

Intentional Habits: Bridging Atomic Habits with Intentional Change Theory

by Diane Mitchell-Miller

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” – Aristotle

“The secret of your success is found in your daily routine.” – John C. Maxwell

“Your habits will determine your future.” – Jack Canfield

“First we make our habits, then our habits make us.” – John Dryden

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work as a coach is witnessing the profound impact of seemingly small changes. Recently, during a virtual session, a client I'll call “Taylor” shared an experience that underscored the immense power of starting small. Taylor, a dedicated professional and single mom, felt completely overwhelmed. Her days were consumed by work tasks, school drop-offs, and a never-ending list of errands. “It’s like I’m drowning,” she admitted, her voice cracking with exhaustion.

When I asked Taylor what small, manageable change she could make to feel a little more in control, she paused. Then, almost as if to test the idea, she said, “Maybe I could wake up ten minutes earlier just to sit quietly.” What seemed like a trivial adjustment, a mere ten minutes, became a daily practice of mindfulness—a moment to ground herself before the whirlwind began. Over time, this tiny shift rippled out, leading to bigger changes: clearer boundaries, better stress management, and a renewed sense of agency.

This story isn’t unique. Often, when life feels overwhelming, the idea of overhauling everything at once is paralyzing. But as research and experience show, meaningful transformation starts with small, intentional steps.

True behavior change isn’t about willpower or temporary action. It’s about aligning your habits with the person you want to become.”

Behavior change is identity change. Anyone can force themselves to exercise or eat healthily for a short time, but unless those habits align with who you want to be, the change won’t last.

Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become.

Sustainable transformation doesn’t rely on fleeting motivation or sheer willpower; it’s about designing systems and habits that support the person you are becoming. This guide integrates two powerful frameworks—**Atomic Habits** and **Intentional Change Theory**—to help you align your daily actions, motivation, and vision, ultimately creating meaningful, lasting change.

Atomic Habits (James Clear, 2018)

Clear popularized the concept of the compound effect – the idea that small actions, when repeated consistently, lead to exponential growth. Just as an investment grows through **compound interest**, our habits accumulate to create a profound impact over time. Small, consistent actions create lasting change by reinforcing identity-based habits.

- **Identity-based habits** – Becoming the type of person who naturally engages in the behavior.
- **Habit stacking** – Attaching new habits to existing ones for seamless integration.
- **Environment shaping** – Making the desired habits easy and undesirable ones difficult.
- **Four Laws of Behavior Change**: make it obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying

"Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement." James Clear

Note: James Clear popularized "**habit stacking**" in *Atomic Habits* (2018), but the concept originated with **BJ Fogg**, a Stanford behavior scientist. Clear also builds on **Charles Duhigg's** work by acknowledging the role of **keystone habits**, a concept introduced in *The Power of Habit* (2012).

- **BJ Fogg's "Tiny Habits" (2011):** He introduced the idea of anchoring new habits to existing behaviors, using small, easy actions. Example: *After I brush my teeth, I will floss one tooth.*
- **Charles Duhigg (2012):** He coined "**keystone habits**", which are **habits that trigger a ripple effect** of positive change across different areas of life. Example: **Regular exercise** often leads to better eating, improved sleep, and increased productivity.
- **James Clear's "Habit Stacking" (2018):** He expanded on Fogg's idea, formalizing "habit stacking" as a method to group small habits together for easier adoption. Example: *After I pour my morning coffee, I will write down three things I'm grateful for.*

Intentional Change Theory (Richard Boyatzis)

True transformation occurs when we connect with our **ideal self**, leverage positive emotional experiences, and build supportive relationships that reinforce growth. Transformation isn't just about doing more—it's about becoming more.

"Real change occurs when we connect with our ideal self and bring positive emotional experiences to our learning." Richard Boyatzis

Transformation isn't just about doing more—it's about becoming more.

- **Clarifying the ideal self** – Creating a compelling vision of who you want to become.
- **Emotional resonance** – Leveraging motivation through positive experiences.
- **Support systems** – Change is sustained through relationships that reinforce growth.

Together, these frameworks provide a **holistic approach to transformation**—aligning daily habits, motivation, and personal vision to create meaningful, lasting change.

The Elephant and the Rider: A Metaphor of Change

Imagine you're on a winding jungle path, riding a massive elephant. You have a map, a clear goal, and a destination in mind. But no matter how much you tug at the reins or issue commands, the elephant veers off course, driven by instinct.

In *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath describe the Rider as the rational mind—logical, analytical, focused on the future. The Elephant, by contrast, represents the emotional mind—powerful, instinctual, and prone to distraction.

For lasting change, the Rider must guide the Elephant—but the Elephant must also want to move. When both are aligned, the path becomes clearer, and change becomes possible.
Why We Struggle to Change

You know what to do—but you don't do it. Why?

Because change isn't just logical—it's emotional.

Often, our struggle with goals comes from choosing ones that feel inherently punishing. They demand relentless discipline or remind us of our limitations in ways that feel discouraging rather than empowering. Many times, we've already tried—and failed—to produce results in the past, which adds another emotional layer of frustration or shame.

The key is setting the right resolution—whether it's a bold goal, a new habit, or breaking an old one. To begin, start with your desired outcome. It's okay if it feels a little vague; we'll refine it as we go.

You might want to:

- Lose weight
- Get in shape or start exercising
- Spend more time with friends

Once you've named your goal, ask yourself: Why do I really want this?

You might have a whole list of reasons—and that's great. But right now, I want you to focus on the most compelling benefit—the one that truly matters to you.

Logic Doesn't Drive Us—Emotion Does

Chances are, your first reason is logical. For example:

"I want to lose weight because it will lower my blood pressure."

Here's the thing: even though we like to think of ourselves as rational beings, logic doesn't motivate us nearly as much as our emotions do. Why?

Because we're wired to seek what feels good and avoid what feels bad.

Resolutions that feel like obligations ("I should do this") trigger stress—not motivation. And stress often sends us straight toward comfort... usually in the form of the very habits we're trying to avoid (hello, potato chips and Netflix).

So ask yourself:

How do I want to feel?

That's the emotional "why" that will sustain your motivation over the long haul

When Stress Disrupts Change

To complicate matters, many of us live in a near-constant state of low-grade stress. Whether it's the pressure of daily responsibilities, emotional strain, or unresolved anxiety, our nervous systems often stay stuck in fight, flight, or freeze.

When we're stressed, overwhelmed, or emotionally overloaded, our ability to stay intentional takes a hit.

The part of the brain responsible for planning, decision-making, and self-control (the **prefrontal cortex**) quiets down. Meanwhile, our **emotional brain**—driven by instinct and habit—takes the lead.

This doesn't mean we're failing. It means our system is protecting us.

This is why rituals matter. They signal safety. They ground us. They shift us out of reaction and back into intention.

Whether it's a breath before a meeting, a moment of gratitude in the morning, or five minutes of movement when your energy dips—rituals help restore your inner alignment. And from that place, habit change becomes less of a push... and more of a pull.

Cut check: Does Your Goal Feel Good to Your Elephant?
Let's think this through.

Say you want to lose weight and decide to cut out baked goods—your favorite comfort food. At first, you might feel proud for making a healthy choice. But over time, if you strictly avoid them, you'll likely start to feel deprived. And if you eventually cave and eat them, you might feel guilty.

Neither state supports lasting change—both make it easy to give up.

Sustainable change isn't about self-denial—it's about creating habits that feel aligned, energizing, and emotionally rewarding.

Understanding Change

Behavior change is often a battle between:

- The Rider (Logical Mind): Rational, analytical, plans for the future—but prone to overthinking and hesitation.
- The Elephant (Emotional Mind): Powerful, feeling-driven, rooted in habit and comfort—but resistant to discomfort or uncertainty.

When someone has clear goals and well-laid plans but struggles to follow through, it's often because the Elephant isn't on board. The emotional mind isn't motivated or doesn't feel safe.

Bottom Line

You need both the Rider and the Elephant.

The plan and the feeling.

The logic and the why.

When they work together, change becomes not only possible—but inevitable.

Successful Change Requires Three Steps:

1. Direct the Rider

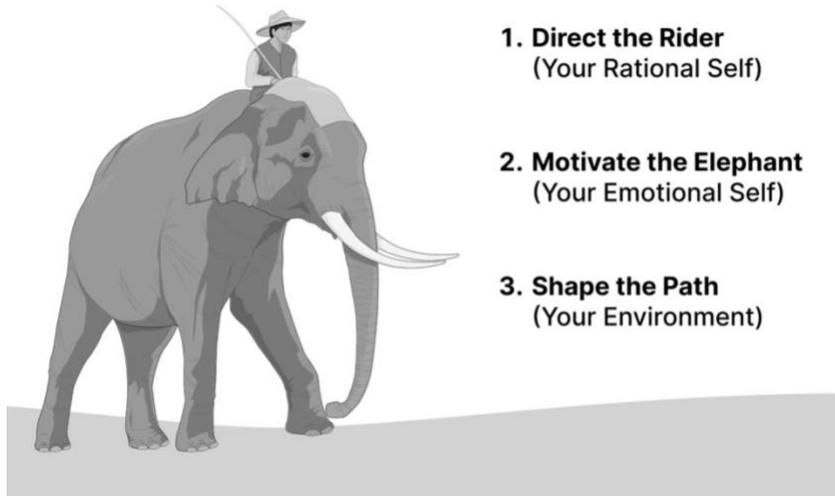
- Give clear, simple directions to prevent analysis paralysis.
Example: Habit stacking—tie new habits to existing routines.

2. Motivate the Elephant

- Appeal to emotion and identity.
Make it meaningful—why does this change matter to you?

3. Shape the Path

- Make change easy and frictionless.
Design your environment for success.



Why Change Fails: Four Hidden Saboteurs

Even with clear goals and good intentions, change can stall. Why? Because the emotional Elephant often has its own agenda. Here are four common saboteurs that pull us off course:

Inner Saboteurs and Limiting Beliefs

There might be subconscious beliefs like:

“I’m not good enough.” “I always fail, so why bother?” “I don’t deserve success.”

These beliefs create internal resistance. Even when the Rider pushes forward, the Elephant quietly sabotages progress to stay in **familiar territory** (our minds prefer what’s familiar).

Unshaped Path / Poor Environment

Even with motivation and logic in place, if the path is cluttered—too many steps, distractions, temptations—it’s easy to slide back into old patterns.

Design beats willpower. If the habit isn’t easy, visible, and satisfying, the Elephant will wander.

- Misaligned Identity

If someone’s self-image doesn’t match the change they’re trying to make, there’s an inner conflict. You can’t consistently act in a way that contradicts who you believe you are.

Goal: “Be a disciplined writer.” Self-image: “I’m not creative or productive.”

That disconnect creates drag.

Unprocessed Emotions or Grief

Sometimes there’s something deeper going on—grief, anxiety, trauma, or burnout. These can sap energy and hijack the Elephant’s ability to move forward, even when the Rider is doing everything “right.”

These aren't flaws. They're invitations. Each saboteur tells us where we need care, clarity, or healing.

Building Identity-Based Habits

What one habit would have the most dramatic impact on your well-being if you were to change it?

Our life is a collection of habits — about half of our day happens on autopilot. Habits are your brain's way of conserving energy. Cognitive shortcuts are formed when your brain converts repetitive actions, thoughts, or behaviors into routines. This process helps free up mental bandwidth for more complex tasks.

PHASE 1: IDENTITY & PURPOSE

Lesson 1: Start with the End in Mind (Who am I Becoming)

Principle: True behavior change is identity change. Anyone can convince themselves to visit the gym or eat healthy once or twice, but if you don't shift the belief behind the behavior, it's hard to stick with long-term changes. Improvements are only temporary until they become part of who you are. Every action you take is a **vote for the type of person you wish to become**. You must tie your desire or goal with something meaningful or to your core values: your Ideal Self.

Tie Your Identity to Purpose: Why Your "Why" Matters: Change is fueled by *meaning*. It often happens in one of two ways: **inspiration or desperation**. Without a compelling reason, change feels unnecessary. Your *why* must be stronger than your resistance—stronger than the comfort of staying the same. In other words, the pain of staying where you are has to become greater than the pain of growing. When your why is tied to your identity—who you *want* to become—you're far more likely to stick with change. This is where purpose becomes power.

Tie Your Identity to Purpose: Why Your "Why" Matters

Key Questions:

Where am I now (REAL self)?

Who am I becoming (IDEAL self)?

What habit reinforces that identity?

What's my why? (What makes this meaningful?)

Example: "I am a healthy and active person. I will walk for 30 minutes every morning." "I am a healthy person that that wants to give the best of me to my family."

Lesson 2: Find the Habits Job (Understand the Real Need)

Principle: When you uncover the *purpose* behind a habit, you give yourself the power to choose a better way.

Every habit—good or bad—serves a function. It has a job. The key is understanding what that job is, so you can meet the *real need* in a healthier, more aligned way. Do you worry because you think it helps you better prepare or eases anxiety? Do you drink to numb stress or crawl into bed when overwhelmed? Often, bad habits are coping mechanisms for avoiding discomfort or managing emotions.

Key Questions:

What is this habit *really* trying to do for you?

When did this habit first start showing up in your life?

How does this habit help you manage discomfort, uncertainty, or emotion?

What need or emotion are you avoiding or soothing when you engage in it?

If the habit had a voice, what would it say it's trying to protect you from?

What would your ideal self do instead, in moments of stress or overwhelm?

PHASE 2: BUILD THE HABIT LOOP

Lesson 3: Make it Easier to Start (Tiny Habits)

Principle: A habit must be established before it can be improved.

Starting small helps reduce resistance and builds consistency. If the habit is too big or overwhelming at the start, it may lead to procrastination or burnout.

The goal is to make showing up easy and take small manageable steps to form the foundation of the habit.

Key Questions:

What is the two-minute version of my habit?

How can I make showing up easier?

Example: "I will put on workout clothes and stretch for 2 minutes in the morning."

Lesson 4: Create Cues that Stick (Trigger)

Principle: Tie habits to specific cues for consistency.

To form a habit that sticks, it's essential to **tie it to a consistent, specific cue**. According to the **habit loop** model (as shown below), every habit is formed through a repeating cycle:

Trigger → Routine → Reward.

Figure your trigger to atomic habits!

This loop helps explain why habits become automatic. The **cue** triggers the **routine** (the behavior), which leads to a **reward** (the benefit). Over time, your brain begins to crave the reward when the cue appears, reinforcing the habit.

Example: Walking (begin with the 2-minute version in lesson 2)

1. **Cue:** You decide to walk every day after lunch. The cue is the specific time of day (after lunch), which becomes a trigger for the habit.
2. **Routine:** The behavior is the walk itself. Every day after lunch, you put on your shoes and go for a walk, following the set routine.
3. **Reward:** After walking, you feel more energized and relaxed, which reinforces the habit. The positive feeling acts as the reward that motivates you to repeat the behavior.

By consistently linking the walk to the specific cue (after lunch), your brain starts associating that time with the action, making it easier to follow through each day. The more often you do this, the more automatic the habit becomes.

Key Questions:

What specific time/event will cue my habit?

Where will I perform this habit?

Example: "After I brew my morning coffee, I will do 5 minutes of stretching."

Lesson 5: Shape your Space for Change (Increase Friction)

Principle: Environment is the invisible hand that shapes behavior. If you want to change your habits, change what surrounds you. Make the *desired habit* easy and obvious. Make the *undesired habit* harder to access by increasing friction. For example: If you're trying to stop late-night snacking, don't bring snacks into the house. The harder it is to engage in a behavior, the less likely it is to happen.

Key Questions:

How can I make the cue for my habit more visible?

What obstacles can I remove?

Example: "I will place my workout shoes by the door."

Lesson 6: Leverage Reward & Accountability (Reward)

Principle: Immediate rewards help build consistency.

Key Questions:

What small reward can reinforce my habit?

How can I make this habit enjoyable?

Example: "After my workout, I will enjoy a smoothie."

PHASE 3: SUSTAINING MOMENTUM

Lesson 7: Track Progress & Create Momentum (Compound Growth)

Principle: Small wins create motivation.

Key Questions:

How will I track my habit?

What feedback system can I use?

Example: I will mark off each workout on my calendar.

Lesson 8: Find a Tribe & Build Social Accountability

Principle: Motivation is stronger with a supportive community.

Key Questions:

Who can I connect with to share this habit?

How can I create external accountability?

Example: I will join a local running group.

Lesson 9: Graduate Your Habits to the Next Level (Keystone Habits)

Principle: When a habit feels easy, level up.

Key Questions:

What's the next step for my habit?

How can I use habit stacking?

What is a good keystone habit? Example: Pair my workouts with listening to my favorite podcast.

Final Thoughts: Making Lasting Change

By combining **Intentional Change Theory** and **Atomic Habits**, you create a powerful, holistic framework for personal growth. While ICT helps you define your **Ideal Self** and build emotional resonance, **Atomic Habits** provides the practical, small actions that reinforce this transformation. Keystone habits serve as catalysts for broader change, creating a ripple effect

that supports your overall development. This combination empowers you not only to form new habits but to consciously design the person you wish to become, leading to sustainable, long-term transformation.

“This is not just about changing habits—it’s about becoming who you were meant to be.”