what's the next piece? But then when it all clicks, it's like a puzzle. It's like, "Oh, there it is. That's it." I'm happy to share it, but I have to confess, it takes years to take something that's quite complicated, like ability and then create a model that is parsimonious and actionable. That's in some ways why it took almost 20 years of research pulling together to now create Tiny Habits, because it's like not you discover everything instantly, it's piece by piece.

James Clear:

I have one chapter in the book on the influence of genes and personality and habits and behavior.

Dave:

Yeah.

James Clear:

I think a lot of the science is kind of on the cusp. It's on the edge right now where we're getting some very interesting insights. We don't quite know everything. There's a lot to still be discovered, but specifically with dopamine. Dopamine actually it often declines with age.

Dave:

Yeah.

James Clear:

The amount of dopamine that you have when you're 40, or when you're 60, is not nearly what you have on your 25 and many addicts will actually age themselves out of addiction. They'll be addicts in their twenties and thirties. Then as they get into their forties and fifties, they just don't experience the wave of desire as much as they did before. It's easier for them to curtail or even discard those behaviors entirely as they continue to age and their natural dopamine levels drop.

There are a lot of touch points here. Parkinson's is another very dopamine dependent disease. As you start to take drugs to regulate your dopamine levels, if those, if the drugs are out of whack, if the dosage is incorrect, there are some very interesting stories. Radiolab has a fascinating episode with a Parkinson's patient who basically their drugs turned them into a porn addict by taking the drugs, but at the wrong dosage, dopamine levels were all out of whack. Suddenly they had these intense cravings and they've spent all day looking at porn and wrecked their career and home life and all types of things.

Dave:

Man.

James Clear:

There's a very fine line there. It's definitely clear that there's a strong link between habitual behavior and dopamine driving those actions.

Dave:

I've got one final question for you. What is the one bad habit you have that you have not yet broken? The hardest one?

James Clear:

Oh man. Well, I have a bunch. I say this in all sincerity, my readers and I are peers. We're both going through it together. We're trying to figure it out. We're experimenting, I'm learning this just as much as everybody else is. My publisher had a good line, she said, "We write the books we need." I wrote about it because I wanted to learn about it.

Dave:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

James Clear:

I'm still going through it for sure. I'll give you one though that I struggled with a lot when I was writing the book, which is, I guess, for lack of a better term of power down routine. I have this Cardinal rule where I won't cheat myself on sleep. I try to get eight, nine hours a night, especially if I'm training heavy in the gym.

Dave:

Yeah.

James Clear:

I also have this problem though, which is, I the work that I do. I get this second wind sometimes around 9:00 or 10:00 PM. I'm like, "Ah, I'll just I'll check email or I'll work on this chapter for a little bit." All of a sudden, 9:00 PM turns into 1:00 AM and it's like, "Okay, well, where do I make the trade off here?" I

always choose to get the sleep, which I'm glad that I do. But if I go to bed at 1:00, that means that my day doesn't start until 9:00 or 10:00.

I would prefer to get up earlier, but that's one that I still haven't quite kicked. I think as one final kind of useful maybe exercise or point, I think you could do this not just for what I'm struggling with, but also for pretty much any habit, which is walk back the behavioral chain of what leads to that.

Dave:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

James Clear:

You might look at that. I might look at this and say, "Well, I think the real problem is that I'm not sleeping. The problem is I'm going to bed at 1:00 AM," but then you are like, "Well, okay, why am I up at 1:00? Well, actually I'm up at 1:00 because I'm staying up answering emails. Okay. Why am I answering emails? Well, I'm answering emails because I do a bad job of shutting down at 6:00 and I don't have enough of this automated and there's a bunch of emails to answer still."

Then you start to realize like, "Okay, maybe the real answer is we need a better system for processing email and I actually need a better habit of shutting down at 6:00. I don't need a better power down habit. I need a better end of workday habit." Walking back that behavioral chain to get to the root cause, I think could be a very useful way to try to solve some of those problems we all struggle with much.

Dave:

I really like that perspective. You look at the system and where's the system broken? Because there's probably not what you noticed it's upstream. It's almost always upstream.

James Clear:

Right.

BJ:

Don't self trash-talk, don't beat yourself up. Don't blame yourself when your change efforts don't work. If they don't work, you're probably taking an approach that's an old fashioned approach and it's not your fault. It's you just haven't been given the right approach yet. Just that notion Dave of, "Wow, you mean I did X, Y, and Z for so many years and didn't work and it's not my fault?" No, it's not your fault. You just hadn't been given the right way to do it yet. The best way to do it is by feeling good. Not by feeling bad.

Dave:

That's actually relaxing to hear that, even though I already know that it's true. I spent so much time in that building habits to lose weight. The habit is I'm going to order the salad with no dressing and no chicken, and I'm going to work out excessively. When it doesn't work, "Oh my habits don't work." Then you feel bad. Maybe I need more habits and all, but it turns out that it really wasn't my fault and that I was doing it, but it wasn't working.

BJ:

Yeah. It was four months in. I started teaching Tiny Habits publicly in 2011. People would sign up and I would coach them through email 2-300 people a week adds up probably 4-5,000 people in teaching and

a woman wrote me on a Wednesday. It's a five day program, said, "BJ you have now helped me see, I've endured a lifetime of self trash talk and thanks to you and your celebration, I'm changing that now." I forgot her exact words, but it's basically, "I now see a potential in myself I never imagined."

That Dave, that email was significant. I remember exactly where I was sitting, how it struck me and my reaction was, "Okay, this Tiny Habit thing, this quirky little thing I've been doing needs to not just be BJ's side research project, I need to bring this out in a bigger way, because then I started reading people's emails differently. I understood that this was really common. People self trash talk all the time. They beat themselves up. I think it's the first paragraph in my book where I say, "That's not helping you and it's not your fault. This book's about helping you do it in a way that you feel good and shame and self trash-talk has no role in the best way to transform your life."

James Clear:

But then you are like, "Well, okay, why am I up at 1:00? Well, actually I'm up at 1:00 because I'm staying up answering emails. Okay. Why am I answering emails? Well, I'm answering emails because I do a bad job of shutting down at 6:00 and I don't have enough of this automated and there's a bunch of emails to answer still."

Then you start to realize like, "Okay, maybe the real answer is we need a better system for processing email and I actually need a better habit of shutting down at 6:00. I don't need better power down habit. I need a better end of workday habit." Walking back that behavioral chain to get to the root cause, I think can be a very useful way to try to solve some of those problems we all struggle with much.

Dave:

I really like that perspective. You look at the system and where's the system broken? Because that's probably not what you notice, it's upstream. It's almost always upstream.

James Clear:

Right.

Dave:

One habit that I'm going to ask everyone listening to put in, is this is a very simple habit, it's not daily at all. Every time you finish a book, when you close the page or you get to that last page on your Kindle or your Audible, the habit is this, go to Amazon, leave a review for the author.

BJ:

Yes.

Dave:

It doesn't matter if it's a bad review or a good review. It matters to the author, but it should be a truthful review, but we want data on how we're doing. If you like to leave a tip at a restaurant, which is probably a habit that you do, do the same thing for an author, it will leave us a review, it matters. Pick up Tiny Habits.

BJ:

Right on.

Dave:

Leave a review after you've read it. I know BJ is going to want to see the review, so will I. On that note, leave a review for the show too. I appreciate that. Have a beautiful day.