

How to Transform a Life Stuck in a Rut

Has a New Year's resolution ever made a permanent difference in your life? Maybe you stuck with it for the first week of the year. But dang it, January is cold. Some mornings it's hard to just get out of your warm bed, let alone trudge to the gym, write a blog post, or meditate before work. By February, our best-laid plans are all but forgotten.

But it's not really the cold that's to blame. The problem was that your resolutions required perpetual resolve. But life happens, and inspiration inevitably fades. You can't expect yourself to stay inspired year-round. You need to rest your success on something sturdier.

Instead of making specific resolutions, make one resolution that will beget a year full of resolutions. Resolve to regularly track, review, and shape your habits.

Groove or Rut?

Nothing is more powerful than the human habit. Individual actions are what make things happen. And establishing a habit is a meta-action that determines the general course of future actions.

You choose your fate by choosing your character. And you choose your character by shaping your habits.

To establish a habit is to pave the road ahead. Your path can either be a groove or a rut. By getting yourself in a habitual groove, you make progress come easy. By getting yourself in a habitual rut, you condemn yourself to stagnation.

Habits comprise much of one's character. And as Heraclitus said, "A man's character is his fate." You choose your fate by

choosing your character. And you choose your character by shaping your habits.

By shaping your habits, you can radically transform just about anything about yourself. “I’m kind of lazy. I’m not good with money. I’m not an athlete.” These are not verities. They’re manifestations of habits, and all habits can be hacked.

Apps for That

In the hacking of habits, the trick is to track. Think of a way to measure the useful habit you want to establish or the hampering habit you want to minimize. Then set daily goals for yourself, i.e., at least 20 minutes on the exercise bike or practicing the piano, no more than 30 minutes on Facebook, complaining at a family member no more than 3 times, etc. Download timer and tally apps onto your smartphone to keep score. (I use [Hours](#) and [Tally](#).)

Then, on some kind of calendar, [mark the days](#) that you meet your daily goal. (For this, I use the app [Momentum](#).)

Do this only for as many habits as you can sustainably manage, at first perhaps no more than one in each of the major categories of your life: health, intellectual development, emotions, relationships, work, etc.

Now this is the key part. Review your habit projects every single day, ideally always at the same time. Assess how you’re doing. Look at your calendar and notice whether you’re having success streaks. [Free-write](#) in your journal (I use [Evernote](#)) about it.

If a new habit is sticking, can you raise the bar? Ramp up to 30 minutes on the bike? Go for zero times fussing at your family? (Believe me, achieving this last one is mind-altering and life-changing.) Has your winning streak been so long, that you can consider the habit established? Can you move on to a new habit?

If a habit is not sticking, should you lower the bar to something more within reach? 15 minutes on the bike? 10 minutes? 5 even? Start with baby steps if necessary. Once you unlock a smaller, attainable achievement, you can always ramp up to larger ones later.

If it helps, draft a questionnaire for yourself that you can copy and paste into each daily journal entry.

Sculpting a New You

All details about your specific habit projects are negotiable. The key is to keep at the overall habit-monitoring meta-project. Keep seeking progress, however small. Sustained, small progress will inevitably accumulate into transformative changes in your life. By the end of the year, you'll be a different person: a new and improved you.

If you continually hone and ramp up your health regimen, you'll feel a year younger instead of a year older.

If you establish the habit of reading inspiring books and writing thoughtful articles every day, your perspective on life will be deepened and expanded.

If you monitor and reflect upon the way you [think about and talk to other people](#), you can gradually but fully purge yourself of toxic mental and emotional habits, and radically improve your sense of well-being.

If you do one thing every day to develop a new skill, you'll have that skill, and at an astounding level.

If you do one thing daily to build an online side-business, you'll have had invaluable practical lessons in entrepreneurship and will likely have created a new income stream for yourself: maybe even a new career.

Again, none of your limits are immutable. Even a mountain of limitations can be eroded away by the steady drip of a daily

practice: by the almighty power of habit.

Restore the Core

Whatever you do, don't condemn yourself over lack of progress. Self-condemnation is useless for your purposes. And remember, this is all [about you and for you](#). No matter how many days you miss your goals, just keep checking in with yourself every day and keep adjusting. Did you miss your habit review yesterday? Don't condemn yourself over that either, much less use it as an excuse to give up entirely. Just habit-check today: do it now, even.

Your daily habit review is your anchor, your lifeline, the essential core of all your self-improvement efforts. No matter how bad it gets, no matter how severely you relapse into a rut, you can always get your groove back by restoring your core: by returning to your daily habit review. Once you restore your core, you can start rebuilding out from that center and get back everything you temporarily lost.

As Will Durant wrote, paraphrasing Aristotle, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

You can determine your days and sculpt your soul. Just keep hacking your habits.

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Dan Sanchez is Managing Editor of FEE.org. His writings are collected at DanSanchez.me.

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