HABITS · EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

BUILDING A ROUTINE THAT HOLDS

Routines don't fail from a lack of discipline. They fail because they were built to run on willpower and memory, the first things to go on a hard day. This workbook helps you build one that runs on systems instead, so it holds when you're tired, busy, or distractible.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Each step explains one thing that makes routines stick, gives you a small thing to try this week, and leaves room to write. Go at your own pace, and expect to come back to it. You don't have to do it all at once. Start with the step where you're most stuck.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Action comes before motivation
- Start absurdly small
- Anchor it to something you already do
- Design the space, not the willpower
- For ADHD brains, keep the routine outside your head
- Decide what gets to be good enough, then build one routine

STEP 1

ACTION COMES BEFORE MOTIVATION

Most people wait to feel motivated before they start, and for a tired or low-mood brain that wait can last forever. Behavioral activation, a core tool in therapy for depression, flips the order: you do the small action first, and the motivation shows up partway through.

IF YOU CAN'T GET STARTED

Try the five-minute rule: promise yourself you only have to do five minutes, and you can stop after. You can also pair it, doing the hard thing right after something you enjoy, like your morning coffee or a favorite song. Lower the bar out loud: "I'm just going to open the document," not "write the whole report."

TRY THIS

Pick one thing you've been waiting to feel ready for, and do a two-minute version of it before the motivation arrives. Notice what happens to your energy once you've started.

REFLECT

What's one thing you keep waiting to feel motivated for?

What would the two-minute version of it be?

What usually gets in the way of just starting?

STEP 2

START ABSURDLY SMALL

James Clear's two-minute rule says to shrink a habit until it takes about two minutes to start. "Read before bed" becomes "read one page." Starting is the hardest part, so a habit you can always start is one that survives. BJ Fogg adds a step: celebrate the second you do it, even a quiet "yes," because that flash of good feeling helps it wire in.

HOW TO SHRINK ALMOST ANYTHING

Meditate becomes three slow breaths, journal becomes one sentence, clean the house becomes clear one surface, eat healthier becomes add one vegetable. If you miss a day, don't miss twice: one slip is nothing, two starts a new pattern.

TRY THIS

Take one habit you want and shrink it to a two-minute version. Do it once, then celebrate immediately in whatever way feels natural to you.

REFLECT

The habit I want, and its two-minute version:

When in my day will I do the two-minute version?

How I'll celebrate right after:

STEP 3

ANCHOR IT TO SOMETHING YOU ALREADY DO

New habits stick best when they're tied to an existing one, what Clear calls habit stacking: "after I [current habit], I will [new habit]." Charles Duhigg describes the loop underneath, a cue triggers the routine and a reward makes your brain want to run it again. A reliable cue and a small reward turn a one-off into a habit.

ANCHORS THAT ALREADY HAPPEN EVERY DAY

Good anchors are things you already do without thinking: your morning coffee, brushing your teeth, closing your laptop, feeding a pet, getting in the car, turning off the bedside lamp. Pick one that happens near the time you want the new habit, so the cue and the habit line up.

TRY THIS

Write one "after I ___, I will ___" recipe, using something you already do every day as the anchor, and attach a small reward to the end.

REFLECT

The thing I already do reliably every day (my anchor):

After I ___ (my anchor), I will ___ (new habit):

The small reward I'll give myself:

STEP 4

DESIGN THE SPACE, NOT THE WILLPOWER

Wendy Wood found that about 43 percent of what we do each day repeats in the same context, often while our minds are elsewhere, so your environment carries a lot of it. Make the cue for the habit you want obvious, and add friction to the one you don't. Adam Grant calls these external supports scaffolding: temporary structures of tools and environment you lean on until the routine stands on its own.

MAKE IT OBVIOUS, OR MAKE IT HARD

To do more of a habit: put it on the counter, lay it out the night before, keep it in sight, make it the default. To do less: put it out of reach, delete the app, add a step, keep it in another room. You're editing the path of least resistance.

TRY THIS

Change one thing in your environment. Make a good cue visible (meds by the coffee maker), or add friction to a habit you want less of (charge the phone in another room).

REFLECT

One cue I'll make obvious:

One friction I'll add to a habit I want less of:

The one change I'll make in my space today:

STEP 5

FOR ADHD BRAINS, THE ROUTINE LIVES OUTSIDE YOUR HEAD

ADHD is a performance problem more than a knowledge one. As ADHD researcher Russell Barkley puts it, the challenge is doing what you already know, right at the moment it counts. The reasons are physical: time blindness, a working memory that drops things, and a reward system wired for now over later. None of that is a character flaw, and the fix isn't more willpower.

Barkley's answer is to **externalize**: move time, cues, and reminders out of your head and into the physical space at the "point of performance," where the action happens. A few ways to do that:

- **Make time visible.** To work around time blindness, use a countdown timer or a clock you can see, and set alarms for transitions, not just deadlines.
- **Capture, don't hold.** Keep one place to dump every open loop, a notebook or a notes app, so your working memory isn't the storage.
- **Shrink the start.** Task initiation is the hard part, so commit to five minutes or just the first physical step, not the whole thing.
- **Build in an immediate reward.** An ADHD brain responds to now, so pair a boring task with something you enjoy and celebrate the second you start.
- **Body double.** Do the task alongside someone, in the room or on a video call, and borrow their momentum.

> TRY THIS
>
> Pick one thing you keep forgetting and move it out of your head into the room, a sticky note where you'll hit it, an alarm, a whiteboard. Or try body doubling on a task you avoid.

REFLECT

What am I asking my memory to hold that could live outside my head?

Where will I put it so I can't miss it?

What immediate reward could I pair with a task I avoid?

STEP 6

DECIDE WHAT GETS TO BE GOOD ENOUGH

In a full season, trying to keep everything at 100 percent is how routines collapse. Sort your commitments: a few get your real effort, a bigger group is allowed to be good-enough, and some you set down on purpose for now. Adam Grant's point: perfectionism shrinks what you attempt, and high standards paired with permission to be imperfect are what keep you going.

A QUICK WAY TO SORT

List everything on your plate, then mark each one. A star for the few that get your full effort, a check for the bigger group that's allowed to be good-enough, a line through the ones you're setting down for now. Most people are surprised how much moves out of the star column without anything falling apart.

HOW LONG HABITS TAKE

Forget the 21-day myth. In a University College London study (Lally and colleagues, 2010), habits took a median of **66 days** to feel automatic, and anywhere from **18 to about 254 days** depending on the person and the habit. It's normal for this to take a couple of months, and missing a single day didn't derail people. A missed day is a blip, not a reset.

TRY THIS

Name one thing you'll let run at 60 percent this month without guilt, so the routine that matters gets protected.

REFLECT

Runs at 100% right now:

Allowed to be good-enough:

Setting down for now:

PUT IT TOGETHER

BUILD ONE ROUTINE

Pull it into one plan. Keep the two-minute version small enough that you'd do it on your worst day.

The routine I want

The two-minute version
e.g. read one page, put on my shoes

I'll anchor it to something I already do
After I ___, I will ___

The cue I'll make visible
e.g. meds by the coffee maker, sticky note on the mirror

My small reward, and how I'll celebrate

If it breaks, my restart is
one missed day is a blip, not a reset

Put this where you'll see it, on the fridge or as your phone wallpaper, so the plan lives outside your head instead of just in it.

Build the system, and let it carry you on the days willpower can't. Draws on behavioral activation (from CBT for depression); the habit science of James Clear, BJ Fogg, Charles Duhigg, and Wendy Wood; Russell Barkley's work on ADHD and executive function; Adam Grant's *Hidden Potential*; and Lally et al. (2010) on how long habits take to form. My Mental Climb is not affiliated with or endorsed by these authors.

EDUCATIONAL ONLY, NOT THERAPY.