

Making the self-improvement habit

This edition of Monday Morning Motivation is written for the first Monday in September.

At least here in the Northern Hemisphere, interest in self-improvement seems to peak around two times of year -- the most obvious one is around New Year's Day, specifically the last week in December through the month of January.

After January, interest seems to level off, dipping to a low point during the summer months, and then rising again as September comes on the scene.

Why? January's a simple thing to see -- everyone is making a new commitment to better themselves for the New Year. Well, to those of us who started school in September after a long summer vacation, the answer is simple. We get in the habit of taking the summer off, and when September rolls around, we get back into the same mindset we had in school -- September means the start of a new school year -- and even though for most of us, it's been a while since we were in grade school, we still fall into those same habits.

And that's what we're going to talk about today -- making a habit of self-improvement.

I read a book once by an author I admire, Patrick McManus. He said as a writer, he owed much of his writing success to a habit -- unfailingly, he would write each day, from 7 to 9 p.m. It didn't matter what else was going on in his life -- that was his habit, and those hours were when he wrote.

He had made his success a habit -- and as a result, he wound up writing a number of books (all of which are delightful, I might add).

So much of the time, we don't realize that self-improvement, like most other things in this life, is best undertaken when we make good habits of success, and then stick to them.

Have you ever had a bad habit? This isn't true confession time here -- I'm not asking for you to write and tell me about your filthy habits (although that reminds me of a nun joke about a couple of nuns and a dry cleaner). I imagine you, like I, found your habit to be a difficult thing to break -- it took effort, determination, and sometimes a bit of what people always call "will power."

So we tend to look on habit as a bad thing -- even a boring thing.

But here's the thing -- sometimes it's good to be a slave to your habits.

Make positive habits, and they work for you -- they pull you along, they help keep you in line, they help change your way of thinking.

Don't believe me? You ought to -- it really works.

I can prove it to you with something small. For the next 20 days, make a habit of spending 30 minutes a day reading a book. You can pick your own book -- if you need a suggestion, try one of the following: "**David Copperfield**" by Charles Dickens; "**Blink**," by Malcolm Gladwell; "**The Professor and the Madman**" by Simon Winchester; or "**The Last Lecture**" by Randy Pausch.

Be certain to set aside the same time every day. Get up a little bit earlier, or go to bed a little later -- but make sure it's the same time, or close to it.

At the end of the 20-day cycle, you will find yourself looking for your reading time -- even though you no longer have to read. You will have successfully formed a good habit.

Now, just the same way as you form this good habit, you can form others. You can habitually plan your day, or your week. You can form a habit of paying your bills when they first come in; you can habitually sock away money every month; you can make a habit to take your spouse out on a date every week, or talk with your kids, or go to the gym.

You can also change your thinking patterns -- in fact if you choose to read a challenging book, I think you'll find your thinking patterns will change dramatically.

Habit can be an easy ticket to becoming better -- because when we form good habits, we learn to use habit as another tool in our effort to become better.

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