

“If you want a smart, science-based, and joyful approach to sustainable behavior change, start here.”

—TOM RATH, bestselling author of *Eat Move Sleep*

How to Finally Achieve Lasting Changes in Eating and Exercise

THE JOY CHOICE

MICHELLE SEGAR, PhD

AUTHOR OF *NO SWEAT*

SNEAK PEEK INSIDE THE BOOK

Praise for
THE JOY CHOICE

“Michelle Segar is my go-to expert on sustainable behavior change. Her work is smart, innovative, and actionable. In *The Joy Choice*, she reveals some of the most interesting and counterintuitive findings that I have read in years. Perhaps most importantly, this book shows us how to eat better, move more, and have a sound night’s sleep. If you want a smart, science-based, and joyful approach to sustainable behavior change, start here.”

—Tom Rath, bestselling author of
Eat Move Sleep and *StrengthsFinder 2.0*

“If you’re frustrated with your progress in exercising and eating right, this book is for you. Michelle Segar distills the research and enlists a warm, engaging style to shift the focus away from narratives of willpower and toward a new approach to our choices that is full of humanity, imperfection, and, yes, joy.”

—Daniel H. Pink, #1 *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Power of
Regret, When, and Drive*

“If you’ve ever felt challenged to stick with health goals and plans amidst a busy, chaotic life *The Joy Choice* was written for you. Segar uses understandable science, stories, and graphics to explain why failing to meet our eating and exercise goals isn’t because we just fail. And even better, she reveals easy and fun ways to be to stay consistent with our health goals, while still tending to the meaningful people and demands in our lives.”

—Tina Payne Bryson, LCSW, PhD, *New York Times*
bestselling coauthor of *The Whole-Brain Child* and
No-Drama Discipline, and author of
The Bottom Line for Baby

“Even the most committed couch potato is no match for Michelle Segar’s energy and expertise. If you don’t think working out and eating well can be fun, get ready to think again. This is an insightful and entertaining read on the science and practice of adopting healthy habits.”

—Adam Grant, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Think Again*

“She’s done it again! I’ve been sharing Michelle Segar’s insights in my lectures around the world and with my patients at home since reading her first book, *No Sweat*. Her new book, *The Joy Choice*, builds on this past work with new science and deeper insights into how we can cut through the all-or-nothing thinking that accumulates over time, eventually derailing our goals. Using stories from her health coaching practice and graphics to relay this fresh thinking, *The Joy Choice* is a riveting and quick read. By the end, we’ve learned the *know how* to painlessly and playfully maintain consistency with our healthy eating and exercise goals while still living our busy lives.”

—John Ratey, MD, Harvard Medical School and bestselling author of *Driven to Distraction* and *Spark*

“*The Joy Choice* is a humane and inspiring book about how we can learn to stick with our greater eating and exercise goals. It uses cutting-edge research to explain why we shouldn’t beat ourselves up when we can’t do what we planned, and provides us with a science-based, practical framework for successful behavior change. Eloquent, informed, and wise, this is a book I’ll be telling all of my friends to read.”

—Ethan Kross, bestselling author of *Chatter*

“*The Joy Choice* offers a new, practical approach to sustaining healthy behaviors that’s both science-based and humane. Dr. Segar fully acknowledges the daily challenges that threaten to disrupt our self-care plans and reframes them as “choice points”—opportunities to think flexibly, connect to our values, and accept imperfection. Going for consistency over time (rather than aiming for an unachievable

perfect execution of the plan) is liberating and, yes, joyful! *The Joy Choice* comes at a time when we couldn't need it more."

—LuAnn Heinen, Vice President of
Business Group on Health

"If you feel you have 'failed' at every healthy eating or physical activity plan you've ever tried, you are almost certainly a victim of the modern-day diet culture we live in. But there is a way to escape this trap, and it's called the Joy Choice! Dr. Segar provides a step-by-step guide and the specific tools needed for implementing meaningful, healthful changes, once and for all. *The Joy Choice* is a must read—not only for individuals, but for dietitians, therapists, and coaches, too."

—Suzanne Dixon, MPH, MS, RDN,
registered dietitian and epidemiologist

"Combining her accessible, optimistic, can-do ethos with research, Michelle teaches us the art of thinking about our own thinking. Through learning how to flexibly reframe and re-imagine our perfectly imperfect lives, we can divine our own Joy Choices even when 'stuff happens,' every day."

—Jane Sarasohn-Kahn, health economist, blogger
at Health Populi, and author of *HealthConsuming:
from Health Consumer to Health Citizen*

"The science of behavior change forms the foundation of the work educators and trainers do every day. *The Joy of Choice* explains the latest research and new thinking about how to encourage changes in behavior in ways that support (instead of stress out) everyday living. Beyond helping individuals better stick with healthier lifestyles, this insightful book provides compelling examples and a roadmap for learning and development professionals to put these new principles into practice in our work creating behavior change for others."

—David Kelly, EVP and Executive
Director of The Learning Guild

“*The Joy Choice* offers up a counterintuitive new formula for creating sustainable changes in eating and exercise through joy, purpose, and play. From a creative integration of the latest science and provocative stories from her work with clients and industry, Segar tells us a new tale of behavior change that lets reach our goals in perfectly imperfect ways. This book is for anyone who has felt like a failure or simply hasn’t figured out how to stick with healthier lifestyles and seeks to do so.”

—Scott Barry Kaufman, author of
Transcend and host of *The Psychology Podcast*

“An essential read on how behavior change really happens (hint: it’s not just habits!). A go-to expert, Michelle Segar knows exactly which levers to pull to achieve lasting results. If you’ve ever struggled with exercise or eating goals you need to read this book!”

—Ron Friedman, PhD, bestselling
author of *The Best Place to Work*
and *Decoding Greatness*

“As one who has struggled over the years to lose weight and maintain regular exercise regimes because life always seems to ‘get in the way,’ I found *The Joy Choice* a wonderfully powerful guide to fresh ways to approach our relationship with our most important self-care -goals. Dr. Segar reveals why so many of the goal-achievement strategies we’ve been taught actually sabotage our success. And she helps us embrace a new approach that works because it aligns with our deepest values, supporting who we are in our core and preventing the deep internal resistance that so commonly gets in our way. Get *The Joy Choice* today! It will finally free you to achieve your top self-care goals in a far simpler way that aligns with your most empowered and confident self.”

—Kathy Caprino, MA, career & leadership
Coach and author of *The Most Powerful You:
7 Bravery-Boosting Paths to Career Bliss*

THE
JOY
CHOICE

HOW TO FINALLY ACHIEVE
LASTING CHANGES IN EATING AND EXERCISE

MICHELLE SEGAR, PhD



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For everyone who has struggled to adopt healthy eating and regular physical activity in ways that are sustainable and nurturing. I wrote this book to help you understand why it's not your fault and guide you to new science and simple tools that can help you turn this around in feel-good, self-affirming, and lasting ways.

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INTRODUCTION

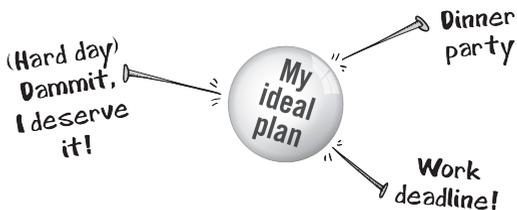
IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT

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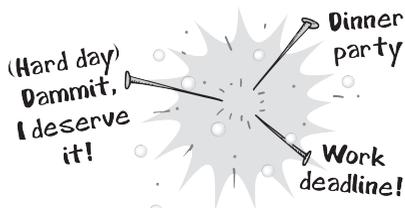
**YOU CREATE YOUR IDEAL PLAN IN
A MOTIVATION BUBBLE**



BUT THEN LIFE HAPPENS!



LIFE BURSTS THE MOTIVATION BUBBLE



If so, you're not alone and you're in good company.

We typically initiate a change in eating or exercise or other self-care behaviors in what I call a “motivation bubble.” It might be New Year’s resolutions time, an upcoming wedding, or some image we see on social media that inspires us to start an ambitious eating or exercise project, again. We are filled with inspiration, commitment, determination, and energy. At *these* moments, our goals feel very attainable and we have a sincere belief that *this time we will really do it!* But at this point, our motivation bubble feels like it’s in a completely different orbit from the other parts of our busy lives; as soon as this giant (yet fragile) motivation bubble comes into contact with *any* everyday conflict or challenge, it easily bursts. And when it does, our intended eating and exercise plans go right down the drain. This happens again, and again, and again.

When my clients start working with me, they tell me that it’s their fault they can never stick with their healthy eating and exercise plans and goals. Beyond self-blame, they lament their lack of willpower and assert that *if they just had more* self-control, they’d achieve lasting success.

They couldn’t be more wrong.

It’s not their fault, just like it’s not yours. We’ve been told a singular story of behavior change that sets most of us up to start and stop, and start and stop, but never to sustain. This story is simplistic and misguides us to focus on the wrong things, like needing more self-control. Or it seduces us into believing that the latest exercise fad, popular diet, or trending behavior-change strategy is our golden ticket to *finally* getting it right. Yet, as you likely know, while these things work for some, they don’t work for the majority of us. Let’s talk about why.

Whatever the reason, season, or event that motivates us to start anew and may even help us succeed for a while, sooner or later life just happens! Work gets busy, an aging parent needs extra care, our

kids and animals have unanticipated needs... Our hoped for, well-intended eating choices or exercise plans will eventually face a conflict. And *this conflict* often turns out to be the culprit, the mundane thing that derails our grand plan, kicking us right off the path of lasting change.

The behavior change story most of us have learned *hasn't focused on* these conflicts that never stop arising, nor has it taught us how to avoid or overcome them. I call these conflicts "choice points," and they are the real place of power for achieving lasting changes in eating and exercise.

If lasting change is what you're after, I'm here to help.

If you could find a simple and fun approach for overcoming these in-the-moment conflicts that derail our best intentions would you be interested in learning more about it? Welcome to *The Joy Choice!*

But first, I'm going to say something that may genuinely shock you.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Now.

If you're like most of my clients, weight loss probably figures into your behavior change goals in some way. One of the biggest things I've learned about creating lasting changes in eating and exercise behavior is that hitching them to a weight-loss goal can't be sustained by most people. I know this may sound counter to everything we've been taught, but research suggests that if you want to stick with your desired changes in eating and exercise, it will be unlikely if weight loss is your primary goal. But don't worry—*The Joy Choice* is here to help you navigate this new territory.

In *The Joy Choice*, you'll discover the science-based and real-world reasons that weight-loss goals inadvertently *thwart desired changes in eating and exercise* for so many of us. You'll also learn how to move

from this roller coaster of failure into the cycle of sustainable success. But make no mistake. This book is not about changing our behavior. It's about what we can do to achieve *lasting* change.

And that starts with ditching what decades of personal experience shows leads to false hopes and eventual self-sabotage and replacing it with what the emerging science and my work with clients suggests is powerful enough to change the way we think and feel and drive the consistent choices that favor healthy eating and regular exercise. *The Joy Choice* rewrites the story of behavior change with this new and delightfully counterintuitive science showing that play, positive experiences, and affirming who we are at our core are the actual ingredients of achieving lasting change.

Rule-based, perfection-seeking, weight-focused behavior-change approaches do get us started and inflate our motivation bubble. But they don't stand a *lasting* chance in the crazy-busy context of our other daily priorities and needs. Many of us bounce like billiard balls between career responsibilities, schoolwork, household tasks, medical appointments, aging parents, our own parenting responsibilities, and the list goes on. The resulting stress, fatigue, anxiety, and overwhelming quantity of daily tasks and decisions create cognitive overload (too many things to do!) and decision fatigue (too many choices to make!).

As I thought about the idea that the stress of daily life could mimic the attention-scattering thinking caused by conditions like ADHD (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), I realized that the issues that some of my clients—and maybe you, too—grapple with *reflect challenges we all face under stress*: getting distracted by unexpected demands, feeling overwhelmed by options, making the impulsive choice rather than the one we had planned, and ultimately giving up in despair of ever reaching our goals, *again*. Can you relate?

The story of behavior change we've been told all these years is not really the best way to behavioral sustainability. Well, then, what is?

THE PERFECT *IMPERFECT* SOLUTION

Behavioral sustainability is the result we want, but to do that, we need to know how to make the consistent decisions that underlie that lofty objective. When we start a change, we tend to focus on the future goal that it is in service of achieving. But change does not happen in the future. Change happens in *each moment*, with the choices and compromises we make when faced with the challenges of daily life: An urgent call cut into your planned exercise class! Should you work out for a shorter time than you'd planned? Replace the class with five minutes of dancing with your kids? Drop the whole idea of exercise today? We can't stop these unexpected conflicts from arising, but we can learn how to stop them from derailing our greater goals!

This is the place our attention needs to be: on the front lines of the conflict between our well-crafted eating or exercise plan and the messy, frequent real-life circumstances that challenge it. In *The Joy Choice*, you'll hear stories from my work with clients and industry that will show you how to use simple strategies for making the choices that take us easily and joyfully *through* the dizzying swirl of conflict-induced distraction, which used to derail us, to the other side: sustaining our healthy eating and exercise goals *within the context of our full set of daily priorities and needs*.

This is the choice that keeps you on the path of lasting change, and this is the premise, and the promise, of *The Joy Choice*.

THE JOY CHOICE: THE STORY YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

The Joy Choice transforms the high-stakes hard work of "sticking with the program" into something new: a fresh and joyful approach for navigating the daily decisions and conflicts we face about what to eat or how to fit our exercise in and still meet work, family, and other life

needs. And this profound change changes everything. *The Joy Choice* celebrates and supports our brain's innate self-management system for making the consistent healthy eating and exercise decisions that underlie achieving lasting change. By turning the behavior change story on its head, we get straight to the heart of lasting change.

The first chapters of *The Joy Choice* reveal the hidden barriers to lasting change we so often encounter, and how we can understand and avoid them. You'll learn:

- ✦ the surprising reasons that habits created for eating and exercise so often crash when they come up against real life;
- ✦ the disruptive effects that our crazy-busy lives have on our brain's ability to manage our choices, plans, and goals; and
- ✦ the ins and outs of our four primary *decision disruptors*, the hidden traps like temptation and rebellion that we fall into time and time again.

In the second part of the book, we'll move directly into the comprehensive and joyful solution: *The Joy Choice* graphic-based strategies and decision shortcuts that let us escape those past traps and make the choices that keep us moving forward, finally achieving lasting change. You'll learn:

- ✦ three science-based decision-support strategies—Simplify, Play, and Choose Joy—that will help us quiet the mental noise and clear the decks for effective decision making through joy, ease, and flexibility;
- ✦ to use the fun and easy three-step POP! decision tool that enables us to effortlessly navigate the in-the-moment conflicts our eating and exercise plans face by helping us focus, open up to new options, and pick the Joy Choice, the meaningful com-

- promise that *keeps us on track* so we can stay in sync with ourselves and the people and things that matter most; and
- * the simple, tactical thinking that underlies lasting change.

IN *THE JOY CHOICE*, I'M PROPOSING THAT WE SHIFT OUR GAZE from the far North Star of idealized aspirations, stop blaming ourselves, and chart our own unique journey through *right now*—exploring with curiosity, humor, and compassion the messy, noisy, and predictably unpredictable life that belongs to each and every one of us. We will quiet the noise and confusion and put our attention where it really matters: in the moment of choice, armed with the new thinking and practical strategies we need to master this moment with purpose, play, and joy.

As you read *The Joy Choice*, you will learn how to retake the reins of your own choices and goals and discover your new story of lasting behavior change—this time, with a happy ending.

The Joy Choice is yours.



IS THE POWER OF HABITS ALL IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE FOR HEALTHY EATING AND EXERCISE?

A FEW YEARS AGO, I BEGAN TO NOTICE THAT MORE AND MORE OF MY CLIENTS were asking me to help them develop a “new habit” for sticking with a diet or healthy eating plan or making exercise a permanent part of their daily life. “I don’t know what’s wrong,” they say. “I know it should be easy, but something always seems to get in the way and I get sidetracked. Can you help figure this out?”

Well, yes and no. Let me explain.

ARE YOU A HABITER OR AN UNHABITER?

Tuesday, five a.m., the middle of winter, and our hundred-year-old house in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is dark and cold. I am huddled under the covers when my husband’s alarm rings, as it does every morning. Jeff quickly turns it off, climbs out of bed, and heads for the basement, already dressed in workout clothes so he doesn’t have to think

about anything other than starting his exercise. For decades, he has biked for forty-five minutes, lifted weights, showered, eaten breakfast, and headed off to work, refreshed and ready for his day. He is a true believer in the power of his habit, and for good reason: it works for him. Can you relate to this?

Let me be the first to say that I cannot. And perhaps you can't either.

You probably know someone like Jeff, for whom this type of habit actually works. But I'm going to come right out and say it: If you are hoping to easily incorporate behaviors like daily exercise, more thoughtful eating, or other self-care behaviors like meditation into your busy, noisy, wonderful, frustrating, and complicated daily life, forming lifelong habits is probably not going to work for you.

Wait—what?

Some people are innately more wired for disciplined living, while others struggle to harness their focus and self-control. Before you embark on a new lifestyle change that you intend to sustain, it's important to recognize whether you are more like what I call a *habiter*, like Jeff, or an *unhabiter*, like me.

Take a moment to look over the following statements, and check off the ones you agree with:

- I am very disciplined and organized.
- I stick to my plan even when I am tempted; I do not make impulsive choices.
- My days run according to schedule, with rare exceptions.
- I don't have any inner conflicts or ambivalence about eating healthy foods or exercising—I am 100 percent on board.

- I tend to rely on someone else to manage many of my daily needs (e.g., schedule meetings, transport children, make meals, organize social events, etc.).

How did you do?

These statements reflect qualities and circumstances that enable habits to form—a disciplined personality, low internal conflict, and stable daily structures with low levels of unanticipated needs. If you agreed with most or all of the boxes on this list, you're probably a habiter: It's much more likely you'll be able to form and stick with habits as a behavioral strategy for achieving and sustaining your health, fitness, and self-care goals.

If you found yourself unable to agree with these statements, or disagreed with most of them, forming lifelong habits for changes in eating and exercise is less likely to work for you. You're an unhabiter, and this book is for you.

ARE HABITS REALLY THE BEST SOLUTION FOR LASTING CHANGES IN EATING AND EXERCISE?

Jeff and I have a lot in common, and some basic differences. Like me, he's a scientist. Like me, he loves to eat great food, play Ping-Pong with our son, and hang out with friends and family. Unlike me, he's a naturally disciplined, well-organized person who keeps everything neat and clean, plans his upcoming work-related needs every Sunday, and always manages to do what needs to be done, even if it means skimping on sleep.

As a person who values rest and is comfortable with leaving a few dishes in the sink, I find Jeff's ease with sticking with complex habits like exercise and surviving on less sleep both frustrating and enviable. The idea of incorporating this seeming effortless into my own

routine is very attractive, and I have been successful with making habits of some simple tasks (notably, flossing at night, checking our dog's water bowl in the morning, and drinking a glass of water myself as soon as I wake up). Habits do serve an important role in our lives, and they help us achieve certain things without effort or thought, enabling us to save our conscious thinking for the times we need it most.¹ But I am also aware that this does not mean habits are the answer for sticking with the more complex behaviors and goals that so often end up in our New Year's resolutions.

Research shows that the very process that makes habits so valuable for simple, mechanical behaviors like making coffee in the morning or taking your meds at the same time and place every day also makes them unworkable for many people who want to adopt more complex lifestyle behaviors—like getting to the gym regularly, or avoiding junk food—that they can sustain within the challenges of daily life. To really understand why habiters and unhabiters might benefit from different behavior change solutions, it's important to understand what habits really are.

WHAT ARE HABITS, ANYWAY?

When I ask people how they define a habit, the most common response is “doing something with regularity.” Does that mean every day? Most of the time? This is a pretty vague description for a habit. To actually create an automatic habit, it's important to determine precisely what you want to do and when you want to do it, such as put your keys on a hook by the door as soon as you enter your home from work.

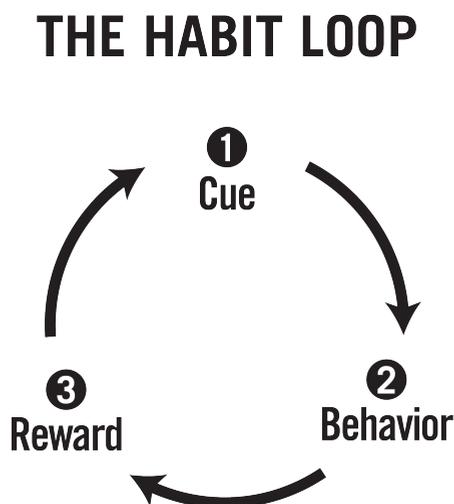
You might recognize this idea because popular books generally teach us to form habits based on this more formal and precise definition of a habit: *performing an action reflexively, without the need to*

think or exert self-control—theoretically saving time, saving willpower, and saving our brain power for other tasks.² What these books have been advocating for is specifically referred to as *habit formation*. But for habit formation to work, it needs to meet a very important requirement: *it has to occur within a stable context*.³ Habit formation is the topic of a lot of research, fuels current debate, and is also used to design many healthy behavior apps, so it's worth taking a moment to understand.

Habit formation is often described as a three-part process:

- ✦ The *cue* is the trigger or cause of the habit (e.g., Jeff's wake-up alarm).
- ✦ The *behavior* is the actual action—the desired habit (e.g., riding the bike).
- ✦ The *reward* is some type of positive experience or feeling associated with the behavior (e.g., feeling accomplished, refreshed).

Together, these three elements constitute a *habit loop* (as shown in the figure), which is necessary to form a habit that sticks.⁴



Habit formation of this type requires one very important condition: it needs to occur in a *stable*, unchanging context. This requirement is so central to the ultimate success of forming habits that Wendy Woods, a leading researcher of habits, says, “Variety weakens habit... variety is the enemy of stable contexts... If you are not arranging your life to reliably, unfailing, cue your habit, then that habit will never take hold.”⁵ Unfortunately, when it comes to eating and exercise, the real world rarely plays along with this scenario.

The popular habit approach derives from pioneering psychologist William James (1842–1910). He wrote a book called *Habit* that promoted the value of automating our days through habits so as to free our minds for our most important work.⁶ This advice came long before our lives were continually interrupted by email, texting, social media, online dating, not to mention parents who have to juggle managing their children’s screens, gaming, and social media, drive kids to numerous classes, games, and parties, and make time to watch the latest streaming must-see series. Even within this context, habits work well for many simple tasks and for people like Jeff, who are naturals.

But the currently popular narrative advocates habit formation as a solution that can work for anybody and any behavior, and it has become a popular part of the behavior change story. There are some interesting science-based reasons that forming habits for eating and exercise works for habiters, but is not likely to work for me and others who are unhabiters.

EXAMINING FOUR COMMON ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HABITS FOR HEALTHY EATING AND EXERCISE

My clients sometimes come to me saying that they did something wrong because they can’t make habits work for their lifestyle goals,

continuing the self-blame game. They believe that they *should be able* to form an exercise or healthy eating “habit” because they hear everyone talking about it, their family and friends and online influencers. But these beliefs are based on four common assumptions about “everybody” that don’t hold up under scrutiny.

Assumption 1. Everyone can form habits.

Popular thinking holds that habits can work for everyone. But there are several reasons that this thinking doesn’t hold up when it comes to forming habits for complex lifestyle behaviors.

First, you may be surprised to discover that much of the research on human habits has not been conducted on a typical sample of “everyone.” Instead, these studies often use limited (*not* representative) populations, including specific groups that might be more inclined toward habit formation, like active members in a fitness club or college students who may have less on their daily plates.

So, what’s wrong with using college students in studies about forming lasting lifestyle habits? Consider this: The vast majority of university students at four-year institutions are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, are mostly single,⁷ so their lives are likely to have fewer responsibilities and be less logistically complicated than those of working adults. In fact, a highly cited academic study on how long it takes people to develop habit “*automaticity*,” performing an action on autopilot without the need to think about doing it, was conducted mostly among postgraduate students (average age twenty-seven) in the United Kingdom.⁸

The ninety-six students who enrolled were asked to choose one new behavior to perform daily in the same context (e.g., after dinner) for twelve weeks. They chose to form new healthy habits related to either drinking water, eating, meditation, or exercise. This study

found that it took sixty-six days, on average, for habit automaticity to form.

Research helps advance our knowledge. And this interesting study is no exception by contributing to what we know about habits and automaticity. This research, and its sixty-six-day finding, are heavily cited across academia and industry. Yet there are some reasons to be cautious about generalizing these findings beyond this study. The biggest issue relates to the wide variability in time participants took to achieve automaticity, ranging from 18 to 254 days. This range, and the 66-day average derived from it, is so large that it is hard to justify as a rule of thumb to use outside of this study. Also, about half of the graduate students in this study didn't do their target behavior enough to achieve the automaticity status that the study was about. In their conclusion, the authors noted that "even in this study where the participants were motivated to create habits, approximately half did not perform the behavior consistently enough to achieve habit status." Even though the authors clearly acknowledged their study limitations, the sixty-six-day habit formation stat is often promoted as an established fact. As with so many other behavior-change targets, when we aim for what we've been told and it doesn't hold, we are left feeling like a failure, again.

When we are trying to understand how to form habits, or other techniques aiming to create sustainable lifestyle changes, we need to be careful about generalizing research conducted among university students to the general population of adults. Although some students have jobs and families, they may also have fewer complex responsibilities related to caring for and managing family- and work-related needs.

Second, research suggests that certain personalities succeed better than others at forming habits. Not surprisingly, people who tend to be innately disciplined and have high self-control (like my

husband) are better at forming habits than those of us who don't share those traits.⁹ When I speak about this in presentations, most people jump to the conclusion that the only reason some people have trouble forming new exercise and healthy eating habits is that they don't have the innate self-disciplined personality. But, as you'll soon learn, this is not true.

Assumption 2. Our internal conflicts about eating and exercise do not affect our ability to form automatic habits for eating and exercise.

One reason the idea of habit formation is so attractive is that the mechanistic idea of automatic behavior sidesteps the guilt, shame, resistance, rebellion, and other internal conflicts that so often pull the plug on our eating and exercise resolutions. It's easy to assume that once it's installed—out of sight and out of mind—the habit will easily override any complicated feelings about exercise or healthy eating we may have. But there are some compelling reasons as to why this is a false assumption.

Whether we realize it or not, we often change our behavior to conform to cultural pressures (to get “our younger body back” or to please our partners or parents) or on doctor's orders (to drop pounds or exercise more and eat better to improve our health). Yet, when we try to make these “sensible” changes, many of us encounter a feeling of internal pressure and obligation. These forces are often unconscious but they still exert pressure, so it's no wonder that conflict kicks in. This inner conflict exerts itself in many ways: Long-standing shame about our bodies bubbles up to sabotage our good intentions, leading us to avoid the punishing, high-intensity exercise we think we *must* do to burn calories. Resentment over the (often self-imposed) restrictions we now have to follow *actually motivates us to rebel against them*,

and we might even find ourselves choosing to eat a box of cookies without realizing we had taken it out of the drawer, dammit! We may even cancel our annual physical so we don't have to hear our doctor's (well-meaning) warning to lose weight or risk getting diabetes.

Let's be real: How many people *don't* experience inner conflicts with making changes in eating and exercise? We may feel that our motives are solely our own, our goals are simple, and habit formation is what will get us there quickly. But the fact is, many, if not most of us, have a great deal of psychological conflict wrapped up with dietary change and exercise, and habits can't make this conflict disappear.

Importantly, there are theories about, and research showing, that these types of inner conflicts will almost inevitably spoil our best intentions. *Self-determination theory*¹⁰ proposes that if we do not feel aligned with our goals or choices (for example, joining a gym because it's the *en vogue* place to work out, but we hate going because it makes us feel bad about ourselves), this not only demotivates us but can pile on guilt and shame. *Reactance theory*¹¹ would contend that when we feel pressured to exercise more or eat in healthier ways, especially from a "should," we are literally motivated to react against or do the *opposite of our intended action*—even *when we* are the ones who initiated the change.

Worse, these inner conflicts all too easily cause negative associations and ambivalence that inhibit our ability to experience the very positive rewards needed to drive the habit loop! These conflicts can lead to an internal friction, which disrupts the nonconscious automaticity that habits depend on to stick.¹² They also deplete us, leaving little energy to power through our ambivalence.¹³

Inner conflicts about trying to change our diet or exercise, whether conscious or not, put us at odds with our core self and lead

us to sabotage rather than support sustainable behavior change. Believing that we should be able to “muscle through” our guilt and resentment just piles on more guilt, resentment, and conflict. Yet the common belief that we *should* be able to do this, and that habits will take us there, means that we rarely address these fundamental issues when we try to form a habit.

The bottom line? Habit formation demands a reliably stable context that makes our choices frictionless and depends on positive experiences. The turmoil created by inner conflict is anything but.

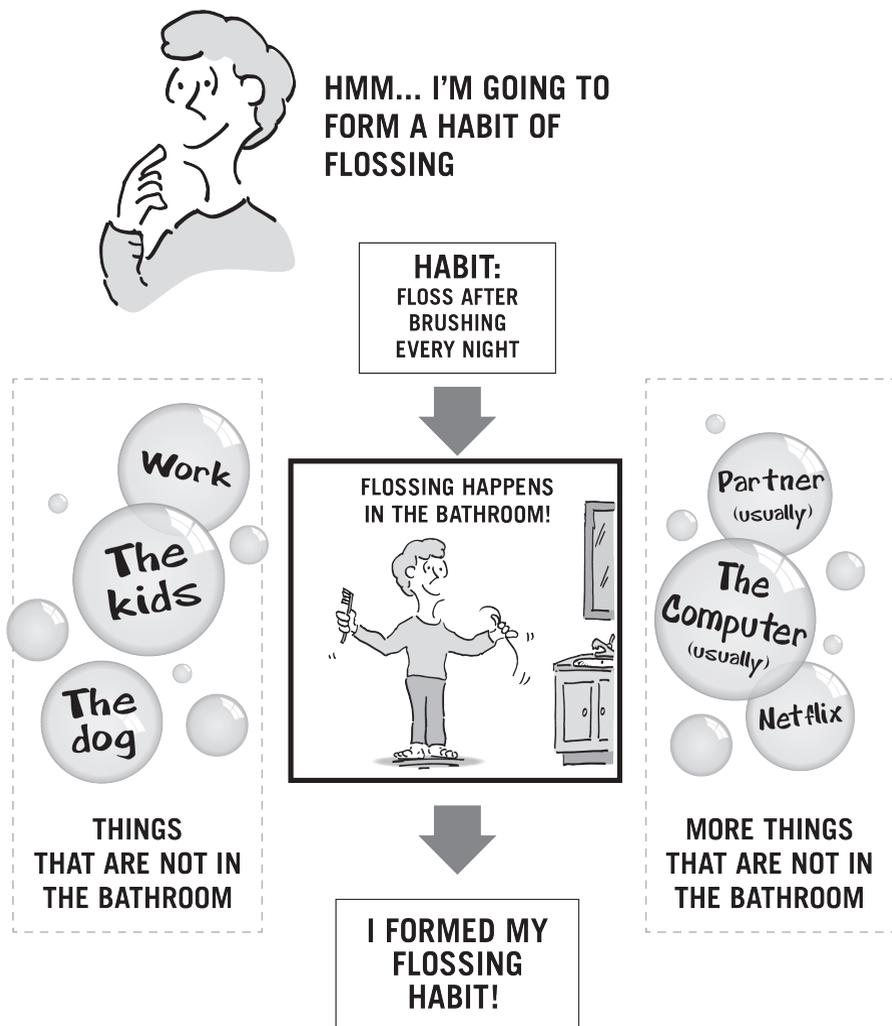
Assumption 3. It's possible to form an automatic habit for any lifestyle behavior.

This is the big one.

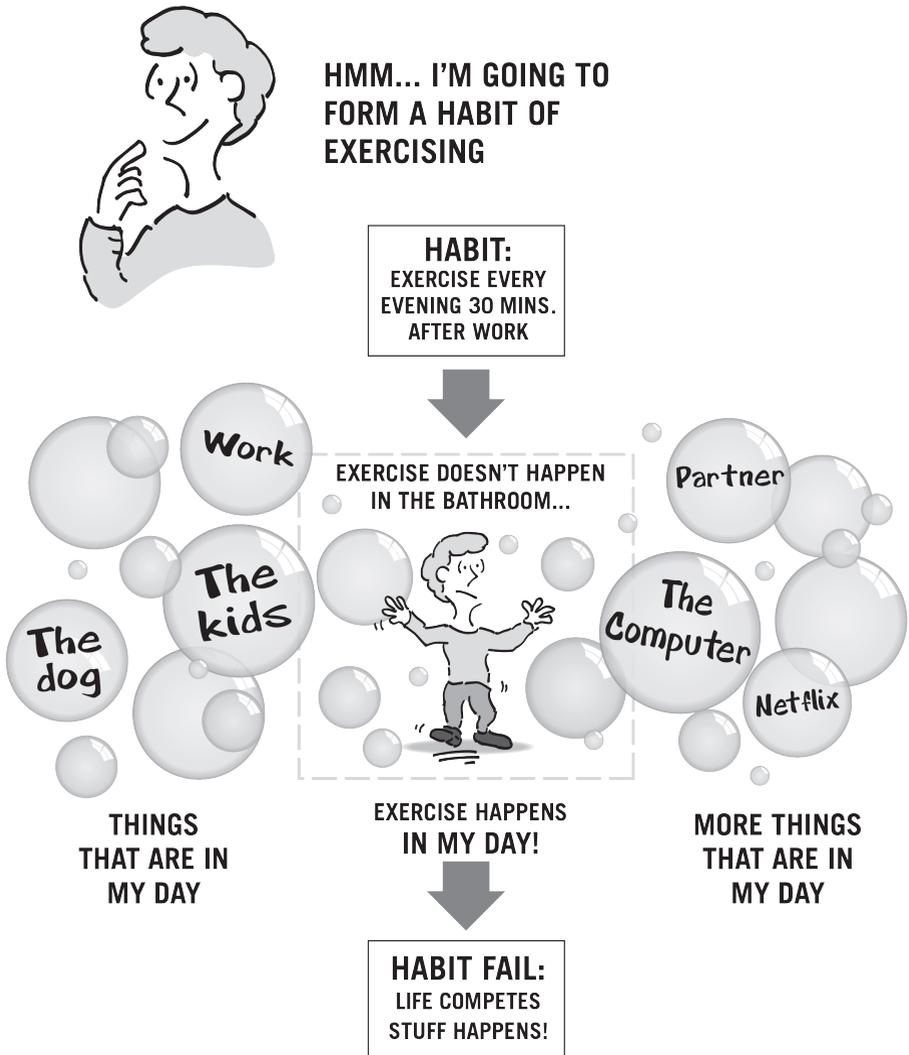
Here's how the thinking goes: Habits work so well for some behaviors that habit formation must be a great strategy for creating sustainable change for *any* behavior. It seems obvious that putting a health behavior on autopilot, as habit formation promises, will make the need for self-control obsolete—we make the healthy choice automatically, effortlessly, without a second thought. But this assumption is not correct.

It's true, we shouldn't *have* to think about simple behaviors like flossing daily or always putting the car keys in the same place. These are perfect for habit formation: the context is stable, the cue is the same, the reward is immediate, and repetition is built in. It's hard to imagine your key hook moving during the night and we floss inside the bathroom, a context known for few outside interruptions. The following graphic shows the relative ease of forming a flossing habit.

It's just you and your floss after (or before) brushing. No problem!



Now consider the many forces going *against* exercise habits: lack of desire, a rescheduled meeting, other people’s needs, time to change clothes or shower...and these are only a few. Every day, even our best-laid exercise or eating plans get disrupted by life stuff (a family emergency, a bad day at work, low energy), or by the tug-of-war between our reflective self (“I should get to that spinning class.”) and our reactive self (“I want to stream that show!”).



As this other graphic makes clear, in contrast to a simple behavior like flossing, our lifestyle behaviors are generally surrounded by the complexities inherent in the many contexts, people, and needs of our daily lives. Research suggests, for example, that even among people *with* strong exercise habits, a simple change in circumstances (like exercising in a different location) disrupts their exercise habit.¹⁴

The basis for habit formation comes from simple, mechanistic behaviors, so it's no surprise that disagreement exists over whether more complex behaviors (that is, behaviors with multiple subcomponents, like exercise) can even become automatic.¹⁵ There's currently a healthy debate among habit scientists about the feasibility of automatic habits for complex lifestyle behaviors, including how they form, what is the best type of motivator, and whether internal circumstances can also cue them into action.¹⁶ The jury is still out on this science, but we're still living in the real world and in need of healthy eating and exercise approaches we can count on.

Assumption 4. Automaticity is the ideal for lasting changes in healthy eating and exercise.

A much-touted virtue of habits is *automaticity*, or performing a behavior with little conscious awareness or effort.¹⁷ The idea of acting reflexively, without any need for thought or work, sounds great, especially if you feel tired and stressed. Certainly, it's helpful in many parts of life, not least in helping us get out of bed and off to work in the morning.

We've known for a long time that we spend a lot of our day on autopilot and make many decisions unconsciously.¹⁸ Some argue that because we *already* live so much of our lives this way, we might as well try to leverage this human tendency to form automatic habits for lifestyle behaviors like healthy eating and exercise too. Yet, given that automatic habits are vulnerable to disruption by deviation from the plan, those of us who have overlapping responsibilities (work, family, school, volunteering) and are also managing the logistics of numerous life arenas are unlikely to have the reliably stable life conditions required to form automatic habits for complex lifestyle behaviors.

Consider the almost daily schedule upheavals that require us to drop what we are doing or had planned to do and choose the best response *right now*, based on our actual circumstances in that moment. Autopilot can't help us here—we need conscious awareness to optimally solve the challenges we and our eating and exercise plans face.¹⁹ In fact, the automatic and narrowed frame of mind cultivated in habit formation may actually *thwart* our real-world need to pivot, problem solve, and be sufficiently flexible to change course in the moment.²⁰

Can the new “micro-habits” avoid the vulnerabilities of bigger ones? I'm a big fan of starting small, taking mini-steps, and staying realistic, as this new movement promotes.²¹ If micro-habits refer to small steps, then that's different than the automatic habits being discussed here. But if we're talking about forming small *automatic* habits, their habit loop would be vulnerable to the same unexpected disruptions as their bigger counterparts.

In lives that present us with the continual need to improvise and negotiate, mounting science shows, paradoxically, that we need to be flexible (not rigid) if we hope to become consistent with exercise and healthy eating.²² Eating and exercise habits are easily derailed by the unexpected: an urgent meeting at work that interferes with your gym plans, an abundance of “bad” food choices at your family get-together, a sudden snowstorm that makes your run impossible, your child's tummy ache that keeps you both in the house. These are far from unsolvable problems. Yet if we are relying on automatic responses when challenges arise to our hoped-for exercise and healthy eating habits, we may be unprepared and won't have the necessary consciousness in the moment to most effectively manage our competing obligations and make the best choice for our full set of needs—the task at hand, the people who rely on us, the time we have available—on the spot.

LIFE IS MESSY

So, here's the thing: Programming our eating and exercise choices to unfold effortlessly and without conscious thought sounds great in theory, but real life easily upsets the program. As a remedy, we could try streamlining our environments, getting rid of temptations, and arranging our lives—without any variation—to accommodate the automaticity needed for habit formation. These are great ideas, but this level of control over our lives is not always easy (or even possible) for many of us to achieve. In fact, there is little research support for the idea that habits can power *lasting* changes in lifestyle behaviors like eating or exercise.²³ What's more, studies aiming to corroborate this assumption have generally failed to do so, even among simple behaviors, such as flossing.²⁴

Try as we might to smooth out the bumps in the road, life often seems to be nothing but one unexpected detour after the next. And like it or not, change is the enemy of reflexive, automatic habits. As we'll explore in the next chapter, research has found that these sorts of everyday changes and challenges can easily create a life context that overwhelms not only our ability to stick to the program we embarked on, but also our ability to make the in-the-moment choices that keep us on track with our goals.

PRAISE FOR
THE JOY CHOICE

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