

A Guide to Developing the Self-Discipline Habit

One of the most important life skills to develop, for those just starting out in life (and everyone else!), is the skill of self-discipline.

It's like a superpower: when I developed some self-discipline, I started exercising and eating healthier and meditating and writing more, I quit smoking and ran marathons, I started a blog and wrote books, I read more and work earlier, I decluttered and transformed my finances. I'm far from perfect, but I've learned a lot.

But if you don't develop self-discipline, it causes problems: health problems, distraction, procrastination, financial problems, clutter, things piling up and overwhelming you, and much more.

So it's such an important skill to develop, but most people don't know where to start. This guide is aimed at helping you get started.

I'm writing it for my kids, and for anyone else who would like to develop a superpower.

Finding Motivation

The first question is, how do you even get motivated to start? Most of us don't want to *think* about our lack of discipline, let alone take a bunch of actions.

For me, the motivation came from realizing that what I was doing wasn't working. Ignoring the problems only made things worse. Trying to be disciplined but doing it half-assedly only resulted in me feeling bad about myself. Being wholly undisciplined was causing myself a bunch of pain.

Once you realize that you're causing yourself pain ... you might develop a whole-hearted intention to *stop* hurting yourself. You might say, "OK, that's enough with making my life worse. Let's try to make it less worse."

With that in mind, you can tell yourself that you are going to:

- Start taking small actions to make things better
- Do the things that hurt you less
- Push yourself into discomfort a little bit, so you can get better at this over time
- Get good at self-discipline with some practice

Keep these things in mind as you practice, as you get the urge to not practice, and as you make mistakes and then want to give up.

There are other good motivations as well:

1. Wanting to help others — if you get better at exercise or healthy eating, for example, you can help your aging parents who need to get better at these things. If you get better at not procrastinating on your life's work, you can help more people with that meaningful work. More on this below, in the "Focus on Others" section.
2. Appreciating life — we have a short time here on Earth, and the life we have is a gift. When we procrastinate and give in to endless distraction, and don't make the most of our time, we are not fully appreciating the gift we have. Instead, we can appreciate it by being present, being grateful, and being purposeful about how we spend our time.

With these motivations — or whatever motivations move you the most — we can start to practice.

Small Actions

One of the most important things you can do to get better at self-discipline is to take small actions. It can seem overwhelming to tackle huge, intimidating projects ... so don't. Instead, tackle easy actions, things so small you can't say no.

Have some taxes to do? Just do 5 minutes. Want to run? Just run for 10 minutes. Have a report to work on? Just do the first few paragraphs. Want to declutter? Just find 5 things to declutter.

You'll get better at self-discipline if you focus on small tasks, and break bigger projects into small tasks. [Read more.](#)

Discomfort Training

One of the reasons we don't have self-discipline is because we run from the hard, uncomfortable things. We would rather do the easy, comfortable, familiar things.

So instead of facing our hard, uncomfortable projects or finances, we run to distractions, videos, games. This running from discomfort is ruining our lives.

What you can tell yourself is that you're done running. You are going to push into discomfort, a little at a time, and get good at being uncomfortable. This is another of your superpowers. When others run, you're OK (even if it's not always fun).

One small task at a time, push yourself into discomfort. See how it feels. See that it's not the end of the world. See that you are awesome enough to handle discomfort, and that the results are well worth it.

Mindfulness with Urges

You'll have the urge to quit doing something hard, or to put it off for now. Those urges don't serve you well.

Instead, develop mindfulness around those urges, and see that you don't have to follow them.

A good way to do that is to set a time for yourself where you can do nothing but X. For example, for the next 10 minutes, you can do nothing but write your book chapter (or exercise, meditate, etc.). When you have the urge to procrastinate or run to distractions, you'll easily see it, because you're either writing the book, or you're not. When you have the urge, tell yourself you can't follow it, you have to either write your book chapter or sit there and do nothing.

Raymond Chandler used that as his simple writing system: "Write or nothing. I find it works. Two very simple rules, a. you don't have to write. b. you can't do anything else."

The reason it works is that you are setting up a time where you do nothing else but that one specified task, and you can see your urges to run away. Use this to learn to be mindful of your urges, and see that you don't have to follow them.

Interval Training

If you combine the above items into a system of bursts, or intervals, you can train yourself using interval training:

1. Set your intention to practice self-discipline and not hurt yourself anymore.
2. Set a task to focus on (writing, drawing, strength training, meditating, etc).
3. Set a timer for 10 minutes. Five minutes is also fine if 10 is too long. Don't go longer until you get good at 10 minutes, then increase to 12 and eventually 15. I don't find I need to go beyond 15-20 minutes even when I'm kicking butt.
4. Do nothing but sit there and watch your urges, or push into your discomfort by doing the task.
5. When the timer goes off, give yourself a 5-minute break.
6. Repeat.

You can train for several intervals, or potentially for an hour or two. Then take a longer break, and do another set of intervals after that.

This kind of interval training is fantastic, because it's not that hard, you really train yourself in discomfort and watching urges, and you can get a lot done this way.

A Focus on Others

When you find yourself struggling, dig into deeper motivation: doing your work/exercise/meditation etc. not for yourself, but for others.

For example:

- I'm writing this article to help my kids, and anyone else who might benefit.
- I work out to be healthy, not only for myself but as an example for my kids and others who might benefit.
- I meditate not only for my own peace and sanity, but so that I can help others find their own peace and sanity.
- You might draw or write or play music to inspire others.

In each example, you might benefit ... but you're also doing it to benefit others. And this benefit to others is *much* more motivating than doing something just for yourself.

Try it ... try doing a difficult task for someone else. Tell them you're going to do it for them beforehand, then keep them in mind as you do it. See if you feel more motivated.

Victories in Success & Failure

A huge mistake that a lot of people make is that they mess up, and get discouraged by this. They feel bad about messing up. This causes them to give up and not want to think about developing self-discipline.

Here's the thing: failure is actually a victory.

Failure means you tried. So it's a victory from the start.

But it also means you learned something — you now know that what you tried didn't quite work. Next time, you can try something a bit different. Add more accountability, try it at a different time, unplug your wireless router, get a workout partner, anything. Because of your failure, you have new information. You've learned, and that helps you get better.

Failure is a victory. Success is also a victory. No matter what your result, you can see it as an opportunity to learn, to grow, to get better.

Drop any ideas of being perfect at this, and just keep trying.

The next time you fail at whatever you're trying, instead of letting it get you discouraged, see it as a victory. Then keep going, no matter what, because giving up is only going to hurt you some more.

Getting Support

You're not in this alone. You have family, friends, online strangers who can help you. Form a support team by reaching out to the people around you, and asking for their help.

Lots of people skip this because they are embarrassed by their lack of discipline. They feel that the way they behave is shameful. That's not true. Actually, we all act like this, but we're just afraid to show that side to each other. But the truth is, if you show your "dark" side to people, they actually love you more, trust you more, relate to you more. So don't be afraid to connect with others in a vulnerable way.

Find the courage to ask for help. Then let yourself be supported as you work on pushing yourself into discomfort and hurting yourself less.

If you need help from me, try my 44 Training Program - Turning Uncertainty & Discomfort into Mindful Openness.

You can do this.