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HACK YOUR HABITS



Break the Bad & Build Good Ones
that Last a Lifetime

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a Lifetime**

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<https://deanyeong.com/habit-guide>

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You Are the Result of Your Habits

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

This is a powerful quote by one of the greatest Greek philosophers and scientists. It comes as no surprise that this is the ultimate truth for anyone who has ever achieved excellence in life.

It's not about the talent or the luck; rather, it's the repetitive action with consistency that counts. And that's the power of habit.

- **To build a huge blog audience:** You (read: I) need to write and publish high-quality content consistently.
- **To master design skills:** You need to practice deliberately for a long period of time and stay up-to-date with the latest trends and best practices.
- **To live healthier:** You need to manage your diet closely and never miss a workout.

The truth is, habits are formed, even without us wanting to achieve any particular goal. In most cases, habits are formed unintentionally and unconsciously.

The purpose of this mechanism of forming habits is not to help us achieve our goals. In reality, habits are formed to put a repeated pattern, behavior, or action into autopilot to reduce the energy used by your brain in the process of making tough decisions.

On average, the human brain makes up just 4 percent

of the mass of the whole body, but it consumes almost 20 percent of our total energy to function optimally. That's how much our brain is working to allow us living a normal life.

For it to work efficiently, our brain actually ignores almost 80 percent of the information it collects by putting them into autopilot, due to our limited energy and limited ability to make decisions consistently.

Without the mechanism of forming habits, we would probably not even exist. We'd never be able to remember a thing, never be able to learn a thing, and never be able to even think.

Just imagine that. How could you stay sane if you needed to decide whether you should brush your teeth today and which side of your teeth you should start brushing first, whenever you want to brush your teeth?

Even when we were younger, when we hated routine

so much and wanted everything to be fresh, we still had a few habits, if not hundreds, that we weren't aware of.

I brushed my teeth twice every day; I tied my left shoelace first; I wrote using my right hand; I felt happier when I saw my mom smile; and I took a shower right after I got home from school or work. Those are the habits that helped me to run my day.

More than 80% percent of our daily activities are our habits. With that said, any result you obtained today—regardless good or bad—is the collective product of your habits in the past.

Likewise, every result you desire for the future depends on the habits you have and cultivate at this moment. Turning this around, your current bad habits will eventually destroy you in the future.

It's clear that mastering our habits will do way more good to us as creatives and entrepreneurs. To be a

better version of ourselves, it's crucial to break and reduce destructive habits and cultivate good, lasting habits.

In this book, you will learn the scientific formula behind habit formation, how to break a bad habit and replace it with a good one, and finally, how to make good habits stick.

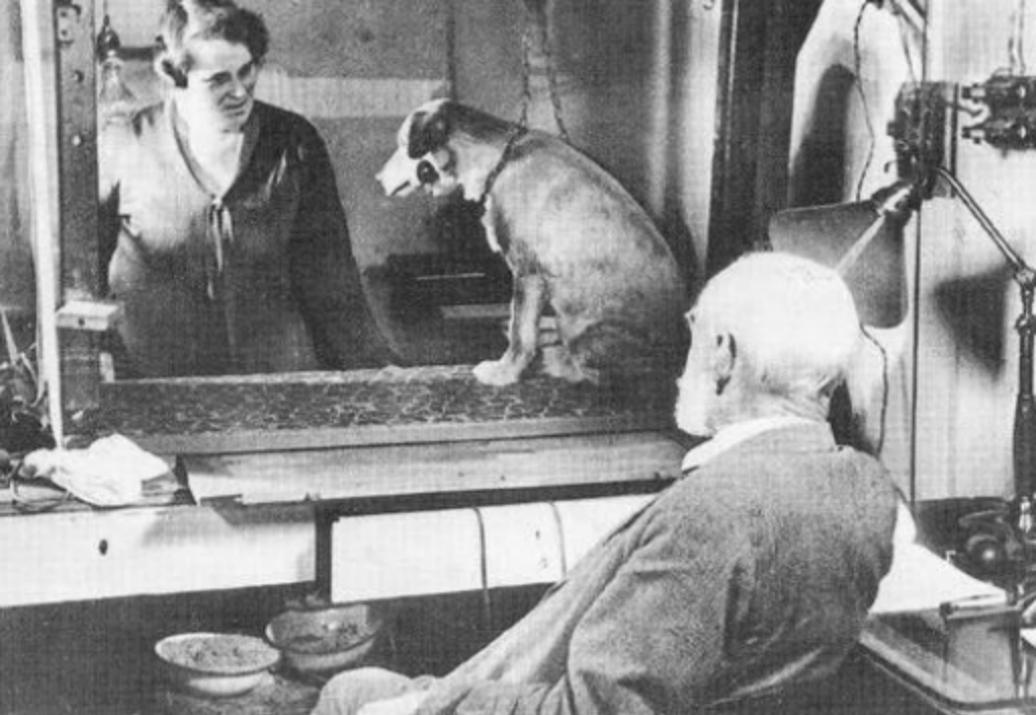
2

How a Habit is Formed

In 1901, a Russian psychologist named Ivan Petrovich Pavlov and his assistant researcher, Ivan Filippovitch Tolochinov, had come to learn the concept of what they called “Conditioned Reflex” when examining the rate of salivation among dogs.

Pavlov had learned that when a buzzer or metronome was sounded in subsequent time with food being presented to the dog in consecutive sequences, the dog would initially salivate when the food was presented. The dog would later come to associate the sound of the buzzer with the presentation of the food and salivate upon the presentation of that stimulus. With time, the dog would salivate when it heard the sound of a buzzer or metronome even without the food being present.

Pavlov’s work gradually became known in the West, particularly through the writing of John B. Watson, an American psychologist. He viewed Ivan Pavlov’s conditioned reflex concept as the fundamental psychological mechanism that forms human behavior.



In 1913, Watson published an article called "*Psychology as the Behaviorist views it*," which stated that our behavior is the result of stimuli and responses. This basically means that all behavior, no matter how complex, can be reduced to the simple stimulus-response associations.

In the published article by Watson, he explains his belief that when we're born, our mind is a blank slate. Our behavior is then formed and shaped by the stimuli within our environment.

WHAT TURNS A ROUTINE TO A HABIT?

Most people think that habits are formed when you have done something over and over again. They think if they repeat something regularly for long enough, it will eventually become a habit and they will be able to do it consistently without any extra effort.

If this is true, why are there so many people who have been working out in the gym for years but still drop off-track? And are those who work from 9 to 5 for 20 years doing their work better, without extra effort, and feeling happy about it?

Repeated behavior is simply a blank definition of habit. It explains what habit is, but it can never explain how habit is formed. To form a habit, a scientific formula is required by design.

Something is missing in the statement from Pavlov's dog experiment: the dogs' behavior actually becomes a habit after time. When the dogs hear the sound of a buzzer, they are given the signal that the food is

coming, and thus the dogs start salivating.

But what is it that makes the dog remember the stimuli, in this case, the sound of a buzzer? What makes the dogs fall directly into the routine of salivating once the stimulus is presented?

The answer: a reward.

The reward is what makes the behavior becomes addictive. It signals the brain that the behavior or action is worth repeating because it leads to pleasure or avoids some sort of pain. Besides, the reward also further strengthens the neural pathway of the behavior, both the trigger and the routine.

To form a habit, we need to close the stimuli response into a loop of what we call the **habit loop**, with the presence of a reward. In the case of Pavlov's dogs, this reward is the food.

Here's another simplified example:

You see the delicious hamburger (trigger), you eat it (routine), and you feel satisfaction on your taste buds and in your stomach (reward).

Now you remember the pleasure a hamburger brought to you. The next time you see a hamburger again, you

**Repeated
behavior explains
what habit is, but
never explain
how habit is
formed.**

can't resist eating it... even you are on a diet plan to lose weight. It may sound oversimplified, but this is exactly how a habit is formed.

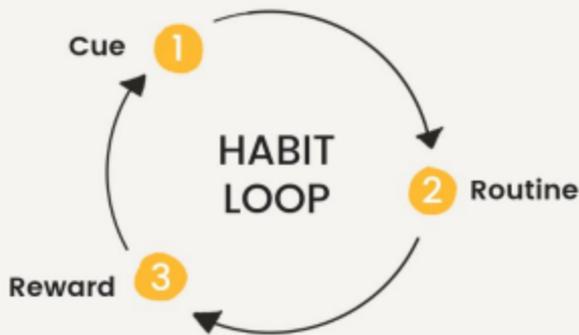
ELEMENTS OF A HABIT LOOP

Now, let us dive deeper into the habit loop. To form any habit, you first need a routine, then a trigger and a reward.

Trigger | A reminder that act as a trigger that leads to the routine

Routine | A behavior (the habit)

Reward | A—positive or negative—outcome after you have accomplished your routine



As shown above, the habit loop forms a cycle in which each element leads to the next. We need a trigger to remind us of our routine. After we have completed the routine, we will receive feedback. Feedback can be positive or negative.

If it's positive feedback—in this case, we are calling it a reward—a habit loop is formed. Whenever the trigger is presented to us next time, we will get into the routine automatically and expect to gain a similar reward.

But what if the feedback is negative? It's not a reward at all. This is why most people can't make regular exercise a habit: because they have unconsciously associated negative feedback into their mind and body after their workout, even though they really wanted to exercise.

Do you want to get fit, but have the mindset below?

- *I have to starve myself to lose weight.*

- *No pain, no gain. I need more pain for good gain.*
- *Having healthy foods means having foods that I don't like.*
- *I need to make myself puke (feel bad) to prove I've gone through a good workout session.*

If that sounds like you, then you are more likely to get in and out of your endless new fitness resolution and plan without gaining any significant results.

The same thing happened to me three years back. I started with basic weightlifting. Then, I trained with high-intensity interval training (HIIT), expecting to lose some fat. But HIIT is not sustainable for the long term, both physically and mentally, so I switched to a regular bodybuilding routine again. I was making no progress, only moving in circles for three years, simply because I was never able to make working out regularly a habit, due to the wrong measuring parameters and the wrong reward (pain).

SIDENOTE | Most of the time, the problem doesn't lie in the action or routine we take. The problem lies in the consistency. The problem lies in our incorrect approach to building habits.

Most people fail to build a new routine or habit into their day-to-day life because they do not acknowledge the habit loop.

They may try too hard to force themselves into a certain routine, such as jogging for 30 minutes a day or waking up early at 5 a.m., and only find themselves failing to keep the consistency with the routine after a few weeks, or maybe just a few days.

Does that sound familiar?

Now that you understand how a habit is formed, the best solution to implement a new routine you'd like to

practice into your daily life is really the matter of identifying the trigger, testing and adjusting it, then setting up a reward plan, testing and adjusting it too.

I may be oversimplifying the process since if it's that simple, everyone should have done it already. Yes, it's simple, but it's never easy.

What to Do Next?

KNOW YOUR ROUTINE. This is the easiest part. Acknowledge the routine you want to practice and write it down.

SET UP A TRIGGER. There are five types of trigger: time, people, location, emotional state, and preceding action. Invest some willpower to move yourself to the routine once the trigger is presented, especially at the beginning stage.

SET UP A REWARD. It could be anything; however, a reward that you associate with positive emotions works best here.

3

Breaking & Building Habits

Small bad habits can create a big negative impact in our life. The bad habit might ruin your relationships with people, destroy your body, or even take away your precious time for more important matters.

These bad habits very hard to break and remove even if we aware of them.

- We want to lose weight, but we can't stop eating unhealthy food.
- We want to have a better relationship with our partner, but we get pissed off easily.
- We want to build our business, but we procrastinate in doing the important work.

If you have ever lost weight on a diet only to gain it all back, you were probably as perplexed as you were disappointed.

And if you have finally quit smoking for two weeks

only to get back to it all over again, you might start blaming yourself for your lack of self-control. You felt certain that you had conquered bad eating habits or smoking – so what caused you to backslide?

When asked how to stop smoking, most people will say it's as simple as not buying cigarettes or simply forcing themselves to stop by suppressing the urge to smoke.

Now, let's refer back to the habit loop. If you're a smoker and have been thinking about quitting or trying to quit smoking for a long time, this is the time for you to look more closely. If you're not, just replace "smoking" with any bad habit you might have that you want to break right now.

Start unpacking the habit of smoking into three parts: trigger, routine, and reward. Try to imagine when and where you usually smoke. At home? After lunch or dinner? And who are you with when you're smoking? Friends who smoke together?

Be specific with your answers. Then, write them down in the trigger section. You can do the same exercise for any bad habit you'd like to break by understanding this.

Next, write down the routine. In this case, smoking is the routine.

Finally, fill in the section about the reward. What you do immediately after you smoke? How do you feel after you smoke? Is it the cooling sensation of certain cigarettes you're enjoying? Or the time you have with your smoke buddies? By completing this exercise, you'll have a clear picture of how the habit of smoking was built up in your daily life.

So, why is "simply stop smoking" not good or useful advice? Because every bad habit has a trigger. Most importantly, at the end of the routine, every bad habit provides you with a benefit or a reward in some way.

It might harm you physically, but it benefits you or

provides you pleasure emotionally and mentally.

Even if they do stop smoking for a while, they will quickly get back to it, all due to the incomplete habit formation cycle. This applies in many other different cases, from procrastination, to porn addiction, to bad diet patterns.

**Bad habits are
hard to break
because the habit
loop can't be
extinguished.**

Instead of removing a bad routine, the best way to break a bad habit is by replacing it with a new good routine in existing habit loop.

Before we dive into that, let's discuss the other two methods that work but are less effective: removing the trigger and replacing the reward with pain.

1. REMOVING THE TRIGGER

Removing the trigger is a very helpful way to break and remove a certain habit, such as snacking too much. Most of the time, we only snack when we see those delicious junk foods. By not buying and storing any snacks on your kitchen shelves, you will see a significant change if you used to snack a lot.

But what if the trigger is out of our control, or it's something that's impossible to avoid. Let's get back to the habit of smoking. If the stimulus is "after dinner," how is it possible for you to eliminate dinner from your life?

2. REPLACING REWARD WITH PAIN

The next method is to replace the reward with pain. This is something that lies under a deeper level of our mind.

We can definitely lose weight if we link enough pain to having unhealthy food and not exercising, but it's easier said than done. Besides, it requires us to place a heavy load of focus and energy into that matter.

This strategy is useful as a backup plan while we're replacing the bad routine with a good one. It reduces the chances that we'll fall back into the old routine because we associate pain with it.

WORKING ON THE HABIT LOOP

By understanding how habits are formed, you can break any bad habit with proven techniques. It's not going to be easy, but you will gain better clarity and control over your own behavior by doing it.

I used to have bad habits that took away too much of

my time, such as surfing the web aimlessly. To have a clearer observation into this habit, I wrote it down with pen on paper.

Routine | Surfing the web without any purpose

Trigger | When I'm bored, tired or stressed

Reward | Entertainment (videos), feeling of having learned some new (unrelated) information

Then I transformed this habit by replacing the routine from a non-empowering one to an empowering one. I started by researching something that I could do rather than surfing the web aimlessly, and I downloaded a book summary app called [Optimize](#).

Rather than surfing the web – mainly Facebook or YouTube – when I have a window of free time, I sign into my Optimize app to pick a book summary to read. By the end of my read – it usually takes 7 to 13 minutes – I felt that I have learned something new.

The best part is, those book summaries are useful, and

I'm spending less time doing it. I have to admit that Facebook Newsfeed and YouTube videos are very hard for most of us to get rid of once we start falling into the habit of looking at them.

Sidenote: The most common bad habit people have is not any destructive bad behavior but simply not carrying out the good habit they want to practice. In other words, people procrastinate. The truth is that the trigger for procrastination and distraction boil down to two things: stress and boredom.

You watch TV when you're bored, or you smoke when you feel stressed. When you have figured out the trigger, the best way to overcome procrastination is to set

up a positive routine whenever you feel bored or stressed, and then, associate a reward with the routine afterward. For sure that it takes willpower and self-discipline in the early stages, but it breaking procrastination means so much to many people.

Replacing a bad habit with a good one is the best method to break any unhealthy behavior. Meanwhile, you can use the other two methods to strengthen your newly formed habits and avoid falling back into the old habit loop.

Besides reading book summaries instead of social media feeds, I downloaded two Google Chrome extensions—[DF YouTube](#) and [Newsfeed Eradicator for Facebook](#)—to block my YouTube recommendation feed and Facebook newsfeed. This will further block me from getting back into my old routine.

Then, I linked so much pain to surfing the web aimlessly. For me, surfing the web without a defined purpose means wasting time and poor productivity, which will take away the precious time I have to invest in something that truly matters to me.

What to Do Next?

UNPACK YOUR HABIT using the habit formation loop. Spend time identifying all the three elements that form your bad habit.

SUBSTITUTE A GOOD ROUTINE that provides the same reward to replace the bad routine.

ASSOCIATE PAIN WITH THE BAD ROUTINE to increase the effectiveness in breaking the bad habit.

4

**Making Habits
Stick for a Lifetime**

In 1971, a group of researchers led by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo was studying the psychological effects of becoming a prisoner or prison guard. Zimbardo and his team aimed to test the hypothesis that the inherent personality traits of prisoners and guards are the chief cause of abusive behavior in prison.

Eighteen psychologically stable and healthy male participants (students) were recruited and told they would participate in a two-week prison simulation. The group was intentionally selected to exclude those with any criminal background, psychological impairments, or medical problems.

The experiment was conducted in the basement of Jordan Hall (Stanford's psychology building). Nine out of the 18 participants were assigned the role of prisoner, while the other nine were assigned the role of a prison guard.

Zimbardo designed the experiment in order to induce



disorientation, depersonalization, and deindividuation in the participants. The guards were provided with batons to establish their status, clothing similar to that worn by actual prison guards, and mirrored sunglasses to prevent eye contact.

On August 20, 1971, Zimbardo was forced to announce the end of the experiment, because the participants had adapted to their roles well beyond Zimbardo's expectations. The guards enforced authoritarian measures and ultimately subjected some of the prisoners to psychological torture. Many of the prisoners passively accepted the psychological abuse,

and readily harassed other prisoners who attempted to prevent it, at the request of the guards.

Even Zimbardo himself was affected and consumed by the experiment; in his role as the superintendent, he permitted the abuse to continue. Two of the prisoners had to quit the experiment early, and the entire experiment was unexpectedly stopped after only six days because of the objections of a researcher in the team.

The results of the experiment favor situational attribution of behavior rather than dispositional attribution. Simply put, it seemed that the situation, rather than their individual inherent personalities, caused the participants' behavior. It also illustrated and explained the power of authority.

THE POWER OF ROLE AND IDENTITY

When you think about it, our lives are very similar to (or even the same as) the experiment. We play one or many roles – as a father/mother, citizen, or employee

—from day to day. In most cases, we don't decide what role we're playing and who we are; sometimes, we don't even have the choice of being cast in a role, such as a son, a citizen of a certain country, and a part of a certain race.

Often, our environment and situation decide who we are and what we do. It also indirectly shapes our beliefs and identity at the same time. If we believe we can never be successful and then define ourselves as a failure, we will be quickly consumed by the situation. It's not that the situation can't be changed, but more about our behavior in believing we can do nothing to change. In other words, we learn helplessness.

During the end of the experiment, Zimbardo invited a Catholic priest who had been a prison chaplain to evaluate how realistic our prison situation was, by interviewing each prisoner individually. The only prisoner who did not want to speak to the priest was Prisoner #819, who was feeling sick and had refused to eat.

While Zimbardo was talking to him to find out what doctor he need to see, he started breaking down and crying hysterically. Zimbardo then took off the chain around his ankle and his cap, when he decided to withdraw from the experiment to see the doctor. While he was doing this, one of the guards lined up the other prisoners and had them chant aloud: "Prisoner 819 is a bad prisoner!"

As prisoner 819 heard the chanting, he started sobbing uncontrollably and refused to leave. Even though he was sick, he wanted to go back to the cell to prove he was not a bad prisoner.

Zimbardo then said, "Listen, you are not 819. You are [his name], and my name is Dr. Zimbardo. I am a psychologist, not a prison superintendent, and this is not a real prison. This is just an experiment, and those are students, not prisoners, just like you. Let's go." Prisoner 819 stopped crying suddenly, looked up at Zimbardo like a small child awakened from a nightmare, and replied, "Okay, let's go."

We all face the same situation in real life. Every routine and habit we have right now is directly tied to our identity. This basically means we will always do what our role should or would do. Your self-identity leads to your behaviors and actions; then, your behaviors and actions produce the appearance and results.

To make a habit stick, you first need to change your identity. You can't be a good singer if you think you're bad at singing. You will definitely miss your workout again and again if you brand yourself an unhealthy person. And you will never achieve a breakthrough in your business if you perceive yourself as a loser in the market.



- Instead of forcing yourself to exercise every day, become someone who never misses a workout.
- Instead of competing with everyone in the company, become the employee of strong integrity and work ethic.
- Instead of comparing yourself with others, decide to be a person who opts for never-ending improvement.

The power of self-identity is not magic or miracle. You won't become successful instantly by training yourself to believe you're a successful person. The appearance and results never happen immediately. However, the self-identity you mark for yourself will eventually translate into your behavior and actions—which means you will start acting like a successful person.

What to Do Next?

SELF-AWARENESS. Identify and define your identity by seeking feedback from people around you and engaging in constructive self-talk to understand yourself at a deeper level.

DEFINE YOUR VALUES. Figure out what really matters to you, and what matters to you more. Prioritizes things and areas in your life and then set goals that align with your values and priorities.

DEFAULT TO TINY ACTIONS. Take consistent tiny actions even when you don't feel like it. It may sound counter-intuitive, but here is where you need a little more willpower. Every time you conquer the distraction or temptation, it strengthens your self-identity.

FORM A GROUP. Get together with not just like-minded people, but also action takers, especially people who have already done what you want to do. They are going to become the evidence that further strengthens your faith and your identity.

5

Environment Matters

It definitely helps when you acknowledge the power of habit and equip yourself with the knowledge and tools required to break bad habits and build good habits. However, there is no cookie-cutter solution to fit every single person's needs.

All the examples above are simply illustrations of the principles that help me and many others to master habits. They are not guaranteed to provide the exact same results when implemented on yourself.

It's crucial to understand the complexity of how our habits are formed and how they then shape us. To think a habit can be transformed within minutes or days is ridiculous and naive. You have to implement the theory and techniques consistently to test and experiment, then adjust accordingly with the feedback.

Mastering your habits is never easy, but it's worth the time and effort. It shapes your behavior and routine, and that will lead you to your desired success.

While it's difficult to summarize in mere words, here is something you can do to make the process of mastering your habit simpler and easier.

As we mentioned above, habits are formed when every element of the habit loop is in place. All of the three elements are essential and crucial in breaking and building our habits. And if you take a closer look, they are heavily tied to our environment.

With that said, your environment directly shapes your habit. At the same time, it also shapes your beliefs and self-identity. To sum these up, **your environment directly shapes who you are, how you act, and also what you're going to achieve. Your environment dictates your results.**

The point I want to emphasize here is not about submitting yourself to the current environment and circumstances, then giving up on trying. Instead, I suggest you become aware of the power of your environment, then, take the responsibility of

designing an environment that assists you in achieving success.

Many people might make the conclusion that they are doomed if their environment is not ideal. I can't argue with this statement. It's a harsh thing to say, and many people might even argue that this is not correct since there are countless examples showing people who won their battle against all odds. However, the truth is that our environment shapes us way beyond our imagination. But there is always minor change we can make to improve our environment.

- Create an environment so you eat less junk food and never miss a workout again.
- Design an environment so you won't get distracted easily and focus on marginal progress.
- Build an environment to shape your pattern physically, emotionally, and mentally to make the process of achieving your goals a lot easier.

People didn't have this knowledge or these tools in the past, but now we get to enjoy the privilege of information and freedom to shape our life by transforming our habits.

**Winners win
because they
create a winning
environment that
makes winning
easier.**

Acknowledgement

This guide is the collective insights of many great writers and authors whom I am following.

It will never exist without these people: Angela Duckworth, Anthony Robbins, Carol Dweck, Charles Duhigg, Daniel Kahneman, Malcolm Gladwell, Stephen R. Covey, and many others.

Google them. It worth your time.

About Dean Yeong

Dean Yeong writes about the art and science of living a better life for makers, creators, and entrepreneurs.

He studies successful people from a wide range of backgrounds—to uncover how they think, work, and live. He then shares insights and lessons he learned to [his popular newsletter](#).

The Monday Dispatch is a community of makers, creators, and entrepreneurs who receive my weekly articles on how to improve focus, build positive habits, and make better decisions.

Some of his ideas and words are being featured on HuffPost, Inc, Thought Catalog, and many other major publications.

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