

Katy Milkman

**How to Change: The
Science of Getting from
Where You Are to Where
You Want to Be**

Made by Blinkist



These key insights in blinks were written by a team of experts at Blinkist. We screen the world of nonfiction to choose the very best books. Then, we read them deeply and transform them into this concise format that brings you the most inspiring ideas from the text.

Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Discover how to change your life.

You're familiar with self-help advice. You know that you should set audacious goals. You know about the importance of habits. Every evening, you write in your bullet journal. And every morning, you make a long to-do list. But, somehow, your goals still elude you.

What are you supposed to do? How are you supposed to achieve your goals – how are you supposed to transform your *life* – if the tools at your disposal don't lead to positive change?

These blinks trace our failure to change to a handful of common human flaws, like laziness, impulsivity, and procrastination. They point out how these flaws stop us from achieving our goals and lay out a simple strategy tailored to overcoming each failing.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why New Year's resolutions aren't stupid;
- how receiving advice can do you harm; and
- how one bank boosted customers' savings by 80 percent.

A fresh start can make it easier to change.

Are you the type of person who makes New Year's resolutions? Lots of us do.

No matter how heavy the previous night's celebrations were, January 1 is almost always a hopeful day. There's something about ringing in a fresh twelve months, and ringing out the old, that makes daunting plans seem feasible and past mistakes seem far away.

But some people are skeptical about New Year's resolutions.

After all, why would a diet succeed in January when it failed in December? Isn't it silly to think that starting a new year will suddenly make your goals easier to achieve?

Well, there's an answer to that question.

The key message here is: A fresh start can make it easier to change.

It's not superstitious to think that it's easier to pursue our goals in the new year – it's true. In fact, this rule doesn't just apply in early January, but after *any* kind of milestone or fresh

start – like a birthday, the start of a new semester, or the Monday of any run-of-the-mill week.

That's what the author and her colleagues discovered when they looked at data from campus fitness centers. But why? Why do certain dates motivate us so effectively?

In a word, a fresh start changes our perspective. It puts distance between our previous, failed attempts at change and the new one we're about to make. It wipes the slate clean.

That's why some dates are more effective than others for motivating change – the bigger the milestone, the more encouraged we feel. But it's not all good news. A fresh start can certainly trigger change – but not all change is for the better.

Two separate studies that focused on gym-going among undergraduate students noticed that holiday breaks can cause problems. The break certainly provided a fresh start, but the only change it triggered was a disruption in the students' new, healthy routines.

So what's the lesson? It's simple. Watch out for fresh starts like birthdays, new semesters, and anniversaries, and make sure to capitalize on them by undertaking something new – but be careful you don't backslide on your old, established routines.

Beat your impulsivity using temptation bundling and gamification.

So, you're trying to change. You've waited for a fresh start, and now you're raring to make some progress – but, somehow, things aren't working out.

Your heart's in the right place, but you're still struggling to devote yourself to your ambitious plans and projects. You find yourself reaching for your phone instead of your textbook, or chocolate instead of some fruit. In short, you're falling prey to impulsivity.

Impulsivity is also known as *present bias*. When you act impulsively, you prioritize instant gratification over larger, long-term goals: your bias leads you to favor trivial but immediate pleasures, like chocolate, at the expense of more substantial rewards down the line, like better health.

Luckily, impulsivity can be tackled.

The key message here is: Beat your impulsivity using temptation bundling and gamification.

In a famous musical from the 1960s, Mary Poppins advised the world that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down – and when it comes to handling impulsivity, that advice is well worth listening to.

You see, there's a strategy that the author calls *temptation bundling*. It's a way of pairing a pleasurable activity with a demanding but worthwhile task in order to make the work seem more appealing – just as Mary Poppins sweetened some unpleasant medicine with a bit of sugar. For example, you might allow yourself to watch trashy TV while you're jogging on a

treadmill, or eat your favorite candy while you're studying.

In one study, students in Florida engaged in temptation bundling while they completed a math assignment – and, much to their teachers' surprise, they actually completed more assignments when they were allowed to eat snacks, listen to music, and doodle with Magic Markers as they worked.

But temptation bundling won't always work. You can't eat burgers while going for a jog, and you certainly can't sleep in while studying for an exam. So in some situations, *gamification*

might be a better answer to impulsivity.

Gamification means making real-world tasks more appealing by adding game-like elements, such as leaderboards, points, and rewards. At Wikipedia, an economist named Jana Gallus made use of gamification in order to motivate the website's enormous team of voluntary editors. Based on their performance, top editors could gain public recognition on the site or accumulate badges next to their names.

These little perks cost Wikipedia nothing – but the gamification

was enough to keep the voluntary editors from getting distracted. And by the following month, it also increased their participation by 20 percent.

Use commitment devices to overcome procrastination.

Everybody procrastinates. We put off filing our taxes, going to the gym, and saving for retirement. We know we should probably make a start today – but what’s another hour, another day, another week?

In isolation, not much. But soon the time compounds – and eventually we find ourselves stressed, disappointed, and underprepared yet again.

In our worst moments, it can feel like something we’re

destined to do: we've often procrastinated for so long that it's come to seem inevitable. But the good news is that our tendency to procrastinate can be overcome.

The key message here is: Use commitment devices to overcome procrastination.

Omar Andaya, president of the Green Bank in the Philippines, was facing a problem. In fact, it was a problem that many banks face: customers just weren't saving enough. Sure, they wanted to – but, like everyone else, they made excuses, procrastinated, and postponed.

After talking to a group of academic experts, Andaya decided to take a strange course of action. As an experiment, he offered a couple of hundred customers a “locked” savings account: they could add money to it, but they wouldn’t be able to make any deductions until a certain balance had been reached or an agreed date had passed.

In other words, it was a classic *commitment device* – a system designed to restrict freedom in order to limit temptations. And it was a huge success.

Compared with regular customers, those offered locked

accounts saved 80 percent more the following year!

Now, you may not save with the Green Bank in the Philippines, but you can still use commitment devices to beat procrastination. *Cash commitment devices* are one of the most versatile types.

A cash commitment device is pretty straightforward: you put your money where your mouth is by making procrastination expensive. To do this, nominate a friend to track your progress, and share your goals with her – if she finds you've been

procrastinating, she can fine you an agreed amount.

If you're not sure you can spare the cash, don't worry. *Public pledges* are less costly, but they're still surprisingly effective. By making your aims known to your friends and family, you create a powerful incentive to keep working hard – after all, if you declare to Twitter that you're writing a novel, it would be embarrassing not to deliver one day!

Good habits can help you defeat laziness.

Laziness is a common vice – so common, in fact, that we load children with proverbs and fables about the dangers of idleness and the value of good old-fashioned hard work.

Take the story of the Ant and the Grasshopper, for example, or the fable of the Little Red Hen – they're both designed to teach children that hard work pays off, whereas laziness leads to trouble.

Despite these warnings, though, most of us still succumb to laziness from time to time. In fact, our natural tendency to take the easy way out is one of the biggest obstacles we face whenever we try to change.

That's where habits come in.

The key message here is: Good habits can help you defeat laziness.

When you wake up in the morning, you probably have a routine that you follow unthinkingly: maybe you shower, dress, brew some coffee, and grab your breakfast before

hopping in the car and heading to work. Whatever you do, you probably don't give it much thought – it happens automatically, thanks to the power of habit.

But habits don't just govern morning routines. If you're clever about it, you can make unpleasant behaviors, like tough workouts or intense study sessions, every bit as automatic as the elements of your 8:00 a.m. routine.

This isn't just a hunch.

Neuroscientists have shown that the more ingrained a habit becomes, the less we rely on the

parts of our brain involved in reasoning, like the prefrontal cortex, and the more we depend on the sections of the brain responsible for action and motor control.

So, how can you harness this information to make it easier to change? It's easy: you need to make a sustained and deliberate effort to turn good behavior into a habit.

Say you want to start sitting up straight after years of hunching painfully at your desk. What do you do? Well, you start by practicing.

Day after day, practice sitting with better posture until it becomes second nature to you. And be sure to reward yourself for following through: linking the action to something pleasant helps to prompt the same behavior in the future.

Once your actions are automatic, laziness can't get a foothold – and change starts to feel a whole lot easier.

**To boost your own confidence,
give other people advice.**

Lauren Eskreis-Winkler, a psychologist and researcher, had noticed something strange: everyone she spoke to was brimming with advice. Whether the topic was losing weight, spending less, or saving more, everyone had tips and opinions on the best way to proceed.

To Eskreis-Winkler, this was a puzzle. Some of the people who were telling her how to spend less had racked up huge debt themselves. Some of the people sharing advice on saving money

didn't even have a dime set aside for a rainy day. But what puzzled Eskreis-Winkler most was that lots of the advice these people were giving was actually good. So why didn't they just follow it themselves?

The answer, she realized, is that people lack confidence.

The key message here is: To boost your own confidence, give other people advice.

We humans like to help each other. When we notice someone struggling, we try to lend a hand – and, very often, our assistance takes the form of

advice. We offer tips on parenting and dieting, on making friends and finding a partner. It's well-intentioned – but it often backfires.

When Eskreis-Winkler examined the psychology of giving and receiving advice, she discovered that unsolicited tips and guidance can prove to be serious obstacles to change. Whether we realize it or not, giving someone unsolicited advice communicates to them that they're not capable of changing on their own – a serious blow to their faith in themselves at the worst possible time.

Thankfully, it's not all bad news – there's a helpful flip side to Eskreis-Winkler's research. Just as receiving advice can deal a blow to our confidence, giving advice can actually boost our faith in our ability to change. That's what the author discovered when she and Eskreis-Winkler teamed up to study the links between advice and academic performance in high school. Asking students to spend just a few minutes crafting study tips for their younger peers led to significant increases in their own grades at the end of term.

So how can you leverage this insight in your own life? Well, consider forming “advice clubs” with friends or colleagues.

Offering people solicited guidance will, paradoxically, boost your confidence in your own abilities.

If that doesn't appeal to you, then try approaching the challenges you face as though you were advising a friend in similar circumstances: you'll be surprised how clear-sighted and confident you can be when you imagine it's someone else you're advising.

Your peers change you – so choose them carefully.

So, your friends can unintentionally hamper your progress if they offer you unsolicited advice. But that doesn't mean your social circle is always a problem when you're trying to change. In fact, your friend group can be one of the greatest resources you have – if you know how to make proper use of it.

One of the reasons our peers matter so much is that we humans are naturally susceptible to social pressures.

Now, most of the time this is presented as a failing – remember being urged to resist peer pressure as a kid? But that’s only half the story.

You see, social pressure can make you behave badly. But if you’ve got the right friends, it can also keep you on the straight and narrow.

The key message here is: Your peers change you – so choose them carefully.

When UC Davis economist Scott Carrell attended the US Air Force Academy, he was surprised to find that his twin

brother's grades were outstripping his own in many areas. Back in high school, Carrell had been the better student – but something had changed when the twins arrived at the Academy, and bit by bit his brother crept ahead.

Years later, Carrell decided to test a hunch of his. He guessed that the decisive factor in his brother's good grades was his new peer group. Being surrounded by hardworking and scholarly cadets exerted a strong social influence – powerful enough to motivate his brother to start hitting the

books like he'd never done before.

Carrell decided to crunch the numbers, examining the academic performance of over 3,500 first-year cadets. What he found was that for every 100-point increase in the average verbal SAT score of a squadron, a cadet's own GPA rose by 0.4 grade points on a 4.0 scale: that's the difference between getting Bs and getting straight As.

Be aware of these social influences when you choose who to spend time with – whether you recognize it or not,

your peers influence your own success.

In fact, you don't have to leave social influences to chance. If there's a friend whose success you'd like to emulate, then emulate her strategies first. Ask her what it was she did that allowed her to master three languages, or parent so patiently, or cook such tasty vegan dinners. By "copying and pasting" someone's methods, you can often copy their success, too.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

If you want to change your life and achieve your goals, then you have to address your failings one by one. Whether you tackle your laziness, your impulsivity, or your bad habits first, make sure you take a tailored approach to your failings, and make use of commitment devices, good habits, social influences, and temptation bundling.

Actionable advice:

**Compliment people's hard work,
not their natural abilities.**

When you praise someone for their natural aptitudes, you run the risk of encouraging them to develop a fixed mindset – meaning that, when they do encounter failure, they'll take it as a reflection of their real inborn abilities and worth.

When you praise someone's hard work, on the other hand, you suggest that hard work yields good results. So don't tell a colleague that she has a gift for making sales pitches – tell her you're wowed by how her skills keep improving.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *How to Change* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

Nice work! You're all done with this one.

We publish new books every week at blinkist.com.

Come and see – there's so much more to learn.

Inspired to read the full book?

[Get it here.](#)

Copyright © 2014 by Blinks Labs GmbH. All rights reserved.