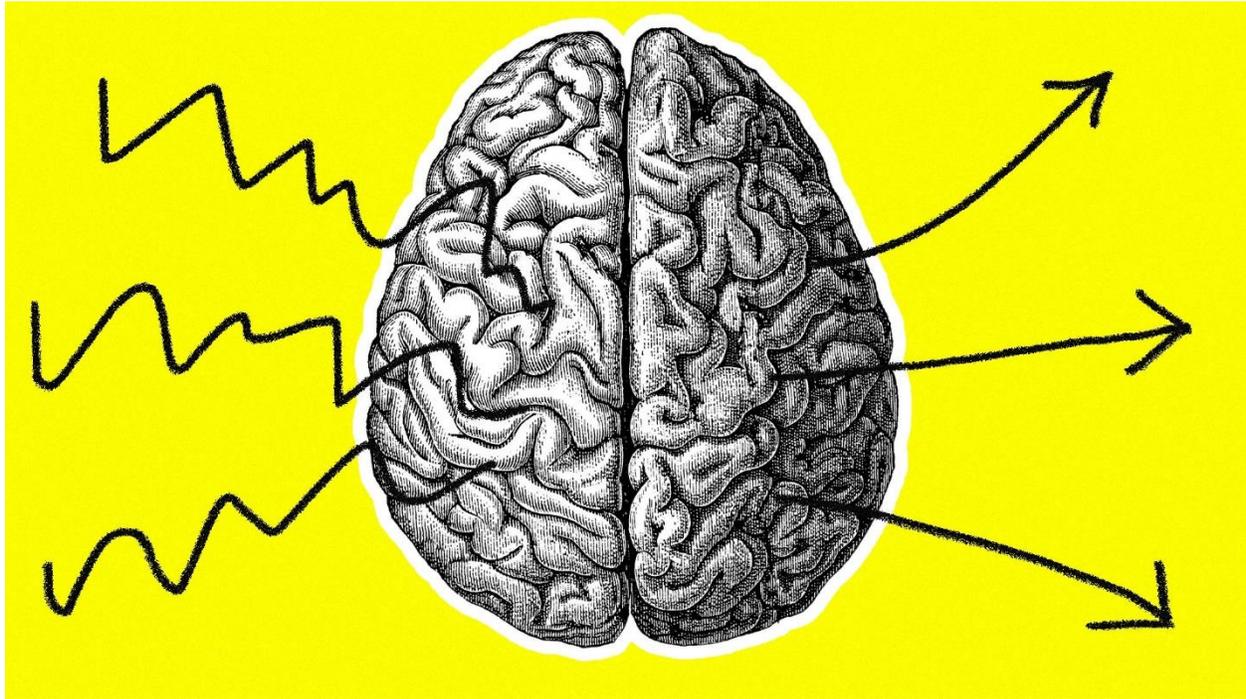


How to Actually Change Your Behavior for the Better

A conversation with behavioral scientist Katy Milkman on procrastination, impulsiveness, and the many other ways people sabotage themselves—and how to stop doing that.

BY [CLAY SKIPPER](#)

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If you need to be convinced that humans aren't so great at changing their behavior, look no further than the monumental effort it's taken to get Americans to wear masks, socially distance, and get vaccinated. Which explains why Dr. Katy Milkman has had a very busy pandemic. As a behavioral scientist and professor at Wharton, she's one of the people in the country most primed to understand why humans do (or don't do) the things they do.

Though there has always been outreach from companies and public policy makers from time to time, she says that during the pandemic "the amount of inbound traffic from major players wanting advice was just completely off the charts." As one of the co-directors of Penn's Behavior Change for Good Institute, Milkman helped answer queries from a wide range of state and public health officials, including, more recently, the Biden administration.

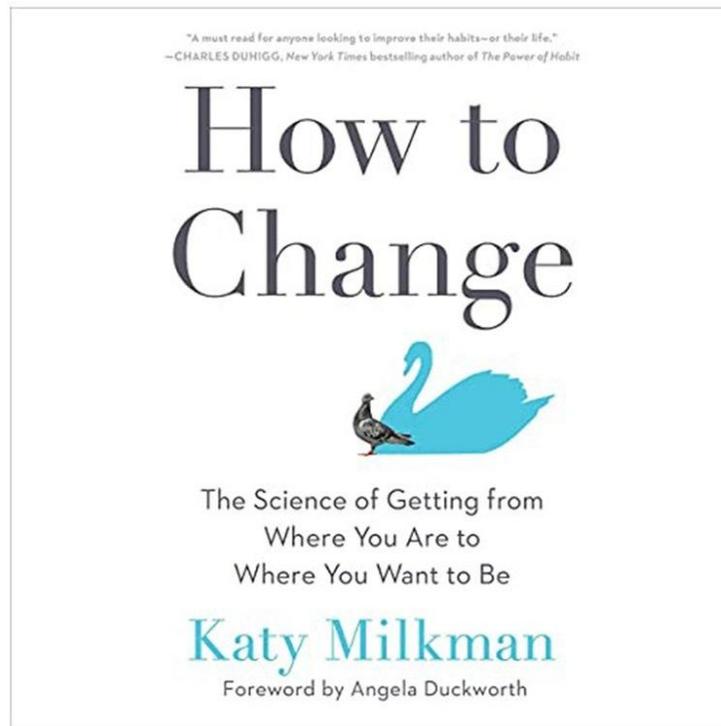
As momentum for a vaccine started building, and discussions ramped up about development and supply chain issues, Milkman and her team realized there'd be another hurdle, one we're still dealing with now:

convincing people to actually show up get the shot. They launched an experiment—in partnership with Walmart, and two large northeast health systems—involving nearly a million patients to test the efficacy of messaging that encouraged flu vaccination. The hope was that the results could be used to better motivate people to get the covid vaccine when it became available.

What did they find? Simple text messages were very effective in reminding people to get their flu shot, especially if those texts included messaging saying “We have a vaccine reserved for you.” That relates to something called the endowment effect, which Milkman says is “where you value something more, and you’re less willing to give it up when you feel it belongs to you.” They also found that inviting people to come to the local clinic to get a flu shot was less effective than a text that provided a specific date and time for an automatically scheduled appointment. That’s because of the default effect: humans choose the path of least resistance. Translation: we’re lazy and don’t like to put in the effort to make an appointment. But if you default us to an appointment, we’re more likely to show up to it.

“If I were in charge, everybody in America would be given a default appointment time and told a shot has been reserved for them,” says Milkman.

She’s not in charge, but you can see why the people who are want her opinion. The good news is that for those of us less able to access her advice, she’s written a book compiling the wisdom she’s gleaned from her years studying humans. [*How to Change: The Science of Getting From Where You Are to Where You Want to Be*](#) has eight chapters, each tackling a cardinal human flaw. The bad news is that we’re impulsive, forgetful, lazy, overconfident, conformist, and we procrastinate—the good news is that Milkman’s work has revealed some solutions for each. Since the gradual post-pandemic reopening seems like as good a time as any to establish some new habits, *GQ* asked Dr. Milkman for some help.



How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be

GQ: I wanted to ask you about the “fresh start effect”—this idea that we’re better at changing our behavior when we begin a new “chapter,” say after a move or a new job—because coming out of the pandemic strikes me as a fresh start in some ways. You talk about a fresh start being good for kick starting new habits, but potentially disruptive to habits you’ve already established and don’t want to break. What advice do you have for people who have created new routines they don’t want to lose post-pandemic?

Katy Milkman: So the first thing is awareness. This has been a grand experiment—that seems like a heartless way to describe something that’s been so awful, but it has been, in a sense. We had to try things we never would have tried: Zoom meetings, different ways of getting our physical activity in, interacting differently with our children or our partners. So that has hopefully taught us things that we like better that we never would have discovered, and probably also things that are worse.

Can we keep the good and throw out the bad? That requires planning and really deliberate action on our part to keep those things that are working—and if they can’t work anymore, to find a substitute that will. We need to make really concrete plans about what we’re going to do. That’s my number one piece of advice, concrete planning. Okay, what are the things you’re going to keep? How are you going to keep them? It’s not a sexy answer, but it’s the important answer.

There was a study of the 2014 London Tube strike 2014. A bunch of different stations were closed, but some were open, so all these commuters had a couple of days where they were forced to experiment with new routes to work. When the strike ended, most went back to their old route, but about 5%—a

meaningful number—found a new route that turned out to be better. They had been taking a less efficient route to work because they looked at a map and they thought, “Oh, this is how I should get to work,” and then they did it for 5, 10, or 50 years. Along come the strike and forces them to ride a different way. They're like, “This was five minutes faster. I'm going to do this.” And they stuck with that from then on.

I've certainly had those moments in life, where something accidental makes you discover something you never went looking for. You're like, wait, this is better. Out of this pandemic, maybe it's going to be 5% of the things that we've discovered that are better. Like my family never went on hikes, and we now go on a hike every Saturday and Sunday. I'm sure everybody's got different things that the forced exploration has led them to discover. I think we need to hold onto that.

In the chapter called “The Laziness Problem” you tackle the human tendency to default to the path of least resistance. Are there specific things in your life where you've harnessed that tendency to get yourself to practice certain behaviors?

Oh my gosh. So many ways. In our kitchen, we don't have a bunch of junk food by default. The choices you make about accessible foods are defaults, My calendar has all sorts of defaults built into it. I have a weekly meeting that's my ideating meeting. I make sure there's time blocked for that. There's other time that I block off for writing. Those are defaults that we're building in to make sure time gets used for the things that we value and are most important.

I have default replies for different [emails] so that I don't have to think about them. If situation X arises multiple times, rather than thinking about it each time, I have thought about it once and this is how I handle it. And then I try to use these principles in teaching as well. By default, all my students have meetings scheduled with me at the beginning of the semester, like an office hours visit.

It seems like a lot of behavior change just comes down to humility. The Table of Contents of your book reads like a catalog of all the ways in which humans are fallible. And I think a lot of people don't want to admit that—

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The Table of Contents is a little tough. [*laughs*] Somebody was like, “God, this is so depressing!”

There's that thing—I'm sure you know—where if you ask people if they're average, below average, or above average, a large majority of people rate themselves above average. Which is mathematically impossible. And it seems like behavior change might only start by admitting to yourself that you're flawed in a lot of ways.

Right, and that's actually how you become above average, which is what's funny. Like the worst thing you can do is be naive. Like, *I don't need to set myself up with special accommodations to help me dodge them. I'm going to achieve my goals without any crutches.* If you do that, you get nowhere basically. There are some humans out there who would get somewhere, but for most of us that would be a disaster.

As soon as you start recognizing like, yikes, I tend to stress eat, or I'm not going to getting myself to the gym because I don't find it fun, or I'm not getting my homework done because I'd rather watch TV,

that's when the magic happens. Because you can say, "Oh, wait, this is a problem." And it's solvable! Just like a math problem. There are solutions.

So start with self-awareness.

Totally. It's really two things. [My team's] been talking a lot about people's under appreciation of how much the tools in the world help us solve things. There are all these tools that can make things easier for us, but when we see something that works out for us easily, we attribute it to ourselves and not to the tool. So you need both self-awareness and a recognition that there are tools that can help.

For the most part, it's not like other people who are getting further in life have some superior skill set or willpower or abilities. I mean, that obviously matters too. But in a lot of cases, the people who you're looking up to and thinking they have it all figured out, mostly they've figured out their own flaws. It's more about the systems than about the people. [Angela Duckworth has this wonderful study](#) looking at people we think of as self controlled and showing it's actually that they have good habits. They're not even using self-control—it's just autopilot.

In another part of your book, you write about research that showed that though routine is important to habit formation, forming the "stickiest" possible habits comes through flexibility—so being able to go with the flow and not spinning out if you can't work out at the same time every day. How do you think about mixing flexibility and routine?

Once I build a habit, my habits tend to be "no matter what" habits, as opposed to "if and only if" habits. So no matter what, I'm going to find time to talk to Angela Duckworth every week and check in. We have a default time, but when that doesn't work, we always reschedule. I'm teaching my son to read right now, and it's 20 minutes a day and we have a regular time, but we also have a no matter what rule.

There's also the "what the hell" effect, named for our tendency to let a minor setback snowball into a bigger failure. [Think: if you're trying to eat healthier, but allow yourself a couple of chips, and then think, what the hell, why not have the whole bag?] As we're establishing new habits, how do we protect against that?

Honestly, when people ask me what I am most interested in studying next, and what I will focus my research on in the next 20 years, I think we under appreciate how critically important the "what the hell" effect is. We all fall down and then give up. And we have to get better at figuring that out. The answers I give in the book—which I don't think are nearly sufficient to solve it for all of us, but they're like the best things I've seen—one is the failure-as-growth mindset work: every time there's a setback, ask, "What did I learn from the fact that that happens? And how can I grow from it?" As opposed to, "Gosh, I suck."

[The mulligans research](#), from Marissa Sharif and Suzanne Shu, is brilliant. You basically build an expectation that there will be a couple of things that slip and that you have emergency reserves to use, but that you're not going to count it as failure. That's really a framing thing.

Then idea of the flexible versus elastic habits. Trying to build resilient habits so that if you have a slip up, you do the right thing later, even though you didn't do it right now. *I didn't get to the gym this morning,*

but I'll go this afternoon, instead of I didn't get to the gym this morning, therefore I'm not going to the gym. I think those are the three best things we know, but it's, to my mind, it's like woefully inadequate.

I think the streak idea is sort of related to that. When we break a streak, it turns out to be super demotivating, because of the what the hell effect—even though streaks are really motivating. But then thinking about like, okay, so how do we get people back on the wagon? Can we give them a streak redemption opportunity or something? Anyways, there's a lot to be understood that isn't yet understood, but I'll be studying it.

This interview has been edited and condensed.