**How Routines Can Aid In Mental Health**

During dinner with a physician friend, he made a comment that stopped me, "After 20 years of seeing patients, I find that whenever trauma takes place in life, the first thing to go is routine." I had to let that soak in. "Really? Why routine?" I asked.

He shared how seemingly small habits can impact a person as a whole, and when ignored, can have significant effects. The pain in your head from dehydration, for example, because you skipped your afternoon water break or the improvement of your emotional state after a workout.

**The little things add up.**

My intentionality on having a routine began after that conversation, I was excited to see improvement. But then the coronavirus quarantine hit the United States and everyone had to adjust. Suddenly everyone realized there are thousands of things we can't control, and most of us were knocked off our daily patterns. Including our normal routines. The whole experience was very disorienting.

But letting routine slide will amplify our feelings of being out of control.

You can't control if the "safer at home" days come back around. However, by identifying a few areas that you can control **and developing new habits** around those areas, you'll be able to experience the positive impact routine has on mental health.

## ****Adjust Your Current Habits****

We all have habits. That’s not the problem. The problem is having the right habits and making it easier to do the right habits. And here’s the good news-to get started you only need to add one small thing at a time to something you’re already doing.

In the book [Atomic Habits](https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits), author James Clear outlines what he calls 'habit stacking’. The formula goes like this: **After/Before [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT]**.

For example, let’s say you drink coffee every morning. Let’s also say one of your goals is to be more present. (I know there’s a lot open to interpretation here but stay with me) Using James’ formula you could do the following: ***Before*** *drinking coffee,* ***I will*** *pause for one minute, eyes closed and just breathe. 4 seconds in, 4 seconds out.* You're introducing one new thing versus changing everything all at once. And when you change everything at once, nothing ever sticks.

(One other suuuuuuuper encouraging takeaway from Atomic Habits is the 1% rule. Check out a post I did on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/stevelscherer_leadership-goals-activity-6767519883040321536-FxJf) about it.)

Pretty great, right? Except if you despise discipline.

I'll be candid – I hate discipline and routine – but I love what they produce. It seems so restricting to my free-spirited personality. The same goes for waking up early. When my alarm goes off, I can't stand it. It’s completely unnatural to me. But the truth is, when I get up early, I don't regret it. No joke, I have my early alarm titled 'Never Regretted'. It’s a small thing I do to remind myself that it’ll be worth it. In the morning when I turn off my alarm the first words I see are ‘Never Regretted’. And on several occasions a very faint thought pops in my head; "Get up. You won't regret it. You never have." I still fail regularly and hit snooze from time to time. It’s not perfect but I am getting better.

What if you don’t know where to start? I’d suggest building awareness as a first step, then move to build a system.

## ****Build a System for Success****

One of my favorite quotes from Atomic Habits is, "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems." Yikes. This means we need to identify bad habits or weaknesses and build a system that will help us succeed. When I wake up, my brain is functioning at roughly 1/30th capacity. One time I got up with my alarm, went into the kitchen, couldn’t remember what I was doing, grabbed something to drink and went right back to bed. I was so out of it I figured I was just thirsty, didn’t realize what happened until breakfast with the family.

So, because of my constitutional weakness (AKA hatred of rising early) I realized that to improve my morning routine, I needed to mentally prepare for it. One of my driving questions was, “What can I do so that I have the least amount of thinking in the morning and still have a great morning routine?”

I learned that my morning routine MUST start the night before.

Now, I prep each night by putting a big glass of water with apple cider vinegar next to the kitchen sink, so I don't have to think about it. Because I know I’ll be thirsty. Then I gather what I need for a morning run and put it by the back door before bed. I'm talking socks to earbuds. Because I know I’ll need stuff to run and won’t want to go look for it. When it’s all said and done my only excuse for not doing the run is, well, not wanting to run.

After implementing this routine, I've gotten hydrated, gone for a run, and pumped positivity into my head via Audible or a podcast all before the rest of my family is out of bed. This process releases my stress from the previous day and gets me mentally ready for the day ahead.

By managing our activities, we’re mitigating the chance for making excuses, which increases our chances of successfully maintaining a new routine.

## ****Start Adding New Routines****

What areas of your life do you need to gain more control in? Spending, thought life, reprioritizing how you spend your time, physical health, weight loss, organization? Now is always a great time to create new routines and good habits. Here are a few tips and tricks that will help:

1. **Take in resources** on the topic of habits and routines, like Atomic Habits by James Clear, or [Make Your Bed](https://www.amazon.com/Make-Your-Bed-Little-Things/dp/1455570249) by Admiral William H. McRaven.
2. **Set your goals and create a system**. Don't get bogged down in trying to create the "perfect" approach – it can stop you from acting. You can always improve things later.
3. **Fast from social media** or make it a reward for adding a positive habit: ten pushups = 10 minutes on Facebook.
4. **Connect something you like to do to something you need to do**, like watching Ted Lasso only while doing the dishes or cleaning out a junk drawer.
5. **Improve your mental outlook** by voicing gratitude for everyday things-appreciating a hot cup of coffee, or valuing technology that keeps you connected with family.
6. **Acknowledge the things** you did differently today (assuming today you implemented new habits) and don't discount small changes. They may seem insignificant, but over time, a few small changes can make a real difference. Remember 1%, everyday = big change.
7. **Don't stop.** No one is perfect. You will have moments of weakness and things will happen that interfere with your plans but get back on track and don't allow yourself to miss twice.
8. **Start small** – but start today with just one new habit. Change takes time and momentum will build as you see the results.
9. **Don't do it alone.** Include your friends and family in what you are trying to do. Allow those you trust to encourage you and keep you accountable.

You have an opportunity to exercise control amid unknowns of everyday life. I’m convinced you will be amazed by what you can build and accomplish by creating new routines. You don't have to passively react to everything coming at you. Using your time intentionally to create new routines in your life will provide you with energy, focus, and hope – and hope is a powerful force!

**Want more?**

**Listen to podcast episode 67,** [Lifelong Leadership Growth](https://podcast.impactofleadership.com/podcast/lifelong-leadership-growth-lyle-wells/) **with Lyle Wells.**

Check out my detailed [morning-routine](https://impactofleadership.com/resources/34481/best-self-morning-routine) blog...I still hate waking up early but it’s worth it.

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