Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results
by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: Welcome to Insights at the Edge, produced by Sounds True. My name is Tami Simon, I’m the founder of Sounds True, and I’d love to take a moment to introduce you to the new Sounds True Foundation. The Sounds True Foundation is dedicated to creating a wiser and kinder world, by making transformational education widely available. We want everyone to have access to transformational tools, such as mindfulness, emotional awareness, and self-compassion, regardless of financial, social, or physical challenges. The Sounds True Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to providing these transformational tools to communities in need, including at-risk youth, prisoners, veterans, and those in developing countries. If you’d like to learn more, or feel inspired to become a supporter, please visit soundstruefoundation.org.

You’re listening to Insights at the Edge, today my guest is James Clear. James Clear is the author of the New York Times bestselling book, Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones. He is also the creator of Habits Academy, which is a training platform for individuals and organizations that are interested in building better habits, in life and work. In this conversation with James, my own approach and the approach of Sounds True historically, which has been the depth of internal change and discovery, meets external behavior change, how they come together and compliment each other. Here’s my conversation with James Clear:

To begin with, James, I was reading your book, Atomic Habits, and the very opening story, your story, of how you became a habit change expert really moved me, it was very powerful. And by way of introduction, would you be willing to share that with our listeners?

James Clear: Sure. So before I was born, my dad played professional baseball. He played in the minor leagues, for the Saint Louis Cardinals, and so growing up, I wanted to be a professional baseball player, too. And so I played sports, many different types, all through my childhood, until my sophomore year of high school, when I had this serious injury when I was hit in the face with a baseball bat. And it was an accident—a classmate of mine had taken a swing, and the bat slipped out of his hands, kind of rotated helicopter-style through the air, and struck me right between the eyes. Broke my nose, broke my ethmoid bone—which is the bone behind your nose, fairly deep inside your skull—shattered both eye sockets. I looked down, I had blood on my clothes, a couple classmates ran over, one of them literally took the shirt off his back and gave it to me to kind of plug up the blood coming from my nose.

I was sort of unaware of how seriously I had been injured, so a couple of my classmates gathered me up and sort of helped me back down into the school. We walked down, we were on this hill outside of the school, walked back down in and went to the nurse’s office. [I] started answering questions, but didn’t answer them very well. They asked
me what year is it, and I said 1998, but it was actually 2002. Or, "Who's the president?" And I said Bill Clinton, but it was actually George W. Bush. So I was, like, kind of there, because it would have been Bill Clinton, if it was like 1998, so a little bit still conscious, and then they asked me my mom's name, and that took me like 10 seconds to answer, it was the last question I remember.

So they took me in the ambulance to the local hospital, and when I got there, I started struggling with basic functions like swallowing, breathing. Pretty soon I lost the ability to breathe on my own, had my first seizure of the day, had to intubate me—you know, pumping breath into me by hand. Doctors got together and decided I had to be AirCared to a larger facility, so they put me on a stretcher and took me off to the helipad, and my mom flew down and held my hand in the helicopter as we flew down to a larger facility in Cincinnati—I grew up about an hour north of the city.

When we got there, there was a team of doctors and nurses, like 20 or so—maybe a dozen, 12 to 20, that took me off to surgery, and got me settled. Some of them whisked my mom off to a waiting room where she reconnected with my dad—he had been off taking care of my brother and sister. As I was getting ready to go undergo surgery, I had another seizure—I ended up having three that day. So they decided I was too unstable to undergo surgery, so the doctors placed me into a medically induced coma.

My parents, you know, the priest comes up to them, is talking to them, they spend one of the worst nights of their lives in the hospital with a sticky, plasticky mattress. Thankfully the next morning, my vital signs had stabilized to the point where they decided they were comfortable removing me from the coma and they did that, and the process of healing began.

The next 9 months, I couldn't drive a car, physical therapy sessions, I was practicing basic motor patterns like walking in a straight line. I had double vision for weeks. And so all I really wanted to do was get back on the baseball field, but my return to baseball was not smooth; a year later when I finally tried out again, I was cut from the team, I was the only junior to be cut that year. My senior year I made the team, but barely got to play, but around this time I started to accumulate some small habits that—I don't know, now I talk about them and they seem kind of insignificant, you know, it's like going to bed at the same hour each night, or writing out a list of what I need to do the next day, and doing that the night before, or preparing for class for an hour each day.

When I got done with physical therapy, this is the first period in my life where I started to go to the gym consistently. So at first once or twice a week, then three or four times. And individually, none of those things really seem that significant, but they gave me a sense of control over my life again, they allowed me to kind of feel like I was bouncing back from this thing that I didn't ask for, didn't want to happen.

So my last two years of high school baseball were very below average, and then I was able to weasel my way onto a college team. I came off the bench my freshman year, sophomore year was the starter. Then junior or senior year things started to come together, those habits started to compound a little bit more, and I was team captain my junior year and ended up being named to the Academic All-American team my senior season, which is about, I don't know, 30 players around the country or so.

I never ended up playing professionally, but I do feel like I was able to fulfill my potential, that I was able to make the most of the circumstances I had. So I think, ultimately, that all any of us are really trying to do, and I didn't have the language to
describe any of this at the time—I was just chilling up and doing what I needed to do for class, or during practice, or at a game, or whatever. I never would have said, "Oh, I'm trying to get one percent better today" or something like that, but now, after writing about habits for six, seven, or eight years and publishing Atomic Habits and kind of investigating the topic a little bit more, I can look back on that practice, that period in my life and see that that is kind of exactly what was happening.

So I sort of came to the topic first as a practitioner, or I had to—I guess to put it a different way, I had to learn the ideas, to figure out how to perform, how to bounce back from injury, how to perform at a higher level, how to improve. And once I had practiced the ideas in my personal life, I felt this strong pull towards them, and I've always been interested and scientifically minded and kind of curious about how things work, and so the more that I began to investigate it, the more I wanted to write about it as well.

TS: And then once you started writing about it, it really caught on, your perspective.

JC: So, the first article I wrote was November 12, 2012, and then I wrote a new article every Monday and Thursday, so twice a week, for the next three years. That was easily the project that took off the most, of the other things that I tried. I'd been an entrepreneur for about two years at that point. Most of the other things I'd done just sort of flopped around, or had not really gone anywhere. I did get good advice early on, which was somebody told me, "Try things until something comes easily." And it wasn't easy work, but the results were coming much more easily than anything else I had done. I think part of that is I have this personal background and experience with the ideas; I kind of practiced it, so I knew—on the one hand, it takes a lot of work to have an informed opinion, to be well educated, or have a well-balanced opinion, but at the end of the day, anybody can have an opinion. It's something very different to put the ideas into practice, and so I think, hopefully that made the ideas better, made them more practical, more useful, more applicable, because I practiced them myself.

Once I started to get a little better results, once I started to see some signals of progress, well then I just kind of went all in on it. The site grew very quickly—I think we had 35,000 subscribers after the first year—or 100,000 after year one, the first full year, 250,000 by the time I signed the book deal, and now it's, I don't know, 500,000, 600,000, something like that.

TS: You know, I want to share your model with our listeners, and it's simple and powerful, of how to create a new good habit and also how to break habits you want to break. But before we get there, I have some philosophical questions, if you will, James, that I hope you'll feel good about going at with me, here. Which is, as you know at Sounds True, we really looked at inner transformation, and how by connecting, you could say, with the depth of your heart or the depth, you could even say, of your soul, then there is a change that happens, and you become more into your authenticity, as a person. And habit change, when I first started reading about it in your book, felt to me a little bit, in a way, kind of from the outside in, instead of the inside out, and I'm curious what you think about, where the outside in and the inside out meet, or how you look at that.

JC: It's kind of—it's sort of like two sides of a coin, in the sense that it is both two separate things and one contained thing, like you are both your body and your mind. They're two separate—the internal, and the external, and yet also one and the same. You know, it is one coin, and it also two sides. So I think that that's true, and I like to think about—if we could just distinguish the internal and the external a little differently—there's a connection between behavior and belief, or internal story, or
internal narrative, or mindset—whatever you want to call that, heart, soul—and your external behavior. I think that it's a two-way street, or a loop, if you want to think of it that way—however it is, they feed back on each other, it runs both ways.

But I tend to find that if you want to start by changing your beliefs, that seems to be a more short-term strategy. You know, you might be able to convince yourself and say—this is where you hear common things like "fake it 'til you make it," or something like that. You might be able to say, "I'm a healthy person, I'm a healthy person," and convince yourself of that, and then actually go to the gym once. But it also, you might say "All right, I'm the type of person that wakes up at 5 AM," and then it gets to be 5AM the next morning, and you re like, "Well, maybe I just press snooze." So instead of letting the beliefs drive the behavior, I think it's more powerful to let the behavior drive the beliefs.

What I mean by that is, doing one pushup, that doesn't transform your body overnight, but it does cast a vote for, "I'm the type of person who doesn't miss workouts." And no, writing one sentence does not finish the novel, but it does cast a vote for, "I'm a writer." So I think what we could say is, your habits are how you embody a particular identity. Every time you make your bed, you embody the identity of somebody who is clean and organized. Every time you study biology for 20 minutes on Tuesday night, you embody the identity of someone who is studious. Every time you shoot a free throw, you embody the identity of someone who is a basketball player.

If you do those things once, or twice, no, you don't make something radically different about yourself, but if you keep showing up, and every Tuesday you study, or every morning you make the bed, or every week you show up and practice basketball, at some point you cross this invisible threshold. Maybe it's three months, or six months, or a year later, but at some point you start to think, "Yes, being a clean, organized person is part of who I am," or "I am studious," or "I am a basketball player," like that's part of my identity.

So I think the summary, the way I think about this connection, is that every action you take is like a vote for the type of person you want to become, and this is probably the true reason that habits matter so much. We often talk about habits mattering in the sense that they get us external results. Oh, I want to lose weight, or get a six pack, or double my income, or reduce stress. And sure, habits can help you do all of those things, but the real reason that they matter is that they cast votes for your desired identity, they reinforce that you are becoming a new type of person.

So the way that I see it is that those small habits, those little votes you are casting, that's the only way for that internal narrative to really stick. Maybe you can convince yourself something different in the moment, but in the long run, we believe in the things we have evidence for. We have a word for beliefs that don't have evidence—we call it delusion. And that's exactly what it feels like, if you keep telling yourself you are something when you don't have evidence for it. You feel like you are deluding yourself, you feel like you are lying.

TS: Yes.

JC: And by building that habit, you end up reinforcing that you are that kind of person.

TS: OK, so I'm just going to ask a few more questions here, at the outset. How do you know that the habits you are focusing on are the habits that really come from the
depth of you, and their not just an ego based idea? Like you mentioned someone doubling
their income, or losing a bunch of weight. I mean, maybe these are ego ideas you have
about what's going to make you happy, and then you set of on this habit-change
path, you accomplish it, but there's like an emptiness inside.

JC: I think that's definitely possible. If you read books like Stumbling on Happiness,
or other research around happiness, we often don't know what really makes us
happy. I think it would be misguided to act as if really any human has some clear, distinct
vision of exactly what they need in their life. I think most of us are going through life,
doing the best we can, making guesses along the way, and then trying to update our
beliefs and our behavior based on the feedback that we get.

So it's really a game of trial and error, that's kind of the process of living. I
don't think there is any clear answer to that. The problem is, if you ask people a
very vague question like that—"What kind of person do you want to be? What are your
values, what will make you happy?" We sort of generally have guesses, but people often
get locked up when they are asked to answer those questions, they come up with a list of
values, or they try to come up with various solutions, but it feels very vague.

The benefit, I think, of asking yourself, "What kind of results do I want?" is that those tend
to be very specific. People may not know exactly how they would live out their values, or
what their values even are. They may not know what it means to live a life that aligns
with their soul, but they generally do know what kind of results they want. They generally
do know they'd like an extra hour each week, or to lose 10 pounds, or to make
10,000 extra dollars a year, or whatever that is.

So I think my argument is, OK, that's fine, it's good that you know your results,
but rather than focusing on that outcome, let's go one step further and ask
ourselves, "Who is the type of person that could achieve those results?" So, who is the
type of person that could lose 10 pounds? Well, maybe it's the type of person who
doesn't miss workouts. And so now your habit is focused on fostering that identity,
showing up as a certain type of person each day, and a little less on tying your self-worth
to a particular measurable outcome or goal.

TS: OK, let's get into the model. You teach these four laws of habit change. Can you
introduce the model and these four laws?

JC: Sure. So roughly speaking, if you want to build a good habit, you need about four
different things to happen. Or I guess we could say you have four different points of
intervention. You don't necessarily need all four to happen at the same time, but the
more of these that you have going for you, the better off you'll be, the more likely
that the habit will stick.

So the first thing you need is you want your good habits to be obvious. Every habit starts
with a cue, or a trigger, something that gets your attention, and you want the cues of your
good habits to be obvious, available, visible, easy to see.

The second thing is that you want your habits to be attractive. The more attractive or
appealing a habit is, the more you are going to feel motivated to do it, it's going to
feel enticing to you.

The third thing you want is your habits to be easy. Every behavior in life has a certain
amount of difficulty associated with it, a certain amount of energy or effort that is
required. And the simpler, more convenient, frictionless—in other words, the easier a behavior is, the more likely you are to stick with it. So the third thing is you want to make it easy.

And then the fourth and final one is you want to make it satisfying. The more satisfying or enjoyable a habit is, the more you have some kind of signal of pleasure, the more likely you are to stick with it in the long run.

And so those four—make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, make it satisfying—they give you four different places that you can intervene, four different levers that you can pull on, to build a good habit and get it to stick. I think it's worth noting here, as we cover those four, if you want to break a bad habit, you just invert those four. So rather than making it obvious, you want to make the cues of your bad habits invisible. Hide them, get them out of sight. Unsubscribe. Instead of making it attractive, you want to make it unattractive. Instead of making it easy, you want to make it difficult—add friction, increase steps, make it less convenient. So then finally, instead of making it satisfying, you want to make it unsatisfying. Add a consequence, have some kind of immediate cost to the behavior. Now, of course we'll talk about some examples here, and the purpose of the book is to kind of break all those down into what you can actually do to make those four things happen, but roughly speaking, those are the four laws. Make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, make it satisfying.

TS: OK, so what I thought we could do together, is go through creating a good habit together, and then I'm going to ask you to help me break a personal bad habit.

JC: All right.

TS: But let's start with creating a good habit, that I think our listeners might be interested in, and you can pick which of these you'd like to take us through. Maybe it's eating a healthy diet, or exercising more, or developing a daily meditation practice. Pick one and take us through it step by step.

JC: Sure, OK. Let's go ahead and let's start with the exercise one.

TS: OK.

JC: So, we are going to build an exercise habit. First thing you want to do is make it obvious. There are a couple elements to this. The first question is, obvious when? Like, when is this new routine going to live in my life? And so there is one concept I talk about in the book, it's referred to as an implementation intention. So there are well over a hundred studies on implementation intentions, and basically what it asks you to do is to fill out a sentence that says something like, "I will exercise on this day, at this time, in this place." And implementation intentions have been used for every habit from going to the polls and voting, recycling more frequently, getting your flu shot, quitting smoking, and of course exercise. So the idea here is that if you specifically state when and where you are going to perform a behavior, you are two to three times more likely to follow through. So the lesson, I think, is a lot of people feel like what they lack is motivation when what they really lack is clarity. We kind of wake up and have this big notion of, "This time it will be different. I'll try harder, I'll work harder, I'll be better, I'll eat better." Those big notions are totally worthy, but they are too non-specific, they lack a concrete idea of where the habit lives in your life. That's the first thing you can do, make it obvious by choosing a time and a place where that's going to live.
TS: OK so I say I’m going to exercise three times a week, I put in my calendar, and the date shows up, and I blow it off. It’s a great intention, but that’s not my problem, my problem is that I blow it off.

JC: For sure. OK, lets take an example, lets just add a little more detail to it, let’s say that you’re like, “All right, tomorrow’s going to be the day, I’m going to go for a run. I’m going to wake up at six, and going to go for a run before work.” And then, as you say, 6 AM rolls around and your alarm goes off, your bed is warm, it’s cold outside, you’re like, “Eh, I’ll just press snooze instead.”

So if we rewind the clock, and we come back to today and you make that same implementation intention, but then let’s say you say you send a text to a friend. And you say, “Hey, lets meet at the park at 6:30.” Well, now 6 AM rolls around and your bed is still warm, and it’s still cold outside, but if you don’t get up and go for a run, you’re a jerk because you leave your friend at the park all alone. And so suddenly—this is another strategy, this is what’s called a commitment device. A commitment device is a choice that you make in the present that locks in, or commits you, to a behavior in the future. So in this case, texting your friend is a commitment device for running the next morning.

I mentioned earlier that the second law is to make it attractive. Well, suddenly what you’ve done now, by sending that text, is you’ve simultaneously made it more attractive to get up and go for a run, and less attractive on the bad habit side to sleep in and press snooze. So a commitment device is one way to—now we’ve made it obvious, we’ve made it obvious, we’ve decided when and where, now we have also made it attractive, or more attractive than it otherwise would be. We’ve kind of changed the calculus that’s going on in our mind. And part of the reason for that is because the behavior now bears an immediate cost. And you’ll see that this is true for many habits that simultaneously, while you are building the good one, you are kind of crowding the bad version out. So you are building the habit of waking up and running early, you are crowding out the habit of sleeping in.

Sometimes I like to think about behavior change in that way, that it’s sort of like one plant crowding out another, and sometimes if you have multiple behaviors that you want to build, it’s actually more useful to just focus on the positive one, and letting that naturally crowd out the bad behavior. If you watch TV at 7 PM and you feel like you are doing that too much, well forget about that for a second. If you, say, want to build a journaling habit, well now you can say, “After work, I go to a coffee shop, and do some journaling in the coffee shop.” By definition, every minute that you are in there journaling is a minute you’re not watching TV. So you can sort of, sometimes you can kill two birds with one stone there. But that shows us how you can start to layer these strategies. You’ve got make it obvious and make it attractive working for you in that case.

TS: OK, we’re going to make it easy, that makes me happy, I’m glad we’re going to make it easy, maybe I’ll actually do it if it’s really easy.

JC: And that actually is precisely the idea. In fact, by making it easy, you automatically tend to make the habit more attractive. You can imagine, for example, doing one push up sounds much more attractive than doing 50. By scaling it down, you make the habit more likely that it’s going to stick.

Now I want to offer a practical strategy here, because I feel people implicitly understand
this idea that, OK, easier behaviors are more interesting, more likely to stick. So the practical strategy is what I refer to as the two-minute rule. So the two-minute rule says, take whatever habit you are trying to build, and you scale it down to something that takes two minutes or less to do. So, "Read 30 books a year" becomes "Read one page," or "Do yoga four days a week," to continue our exercise example, becomes "Take out my yoga mat." Now, sometimes when I tell people that, they resist it a little bit, because they are like, "OK, I know that the real goal isn't just to take my yoga mat out, I know I actually want to do the workout. So if this is some sort of mental trick, why would I fall for it?" Basically.

I understand if you feel that way, but I have this reader, his name's Mitch, and he ended up losing over 100 pounds, and for the first six weeks that he went to the gym, he had this rule for himself where he wasn't allowed to stay for longer than five minutes. So he would get in the car, drive to the gym, get out, do half an exercise, get back in the car, and drive home. And it sounds ridiculous, it seems silly, like it's not going to get him the results he wants, but if you step back, what you realize is that he was mastering the art of showing up. He was becoming the type of person that went to the gym, even if it was just for five minutes.

I think this is a deeper truth about habits that often gets overlooked, which is a habit must be established before it can be improved. You have to make it the standard in your life before you can worry about optimizing or scaling it up from there. For whatever reason, we are so focused on finding the best business idea, the perfect workout program, the ideal diet plan, we are so focused on optimizing that we don't give ourselves permission to show up, even if it's just in a small way.

So the two-minute rule kind of helps overcome that tendency to bite off more than you can chew, or to think it has to be perfect at the start. And it gives you a way to build a habit that is so small that it is actually easy. I think if you combined all those you could say, "Make it obvious, I'm going to run at 6 AM Monday morning; make it attractive, I'm going to have a friend join me at the park; make it easy, the first day, all I'm really focused on is putting my shoes on and getting out the door. And if I actually send my friend a text saying, Hey sorry, I can't make it today, that's actually fine, I'm giving myself permission to do that. What I have to do is get the shoes on and lock the door."

And then once that becomes the routine, maybe you scale it up. Maybe you graduate the habit to another level, that is still easy for you after, say, two weeks or four weeks. So now I get my shoes on and I go out the door and I meet my friend at the park, but my small habit is I have to run for at least 5 minutes, and then once that's done, then I turn back around and I can come home if I want. So you kind of get the idea.

TS: Is this phrase, "atomic habits," is that referring to these small changes?

JC: So the phrase "atomic habits," I chose the word "atomic" for 3 reasons. The first one is exactly what you are mentioning here, so the first meaning of the word atomic is small or tiny, like an atom, right? The second meaning of the word atomic is "the fundamental unit in a larger system"—so like atoms build into molecules, molecules build into compounds, and so on. In a lot of ways, I feel like these small habits, that they are kind of like the atoms of our lives. So like, these little fundamental units that make up your larger daily routine. And then the third and final meaning is "the source of immense energy, or power," and I think if you put all those together, you sort of understand the narrative arc of the book, and certainly the meaning of the title, which is if you make changes that are
small and easy to do, and you layer them on top of each other, like units in a larger
system, then you can end up with some really powerful, remarkable results in the long
run.

TS: OK, and then the fourth law that you apply to establishing a good new habit is making
it satisfying. How am I making this exercise satisfying?

JC: Right. So you can sort of think of any behavior or any habit as producing multiple
outcomes across time. So, broadly speaking, we can say there is an immediate outcome
and an ultimate outcome. People often ask, like, "OK, if bad habits are bad for me, then
why would I need them, right? If it’s so bad, then why do I keep coming back to it?"
And the answer is, all habits serve you in some way, and in the case of bad habits,
it’s often the case that the immediate outcome is actually kind of favorable. Like the
immediate outcome of eating a donut is great. It’s sweet, it’s sugary, it’s
tasty. It’s only the ultimate outcome if you keep doing that, for a year, or two years,
or five, that is unfavorable. Same thing for smoking a cigarette. You know, the immediate
outcome of smoking a cigarette is maybe you get to socialize with some friends outside of
work, or you curb your nicotine craving. It’s only the ultimate outcome, two or five
or ten years down the line, that unfavorable.

With good habits, it’s often the reverse. Like, what is the reward for working out for
a week? Not a whole lot—your body looks the same in the mirror at the end of the night,
scale hasn’t really changed. If anything, you might be sore. So the rewards of your
good habits are often delayed, they accumulate much later, and this is one of the
challenges, which is that the costs of your good habits are often in the present, and the
costs of your bad habits are in the future. And because we have this—because we are
wired to focus on the immediate outcome, we often seek the benefits the bad habits
provide right now, and overlook the downsides they have in the long run.

So for good habits, what we need to do then, is we have these delayed rewards that we
are trying to accumulate, so we have something in the present to make it feel like, "Hey,
this is good, this is worthwhile, I should do this." Now the ultimate form of this is when
doing the habit is an affirmation of your desired identity. So like literally, you could be in
the middle of doing a squat or doing a pushup, even if you aren’t consciously
thinking this, it is reinforcing the idea that I am now the type of person who doesn’t
miss workouts, I finish what I start, all those good feelings that are affirming that identity
that you want to have.

But the truth is, early on, most people don’t feel that. The first time you go to the
gym, you kind of feel uncertain, unsure, like you don’t belong, so you need to show
up consistently to build that identity up. And one way to do this is to use what
psychologists refer to as a reinforcement device, or some kind of external reinforcer. So
for example, for every five times you go to the gym, maybe you get to take a bubble bath
to reward yourself. Or for every month that you don’t miss a workout that is
scheduled, then maybe you get to reward yourself by buying, I don’t know, maybe a
new jacket or investing in something you enjoy.

And the key here is that you want to take a reward that doesn’t conflict with your
desired identity. Like if the identity you are trying to build is, "I don’t miss workouts
and I’m a healthy person," and then you reward yourself with each workout with a
pint of ice cream, then you are casting votes that conflict. But if you reward yourself with
a bubble bath, now it’s kind of like, "Hey, I’m casting another vote for taking care
of my body, and ultimately that is what the workout is trying to move me toward anyway."
So those external reinforcers can be good, provided that they are aligned with the type of person you want to become.

TS: Now, James, you mentioned towards the beginning of this conversation that there is a level of trial and error when it comes to, is this new habit really something that is going to deliver the joy and satisfaction I thought when I set out? So how do we know, when we are putting a new habit into action, whether or not it maybe just isn’t all that rewarding? We thought it was going to be, but it’s not. Like, OK, I’ve made my bed every day for a year, I did it, and at the end I thought, "You know, I don’t actually feel like a more organized person, I don’t actually care. It didn’t do anything, didn’t up my level of satisfaction in my life at all. It was a myth. Who cares about making the bed?" I’m just giving a ridiculous example for this point, but it might not make me feel anything, do you know? I thought it would, and I tried it, and it didn’t. Or, how do you know, "Oh, you know, I’m a quitter. I quit, I just quit." How do we know the difference?

JC: Well, in the long run, I think this is why it is important to have a process of reflection and review. So for example, I do an annual review, each year. At the end of the year, I count up how many workouts I did, how many I did each month, how many new places I traveled to, how many articles I wrote, a variety of other things. And really what it is, it’s less a chance to count perfectly, and more a chance to ask, "Hey, are my habits still serving me? Am I still moving in the direction I want?"

And then in the summer, six months later, I do what I call an integrity report, where I ask three questions. First question is, "What are my core values? " So, what are the principles I care about and try and live by? The second question is—you get to pat yourself on the back, it’s, "How did I live by these values each year?" So, talking about the good stuff. And the third question is the most important one, which is, "How did I fail to live by these?" And it’s a chance for you to ask yourself, "Are my habits aligning with the values I want? Are they making me happy, or reinforcing that desired identity, or helping me become the person I want to become?" So I think from a big picture view, it’s nice—now, I’m not saying everybody has to do those two things, but it’s nice to have at least some point when you check in and reflect, and ask yourself, "OK, are these things serving me?"

Now on the more granular basis, I think you often—you don’t necessarily have to wait for every six months or every year to figure that out—but if you have a good measurement to track it. And this one is really challenging, because choosing the right form of measurement, it can actually be very hard. I mean, this happens all the time: people pick a form of measurement—like if we stick with the exercise example, they use the number on the scale. But then pretty soon, your weight becomes a signal for your self-worth and whether things are going well, and it’s less about being a healthy person and more about just making the number on the scale move. Or in school, it just becomes about getting an A, and not about actually learning something. And that’s the danger is that when the measurement becomes the target, it starts to cease to be a good measure, because you aren’t really using it as a way to inform, "Oh, I’m moving in the right direction, I’m directionally accurate": you are using it as the ultimate arbiter of, "Am I a good person or not," or "Am I making progress or not?"

If you are able to select the right form of measurement, then I think you can have a much better idea of whether that is moving you toward the thing you want to achieve. But the challenge of this is what we were mentioning earlier, which is we often don’t quite know what we want. So it really requires a lot of self-awareness, and clarity, some time to
think and reflect, "Is this actually what I'm trying to get? Then only once you understand what you are optimizing for, can you choose a measurement that tells you whether you are moving in the direction of that thing that you are trying to optimize.

TS: I'm really interested in this integrity report. I'm curious, when you fill it out, and you ask, "What are my core values?"—let's say the last time you filled it out, do you remember what you came up with?

JC: They don't change that much each year, but I do try to revisit the list and see if there is anything that is—you know, a new concept or quality that I want to add to it. Pulling up my most recent one here—the core values I had last time, I sort of broke them into four buckets, and then had questions underneath each one. The values were growth, self-respect, grit, and contribution, and then for each one I had a couple questions. Like for example for the contribution one, am I contributing to the world around me or am I just consuming from it? Am I helping make things better for other people? It's not just about listing a value, because if you have to actually sit with that for a little longer, then you have to get a little more clear about, are you actually doing some of these things?

TS: OK, let's go ahead and break a bad habit. So here is my confessional moment, James. I've been a nail biter my whole life. I've quit a couple times, and it's lasted for a few months, but it hasn't lasted that long. How can I use your model to break the nail-biting habit?

JC: Good question, OK. So, I'm going to use this as a way to walk through the model. I want to—hopefully people will be able to get broader principles out of this. Typically, for breaking a bad habit, really good places to intervene are that first and third stage, so in this case it would be to make it invisible or make it difficult. For biting your nails, that is a hard thing to do, because you can't really make your fingers invisible, they are always there, they are always on your hands. So that is one challenge. For blocking out the cue, removing your fingers, isn't really an option here, so you have to skip that one. Then we go to the second stage, make it unattractive. This is a little challenging too, and this is true for many bad habits, which is as soon as the thought arises, you have this craving to bite them—even if it's non-conscious, you are working on something and then maybe chewing the nail, or whatever.

What we are left with in this particular case are the last two stages. First stage, make it difficult. There are actually quite a few novel solutions here that you could do. I have one reader who told me that they learned to stop biting their nails by getting Invisalign. Because when they got Invisalign, you put the retainers on your teeth, and you actually cannot bite your nails, so it makes it very difficult to do so, you have to take it out every single time. And that adds enough friction to the task, that you go, "I don't want to do this." So that makes it very difficult. A really extreme example would be, sometimes if kids are doing it, to like, keep gloves on or something like that, so you can access the nail, but that is the same kind of principle—make it difficult, increase friction.

And then we have the fourth and final step, which is to make it unsatisfying. So, this is where you get some of those nail polishes that people will put on that taste terrible, and so by adding the nail polish, you are making it really gross and vomit-inducing to bite the nail. The hope here is that the cue will happen—you see your fingers, they are doing whatever it is where you usually bite your nail; the craving will still happen, you feel the
urge to do it; and if you don’t have Invisalign, or some other make-it-difficult strategy, then maybe you still bite your nail, but it tastes terrible, and the hope is that you can continue to learn, to train your brain, so that the next time around, you start to learn, "Oh this isn’t serving me, I shouldn’t do this anymore."

Now if you want to take that strategy to an even more extreme level, then you can use—there is a little device, you may have head of it before, it’s called the Pavlok, and it’s a little wristband, it looks like a Fitbit or something, but you can program it to shock you, it provides a little electrical shock. It has an accelerometer in it, so it can actually track when you bring your fingers to your mouth. So you could imagine for example, wearing this thing between meals, and then anytime you bring your hands up like that you get a little buzz, and that reminds you not to do it; or in many cases, actually makes it very unsatisfying, because it’s not fun to be shocked.

But those four strategies, that’s what you’re looking at, those are your options, your places to intervene, and I think in this case step three and step four are your best options.

TS: OK so once again, this brings me to the original question I asked about the inner change and outer change, and how they come together, or don’t. There’s nothing about what you just described that addresses the anxiety that might be happening inside, or what’s going on that is driving the behavior—do you know what I mean? Because is it possible that, OK, I put some kind of chemical on my fingers and I don’t bite my nails, but the thing inside that was scared, or childlike, that wants to put the fingers in the mouth, like a child; whatever that might be, that is still there, it’s just going to come out in another way someplace. I haven’t addressed the psychological level, that’s my question.

JC: Yes, for sure. This is true of pretty much any habit. We go through life and we build habits, mostly to solve the problems of life with less energy or effort than we would otherwise need. So, you can imagine—for example, you mentioned the psychological needs. You might come home from work and feel stressed and exhausted, and one person solves that problem, so to speak, by smoking a cigarette, and another person does it by playing video games for an hour, and a third person does it by going for a run.

We can see that the range of ways to solve that underlying need are very wide, and some of them are healthy and productive, and some are unhealthy and unproductive. So in this case, not only would you want to eliminate the need to bite the nails, or the way in which you do it is to increase friction, et cetera, but also come up with a replacement habit that maybe serves that deeper psychological need.

This can—ultimately, what we are talking about here is changing the internal story you have around the behavior. I hesitate to say that as a first line of defense, because one, it sounds a little airy-fairy-foo-foo, like OK, just tell yourself a different story and then everything will be fine; but also because it is very much a long-term game to be able to do that, assuming that you don’t have an epiphany.

You can sometimes have an epiphany; for example there is a reader that I mention in the book, he bit his nails for many years, and then through sheer will power he was able to not do it for a week or two, and his nails grew out. And then he went to get a manicure, and when he got it done, the person giving him the manicure said, "You know, aside from biting your nails, you actually have pretty healthy nails. They look nice." It was the first time that his fingers looked nice in a very long time, and so suddenly what happened—in
his words at least—was that he had a new story to tell. He was able to take pride in how his nails looked.

This type of thing happens all the time with behavior change, or just behaviors that we stick to consistently. As soon as you start to take pride in a particular trait or aspect of your life, you are very committed to maintaining those habits. If people compliment you on your biceps, you never miss arm day at the gym. If they compliment you on how your hair looks, you buy all kind of hair products to take care of it. So finding a way to change that story and take pride in something that you previously feared, or felt shame or guilt about is one way to maintain that.

But I still think we are talking about two different things—like one is taking pride in the nails, and one is rectifying or using a replacement habit to resolve the psychological tension or stress, anxiety that was the root cause that that behavior was serving. This is what I finish Atomic Habits with; I say at the very end, the holy grail of habit change is not a single one percent improvement, it is a thousand of them. Ultimately, what we need if we are really committed to making changes in our lives, is a variety of small changes all layered on top of each other, and oriented toward the same single goal.

So in this case it may be true that you buy the Pavlok bracelet, and you put on the gross disgusting nail polish, and you invest in Invisalign for six months—and you start to ask some of those deeper questions, about what is the psychological tension that is driving me? What is the underlying stress I need to resolve in a healthier way? Can I find ways to develop some pride around how my nails look, and the health of my nails? If you can do, maybe not all those things, but maybe half, or four or five, then collectively that is a system of change that would maybe move you towards something more sustainable.

TS: Yes. I think that when you start talking about what’s happening at the underlying level, that’s when I get really interested. Because I think for example, with addiction, I’ve seen people change an addiction, drop an addiction, but what’s driving them, it just shows up someplace else, do you know what I mean? Maybe they’re proud, they have a great sense of their new identity as somebody who no longer does xyz, whatever it might be. But they still have an addictive personality, I mean it’s still driving them. They haven’t changed in a wholesale kind of way, just the exterior has changed.

JC: It’s a tough thing. You see this a lot in the fitness industry that people who are really extreme on the fitness side, they are professional athletes, or body builders, or cross-fitters or nutritional coaches or whatever, they often have relatively kind of addictive personalities. So maybe before they struggled with a drug addiction, or an eating disorder, or something like that, and now they don’t have that thing that they are struggling with anymore, but they are addicted to exercise to a certain degree, and that is what you are saying with it shows up somewhere else.

I don’t know exactly how I feel about that. Because on the one hand, life is hard, and we have to find ways to cope, and I think we can roughly put behaviors into a couple different categories. You can imagine there are some categories of behavior that tend to default or skew toward a more negative side, for example taking meth or cocaine, defaults towards more addictive behaviors, more unhealthy outcomes. And then there are other behaviors that certainly, in the extreme can also be negative, like for example, becoming addicted to exercise, but generally speaking exercise defaults more to a productive, healthy outcome, certainly much more than taking substances.
I think often in life, life is not—you are never going to have a life that does not have problems, and so in many cases the quest for self-improvement is not to have a life that does not have problems, but to upgrade your problems. Partially I feel like those people should be praised for upgrading their problems, for making the advancement from a behavior that really wasn’t serving them well to doing something that generally is a more positive influence on their life, even if it’s not perfect. But there is still this deeper work to be done, to try to keep things within the lines, and to try to maintain a balanced and more holistic version of well-being so that you aren’t always going off the rails with the thing that you happen to be investing in.

So I simultaneously think both of those are true, that it is important for us to do the deep work to that we can live a more balanced life, and also important to ask ourselves how can we upgrade our problems, and to have enough grace and forgiveness with ourselves to feel good about the fact that we are directionally moving forward, even if things aren’t quite perfect yet.

TS: In the book Atomic Habits, you talk about these decisive moments that come up. I think that all of us know those moments—those moments could be where we’ve opened the refrigerator, and we’re like, “Hmm, what should I do? I’m not really hungry, but I want something.” Or it could be something much more of a decisive moment related to a habit that’s really important to our integrity as a person, but we know we are in a choice point. What do you have to say that will help us make the choice that we are going to be glad we made when we do our review six months later?

JC: To unpack this idea a little further, it’s sort of like throughout your day you face these forks in the road. An example is my wife gets home from work at 5:15, and either we change into our workout clothes and we go to the gym, or we sit on the couch and eat Indian food and watch reruns of The Office. And both of those nights are good nights, but they are very different, and the thing that determines what happens in that two-hour block of time is do we change into our workout clothes or not? So I think that is the first question you could ask, is walk back the behavioral chain, and try to figure out when does that moment occur, when does that fork in the road occur, and try to optimize for that. Because really what that tells us is that we don’t have to optimize for the two-hour workout, or driving to the gym, or all this other stuff that happens—we can kind of let that be if we just try to optimize for changing into our workout clothes.

Once you figure out what that decisive moment looks like, what choice is made in that moment, then you can start to organize the rest of your day around it. So we can do things like prime the environment to make it easy—maybe the night before, we set out our workout clothes and our gym bag and our water bottle and all that is set up so that when we open the door at 5:15, that’s a very easy choice to make. Or maybe we, as I mentioned before, maybe text a friend and commit to meeting them at the gym at 5:30, and so now we have got a little social proof nudging us along. And there are a variety of examples too, but the idea is that once you figure out the true thing that starts that behavioral chain, then you can start to organize around that little moment, that little fork in the road, rather than worrying about the whole routine.

TS: Ok. Well, what about a decisive moment that many of us face, which is just going to a restaurant, and figuring out what we are going to order when we are in the restaurant—you know, it’s a decisive moment. Do I get the risotto, or do I get the salad?

JC: Yes. There are a bunch of things you can do here, all the strategies we have talked
about so far are still part of it. It could be an identity shift; for example you could say, if you are focused on becoming a vegan or a vegetarian then you could identify as "I'm the type of person that doesn't eat meat," and then that starts to cut down the menu options. Or you could look at, I just mentioned, priming the environment with setting your stuff out beforehand. You could look at the menu before you arrive and select something then, when you're not in the throes of the peer pressure of the group and what people are getting. So you have pre-decided, makes it a little easier for yourself. Another thing you could do is you could just say, "You know what? I'm going to order whatever I want, but I'm going to use a strategy that locks in how much food I'm going to eat." So for example, I do this sometimes, if I want to cut down on the amount of calories I have, then I'll ask the waiter or waitress to box up half the meal before they serve it to me. If I waited until they brought it out, and then I was like, "Oh, I'll just eat half," that would never work.

So there are a variety of strategies—from locking in the behavior beforehand, to identifying as a particular type of person to cut down on the options, to selecting it before you show up, but any of those can help with that choice in the moment.

TS: OK, James, I'm going to ask you a couple more personal questions. What's been the hardest habit you've ever broken or tried to break? Maybe you haven't been successful?

JC: Yes, for sure. You know, I say this a lot: that my readers and I are peers, and we go through this together, and I struggle with all the same things that everybody else struggles with. My publisher told me when I was handing in Atomic Habits, she was like, "We write the books we need." And I felt that a lot, like I'm just trying to figure it out too.

I don't know if it's the hardest one I've ever had to break, or struggled breaking, but it's one that I still struggle with, which is, for lack of a better term, a power-down routine. So I have this rule for myself where I don't cheat myself on sleep, so I try to get eight or nine hours each night, especially if I'm training heavy in the gym. But I kind of get this second wind around 9:00 or 10:00, and its just like "Ah, maybe I'll check email for a minute," or "Maybe I'll work on that chapter for a second." And of course, it never just a minute, and 9:00 or 10:00 turns into midnight or 1:00, and if I go to bed at 1:00, well now I'm facing this trade off, where OK, do I get eight hours of sleep, or do I wake up earlier, because I tend to do better work earlier in the morning? And I always choose the sleep, but it always bothers me that I haven't figured out how to master that behavior.

Similar to what I just mentioned, walk back the behavioral chain. If I ask myself that line of questioning, I start to realize, "OK, what's the problem? Well, the problem is I'm going to bed at 1:00. OK, why am I going to bed at 1:00? Well, because I stayed up late answering email. Well, why am I staying up late answering email? Well, because I have trouble shutting down and I checked it again at 9:00."

And then you start to realize OK, the real problem isn't that I go to bed late, it's that I check my email after the workday is over, and then that reveals a different habit that you need to focus on. The truth is I've thought a lot about my sleep habits, but I probably haven't thought that much about my email habits, and so maybe that is an area where I need to focus.

TS: Have you tried making it very unsatisfying by getting an accountability partner, like
your wife, to make sure you don’t check your email before you go to bed? I just kind of joking with you, James. [Laughs]

JC: It’s a good question! [Laughs] She has better habit than I do, so I’ve learned a lot from her, and she is definitely a force for good in my life, but that’s not one that we’ve figured out yet.

TS: OK, just two final questions. One, people often ask, how many days does it take to form a new habit, you know those whole, "It takes 40 days, just like it was 40 days crossing the desert." Is there any science to defend that, or is that just something people have come up with?

JC: Good one. I mean, you hear all kinds of stuff—21 days, 30 days, 40 days. 66 days is a very popular number right now, because there was one study that showed that on average it took 66 days to build a habit, but even within that study, the range was quite wide. The answer is it depends, but that’s like, kind of obvious as soon as you talk about it a little more deeply. Because it’s like, OK, if the habit is very simple, like drinking a glass of water at lunch, well then that study found that maybe it only takes a few weeks. Whereas if the habit is much more difficult, such as going for a run after work every day, then the study found it takes, seven, eight, nine months. The way—as a sidenote, the way that researchers measure this is what is called an automaticity curve. Basically they look at, they plot out how automatic the behavior is, and you basically hit this asymptote at some point where it tapers off and it’s about as automatic as it’s ever going to be, and once you hit that phase, that’s when they decide, "OK, the habit’s been built."

I think the true answer, the honest answer, to how long does it take to build a habit, is forever—because if you stop doing it, it’s no longer a habit. And I think that—I say that somewhat snarkily, but also there is truth to it in the sense that a habit is not a finish line to be crossed. It’s not something that you do for 30 days, or 40 days, or 66 days, or whatever the number is; it’s a lifestyle to be lived, and if you embrace it that way, then you start to realize the importance of looking for changes that are small, sustainable, non-threatening, something you can integrate into your new normal. I think that that is the real way to think about it, is what is something that I can make part of my lifestyle and not, "What is the 40-day challenge, or 30-day sprint that I can do, and then I’ll be a healthy person or a creative person," or whatever the habit is that you want to build.

TS: OK. Then finally James, you’ve worked with all kinds of people developing new, good habits. What are the new, good habits that you’ve found people find really the most rewarding, like I did it and I’m so glad I did it?

JC: Yes. Well, you almost never regret getting a workout in. You might not feel like doing it at first, but it’s very rare that you get done exercising and you feel like, "Ah, I shouldn’t have done that." So, exercise certainly is one. Writing is probably the one that can have such a dramatic impact on the outcomes of people’s lives; it’s certainly been true for me, so perhaps I’m biased to give that answer. I say that not only because writing is like thinking and it helps you clarify what you are feeling, so it is useful even if it’s private, but particularly because we live in an age of almost infinite leverage, we live in an age of high technology, so many people are connected on the internet now that writing is probably the best form of networking that we have in the world.
Your network is just the value or the reputation that you have among the people that know you. And the more that you write about things and share them publicly—in fact, I think we can extend it even further and say the more you do interesting things and share them publicly, whether it’s writing about it, podcasts, YouTube, whatever—the more you become a magnet for like-minded people. And you attract your own network by building a creation habit in that sense. So, writing is one example, but any kind of creating habit is a good one.

And then the third and final one that I’ll offer that’s like a little one that I think surprises people is leaving your phone in another room while you work. And I’m like everybody else—if I have my phone next to me, I’ll check it every three minutes. But most of the time, maybe 90 percent of the time or so, I’ll leave my phone in another room while I work. And I have a home office, so my phone is only 30 seconds away, but I never go up and get it. And that’s like, do I want it or not? Because in one sense I wanted it bad enough to check it every three minutes if it was next to me, but in another sense, I never wanted it enough to work 30 seconds and go get it. And I think that there are a lot of things like that in our lives—that we are surrounded by technology that is so convenient, so frictionless, so pervasive, that just by removing it a little bit, by increasing the space between you and the distraction a little bit, you’ll be surprised by how rapidly it fades away. So leaving your phone in another room while you work is another good one.

TS: Very good. James Clear, thank you so much, thank you for being a guest on Insights at the Edge.

JC: Great, thank you for having me.

TS: I’ve been speaking with James Clear, author the book Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones, and he is the founder of the Habits Academy. Thank you for listening to Insights at the Edge. You can read a full transcript of today’s interview at SoundsTrue.com/podcast. And if you are interested, hit the subscribe button in your podcast app. And also, if you feel inspired, head to iTunes, and leave Insights at the Edge a review. I love getting your feedback, being in connection with you, and learning how we can continue to evolve and improve our program. Working together, I believe we can create a kinder and wiser world. SoundsTrue.com: waking up the world.