Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 190: JAMES CLEAR

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. Here we discuss strategies and advice on how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your career and life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. Our guest in this encore episode. is James Clear, author of the instant New York Times bestseller, _Atomic Habits, An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones_. It is a terrific book, full of insight, along with actionable, practical tips for continuous personal improvement. James' story is a perfect example of the power of personal disruption.

James: I grew up in Hamilton, Ohio, uh, which is, uh, a smallish town, um, just a little bit north of Cincinnati, and I grew up kind of on the outskirts of town, uh, spent a lot of time on my grandparents' farm, growing up and running around the field there, and, um, yeah, so I loved it. I thought it was great, and, uh, when I was a child, I think … I mean, I, I …

The short answer is I wanted to be a baseball player. My dad had played professionally, uh, in the minor leagues, for the St. Louis Cardinals, and so I always wanted to be a professional baseball player too, but if it wasn't that, it was probably an astronaut. Um, I still am fascinated by space and the moon, and yeah, I just … Uh, I can't get enough of it, so … Um, who knows? Maybe someday I'll be able to take a trip to Mars or something, but-

Whitney: I was just gonna ask you. I mean, theoretically, it's possible for you to still be an astronaut, right?

James: Right, yeah. Uh, that is true, and, uh, a very exciting prospect to think about, so, those are, those are probably the two that, uh, that were biggest for me when I was a child.

Whitney: So in college, um, i- it sounds like you played baseball in college. Actually, I know you did, 'cause you've got this really compelling personal story, and maybe you'll share a little bit of that with us as we, as we go through the podcast. Um, but you said that you majored in something, and it was kind of a made-up major. Can you tell us (laughs), um, how you came to what you studied, what you studied, and, and how you formulated the major (laughing)?

James: Yeah, that's exactly what my friends would call it too. It was a made-up major. Um, so it was called biomechanics, uh, and basically what happened was I got on campus, and I, I was interested in the sciences, but I didn't have, like, a strong leaning towards any one subject, and so I took a variety of things the first year or so, and none of them were kind of, like, pulling me in. I was, I was interested in a lot of stuff, but, uh, nothing was really clicking, and so I'd heard or found out, through someone, that you … The university would allow you to design your own major, and so I started digging into a little bit more and found out that, like, all I had to do was pick out the classes that I wanted, and they needed to follow some kind of progression, and then, um, figure a framing for them that, that fit, that wasn't currently offered by the university.

And so, uh, I ended up designing this major, that I called biomechanics, that was mostly a combination of chemistry and physics classes, with a little bit of anatomy, and, um, biology, and

kind of, like, sports performance stuff thrown in. And so it took me across probably four or five different departments at the university, uh, which was cool, and, like, um, definitely played to my interests, and it also allowed me to, like, pick the upper level classes that I wanted rather than being boxed into a particular major or track.

So, um, yeah, it was great. It worked out really well, and looking back now, that was probably one of the first entrepreneurial things that I did, even though I didn't know it at the time or wouldn't have said that, but that's a ... That's something that, like, an entrepreneur would do, is look at a situation, say, "I don't really like any of the options, so I'll come up with my own, and, um, so that style of thinking has resonated with me for a while.

Whitney: At the time, when you created the major, what did you think you were going to do with it? What was your plan?

James: Uh, I was planning on going to medical school, and I did plan on that for quite some time. Um, and when I, when I graduated, I couldn't decide if I wanted to go to, like, a Ph.D program in the sciences or medical school, and so I was like, "Well, let me do something totally different and go to business school, 'cause, no matter what I do, I think that'll be useful." That was what I told myself at the time, at least. And, um, I went to business school, and my job there, my graduate assistantship, was in the Center for Entrepreneurship, and so I was tasked with analyzing or recording venture capital investment in the region, and so, because of that role, I saw all these people starting their own companies, and getting funding, and things like that, and that was where I kind of got the itch to start my own thing.

That was where I was like, "Huh, you know, all these people are doing it. Maybe I can d- do it too," and so, after I graduated, rather than going to, uh, medical school or doing more science schooling, I, uh, started my own company, and, um, that was, yeah, eight years ago now, and, uh, I haven't looked back.

Whitney: So what was the company?

James: Well, the first two years was just a total mess. Um, I, uh, I tried a bunch of different things, flopped around. Um, one of the pieces of advice I got early on, that was good, I think, was try things until something comes easily, and nothing really came easily for me in the first, like, year and a half or two years. I ... The very first thing I did was try to build an iPhone app company, which was particularly popular at the time. The App Store was fairly new, and there were all these stories about people becoming millionaires off their, you know, viral hit apps and stuff like that.
And, uh, anyway, the first app I made, I think I hired a developer and spent, like, $1500 dollars on it, and I think, in total, it made 17 dollars, so, um, pretty quick, like, $1400 dollar loss right off the bat.

And I realized, through that and a couple other business ideas that I tried in the first year, that didn't go anywhere, that, uh, the problem was I didn't know how to market anything. I didn't know how to get the word out or why someone would sign up for an email list or buy a product, and that led me to reading about consumer psychology and why people buy things and sign up for things, which led me to behavioral psychology and habit formation, because it's kind of on the periphery of that, and ultimately that's the ... The search to figure that stuff out, to build my business, is what led me to reading more about how habits and behaviors are formed.
And, uh, once I started reading that stuff, it was like, "Oh, this is what I'm really interested in, and this could apply to lessons I've learned as an athlete in college, or the nutrition habits I'm trying to build, or things like that," and, uh, the more that I read about that and began writing about it, the more interested I got in it, and that eventually led to what I write about today.

Whitney: So this interesting. You made the comment, earlier, you flop around until you find something that's easy for you or interesting. Is that what you said-

James: Right.

Whitney: -a moment ago?

James: Try things until something comes easily.

Whitney: Till something comes easily, but it's fascinating to me because it's almost like you, you went around the world, and then came back to where you began, because, if I understand correctly, in college, you started out as not being one of the best players on the team, and then you graduated as one of the best players on the team, so you'd been ha- having this lived experience that led you to then a theory. Could you just tell us a little bit more about that story of, of how your experience ended ... Sort of directed you toward this theory?

James: Yeah, so I think that is true. I, I lived the ideas before I wrote about them, and I didn't ... Because of that, I didn't have a language for describing them when I was doing it, so, as a player, um, I suffered this very serious injury, which I explain in, in detail in the introduction of the book, um, where I was hit the face with a baseball bat, and basically the fallout from that was very long and arduous, and it took, uh, uh, well over a year for me to recover, and, um, uh, my baseball career in high school did not go to plan because of it, but I did end up making a college team.
Uh, the first year I didn't get to start but I got to play a little bit. Second year, uh, I was a starter. The third season, my junior year, I was, uh, captain, and then my senior season I ended up becoming an Academic All-American, which is something only about 30 players around the country are named to that team. And so, um, the, the process of going from having this injury, where I was placed in this medically induced coma, uh, couldn't breathe on my own, to coming all the way back, and, uh, five or six years later, making this Academic All-America team - it was a very long process, and each day, in those, you know, five or six years, I was just trying to find little ways to get better, and I would do things that, that were not ... There's nothing really particularly notable about it, on any given day, like making my bed, or preparing for class, or starting to work out consistently, and, like, all those habits are ... On any individual day, are not life-changing, but the willingness to stick with them, and the commitment to trying to find these little ways to get one percent better each day, ended up leading to, uh, a really remarkable result, in, in my case.

            And, um, I think that that philosophy, and my experience putting those ideas into practice, kind of, you're right, came full circle, as I wrote about habits, and ultimately worked on and published this book, _Atomic Habits,_ about this idea of kind of an easy and proven way to build these better habits and try to get a little better each day. And so I, I kind of had the life experience first, and then, uh, came across the science and, uh, language for it later, and the quest of the book is to take that, uh, scientific backbone for how habits work and, uh, how to change them, and distill it into a guide that's easy to understand and easy to apply that, so that hopefully anyone can use it.

Whitney: So interesting that you use the word quest, 'cause, as you were talking about this, I was having the whole archetype of the Hero's Journey play out in my mind, of, you know, you get hit in the head with a baseball bat, that's the call to the hero's journey, and then you're wandering through for four or five years, figuring things out, and then the boon of the journey is, is discovering that there are words to describe this, and then writing the book and sharing it with other people, so very fascinating. Okay, so let's go to some of the major ideas. The stickiest, I think, of this all is one percent a day. Tell us about what happens. You've done the math around this. Um, what happens when you improve by one percent a day?

James: Well, I like to refer to habits as the compound interest of self-improvement, and the reason why I like that phrase is that, the same way that money multiplies through compound interest, the effects of your habits multiply as you repeat them over time. So, you know, if you save, like, a hundred bucks for retirement today, that doesn't feel like a whole lot. It's like, "Well, I can't retire on that." Like, you know, it's easy to dismiss it as not being important. But if you're committed to saving for

retirement every month, you turn around a decade, or two, or three later, and you start to hit that hockey stick portion of the curve, where the compound interest takes off and the returns are all ... They're all delayed.

And habits are not exactly like that, but, man, it feels like that a lot of the time, and so, if you ... As you mentioned, if you look at the math on this, if you can get just one percent better each day, and you do that for an entire year, so one, point, zero, one, to the 365th power, you end up 37 times better by the time you get to the end of the year, um, and, uh, similarly, if you get one percent worse, you drive yourself almost all the way down to zero, in the same way that it's easy to dismiss saving a little bit for retirement now, or not doing it, habits are very easy to dismiss on any given day.

You know, like, what is the difference between eating a burger and fries for lunch or eating a salad and chicken? Like, not really a whole lot. You know, on any given day, you are like, "Well, my body looks basically the same in the mirror at the end of the night. The scale hasn't really changed. Uh, there isn't really very much to look at there." You just kind of, like, make these choices, and they don't seem like a big deal, and then you turn around one day and it's like, "Knock, knock. Who's there? The consequences of my past decisions."

Finally, they start to accumulate 2, or 5, or 10 years later, and so, for that reason, I think that, uh, it easy to dismiss but actually incredibly important, and if you can capture that one percent, if you can make one percent improvements rather than one percent declines, then you'll end up very surprised with how much progress you make in the long run.

Whitney: When you think about habits that you have decided to adopt and improve one percent a day, is there one habit that you would say, "Wow, that seemed so insignificant," but has made a huge, huge difference in your life? I suspect there are many, but does one in particular come to mind?

James: Um, it's hard because they're ... Like, I ... My default, I want ... If anybody asked me, like, "What's the most important habit?" I always want to say exercise, because, um, you- your, your body is the home that you live in every moment of your life, uh, and so, if you don't take care of your body, then everything else suffers the side effects as a result. Um, however, if I could pick another one, then I would pick reading, and the reason I say that is because reading is sort of a meta-habit that can solve or improve all other habits. Like, pretty much no matter what you're looking to do, if you have the habit of reading, you can get better at it.

You know, like, if you want to build a popular podcast, you can read a book on that. If you want to learn how to lift weights, you can read a book on that. If you want to figure out how to garden and grow better tomatoes, you can read a book on that. Like, there is a book for almost any problem, and, um, as a result of that, building the habit of reading can be one of those things that kind of unlocks all the other areas of your life.

Whitney: So what's your habit around reading?

James: So I have a, uh, a little journal, where I track my habits, and I don't track that many of them, but I do track my reading habit, and I'm looking at it right now. I have it sitting on my desk, and, uh, it says read one page, and so, each day, I just try to read one page. And, you know, of course, there are many days when I'll, uh, read much more than that, but, um, that's the, the actual habit that I track.

Whitney: What are you reading right now? What book?

James: Uh, there's a book called _What is Life?_ Um, it was written by a famous scientist named Schrödinger, and, uh, he was a physicist, but he talks about - If a physicist was a biologist, you know, biologists talk about how life, um, comes from a single cell, and, like, how we evolved into, uh, a human, uh,

what would the physicist's, uh, view of that be?" So, like, if you tried to distill it down to, like, a single atom, or things like that, if you tried to make an equation for it, how would you do that?

And I, I haven't finished it yet, but I think where he ends up going is that it's actually hard to define what is alive and what is not. Um, and the, the, uh, threshold, or the barrier, between, like, "Oh, there's a rock, and this is not alive, and here's a, you know, a fly, and this is alive," um, is actually a lot more fluid than perhaps we think, so I don't know. I'll, I'll see where it ends-

Whitney: Fascinating.

James: -up, but that's what I'm reading.

Whitney: Yeah, fascinating. One of the things that you say in the book, in your book, that I'm reading, but much more than one page per day, um, is that "true behavior change is identity change," and then you go on to say, "Becoming the best version of yourself requires you to continuously edit your old beliefs and to upgrade and expand you identity." Can you talk about that a little bit, and give us a practical tip around if someone's saying, "Okay, I wanna change. I've got to change my identity. What do I do, or, or what does that look like?"

James: The basic idea here is that, once an identity is adopted, then it starts to reinforce certain types of behaviors, and this can be positive or negative, right, like, you could have an identity, like, "I am a writer," and that's the kind of the thing that, you know, uh, motivates you to sit down and write, but you also have identities that don't serve us, you know, things like, "I have a sweet tooth," or, "I'm bad at math," or, "I'm terrible at remembering directions," or, "Whenever I'm at parties, I can never remember people's names." And those little stories, those internal narratives, uh, those identities that we latch onto, they reinforce certain types of behaviors.

              And so the question that I had, and I think, uh, bring us back to, uh, habit formation, is, "How do those identities get formed in the first place?" You know, like, what ... If we wanted to upgrade and expand our identity, if we wanted to look at ourselves in a more fruitful and more productive way, how would we go about doing that? And I think the answer is that there are certain types of your identity, like if you identify as someone who is tall or short, that are relatively fixed, but there are many aspects of your identity that are reinforced over time, like you ... If you ... Uh, well, let's take, like, my own identity as a writer, as an author.

              Like, now I've published a book, and so I look at myself as a writer, but a few years ago, I had not written many articles, and I had never majored in English, or, if you talked to any of my professors from high school or college, they wouldn't have said, "Oh, he's such a great writer." Like, there wasn't anything about my identity that, um, that identified as that.

              In ... So I started writing a new article every Monday and Thursday, and I did that for the first three years that I was growing my site at JamesClear.com, and eventually, I don't know when exactly, but I crossed some kind of invisible threshold, and it was like, "Oh, I keep casting these votes for being a writer. I guess maybe that's who I am." And this is the way that I like to think about how habits and identity influence each other, which is that every action you take is like a vote for the kind of person that you want to become, and so-

Whitney: I love that.

James: -it's like-

Whitney: Say that again, James. Say that again. It's so powerful.

James: Every action you take is like a vote for the type of person that you want to become or the type of person that you believe that you are, and so the more that you perform these little habits, whether

it's reading one page, or writing one sentence, or meditating for ... Or, uh, meditating for 60 seconds, the more you reinforce, you provide evidence, you cast a vote for that identity of being a reader, or being a writer, or being a meditator, and, um, again, there's no one instance that's going to transform your belief, but I think that this is kind of the deeper reason, or maybe the true reason, why, why small habits matter so much, because we often talk about habits as, like, the pathway to getting external results.

You know, like, they'll help you lose weight, or be more productive, or reduce stress, and all that stuff is true, and, like, that's great. That's great that it happens to provide those things, but they also are the pathway through which you forge or reshape your internal identity, through which you provide evidence of believing a certain thing about yourself, and so the deep, true, ultimate reason that habits are so important is that they shape your self-image, and I think that, uh, this is another reason why small habits can be meaningful, even if they don't get the result that you want right away. You know, doing five pushups is not going to transform your body overnight, but it does cast a vote for being the type of person who does doesn't miss workouts, and-

Whitney: I have to tell you a story about that, that you'll appreciate.

James: Yeah.

Whitney: I decided, um, probably about six or seven months ago, that I wanted to be able to do 10 full-body pushups, and, at the time, I could do none, and so I said, "Okay, I'm just going to start," and I started doing 10 pushups, like, on my kitchen counter, right, not too hard. Well, now, guess what? I just did it every single day, 10 pushups, whatever I could do, and now I can do, like, 15 full-body pushups, just because-

James: Wow.

Whitney: -I decided that-

James: That's great. Congratulations.

Whitney: -I'm a person who does pushups. Yeah, so I was like, "Oh, I think that's, that's an example or evidence of, of what you're talking about."

James: Right.

Whitney: Um, okay, so one last question on that. So if, for example, I decide, "Okay, I want to be a person who does pushups," and I'm doing these habits to reinforce that identity that I want to create, would you also then come at it from the other angle, of saying, "I'm a person who's in great health," or, "I'm a person who's physically strong," so you're, you're reprogramming your subconscious mind, at the same time you've got in place this system that's going to drive the behavior so that the two can, can converge to one another? Is that what you're recommending?

James: Yeah, that's an interesting question. So I think, um, personally, the way that I prefer to do it is to phrase it as a question, so something like, "What would a healthy person do?" And as you go through your day, you're asking yourself, "What would healthy person do?" And then you take action based on that identity that you're trying to forge. What you're describing is like telling yourself, "You know, I am a healthy person. I am a fit person," like, repeating these internal mantras or visualizing the type of person that you are, that kind of thing. And I don't think there's necessarily anything wrong with that. Uh, it's, it's ... In many cases, you'll hear people describe that as, "Fake it till you make it," you know-

Whitney: Yup.

James: -where you kind of, like, are-

Whitney: Yup.

James: -repeating to yourself that you're that kind of person or whatever. But in my opinion, fake it till you make it is a short-term strategy, not a long-term one, and the reason that I say that is because fake it till you make it is asking yourself to believe something without having evidence for it. You're saying, "I am a fit person," even though you haven't gone to the gym yet or something like that, and we have a word for beliefs that don't have evidence. We call it delusion. Right, like, there's some kind of conflict there with the brain, where you keep saying you're something but you haven't done it yet. And it's a slight change, what I'm describing, but rather than letting the belief lead the way, rather than saying, "Fake it till you make it," I'm saying, let the behavior lead the way.

And by doing something, whether it's 10 pushups on your counter, or meditating for 60 seconds, or writing one sentence, you have cast a vote through that action, and that action has provided evidence that, "Hey, actually, you are, you are a writer, because you just wrote one sentence," and, uh, again, it's a subtle shift, but by letting the behavior lead the way, you have something to root the identity in, something to base your belief on, so now you can say, "I'm a fit person, and I know that because I just did 10 pushups on the counter." And so, I think there's a certain stickiness to that, that's a little more powerful than trying to repeat a new mantra.

Whitney: Interesting, okay, so instead of creating potential cognitive dissonance, you ask that question. You kind of go into this place of our being agentic. At the same time you do these behaviors that allow you to accumulate or aggregate evidence that would suggest, in fact, you are this person that you're striving to become. Interesting, okay. All right, so let's do this. Um, you have four laws of behavior change. I'd like for you just to walk through them very quickly, like, maybe take a minute, and I know you've got a grid that you can share, and you can tell people about where you can find that, but then what I want to do is talk about five specific ideas that you've mentioned in the book, that really resonated with me, so people can walk away with some tips around that. So if you can talk through those four laws of behavior change in 60 seconds or less - please go ahead.

James: So I like to divide habits, and really the vast majority of human behaviors in general, into four stages, and basically there is a cue which catches your attention, so, like, you walk into the kitchen and you see a plate of cookies on the counter. That's a visual cue. That sparks the habit of eating cookies. The second stage is there's a what I call, a craving, which is really about how you interpret the cue. It's like the meaning that you assign to the cues in your life, so imagine that two people walk into a room, and there's a pack of cigarettes on the table, and one person is a smoker. They see that pack of cigarettes, so cue, and it's immediately followed by a craving to smoke.

The other person, though, has never smoked a cigarette in their life, and so they see the same cue but, to them, it doesn't mean anything, so they're just like, "Yeah, whatever, it's, you know, it's neutral. It's a pack of cigarettes." They don't do anything because of it, because the craving does not follow. So your interpretation of the cues matters a lot, that's the second stage. The third stage is the response, the action itself, that you take, and then finally there's some kind of reward or consequence, but with a habit that sticks, it's rewarding in some way. There's some kind of outcome.

And from those four stages, we can have what I call the four laws of behavior change. So the first law is to make it obvious, so you want the cues of your good habits to be obvious, available, visible, prevalent. The second law of behavior change is to make it attractive. The more attractive a habit is, the more you'll have that craving to act. And we can talk about some ways to do that. The third law is to make it easy, so the more convenient, frictionless, easy, instant, um, your habits are, the more likely you are to perform them. Like, think about checking your smart phone. You know,

like, why do we check our smart phones 150 times a day? It's because they're literally, like, a millimeter from your skin. It couldn't be easier or more convenient.

And then, uh, finally, there's the reward, which is, uh, the outcome, and so the fourth law of behavior change is to make it satisfying. The more rewarding, or satisfying, or enjoyable a habit is, the more likely you are to repeat it. And so those four laws of behavior change, together, make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, make it satisfying, give you a way to adjust ... Like, it's kind of like you have a set of tools, and you can use them to adjust your habits, um, depending on the situation that you face.

Whitney: Fantastic, and you, um, you have a grid or a cheat sheet that people can find. Where do they find that, if they wanna go and, um, take a look at that cheat sheet?

James: Yeah, so the, the cheat sheet, um, is within ... It's in the book. It's in *Atomic Habits,* and at the end of each section, it continues to grow, and then at the very end of, uh, of the fourth law, you have the full cheat sheet put together, and there's a link on that page, uh, that'll show you where to, like, download a PDF version as well.

Whitney: Fantastic. Okay, so now let's get to really tactical. Um, there are five things that I picked out, that really spoke to me. Um, the, the first one is the two-minute rule. Can you talk about that, um, and what that means for people developing a new habit?

James: Yeah, this is a good one to start with. Usually, if, if people say, like, "Well, what's the ... Just the first thing I should do?" this is a good place to start. Um, so the idea is take whatever habit you're trying to build and scale it down to just two minutes or less. So whatever your ambitious plan is, like, you know, read 50 books a year becomes read one page, or write my next book becomes write sentence, or do yoga four days a week becomes take out my yoga mat, and people have heard things like this before, you know, like, take baby steps or start small, but the reason I like the two-minute rule is that it forces you to downscale until it's so easy that you can do it in just a minute or two.

And even when you know that you should start small, it's still really easy to start too big. You know, like, I had, um, I had a reader that I feel like his story is a good example of this. He lost over a hundred pounds, and one of the first things that he did was he went to the gym but 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, drive home, and it sounds silly. It sounds, like, kind of crazy to people when they first hear about it, but when you think about it, 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 four days a week, and only once you're that kind of person do you even have the chance to do a 45 minute workout, four days a week or whatever.

Um, you have to master the art of showing up first, and this is a key insight about building better habits, which is a habit must be established before it can be improved. You need to make it the normal, make it the standard in your life, before you worry about optimizing it, and, uh, the two-minute rule helps you do that by scaling it down to something that you can insert, um, make it the standard, make it the normal, and then worry about optimizing and improving later.

Whitney: Fantastic. Okay, second one, point and call. What does this do?

James: So pointing and calling is an idea that I got from a Japanese ... The Japanese train conductors, Japanese train system, and the basic idea is, like, if you go to Japan ... I was in Tokyo, uh, recently, and you'll see the train conductors doing this thing when they pull up to a station. They'll, like, point and they'll call out. They'll say, like, "Signal is green," and they'll point at the signal, or they'll say, "Speed is 60 kilometers an hour," and they'll point at the speedometer. And the purpose of this task is to raise your conscious level of awareness, and you can do something similar. The

punch line to this, is pointing and calling, as a system, reduces error significantly, so the Japanese, uh, train system is one of the safest in the world, has one of the lowest rates of accidents, um, one of the lowest rates of errors, and incorrectly berthed trains, and things like that. Um, and the reason is, when you do something every day, like a train conductor pulling into a station, you, you start to get bored of it. You start to do it on autopilot. You start to habitualize, habitualize it, and this is one of the downsides of habits, is that, once they're built, you start to overlook your mistakes, because you can do it good enough on autopilot, so you stop thinking about how to do it better. And when it comes to changing our own habits, one of the first tasks is to become aware of them. You know, there are all kinds of bad habits we stick with right now, that we just kind of do without thinking about it, and then it's not until afterward that we realize, like, "Oh, you know, I just watched YouTube for an hour again," and, um, and so the key with pointing and calling is that it raises the conscious level of awareness about what you're doing, and once you become aware of it, then you have a chance to change it.

And, uh, you can do this just in the small ways. You know, like, whenever we leave for a trip, my wife'll do this kind of pointing and calling thing, um, where she'll say, like, "Okay, I have my keys. I've got my wallet. I've got my classes," right. She's, like, calling out loud what items are so she doesn't forget them, and you can do something similar with your habits. You know, like, you can just say, uh, "All right, I'm about to watch a video on YouTube again," and, like, that sounds kind of silly to people, to say it out loud, but by doing that, you become aware of your behavior, and maybe that gets you a chance to, uh, interrupt it and, uh, and change.

Whitney: Fantastic, okay. Let's go to number three. Be specific about the behavior, the time, and location. I'm gonna give you an example, and you tell me if this works. After I eat a lunch of bacon, and eggs, and cheese, at noon today, I will sit down and practice the piano for 10 minutes.

James: The basic idea here is that ... And you're example is, uh, a fine example of it. There's a huge body of research called implementation intentions. There's well over a hundred studies on it, um, and they all show basically the same thing, which is that, if you make a plan specifically for when to implement your behavior, so implementation intention, um, a plan for when and where that's going to occur, then you're more likely to follow through. So, for example, there's one study done on exercise, that found that, if people filled out this sentence, "I will partake in at least 20 minutes of exercise on this day, at this time, in this place," if they filled that sentence out, then, uh, they were two to three times more likely to actually work out over the next week.

And, um, so the more specific you can be, the more likely you are to follow through, and this is ... The interesting thing about this, to me, is that a lot of people wake up and feel like they lack motivation, when what they really lack is clarity. They really are waking up and thinking, like, "Oh, you know, I hope I feel motivated to right today," or, "I hope I have time to work out," but by stating exactly when and where it's going to happen, um, you, you kind of mentally carve out the space for it and are more likely to follow through.

So there have been studies that have done this for voting, like, saying when and where you're going to vote, what route you're going to take to get to the polling station, uh, studies for recycling, uh, saying when and ... You're going to take out the recycling, um, studies for, uh, scheduling, like, colonoscopies, or flu shots, or other medical appointments. If you say, like, "I'm going to get my flu shot on November 12th, at 1:00 PM, at this location," and you have that written down a couple months in advance, you're way more likely to actually follow through and do it. It's all just different variants of the same thing, but the more specific you are about when you're going to implement a habit, um, the more likely it is to happen.

Whitney: All right, these are such great tips. Okay, we're going to go for two more. Um, number four is habit tracking. Um, you said this earlier, and I just think it's really powerful, is that habit tracking provides visual proof that you're casting votes for the type of person you wish to come ... Wish to

become, uh, which is a delightful form of immediate, intrinsic gratification, so talk a little bit about the habit tracking.

James: So I don't think it's necessary for every habit to be measured and tracked. You know, like, I, uh, I don't track, like, you know, how often I tie my shoes or something like that. You know, like, there are ... Like, brushing your teeth or whatever, how, how often you unplug the toaster each morning, like, that's not ... There are, there are many habits you don't need that for, but for, for a few habits, for the ones that are really important to you, um, it can be very helpful to track them. And so the most basic form of tracking is you have a calendar, and you just put a little X, or a dot, or something, you mark that day when you, when you do the habit.

And, um, I've <u>actually created a habit journal</u> for this purpose, um, and, uh, it just has ... It has a template, in the back of it, that has 31 days, for, uh, for each month, and you can, you know, check it off as you go through. If you want to see that journal, you can just go to <u>JamesClear.com</u> and click on books, there's a link to the habit journal there, but, um, the point here is that habit tracking does three things that are helpful for building a habit.

So the first thing it does is it makes it, uh, more obvious by creating a visual cue. So, for example, if you have, like, a calendar on your wall, and you've got, like, a streak of Xs there, then, um, it's more likely that you're going to see that and be like, "Oh, I need to do my ... You know, I need to do my habit today." Um, the second thing that it does is that progress is inherently motivating, and there is kind of this additive effect of motivation with a habit tracker.

So, like, my dad, for example, he likes to go swimming, and each day that he goes to the pool and does his ... And he does his laps, he puts an X on the calendar, and then he gets about two or three weeks into the month, and he looks at it, and he's got this little streak going. Right, he's got a few days in a row, and that is inherently motivating, to be like, "Man, I don't want to break my streak. I don't want to lose my progress," and so it helps get you in there.

And then the third thing that habit tracking does is it is, um, as you just mentioned, immediate proof that you are casting votes for the type of person that you want to be. You know, it's really easy, if you have a bad day or you're just tired, um, to forget about all the progress that you've made, you know, to ... Like, a lot of the things that we do, like, if you ... You know, let's take your, your example of doing 10 pushups. If you've done 10 pushups, and you've done that even for, like, you know, uh, say, three weeks in a row or something, um, but then you just have a bad day, it's easy to get down on yourself and be like, "Oh, you know, my body still doesn't look the way I want. Like, I'm still not as strong as I'd like to be, and I didn't even do my pushups today. Like, what's the point?" And you just kind of get into this little spiral.

But if you have a tracker, then you can have a bad day, but you can look at that tracker, and you have immediate proof that I did have a bad day today but I also have showed up for the last three weeks in a row, and that's really nice, to have that, and satisfying, to have that, when you're, uh, when you're going through those tough days. So habit tracking can be really useful for a variety of reasons.

Whitney: All right. Tip number five, so I'm not sure quite how this is going to look like a tip, but I ... You said something that I thought was very powerful, is that repetition is a form of change, and if you miss a day, you give advice on what to do next.

James: So the point here is that, um, often, when we think about changing our lives or achieving some bigger goal, we think that we need to do things in a bigger way than we've done before, right, like, "Okay, I've got to ... You know, I've got to start working out in, like, a bigger way than, than usual, um, in order to get in shape," but the point that ... With repetition as a form of change, is that you can actually do the same thing that you've been doing but just do it more consistently than you've done before, and that, that will lead to change by itself.

Um, you know, like, you don't have to do ... You don't have to do more than 10 pushups. You could just ... If you've only been doing it twice a week, now you can do it four times a week, and that repetition of the same thing will lead to change itself. Um, and so, uh, in other words, I would say focus on volume before intensity, and that's true in the gym, and it's also true in many other areas. So the, um, the key there is that it's the repetition that instills the habit, and, uh, that can be a very useful approach, even if the, um, if the intensity is not there.

Whitney: And you said something I thought was really interesting, is, if you miss one day, then you miss one day, then start again the next day, because, if you don't do it the next day, then you're starting to create a different habit, so just stay with the habit, or something along those lines. Is that ... Does that sound right?

James: Yeah, so this is useful for what we just spoke about with habit tracking, and the basic idea is that, at some point, every streak ends. You know, like, like, I can do a great job of writing an article, you know, every week, and I did that for three years, but then there's one week where you get sick, or you're, you're busy, or you have to, you know, do something for your kids, or whatever, and, uh, you just don't have space for it, and it's easy to get down on yourself for that.

This is especially true with diets, for whatever reason. Like, people tend to get in this all-or-nothing mentality, where it's like, "All right, I'm starting this new diet," and then you do it for, like, six days, and then your friends want to go to happy hour, or you've binge-eat a pizza, or something, and you're like, "Uh," you know, the self-talk starts. It's like, "Oh, I, you know, I knew I wasn't going to stick to that. Like, why bother? I guess I'm not made for this diet," or whatever. And the key insight here, which you're referencing, is the mantra that I like to keep in mind when I deal with that stuff, 'cause I fall into this just like everybody else, is never miss twice, because, if you never miss twice, you know, it's like ... You know, you stick to that diet, and then you fall off-track. Well, you know, I wish I hadn't binge-ate the pizza, but never miss twice, so let me make sure that the next meal is a healthy one, or, when I was writing my articles every Monday and Thursday, over this three year span, if I missed on Thursday, well, I wish I hadn't done that but never miss twice, so let me pour all my attention to getting back in there on Monday and getting something published.

And if you can do that, then the mistakes are just like a blip on the radar, at the end of the year, but that's only true if you never miss twice. And, uh, it's almost never, like, the first mistake that ruins you. Right, it's, like, the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows. And so, um, that little mantra helps me kind of cut habit- ... Bad habits, off at the source, and get back on track quickly.

Whitney: Never miss twice, okay. All right, so as we start to wrap up, you, um, tell a story that I think really encapsulates, um, all that you've been talking about, about the LA Lakers. Would you share that story with us, as, um, as, really, an example of what you're talking about?

James: So, in the mid to late '80s, the Lakers were a, a really amazing, uh, basketball team in the NBA. Uh, one particular season, I think it was the '86 season, or '87, they, um, they started the season off, like, 29 and 5, which is one of the best records of all time, to start a season, and people were talking, like, "Oh, maybe they're the best team that's ever been in the NBA," and, uh, they ended up fizzling out at the end of the year. They didn't even make the finals. They got beat in the, the Western Conference Championship, um, and they had all this talent, but they weren't realizing it. And so, at the time, Pat Riley, who was the coach of the Lakers, he implemented this system that he called CBE, or career best effort, and so they looked at all the players on the roster, over the summer, and they compiled all of their stats, going back to high school, and they calculated what the average was for each player, in each of the different statistical categories, so it was things like points, and rebounds, and assists, and so on, and then there were also some negative categories, like turnovers, fouls, and then they also created, like, some of their own categories for, like, hustle plays or things like that.

And, uh, basically, through this process, they calculated a score for each game, so you could see, like, what your average score was, as a player, and then they challenged each player, the next season, to improve their average in each category by one percent, and Riley's thought was, "If I can get all the guys on my roster to improve their performance in each category by one percent, over the course of the season, we're gonna have this really incredible result at the end." And so they would track each game, and then, at the end of each month, they would track it in the, um, in the locker room. They had a leaderboard, not only of their own players but also of other players across the league, so they could, like, compare them to their competition and say, you know, like, Magic Johnson, for example, was one of the famous superstars on that team, and Larry Bird is playing at the same time, so Magic would come in and see what his score was for last game, and then look over and see what Larry Bird had just posted in their game. And, um, anyway, they, they installed this process for the next few seasons, and not only did they win the NBA Championship that year, they also became the first team in more than 20 years to repeat as back-to-back champions, uh, the next season as well.

And so that career best effort program is a good example of how to implement this general idea of, "Can you find ways to get one percent better? Can you find ways to maximize your daily habits, and then let that accumulate into something really significant in the long run?"

Whitney: Fantastic. All right, last question for you. So you've just written this book. It's ... Like I said, it's a fantastic book, and obviously a lot of people agree because it is flying off the shelves. Um, what are you doing, or going to do, in the year 2019, we're just now at the very beginning of that year, or this year, to improve by one percent as an author and a writer?

James: Hm, yeah, good question. Um, I think that, uh, first of all, I'm not taking on another writing project right away. Uh, I'm going to focus on the one I just finished. I'll continue talking about _Atomic Habits_, trying to improve the ideas that are there, and this is directly related to your question but a lot of the time, when, when, authors publish a book, they start to double-down on the ideas. You know, like, you spend so much time. I mean, I spent ... It was a six-year process, from start to finish, with this book, and three years, in earnest, writing and researching for it. So once you've put that much effort in, it's really easy to say, "No, this is how it works," you know, and, like, not ... And start to shut yourself down from outside ideas.

But in a sense I kind of view this book as, like, the most polished first draft ever on, uh, how habits work, and so what I want, and what I'm excited to receive, is feedback from readers and other experts, on, "Hey, this is ... You know, I think this is a gap here. Right, I think that you missed something," or, "Here's a piece of research you haven't seen yet," and, uh, so I'm really excited to collect that.

And then, hopefully, if the book continues to be a bestseller and does well for, you know, 5 or 10 years, at some point, I'll turn around and we'll do, like, a revised and expanded edition, so that _Atomic Habits_ can remain the definitive book on how habits work and how to change them, because, ultimately, I mean, that's my, that's my purpose with this, or that's my hope with this book, is that, um, if you could only read one book on how habits work and how to change them, it should be this one, and if that's going to remain true, then I need to continue to look for ways to get one percent better, and update the ideas, and, uh, and improve them over time, so that's kind of the main focus for me, and I'm excited.

Whitney: Hm, well, James, thank you so much. Um, it's really been a pleasure, and I know that, already, from my having read your book and applying some of the ideas, I'm one percent better. So now the question is will I be one percent better tomorrow? Thank you again, for being with us and making the time, um, again, so appreciated.

James: Wonderful, thank you so much.

It's fascinating how the things in our lives that we feel are insurmountable obstacles are often what leads to our life's work. James was hit in the face with a baseball bat in high school and put into a medically induced coma. The slow, incremental progress that he focused on while recovering from that injury not only took him to the college All-American team, *more importantly*, it gave him real-world experience in everything he teaches and shares today.

James' assertion that habits are the compound interest of self-improvement is so intriguing. To think if we can improve just 1% a day - which doesn't seem all that much - we will be 37x better at the end of a year.

When I layer this on to The S Curve of Learning framework, it makes perfect sense.

At the launch point of the curve; it is hard. It can feel like a slog and you may even question if you are making progress at all. But – if you can focus on improving, on those atomic habits James shares, just 1% per day, eventually you will hit that hockey stick. It likely was a grind for James to write articles 2x / week for years, but that's how he built an audience who loves his ideas and how – he – had- an instant - New York Times Best Seller.

I am so happy to be sharing this encore episode with you. I find James' story truly inspiring especially right now when we are all at the launch point of a new S Curve.

Remember Just 1% every day.

To help you with that 1%, we have four copies of James's book to give away to four listeners. To be eligible to win one of the copies, tag @johnsonwhitney and @jamesclear on Instagram and share what you most appreciated about this encore episode.

Thank you again to James Clear for being our guest. Thank you to our team, Jennifer Brotherson, Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe, Melissa Rutty and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.