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Building Real Discipline

Identity-based habits, environment design, and the keystone routine that compounds — installed in 28 days.

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Welcome

Welcome to Building Real Discipline. You have probably tried the usual approach: pick a big goal, get fired up, push hard for a week or two, and watch it quietly fall apart. That doesn't mean you lack discipline. It means you've been running a long-term system on short-term fuel.

This course replaces that fuel. Over 28 days you will build discipline the way it actually holds up in real lives: by changing who you believe you are (identity), changing what surrounds you (environment), and installing one small daily routine that makes everything else easier (the keystone routine).

How the course is organized

There are six modules and 24 lessons, mapped to a 28-day calendar:

Days	Module	Focus
1-3	1. The Discipline Reset	Why willpower fails, your baseline, your plan
4-7	2. Identity-Based Discipline	Who you are becoming, and how you prove it
8-11	3. Environment Design	Making the right action the easy action
12-16	4. The Keystone Routine	The one routine that makes the rest compound
17-22	5. Consistency Under Pressure	Dips, slips, urges, and recovery
23-28	6. Making It Last	Rewards, review, scaling, and maintenance

The calendar is a pace, not a rule. Just *act* every day.

How to use each lesson: read it (about 10 minutes), complete the Action Step on the matching workbook page (Lesson 3.2 goes with Worksheet 3.2), and mark your 28-Day Tracker every day. Begin with the **Start Here Self-Assessment** in the workbook; you'll retake it on Day 28. Go smaller than feels impressive, track without judging, and expect to miss a day — you'll learn exactly what to do when it happens.

An important note. This course is educational and teaches self-help skills from behavioral science. It is not medical, psychological, or financial advice, and it doesn't replace care from a qualified professional. Check with your doctor before building habits around

exercise, eating, or sleep if you have health concerns. If low mood, attention difficulties, stress, or substance use make ordinary routines feel impossible, please talk with a licensed professional — those are real conditions, not character flaws. If you're in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 (US) or your local emergency number.

Let's begin.

Module 1: The Discipline Reset

Before you build anything, you need to stop believing the story that discipline is a personality trait you either have or lack. This module replaces that story with a working model, measures where you are right now, and gives you the full 28-day installation plan.

Lesson 1.1: Why Willpower Isn't the Plan

Most people define discipline as the ability to force yourself to do hard things you don't feel like doing. Under that definition, the disciplined person is the one who grits their teeth hardest. It sounds right. It is also the reason most self-improvement attempts collapse by week three.

What the research actually shows

In a 2012 study, psychologist Wilhelm Hofmann and colleagues had people carry phones that pinged them throughout the day to report what they desired and whether they resisted. You might expect the people who scored highest on self-control to be the ones resisting temptation most often. They weren't. They reported *fewer* temptations in the first place. Their advantage came less from winning battles and more from living lives where fewer battles came up.

Later work by Brian Galla and Angela Duckworth pointed in the same direction: people with high self-control tend to rely on good habits, and those habits carry much of the load.

Meanwhile, the popular idea that willpower is a fuel tank that runs empty ("ego depletion") has come under serious question. A large 2016 registered replication effort led by Martin Hagger, run across many labs, found an effect close to zero. The science is still debated, but the practical lesson is clear: **a plan that depends on summoning heroic effort every day is a fragile plan.**

The three failure patterns

When willpower is the whole strategy, you tend to fail in one of three predictable ways:

Pattern	What it looks like	What's really happening
The Sprint	"I'm going to work out six days a week starting Monday."	The goal is sized for your best day, not your average day.
The Negotiation	"I'll do it after dinner... after this episode... tomorrow."	Every day reopens the decision, so every day is a fresh fight.

Pattern	What it looks like	What's really happening
The Collapse	One missed day becomes a missed week, then "I guess I'm not a gym person."	A slip is treated as proof of who you are.

Notice that none of these are about weakness. The Sprint is a sizing problem. The Negotiation is a design problem. The Collapse is an identity problem. This course addresses each one directly.

A better definition

Here is the definition we will use throughout this course:

Discipline is the ability to keep a promise to yourself when your mood no longer supports it.

That ability is built less from force and more from three things:

1. **Identity** — you keep promises that match who you believe you are.
2. **Environment** — you keep promises that are easy to keep and hard to break.
3. **Routine** — you keep promises that are automatic, so there is nothing left to negotiate.

Willpower still matters. You will use it. But you will use it the way an engineer uses a backup generator: for the occasional emergency, not to power the building every day.

Imagine two people

Consider two hypothetical people who both want to write more.

Dana decides to write for an hour every morning. She relies on waking up motivated. On good days it works. On tired days she argues with herself for twenty minutes, loses, and feels guilty. By day 12 she has stopped.

Leo decides to write one sentence every morning, right after he pours his coffee, at a desk where his notebook is already open. He tells himself, "I'm someone who writes daily." Most days he writes a page because once he starts, continuing is easy. On bad days he writes one sentence and closes the notebook. He never misses twice.

Dana tried harder. Leo designed better. By Day 28, Leo is the one with a habit.

Look closely at what Leo did differently. He chose a size he could hit on his worst day (fixing the Sprint). He attached the habit to coffee and prepared the notebook in advance, so there

was nothing to negotiate (fixing the Negotiation). And he framed it as who he is and refused to let one missed day become two (fixing the Collapse). None of that required more willpower than Dana had. It required a different plan.

What this means for you

For the next 28 days, your job is not to become tougher. Your job is to become the kind of designer who needs toughness less often. Every time you catch yourself thinking “I just need to try harder,” translate it into one of three better questions:

- *Who would I have to be for this to feel normal?* (identity)
- *What would make this easier to start and harder to skip?* (environment)
- *When exactly, and after what, will this happen?* (routine)

Action Step

Open **Worksheet 1.1: My Willpower History**. List three past attempts at building a habit that didn’t last. For each, identify which failure pattern it followed (Sprint, Negotiation, or Collapse) and write one sentence about what design change might have saved it. Then write the course definition of discipline in your own words.

Lesson 1.2: The Three Levers — Identity, Environment, Keystone

In Lesson 1.1 you saw that lasting discipline is built from identity, environment, and routine. This lesson turns those three ideas into a working model you will use for the rest of the course. Think of them as three levers. Pull any one and change gets a little easier. Pull all three at once and change starts to feel inevitable.

Lever 1: Identity — the “why me”

James Clear, in *Atomic Habits*, describes three layers of change: outcomes (what you get), processes (what you do), and identity (what you believe about yourself). Most people start at the outcome layer: “I want to lose 20 pounds.” The problem is that outcomes don’t tell you what to do today, and they vanish the moment you reach them or give up on them.

Identity works differently. “I’m someone who moves every day” answers today’s question automatically. It also survives the end of any single goal.

Psychologist Daryl Bem’s self-perception theory offers a useful angle here: we often figure out who we are by watching what we do. That means identity isn’t just a starting point. It is something you *earn* through repeated action, one small piece of evidence at a time. Module 2 is built on this idea.

Lever 2: Environment — the “how easy”

Wendy Wood, a psychologist who has spent decades studying habit and author of *Good Habits, Bad Habits*, found in diary studies that roughly 43 percent of people’s daily actions were performed habitually, typically in the same context each time. Context drives a surprising share of behavior. The couch, the phone on the nightstand, the snack drawer at eye level — these cues act on you whether you notice them or not.

The implication is freeing. You don’t have to win every moment. You have to arrange the moments before they arrive. Module 3 teaches you to do exactly that.

Lever 3: The Keystone Routine — the “what first”

Charles Duhigg popularized the idea of *keystone habits* in *The Power of Habit*: certain habits tend to create chain reactions that make other positive changes easier. Regular exercise, for example, often comes bundled with better sleep and eating choices for many people.

In this course, the keystone routine is a short daily sequence (usually 10 to 30 minutes, built up from two minutes) that you perform at a fixed point in your day. It is the anchor of your discipline system. Module 4 walks you through designing it.

How the levers work together

Lever	Question it answers	Failure it prevents	Where you build it
Identity	Why would someone like me do this?	The Collapse	Module 2
Environment	How easy is it to start, and how hard to skip?	The Negotiation	Module 3
Keystone Routine	What exactly do I do, and when?	The Sprint	Module 4

Modules 5 and 6 then protect the system: how to handle dips and slips, and how to make it last beyond Day 28.

The Discipline Scorecard

You can use the three levers to diagnose any habit that’s struggling. Score each lever from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong):

- **Identity (1-5):** Does this habit feel like “me,” or like something I’m forcing on myself?

- **Environment (1-5):** Is the first step visible and easy, and are the competing temptations out of reach?
- **Routine (1-5):** Do I know exactly when and after what this happens?

Any lever at 1 or 2 is your bottleneck. Fix the weakest lever first. It almost always gives a bigger return than trying harder on the strongest one.

Example: diagnosing a stalled habit

Imagine Priya, a project manager who wants to read more. She scores her reading habit:

- Identity: 4 — she genuinely sees herself as a reader.
- Environment: 1 — her book is in a bag in the closet; her phone sits on the nightstand.
- Routine: 2 — “sometime in the evening.”

Her problem isn’t motivation or identity. It’s environment. The fix: book on the pillow each morning, phone charging in the kitchen, reading starts “after I get into bed.” Same person, same goal, very different result.

The compounding effect

Each lever makes the others stronger. A well-designed environment makes the routine easier. A reliable routine produces evidence that strengthens identity. A stronger identity makes you more willing to redesign your environment. This is the flywheel you are building. It starts slow — the first rotations take the most effort — and it gets easier as it turns.

Action Step

Go to **Worksheet 1.2: The Three-Lever Scorecard**. Choose two habits: one you already keep reliably and one you keep failing at. Score each on the three levers. Compare the two. Write down which lever is weakest for the failing habit and one change that would move that score up by a single point.

Lesson 1.3: Your Baseline and Your One Target

The fastest way to fail at discipline is to try to fix everything at once. New morning routine, new diet, new workout plan, no phone after 9 p.m., journaling, meditation, and a side project — all starting Monday. It feels ambitious. It is actually a plan to fail at seven things simultaneously.

This lesson helps you take an honest baseline of your current life and then choose **one** target for the next 28 days.

Why one target

Every new habit draws on the same limited resources: attention, time, planning, and the patience to be bad at something while it's new. Spread those across seven changes and each one gets a sliver. Concentrate them on one and it gets everything.

There is also a compounding argument. A keystone routine, once installed, tends to make other changes easier. So choosing one target isn't choosing less. It's choosing sequence.

Step 1: Take your baseline

Before choosing, look at how your days actually run right now. Not your ideal day — your *typical* Tuesday. For three to five minutes, answer:

- What time do you usually wake up and go to bed?
- What are the first 30 minutes of your day like?
- Where does your time leak (phone, TV, email, snacking, reactive tasks)?
- When in the day do you have the most energy? The least?
- Which habits do you already keep without effort?

The last question matters. Existing habits are anchors. Brushing your teeth, making coffee, starting the car, opening your laptop — each of these is a reliable moment you can attach a new behavior to later.

Step 2: List your candidate targets

Write down every change you want to make. Get it all out. Common examples:

- Exercise regularly
- Stop scrolling in bed
- Wake up earlier
- Write, study, or practice a skill daily
- Plan the day before it starts
- Keep the home tidy
- Drink less alcohol or caffeine
- Spend focused time on a side project

Step 3: Filter for leverage

Now score each candidate on three questions (1-5 each):

Question	What you're looking for
Ripple: If this became automatic, how many other areas would improve?	Keystone potential

Question	What you're looking for
Control: Can I do this mostly on my own, regardless of other people?	Fewer excuses, more ownership
Daily-able: Can a version of this happen every single day?	Daily habits form faster than weekly ones

Add the scores. Your highest total is usually your best 28-day target. If two tie, choose the one that feels slightly *less* exciting and more foundational. Sleep routines and morning planning often beat flashier goals for this reason.

Step 4: Write it as a direction, not a destination

Your target is not “run a marathon” or “write a novel.” It is a direction you can move in every day:

- Instead of “lose weight” → “move my body daily”
- Instead of “finish my novel” → “write daily”
- Instead of “get organized” → “start each workday with a plan”
- Instead of “quit my phone” → “protect my first and last hour from screens”

You’ll turn this direction into a precise routine in Module 4. For now, the direction is enough.

Step 5: Pick your Day 1 starter action

You don’t wait until Module 4 to start acting. Starting tomorrow (Day 1), you’ll do a **two-minute starter version** of your target every day. Examples:

Target direction	Two-minute starter
Move daily	Put on workout shoes and do 10 squats
Write daily	Open the document and write one sentence
Plan each workday	Write the top three tasks on a card
Screen-free mornings	Leave the phone in the kitchen overnight
Read daily	Read one page

It will feel too small. That is the point. You are practicing *showing up*, which is the skill underneath every other skill. You’ll expand it in Module 4.

What to do with everything else

The other items on your list don't disappear. Put them on a "Later List" in your workbook. In Lesson 6.3 you'll learn how and when to add a second habit. Writing them down lets your brain let go of them for now without feeling like you've given up.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 1.3: Baseline and Target Selection**. Fill in your typical-day baseline, list your existing anchor habits, score at least five candidate targets on Ripple, Control, and Daily-able, and circle your winner. Write your target as a direction, write your two-minute starter action, and move everything else to the Later List.

Lesson 1.4: The 28-Day Habit Installation Plan

You now have a target and a two-minute starter. This lesson lays out the full 28-day plan so you know exactly what each week asks of you. Keep this page handy; you will return to it often.

Why 28 days — and what it will and won't do

In 2009, Phillippa Lally and colleagues at University College London followed 96 people as they tried to build a new daily habit. The median time to reach peak automaticity was about 66 days, with a huge range — from 18 to 254 days depending on the person and the behavior. They also found that missing a single opportunity did not materially set people back.

So let's be honest: 28 days will not make every habit fully automatic. What 28 days *can* do is get a habit installed — the identity shift started, the environment built, the routine running, and the recovery plan tested. After that, the habit continues to strengthen with use. Think of this as installation, not completion.

The four phases

Phase	Days	Goal	Daily minimum
Start	1-7	Show up daily; begin identity work	Two-minute starter
Shape	8-14	Redesign environment; build keystone routine	Starter, or keystone once designed

Phase	Days	Goal	Daily minimum
Strengthen	15-21	Run the full routine; handle the dip	Keystone routine (minimum version on hard days)
Secure	22-28	Add rewards, review, and plan maintenance	Keystone routine

The daily calendar

Week 1 — Start - Day 1: Two-minute starter. Read Lessons 1.1-1.2. - Day 2: Starter. Lesson 1.3 (if not done). Start the tracker. - Day 3: Starter. Lesson 1.4. Set your daily check-in time. - Day 4: Starter. Lesson 2.1 — write your identity statement. - Day 5: Starter. Lesson 2.2 — complete the Identity Audit. - Day 6: Starter. Lesson 2.3 — begin your Evidence Log. - Day 7: Starter. Lesson 2.4. First weekly review (15 minutes).

Week 2 — Shape - Day 8: Starter. Lesson 3.1 — map your cues. - Day 9: Starter. Lesson 3.2 — friction changes; run the Environment Design Checklist. - Day 10: Starter. Lesson 3.3 — digital environment. - Day 11: Starter. Lesson 3.4 — social environment. - Day 12: Lesson 4.1 — choose your keystone. - Day 13: Lesson 4.2 — design the routine. Run it once. - Day 14: Lesson 4.3 — set your minimum version. Weekly review.

Week 3 — Strengthen - Day 15: Keystone routine. Lesson 4.4 — stack one small addition if ready. - Day 16: Routine. Review your stack. - Day 17: Routine. Lesson 5.1 — prepare for the dip. - Day 18: Routine. Lesson 5.2 — write your recovery protocol. - Day 19: Routine. Lesson 5.3 — practice urge surfing once. - Day 20: Routine. Lesson 5.4 — refine tracking. - Day 21: Routine. Weekly review.

Week 4 — Secure - Day 22: Routine. Catch-up day for any lesson you skipped. - Day 23: Routine. Lesson 6.1 — add a reward. - Day 24: Routine. Lesson 6.2 — begin the Day-28 review prep. - Day 25: Routine. Lesson 6.3 — decide on your second habit. - Day 26: Routine. Lesson 6.4 — build your maintenance plan. - Day 27: Routine. Retake the self-assessment. - Day 28: Routine. Complete the Day-28 Review and your 30/60/90-Day Plan.

Three non-negotiables

1. **Do the minimum every day.** Even on your worst day, the two-minute version counts. It keeps the chain of identity evidence intact.
2. **Check in once a day.** Mark your tracker at a set time (for example, right after dinner). Ten seconds is enough.
3. **Never miss twice.** Missing one day is normal. Missing two in a row is the start of a new pattern. You'll build a full recovery protocol in Lesson 5.2.

Your check-in ritual

Choose one fixed daily moment to mark your tracker. Tie it to something you already do — brushing your teeth at night, closing your laptop, plugging in your phone. At check-in, record three things:

- Did I do it? (✓ full, ½ minimum, ✗ missed)
- One word for how it felt (easy, heavy, rushed, good)
- Anything that got in the way

That's all. Over four weeks those three data points become the raw material for every adjustment you make.

Action Step

Open **Worksheet 1.4: My 28-Day Commitment**. Write your target direction and starter action, choose your daily check-in moment, and fill in your start date so each of the 28 days has a real calendar date. Sign the commitment line. Then turn to the 28-Day Habit Installation Tracker at the back of the workbook and mark Day 1 as soon as you complete your first starter.

Module 2: Identity-Based Discipline

The habits that last are the ones that feel like “who I am” instead of “what I’m trying to do.” In this module you’ll define the identity you’re building, audit the one you’re currently living, and start collecting the evidence that makes the new identity real.

Lesson 2.1: From Goals to Identity

Think about someone you know who never seems to struggle to exercise, or who always shows up prepared. Ask them how they stay so disciplined and they’ll often look confused. “I don’t know. It’s just what I do.” That confusion is the clue. For them, the behavior isn’t a goal they’re chasing. It’s part of who they are.

This lesson helps you make that same shift, deliberately.

Goals versus identity

Goals are useful for setting direction. But they have three weaknesses as a daily driver:

- **They’re binary.** You’re either at the goal or not, which means you spend most of your time “failing.”
- **They end.** Hit the goal, and the reason for the behavior disappears. This is why so many people regain progress after reaching a milestone.
- **They’re far away.** “Run a half marathon in April” doesn’t tell you what to do on a rainy Tuesday in January.

An identity, in contrast, is present-tense and ongoing. “I’m a runner” tells you what to do today, and it doesn’t expire.

The identity statement

You’re going to write a single sentence that describes the person who naturally does your target habit. A strong identity statement has four qualities:

1. **Present tense** — “I am,” not “I will be.”
2. **About the person, not the result** — “I’m someone who trains,” not “I’m fit.”
3. **Believable enough to grow into** — a stretch, not a lie.
4. **Short** — you should be able to say it in one breath.

Weak	Strong
“I will lose 15 pounds.”	“I’m someone who moves every day.”

Weak	Strong
"I want to be a bestselling author."	"I'm a writer who writes daily."
"I'm going to stop procrastinating."	"I'm someone who starts before I feel ready."
"I should be more organized."	"I'm a person who plans the day before it plans me."

The believability problem

Many people write "I'm a runner" and immediately hear an inner voice say, "No you're not. You've run twice this year." That voice isn't wrong about the past. It's just not in charge of the future.

If your statement triggers strong disbelief, use a *bridge statement*:

- "I'm becoming someone who runs."
- "I'm the kind of person who's learning to write every day."
- "I'm practicing being someone who keeps promises to myself."

Bridge statements are honest. They describe exactly what you're doing — becoming. As the evidence accumulates over the next four weeks, you can drop the bridge.

Ask the identity question

Once you have your statement, it becomes a decision tool. When you're facing a choice, ask:

"What would a person who [identity] do right now?"

Not "what do I feel like doing" or "what did I plan," but what would *that person* do? Often the answer is simpler than you expect. A person who moves every day, on a day with no time, goes for a ten-minute walk. A writer who writes daily, on a terrible day, writes one sentence. The identity question lowers the bar to something you can meet and raises the standard of showing up.

Identity at different scales

Your target identity works best when it's connected to something bigger you care about. Try this three-level ladder:

- **Core value:** What do you care about most? (e.g., "being present for my family")

- **Identity:** Who does that value require you to be? (e.g., “someone who has energy at the end of the day”)
- **Habit:** What does that person do daily? (e.g., “someone who moves every day and is in bed by 10:30”)

When the habit connects to a core value, it stops being a chore and starts being an expression of what matters to you. On hard days, you’ll reach for the value, not the habit.

Example: Marcus’s ladder

Imagine Marcus, a sales manager who wants to stop working until midnight. His ladder:

- Value: “I want to be a calm, present father.”
- Identity: “I’m someone who ends the workday on purpose.”
- Habit: “At 6:30 p.m. I write tomorrow’s top three, close the laptop, and put it in the drawer.”

Marcus doesn’t need to fight himself at 9 p.m. every night. He needs to be the person who closes the drawer at 6:30. That’s a smaller, clearer, more winnable fight — and each time he wins it, the identity gets stronger.

Say it, write it, place it

Identity statements work best when you encounter them often:

- Write it on the first page of your workbook.
- Put it somewhere you’ll see during your target habit (a sticky note on your mirror, a phone lock screen, the cover of your notebook).
- Say it quietly to yourself when you complete your daily starter action: “Done. That’s what a writer does.”

That last habit matters. It links the action to the identity every single time.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 2.1: My Identity Statement**. Build your value → identity → habit ladder, draft three versions of your identity statement, rate each on believability from 1 to 10, and choose one (use a bridge statement if nothing scores above 6). Write your final statement where you’ll see it daily, and practice the identity question once before bed tonight.

Lesson 2.2: The Identity Audit

Before you can build a new identity, you need to see the one you're currently running. Every one of us carries a set of beliefs about ourselves — “I'm not a morning person,” “I'm bad with money,” “I always quit” — that quietly shape what feels possible. Most of these beliefs were never chosen. They were absorbed, repeated, and eventually accepted as fact.

The Identity Audit is a structured way to surface those beliefs, test them, and decide which ones you want to keep.

Part 1: Collect your “I am” statements

For five minutes, write every sentence you'd naturally say about yourself in the area of your target habit. Don't censor. Include the unflattering ones, because those usually have the most power. Some prompts:

- “When it comes to [target area], I'm the kind of person who...”
- “I've always been...”
- “I'm just not...”
- “People who know me would say I...”
- “The reason I haven't done this before is that I'm...”

A hypothetical example for someone whose target is daily exercise:

- I'm not athletic.
- I'm lazy in the mornings.
- I always start strong and fade out.
- I'm good at walking though.
- I'm someone who needs a class or I won't do it.
- I hate being bad at things in front of people.

Part 2: Sort them

Now sort each statement into one of three columns:

Supporting	Limiting	Neutral / Just a fact
Makes the target habit easier	Makes it harder or impossible	Neither helps nor hurts
“I'm good at walking.”	“I always start strong and fade out.”	“I work until 5:30.”

Be honest. Some statements feel neutral but secretly work as excuses. “I'm busy” is often filed under “just a fact,” but if it's the reason you never start, it belongs in Limiting.

Part 3: Put limiting beliefs on trial

For each limiting belief, ask four questions:

1. **Evidence for:** What actually supports this belief? List specific moments.
2. **Evidence against:** When has this *not* been true, even once?
3. **Origin:** Where did this belief come from? (A parent, a coach, one bad experience, a comparison?)
4. **Cost:** What has believing this cost you?

You'll usually find the evidence *for* is thinner than it should be for such a strong belief, and that evidence *against* it exists somewhere if you look. "I always start strong and fade out" may be true of three fitness plans, but it probably isn't true of your job, your friendships, or the skill you learned as a teenager.

Part 4: Rewrite

For each limiting belief, write a replacement that is **honest and useful**. Don't swap a negative lie for a positive lie. Aim for accurate and forward-facing:

Limiting belief	Rewrite
"I'm lazy in the mornings."	"My mornings haven't been designed for action yet."
"I always start strong and fade out."	"My plans have been too big to survive a bad week. I'm learning to start small."
"I need a class or I won't do it."	"I do well with structure, so I'll build some into my routine."
"I hate being bad at things in front of people."	"I can practice privately until I feel ready."

Notice what the rewrites do. They turn fixed traits ("I'm lazy") into changeable conditions ("haven't been designed yet"). That's not wordplay; it moves the problem from *who you are* to *what you can change*.

Part 5: Find your hidden strengths

Look at your Supporting column and your "evidence against" notes. These are proof you already have discipline somewhere. Almost everyone does. Maybe you've never missed a work deadline. Maybe you've cared for a pet every day for years. Maybe you practiced an instrument for a decade as a kid.

Ask: *How did I stay consistent there?* The answer often reveals your natural discipline style. Some people thrive on external accountability. Some on routine. Some on visible progress.

Some on competition. Knowing your style lets you borrow what already works instead of fighting your nature.

Example: the accountability discovery

Imagine Sofia, who believes she “has zero discipline.” In her audit, she notices she has walked her neighbor’s dog every weekday for two years without fail. Why? Because someone was counting on her. That’s not zero discipline. That’s accountability-driven discipline. Her fix for her writing habit isn’t more willpower — it’s a weekly check-in with a friend.

Revisit on Day 28

Your identity audit is a snapshot. On Day 28 you’ll revisit it and notice which limiting beliefs have loosened. You may be surprised how much shifts in four weeks when you’re collecting daily evidence.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 2.2: The Identity Audit**. Write at least eight “I am” statements, sort them into the three columns, and put your two strongest limiting beliefs on trial using the four questions. Write an honest, useful rewrite for each. Finish by naming one area where you’re already consistent and describing your discipline style in a sentence.

Lesson 2.3: Votes and Evidence — How Identity Gets Built

You now have an identity statement and you’ve audited the old beliefs that compete with it. But you can’t simply decide to believe something new about yourself. If you’ve spent twenty years thinking “I’m not a morning person,” one affirmation won’t overturn that. You need evidence.

This lesson teaches you to collect it deliberately.

Every action is a vote

James Clear describes each action as a vote for the type of person you wish to become. It’s a useful image. No single vote wins the election. But every time you do your starter action, you cast one vote for your new identity. Every time you skip it, you cast one for the old one.

You don’t need a unanimous result. You need a majority. That’s why a two-minute action matters so much in the first weeks: it’s a vote you can cast even on your worst day.

Why small evidence works

Recall Daryl Bem's self-perception theory from Lesson 1.2: we infer our attitudes partly by observing our own behavior. If you watch yourself sit down to write for 28 consecutive mornings, even for a few minutes, it becomes hard to keep believing "I'm not a writer." The belief doesn't change because you argued with it. It changes because the facts stopped supporting it.

Teresa Amabile's research on workplace motivation, described in *The Progress Principle*, found that making progress in meaningful work — even small progress — was one of the strongest drivers of positive inner work life on a given day. Small wins aren't just consolation prizes. They are fuel.

The Evidence Log

Your main tool for this module is the Evidence Log: a simple daily record of proof that you're becoming the person in your identity statement. Each entry takes under a minute.

Each day, write:

1. **What I did** — the action, however small ("Wrote 2 sentences").
2. **Which identity it proves** — ("I'm a writer who writes daily").
3. **One detail** — something specific about how it felt or what you noticed ("It was easier to start because the notebook was already open").

The detail matters. Specific memories are more convincing than checkmarks. Over time you'll have a page full of concrete moments that directly contradict the old story.

Counting bonus evidence

Your target habit isn't the only source of evidence. Look for any action that fits the identity:

- A "person who moves every day" also takes the stairs, parks farther away, and stretches during a call.
- A "person who plans the day" also prepares for a meeting in advance and checks the weather before the commute.
- A "writer" also jots an idea in their phone, reads with attention, and edits an email carefully.

Record these too. They show the identity spreading beyond one behavior — which is exactly what an identity does.

The two-vote rule for hard days

On difficult days, you'll feel the pull of the old identity. Use the two-vote rule: **before the day ends, cast at least two votes for your new identity, no matter how small.** One can be your minimum habit. The other can be anything that fits: a glass of water, a five-minute tidy, a single page. Two small votes on a bad day tell a very different story than zero.

Watch your language

The way you describe your actions also counts as evidence to your own brain. Notice the difference:

Old language	Identity language
"I have to go to the gym."	"I'm going to train."
"I'm trying to write."	"I write in the mornings."
"I'm on a diet."	"I eat like someone who takes care of their energy."
"I failed yesterday."	"I missed yesterday. Today's my comeback."

You don't need to be perfect with this. Just start noticing. When you catch the old language, restate it once in the new form.

Example: the Evidence Log in action

Imagine James, whose target is "I'm someone who starts work on purpose." His first week:

- Day 1: Wrote top three before opening email. *Felt odd, but the day was clearer.*
- Day 2: Did it again. Also said no to a meeting that didn't need me. *Bonus vote.*
- Day 3: Late start, but still wrote one task on a sticky note. *Minimum counts.*
- Day 4: Top three done by 10 a.m. *First time in weeks.*

By Day 7, James reads his log back and sees seven votes in a row. He hasn't transformed. But the sentence "I'm someone who starts work on purpose" is starting to sound true.

Action Step

Start **Worksheet 2.3: The Evidence Log**. Fill in today's entry with what you did, which identity it proves, and one specific detail. Commit to one entry every day at your check-in time for the rest of the course. Then list three "bonus evidence" actions that would also fit your identity and that you could do this week.

Lesson 2.4: The Language of Discipline — Self-Talk That Holds

The voice in your head is present for every decision you make. It's there when the alarm goes off, when the snack is on the counter, and when you're halfway through a task that's getting hard. Most of us never train that voice. We let it improvise, and it tends to improvise either excuses or insults.

This lesson gives you specific language tools that make discipline easier to keep and easier to recover.

Tool 1: “I don’t” instead of “I can’t”

In a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vanessa Patrick and Henrik Hagtvædt compared two ways of refusing temptation. People who framed refusals as “I don’t” (as in “I don’t eat dessert on weeknights”) showed more persistence than those who used “I can’t.” Their explanation: “I can’t” sounds like an external rule imposed on you, while “I don’t” sounds like a choice rooted in who you are.

Use this for the boundaries that protect your habit:

- “I don’t check email before my top three are written.”
- “I don’t skip twice.”
- “I don’t keep my phone in the bedroom.”

Keep your “I don’t” rules few and firm. Three is plenty. They work because they end negotiations before they start.

Tool 2: Distanced self-talk

Psychologist Ethan Kross, in his book *Chatter*, describes research showing that talking to yourself using your own name or “you” — rather than “I” — can create psychological distance and make it easier to think clearly under stress.

Compare:

- “I’m so tired, I can’t do this today.”
- “Alex, you’re tired. You don’t have to do the full routine. Just do the two-minute version and you’re done.”

The second sounds like a supportive coach instead of a panicked participant. Try it when you notice yourself negotiating.

Tool 3: The “yet” and “so far” edit

When you catch yourself saying something fixed and negative about your ability, add a time stamp:

- “I’m not good at this” → “I’m not good at this *yet*.”
- “I can’t stick to anything” → “I haven’t found a system that sticks *so far*.”

This is more than positive thinking. It’s more accurate. Your past performance was real, but it isn’t a verdict on your future.

Tool 4: The two-minute bargain

When resistance is high, stop arguing about whether to do the whole habit. Instead, offer yourself a deal:

“I’ll do two minutes. If I want to stop after that, I can stop.”

Honor the deal. If you want to stop at two minutes, stop — and count it as a win. Most of the time you’ll continue, because starting is usually the hardest part. But the deal only works if it’s real. If you secretly force yourself to keep going every time, your brain will stop trusting the bargain.

Tool 5: Talk to yourself like a good coach

When you slip, the voice in your head often turns harsh: “You’re pathetic. You always do this.” Research by Kristin Neff and others on self-compassion suggests that treating yourself with kindness after failure is associated with greater motivation to improve, not less. Harshness tends to trigger avoidance: if thinking about the habit hurts, you’ll stop thinking about it.

Use the good-coach script after any slip:

1. **Name it:** “I missed my workout today.”
2. **Normalize it:** “That happens to everyone building a habit.”
3. **Next step:** “Tomorrow, I’ll do the minimum version first thing.”

Short. Honest. Forward. No lecture.

Build your Discipline Script

Put these tools together into a short personal script you can use at the three moments when discipline is tested most:

Moment	Your script (example)
Before starting (resistance)	"Two minutes, then you can stop. That's what a writer does."
Facing temptation	"I don't check my phone before I've written."
After a slip	"You missed yesterday. That's normal. Today is the comeback, minimum version."

Write yours in your own words. It should sound like you on a good day talking to a friend you believe in.

End-of-week review

Today is also Day 7, your first weekly review. It takes 15 minutes:

- Count your tracker marks: how many ✓, ½, and X?
- Read your Evidence Log. Which entry is most convincing?
- What got in the way this week? Write one sentence.
- What's one small change for next week?

Don't grade the week. Just read the data and make one adjustment.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 2.4: My Discipline Script**. Write three "I don't" rules that protect your habit, then write your personal script for the three moments: before starting, facing temptation, and after a slip. Finish with the Week 1 Review questions at the bottom of the worksheet.

Module 3: Environment Design

Your surroundings cast votes too — usually more of them than you do. In this module you'll map the cues that drive your current behavior, then redesign your physical, digital, and social environment so the disciplined choice becomes the default choice.

Lesson 3.1: Your Environment Is Always Voting

Imagine two versions of the same evening. In the first, you come home, drop your bag by the couch, and your phone is in your hand before your coat is off. The TV remote is on the cushion. The running shoes are in the back of the closet. In the second, your shoes are by the door, your phone charges on a shelf in the hallway, and your workout clothes are laid on the bed.

Same person. Same goals. Same willpower. Very different odds.

Cues run more of your life than you think

Wendy Wood's research, discussed in Lesson 1.2, found that a large share of daily behavior is habitual and tied to consistent contexts: the same place, the same time, the same preceding action. When a context repeats, the behavior starts to fire with less and less conscious thought. That's efficient — it's why you don't have to think about how to brush your teeth. But it also means your environment is constantly nudging you, whether or not those nudges line up with your goals.

A *cue* is anything that triggers a behavior. The main types are:

Cue type	Example that helps	Example that hurts
Location	Desk where you only do focused work	Bed where you both sleep and scroll
Time	7:00 a.m. walk	10:00 p.m. "just one more episode"
Preceding action	After coffee → journal	After opening laptop → check news
Objects	Book on your pillow	Phone on your nightstand
People	Friend who runs on Saturdays	Coworker who always suggests a drink
Emotional state	Stress → walk around the block	Stress → snack drawer

The cue audit

To redesign your environment, first observe it. For the next day or two, pay attention to the moments right before your target habit should happen, and right before the competing behavior shows up. For each moment, note:

- **Where am I?**
- **What time is it?**
- **What did I just do?**
- **What's in front of me?**
- **Who's around?**
- **How do I feel?**

You're looking for patterns. Most people discover that their unwanted habits cluster around a handful of cue combinations — for example, “on the couch, after dinner, phone within reach, tired.” Once you see the pattern, you know exactly where to intervene.

The two design principles

Everything in this module comes down to two principles:

1. **Make the cue for the good habit obvious.** Put it where you'll see it, at the moment you need it.
2. **Make the cue for the unwanted habit invisible.** Remove it, hide it, or put distance between you and it.

James Clear frames this as “make it obvious” and its inversion, “make it invisible.” You'll add a second pair — making things easy or hard — in Lesson 3.2.

Designing for your future self

The key insight is timing. At 10 p.m., tired, on the couch, you are not in a good position to make a disciplined decision. At 2 p.m. on a Sunday, calm and planning ahead, you are. Environment design lets your calm, planning self make decisions on behalf of your tired, tempted self.

Researchers sometimes call this *precommitment*. The classic literary image is Ulysses having his crew tie him to the mast so he can hear the Sirens without steering toward them. You don't need rope. You need a phone charger in the kitchen.

One space, one purpose

A powerful rule of thumb: where possible, give each space one main purpose. If your bed is for sleeping, scrolling, working, and eating, the cues blur and none of those behaviors gets

a clean trigger. If your desk is only for focused work, sitting down there starts to *mean* focus.

You may not have a spare room. That's fine. You can create purpose zones within one space:

- A specific chair that's only for reading.
- A corner of the kitchen table that's only for planning.
- A lamp you only switch on when you're writing.

The object becomes the cue. When the lamp is on, you write.

Example: Nora's cue audit

Imagine Nora, who wants to stop scrolling late at night and start sleeping earlier. Her audit reveals the pattern: every night around 10:15, she's in bed, phone on the nightstand, lights low, feeling wired from a long day. The phone is the obvious cue, and the bed is doubling as an entertainment zone.

Her redesign:

- Phone charges in the kitchen from 9:45 p.m. (cue removed).
- A paper book sits on her pillow each morning when she makes the bed (new cue placed).
- A cheap alarm clock replaces her phone alarm (removes the excuse).

She hasn't made a single willpower decision at 10:15 p.m. She's made three design decisions at 2 p.m.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 3.1: My Cue Map**. Log at least three moments when your target habit should happen and three moments when a competing behavior shows up, noting location, time, preceding action, objects, people, and feeling. Circle the strongest recurring pattern and write one "make it obvious" change and one "make it invisible" change you'll implement before tomorrow.

Lesson 3.2: Friction Engineering

In Lesson 3.1 you learned to control what you see. This lesson is about controlling how *hard* things are. Tiny amounts of effort — seconds, a few steps, one extra click — have an outsized effect on what you actually do.

The 20-second rule

In *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor describes his own experiment: he wanted to practice guitar daily but kept skipping it. The guitar was in a closet, about 20 seconds away. He bought a stand and put the guitar in the middle of his living room. With that small barrier gone, he practiced far more consistently. He then applied the same logic in reverse, adding small barriers to the habits he wanted to reduce, such as taking the batteries out of the TV remote.

He called this the 20-second rule: lower the activation energy for habits you want, raise it for habits you don't. Twenty seconds is not a scientific constant — the point is that small amounts of friction matter much more than they seem to.

The friction ledger

Every habit has a ledger of steps between you and the action. Count them. For example, “go for a morning run”:

1. Wake up
2. Find running clothes (where are they?)
3. Find socks
4. Find headphones (are they charged?)
5. Find shoes
6. Decide on a route
7. Get out the door

Seven steps, several of which involve searching and deciding. Each one is a place to quit. Now redesign:

1. Wake up — clothes, socks, and shoes already laid out next to the bed; headphones charged overnight on top; route already chosen.
2. Get dressed and go.

You haven't made running easier on your lungs. You've made *starting* dramatically easier. And starting is where most habits die.

Reduce friction for your target habit

Ways to cut friction for the habit you want:

- **Prepare the night before.** Gym bag packed, lunch made, tomorrow's top three written.
- **Pre-open.** Leave the document, book, or instrument open and ready.
- **Decide in advance.** Choose the workout, recipe, or writing topic ahead of time so you don't face a blank decision.

- **Use proximity.** Keep the tool within arm's reach of where the habit happens.
- **Remove sign-in steps.** Bookmark the page; keep the app on your home screen.
- **Lower the setup cost.** A yoga mat that stays unrolled in a corner beats one rolled up in a closet.

Add friction to competing habits

Ways to add friction for habits you want less of:

- **Distance.** Phone in another room; snacks on a high shelf or not in the house at all.
- **Extra steps.** Log out of apps after each use; delete saved passwords for shopping sites.
- **Unplug.** TV unplugged at the wall; game console in a drawer.
- **Containers.** Wrap distractions in something you have to consciously open — a lockbox, a timed container, or a drawer.
- **Default settings.** Grayscale phone display; notifications off; autoplay off.

The asymmetry principle

You don't need to make the unwanted behavior impossible. You need to make it *slightly harder than the wanted one*. When you're tired, you'll tend to do whatever is easiest. Your job is to make sure the easiest option is the one you'd choose on a good day.

When friction backfires

Friction design has two common failure modes:

- **Too much friction on the good habit.** Joining a gym 25 minutes away when there's a park at the end of your street.
- **Friction you can bypass instantly.** Hiding your phone in a drawer that's two feet away. Distance and extra steps work; cosmetic hiding often doesn't.

If a friction change isn't working after three to four days, strengthen it or try a different one.

The Environment Design Checklist

This is the checklist promised in the course description. It lives in **Worksheet 3.2** in full. Use it now and again any time a habit starts slipping. It covers five zones:

1. **Sleep zone** — Is the bedroom for sleep? Where does the phone charge?
2. **Start zone** — Where does your day begin? What's the first thing you see?
3. **Work or focus zone** — Is the target tool ready? Are distractions out of reach?
4. **Kitchen and food zone** — What's visible and easy? What's hidden?
5. **Transition zones** — Entryway, car, bag: what cues live there?

For each zone, the checklist asks: *What cue do I want here? What cue should go? What step can I remove? What step can I add to the thing I'm avoiding?*

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 3.2: The Environment Design Checklist**. Write out the friction ledger for your target habit and cut it to three steps or fewer. Then work through all five zones of the checklist, ticking what's already in place and choosing at least three changes to make today. Record the date you made each change so you can check its effect in your weekly review.

Lesson 3.3: Designing Your Digital Environment

For most people, the single most powerful environment in their life fits in a pocket. Your phone is a location, an object, and a social cue all in one — and it's designed by very talented people to capture your attention. That doesn't make you helpless. It just means your digital environment deserves deliberate design, the same way your kitchen and bedroom do.

Why digital friction matters so much

Physical distractions usually cost at least a few seconds and a few steps. Digital ones cost almost nothing: a thumb movement. That near-zero friction is why a “quick check” can turn into 40 minutes. Anything you can do to reintroduce friction and remove cues pays off disproportionately.

Step 1: Audit your screen time

Most phones show daily screen time and pickups in their settings. Look at the last week:

- What's your average daily screen time?
- How many times do you pick up your phone per day?
- Which three apps take the most time?
- What's the first app you open in the morning?

Don't judge the numbers. Just record them. You'll compare them on Day 28.

Step 2: Redesign your home screen

Your home screen is a set of cues you see dozens of times a day. Redesign it with this layout:

- **Home screen:** Only tools you use deliberately — calendar, maps, notes, camera, and anything that supports your target habit (a timer, a habit tracker, a reading app).

- **Second screen or folder:** Utilities you need occasionally.
- **Off the phone or buried in a folder named something boring:** Social media, news, shopping, games — the apps that pull you in.

Some people find grayscale mode reduces the visual pull of the phone. It's worth testing for a week.

Step 3: Tame notifications

Every notification is a cue someone else chose for you. Go through your notification settings and use this rule:

Only people and time-critical tools get to interrupt you.

That usually means allowing calls and messages from key people, calendar alerts, and anything genuinely urgent for your work. Everything else — social apps, news, shopping, games, most email — goes silent. You'll check them when *you* decide to.

Step 4: Create device boundaries

Pick two or three boundaries based on your cue audit:

Boundary	How to set it up
Phone-free first 30 minutes	Charge phone outside the bedroom; use a basic alarm clock
Phone-free last 30 minutes	Set a nightly "downtime" schedule on your phone; phone goes to its charging spot
Focus blocks	Do-not-disturb mode plus phone in another room during your keystone routine
Meal times	Phone face-down in a different room
Work boundaries	Remove work email from your phone, or schedule it to sync only during work hours

Use your phone's built-in focus or downtime features, which let you schedule these automatically so you're not deciding every day.

Step 5: Make your target habit the easiest digital action

Reverse-engineer the phone to help you:

- Put your habit tracker or a timer on the home screen dock.

- Set a lock screen with your identity statement.
- Use a single alarm or reminder labelled with your routine's first step ("Coffee → open notebook").
- If your habit is digital (writing, studying, coding), create a shortcut that opens the exact file or page with one tap.

Computer environment

The same principles apply at your desk:

- Close email and chat during focus time; open them at scheduled intervals.
- Use a separate browser profile or user account for focused work with no social logins.
- Keep only the windows you need open.
- Consider a website blocker for your keystone routine window if you find yourself drifting.

The replacement rule

When you remove a digital habit, something fills the gap. If you don't choose what, the old habit usually returns. Decide in advance: *When I reach for my phone out of boredom, I will...* — stretch, drink water, read one page, write one line, step outside for a minute. Keep the replacement easy and physically close.

Example: Sam's digital reset

Imagine Sam, a freelance designer whose target is "start the workday with an hour of deep work." His audit: 110 pickups a day, the first one within two minutes of waking. His changes: phone charges in the hallway, social apps moved to a folder on the last screen, notifications limited to his partner and calendar, a focus mode that runs 8:30–9:30 a.m., and a notebook on his desk as his replacement for boredom reaches. He doesn't expect perfection — he expects fewer decisions.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 3.3: Digital Environment Reset**. Record your current screen-time baseline, redesign your home screen using the three-tier layout, turn off non-essential notifications, and choose two device boundaries to schedule automatically. Write your replacement action for boredom reaches.

Lesson 3.4: Your Social Environment

The people around you are part of your environment too. They create cues ("Want to grab a drink after work?"), set norms (what counts as normal in your group), and influence your identity (we tend to become like the people we spend time with). You can't — and shouldn't

— redesign your relationships the way you rearrange a kitchen. But you can be deliberate about how your social world supports your discipline.

Norms are powerful

We are social creatures, and much of our behavior is shaped by what seems normal among the people we identify with. James Clear notes that one of the most effective ways to build habits is to join a group where your desired behavior is the normal behavior. If everyone in your running club runs on Saturday mornings, running on Saturday morning stops feeling like discipline. It feels like belonging.

Four ways to use your social environment

1. Borrow a norm. Find a group where your target habit is ordinary: a running club, a writing group, a book club, a climbing gym, a coworking space, an online community with a daily check-in. You don't need to become best friends. You just need to be around people for whom the habit is normal.

2. Get an accountability partner. Choose one person and agree on a simple structure:

- You each share your target habit and minimum version.
- You send a daily one-word check-in (“Done” or “Minimum” or “Missed”).
- You have a 10-minute call once a week to review.

The best partner is someone reliable and encouraging, not someone who will shame you or who needs you to fail so they feel better.

3. Tell people what you're doing — carefully. Telling people your *specific plan* can create helpful accountability. Try: “I’m writing every morning before work this month, so I’m not answering messages until 9.” That’s a practical boundary, not an announcement of a grand goal. It also trains the people around you to support the routine.

4. Reduce exposure to friction-creating contexts. Some social situations are strong cues for the behaviors you’re trying to change. That doesn’t mean cutting people out. It might mean suggesting a walk instead of drinks, meeting at a café instead of a bar, or leaving an event 30 minutes earlier.

Scripts for common social pressure

Having words ready makes it much easier to hold a boundary in the moment. Use or adapt:

Situation	Script
Invited out on your routine night	“I’ve got an early start, but I’d love to do Saturday. Does that work?”

Situation	Script
Offered something you're cutting back on	"I'm good, thanks. I'm doing a 28-day thing."
Teased about a new habit	"Ha — yeah, I'm experimenting. We'll see how it goes."
Family interrupting your routine	"I'm doing my 20 minutes. I'll be all yours at 7:20."
Coworker asks for something during focus time	"I'm heads-down until 10. Can I get back to you then?"

Light, friendly, and specific works better than long explanations. You don't need anyone's permission to keep a promise to yourself.

Enlist your household

If you live with others, your routine affects them and theirs affects you. A short conversation can prevent a lot of friction:

- Share what you're doing and why it matters to you.
- Share *when* your routine happens and what you need (quiet, the kitchen table, 20 minutes without questions).
- Ask what they need from you in return.
- Look for overlap: could a partner walk with you? Could a child read beside you?

Be a positive cue for others

Your social environment is two-way. As your habit gets stronger, you become a cue for the people around you. Keep it low-key — no preaching. The most persuasive thing you can do is simply keep showing up.

Example: Tom's accountability setup

Imagine Tom, who has started and stopped a morning workout five times. His identity audit showed he's highly consistent when someone's counting on him. He asks a friend to be his partner. Every morning by 8 a.m., Tom texts one word. Every Sunday, they talk for 10 minutes. Tom tells his partner at home that 6:30–6:50 a.m. is workout time. It's a small amount of structure — and it's the structure he's been missing.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 3.4: My Support Map**. List the people and groups who support your target habit, those who unintentionally work against it, and one group where your habit is the norm. Choose an accountability partner and write the message you'll send

them today. Write two social scripts you'll use this week, and plan the household conversation if you live with others.

Module 4: The Keystone Routine

This is the heart of the course. You'll choose the one routine most likely to ripple through the rest of your life, design it precisely, shrink it to a version you can do on your worst day, and then stack small additions onto it so it compounds.

Lesson 4.1: What Makes a Routine “Keystone”

In architecture, the keystone is the wedge-shaped stone at the top of an arch. Remove it and the arch collapses. Put it in place and the whole structure holds. A keystone routine plays the same role in your day: it's the one routine that holds the rest together.

Keystone habits

In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg describes *keystone habits* as habits that tend to set off chain reactions, shifting other patterns as they spread. His examples include regular exercise, eating dinner together as a family, and making your bed. The claim isn't that these specific habits are magic. It's that some habits create more ripple effects than others, because they change your schedule, your energy, your self-image, or how you approach the rest of the day.

Why you need a routine, not just a habit

A single habit is one action (“write”). A routine is a short, fixed sequence of actions (“coffee, open notebook, write 20 minutes, note tomorrow's first line”). Routines are more powerful as keystones because:

- **They include the setup and the shutdown**, which is where most habits break down.
- **Each step cues the next**, so once you start, momentum carries you.
- **They can hold more than one habit**, so they become the platform for future changes.

The five marks of a strong keystone routine

A good keystone routine usually has most of these features:

Mark	What it means	Test question
Daily	Happens every day, or every workday	Can this happen on Monday and on Saturday?

Mark	What it means	Test question
Early or anchoring	Sets the tone for what follows, often at the start or end of the day	Does it shape the hours after it?
Ripple	Makes other good behaviors more likely	If I did this daily, what else would improve?
Short	10–30 minutes at full size; two minutes at minimum	Could I do this on my busiest day?
Controllable	Depends mostly on you	Could I do this even if everyone else's plans changed?

Common keystone routines

Here are proven structures. Choose one that matches the target you selected in Lesson 1.3, or use them as inspiration.

The Morning Anchor (15–30 min) Wake at a consistent time → water → short movement → write tomorrow-me's top three priorities → begin the first priority. *Ripple: better energy, clearer days, fewer reactive mornings.*

The Daily Planning Block (10–15 min) Same time each workday → review calendar → choose top three → block time for the first → close unnecessary tabs. *Ripple: less overwhelm, better focus, fewer dropped balls.*

The Evening Shutdown (15–20 min) Set time → write tomorrow's top three → tidy the workspace → prep for the morning habit → phone to its charging spot → wind-down activity. *Ripple: better sleep, easier mornings, clean work boundaries.*

The Movement Block (10–30 min) Consistent time → clothes on → a planned workout or walk → quick note in tracker. *Ripple: mood, sleep, energy, and identity as someone who takes care of themselves.*

The Creative Block (20–45 min) Same place and time → phone away → open the project → work → write the first line for tomorrow. *Ripple: progress on something meaningful, which often spills into confidence elsewhere.*

Choosing yours

To pick your keystone, go back to your target from Lesson 1.3 and ask:

1. **Which structure naturally contains my target?** If your target is “write daily,” the Creative Block or Morning Anchor both work.
2. **Where is my day least chaotic?** Mornings are often more controllable for people with evening obligations; evenings may suit people with unpredictable mornings.
3. **What ripple do I most want?** If sleep is the foundation of your problems, the Evening Shutdown may unlock everything else.

Beware the keystone that’s really five habits

A common mistake is building a routine so full that it becomes a Sprint in disguise: meditation, journaling, workout, cold shower, reading, and planning, all before 7 a.m. That’s a great routine for Day 90. For Day 12, it’s a trap. Your keystone routine should contain your target habit plus, at most, one or two supporting steps. You’ll grow it in Lesson 4.4.

Example: Aisha’s keystone choice

Imagine Aisha, a nurse on rotating shifts. Her target was “move daily,” but morning routines keep breaking because her schedule changes. She chooses a post-shift keystone instead: arrive home → shoes off → change into workout clothes → 15-minute walk or stretching video → shower. The anchor isn’t a time; it’s arriving home. That works whatever her shift.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 4.1: Choosing My Keystone**. Score two or three candidate routines against the five marks, choose your keystone, and write its purpose in one sentence (“This routine matters because...”). Note which part of your day it anchors to and the main ripple effect you hope to see.

Lesson 4.2: Designing Your Keystone Routine

A vague routine is a negotiation waiting to happen. “Work out in the morning” leaves a dozen questions open: What time? Where? What workout? For how long? What happens if I’m late? This lesson closes every one of those questions in advance, so that when the moment arrives, there’s nothing left to decide.

Implementation intentions

Psychologist Peter Gollwitzer developed the concept of *implementation intentions*: plans that take the form “When situation X arises, I will perform response Y.” A 2006 meta-analysis by Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran, pooling many studies, found that forming implementation intentions had a meaningful positive effect on goal attainment compared to simply holding the goal.

The reason is intuitive. A specific “when-then” plan links a cue to an action ahead of time. When the cue shows up, the action is already decided.

The anchor

Every routine needs a trigger — the moment that starts it. The best anchors are **existing habits that already happen reliably**, not clock times alone. BJ Fogg, in *Tiny Habits*, calls these “anchor moments” and recommends using the exact moment you finish an existing routine.

Strong anchors:

- After I pour my first coffee
- After I park the car at work
- After I close my laptop for the day
- After I put the kids to bed
- After I brush my teeth at night

Weak anchors:

- In the morning (too vague)
- When I have time (never arrives)
- At 6 p.m. (clock times alone can drift — pair them with an action)

The seven design specs

Fill in each of these for your keystone routine:

Spec	Question	Example (Evening Shutdown)
1. Anchor	After what existing action does it start?	After I close my work laptop
2. Place	Where exactly?	At my desk, then the kitchen
3. Sequence	What are the steps, in order?	Write tomorrow’s top 3 → clear desk → set out gym clothes → phone to kitchen charger
4. Duration	How long at full size?	15 minutes
5. Minimum	What’s the two-minute version?	Write tomorrow’s #1 task on a sticky note
6. Finish line	How do I know I’m done?	Phone is on the charger

Spec	Question	Example (Evening Shutdown)
7. Celebration	What do I do or say at the end?	"Done. Workday closed." + mark tracker

The when-then statement

Now combine the specs into a single sentence you can remember:

"After I [anchor], I will [first step] at [place], then [sequence], and I'll finish when [finish line]."

Example: *"After I close my work laptop, I will write tomorrow's top three at my desk, then clear the desk, lay out my gym clothes, and I'll finish when my phone is on the kitchen charger."*

Design the first step obsessively

The first step matters more than the rest combined, because once you start a routine, momentum does much of the work. Make the first step:

- **Physical**, not mental ("open the notebook," not "think about writing").
- **Tiny** (under 30 seconds).
- **Already prepared** (the notebook is already on the desk, open, with a pen on top).

The if-then backup plans

Gabriele Oettingen's research on mental contrasting, described in her book *Rethinking Positive Thinking*, suggests that pairing a wish with honest thinking about obstacles — and planning how you'll respond — works better than positive visualization alone. Her WOOP method (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan) builds on this.

Apply it to your routine. List the three most likely obstacles, and write an if-then plan for each:

- *If I'm running late, then I'll do the minimum version before I leave.*
- *If I'm traveling, then I'll do the routine in my hotel room after I unpack.*
- *If a family member needs me during the routine, then I'll finish the current step and resume within an hour.*

Test run

Today, run your routine once, exactly as designed. Afterward, answer three questions:

1. Where did I hesitate?
2. Which step took longer or shorter than expected?
3. What needed to be prepared in advance that wasn't?

Adjust the design. Routines rarely work perfectly on the first run. The first week is a prototype.

Example: a finished blueprint

Imagine Chris, whose target is “write daily.” His blueprint: *Anchor* — after I pour my first coffee. *Place* — kitchen table, left corner. *Sequence* — sit, open notebook to the ribbon, write for 20 minutes, write the first line for tomorrow, close the notebook. *Duration* — 20 minutes. *Minimum* — one sentence. *Finish line* — tomorrow's first line is written. *Celebration* — “Done. That's what a writer does.” His if-then plans cover late wake-ups (minimum before leaving), weekends away (notebook travels in his bag), and a partner who wants to chat (a friendly “give me 20 minutes, then I'm all yours”). There is nothing left for morning-Chris to decide.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 4.2: Keystone Routine Blueprint**. Fill in all seven design specs, write your full when-then statement, and design your first step so it's physical, tiny, and prepared. Write three if-then backup plans for your most likely obstacles. Run the routine once today and record your test-run notes.

Lesson 4.3: The Minimum Version — Starting Tiny

You've designed a full keystone routine. Now you're going to design its most important feature: the version you'll do on the day when everything goes wrong. This is your minimum version, and it's the reason your routine will survive the next few weeks.

The logic of tiny

BJ Fogg, a behavior scientist at Stanford, describes behavior as happening when motivation, ability, and a prompt come together at the same moment (his B=MAP model). Motivation rises and falls unpredictably. You can't control it very well. But you *can* control ability — by making the behavior so small that you can do it even when motivation is low.

James Clear offers a similar idea in his “two-minute rule”: when you start a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to do. “Read before bed each night” becomes “read one

page.” “Do 30 minutes of yoga” becomes “take out my yoga mat.”

The point isn’t that one page or one mat unroll changes your life. It’s that doing *something* every day protects the two things that matter most in the installation phase: the anchor (the routine keeps firing at the same moment) and the identity (you keep casting votes).

Full, standard, and minimum

For your keystone routine, define three levels:

Level	When to use it	Example (Morning Movement)
Full	Good days with time and energy	30-minute workout + stretch
Standard	Normal days	15-minute workout
Minimum	Bad, busy, sick-but-functional, or traveling days	Shoes on, 10 squats, 1 minute of stretching

All three count. All three get a mark on your tracker (✓ for full or standard, ½ for minimum). What doesn’t count is zero.

Rules for a good minimum

- **It takes two minutes or less.**
- **It includes the first step of the full routine.** Same anchor, same place, same opening action. This keeps the neural pathway identical, so the minimum is practice for the full version.
- **It’s genuinely doable on your worst day.** Imagine being exhausted, late, and in a bad mood. Would you still do it? If you hesitate, shrink it.
- **It has a clear finish line.** “One sentence,” not “some writing.”

The permission to stop

Here’s the part people skip: when you do the minimum version, you are allowed to stop. You can continue if you want. Most of the time you’ll want to, because getting started is the hard part. But the permission must be real. If “minimum” secretly means “minimum, and then I guilt myself into the full workout,” your brain will learn that the minimum is a trick and resist it.

When to use the minimum

Decide your criteria in advance so you’re not negotiating in the moment. For example:

- I have less than 15 minutes available.
- I slept fewer than 6 hours.
- I'm traveling or my schedule was upended.
- I'm sick but functional (if you're genuinely ill, rest — and see Lesson 5.2).
- I simply feel a wall of resistance.

That last one is legitimate. The minimum isn't only for emergencies. It's for any day when the alternative is skipping.

Why minimum days are secretly the most important

On a good day, doing your routine proves very little. Anyone can be disciplined when it's easy. On a terrible day, doing the minimum proves something powerful: that this routine happens *no matter what*. That's the belief you're installing. The days you'll remember in six months are the days you did one sentence at 11:40 p.m. because you refused to break the chain.

Scaling up gradually

As the routine settles in, you'll naturally find yourself doing the standard or full version more often. Don't rush it. A useful rule: **only increase the size of your standard version after you've completed it five days in a row without it feeling like a struggle.** Increase by about 10–20 percent, not double.

Example: Jordan's three levels

Imagine Jordan, whose keystone is a Creative Block for learning Spanish:

- Full: 30 minutes — lesson app, 10 new flashcards, listen to a podcast episode.
- Standard: 15 minutes — lesson app and flashcards.
- Minimum: open the app and complete one exercise.

In week three, Jordan's calendar explodes. For five days he does only the minimum. Old Jordan would have called that failure. New Jordan knows the anchor stayed alive and the identity stayed intact. The next quiet week, he's back to full sessions without having to "restart."

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 4.3: Three Levels of My Routine**. Define your full, standard, and minimum versions, making sure the minimum shares the same anchor and first step. List your personal criteria for using the minimum. Then do the "worst-day test": describe your hardest likely day this month and confirm the minimum would still happen. Today is also Day 14, so complete the Week 2 Review at the bottom of the worksheet.

Lesson 4.4: Stacking and Compounding

Once your keystone routine runs reliably, it becomes something bigger than one habit. It becomes a platform. Because the routine already has a fixed anchor, time, and place, you can attach small new behaviors to it with very little extra effort. This is how discipline compounds: one strong routine carrying more and more of your life.

Habit stacking

James Clear calls this *habit stacking*, building on BJ Fogg’s anchor method: you link a new behavior to one you already do. The formula:

“After I [current habit], I will [new habit].”

Your keystone routine is the perfect base for stacking, because every step in it is already a reliable cue.

When to stack

Timing matters. Stack too early and you overload a routine that isn’t yet stable. Use this readiness check before adding anything:

- ☐ I’ve completed my routine (at any level) on at least 10 of the last 14 days.
- ☐ I haven’t missed two days in a row in the last week.
- ☐ The first step feels close to automatic — I start without much internal debate.
- ☐ The routine feels a little *too* easy at standard size.

If you can tick three of four, you’re ready to stack one small addition. If not, keep strengthening the base. There’s no penalty for waiting.

What to stack

Good stacks share three features: they’re tiny (under two minutes to start), they fit naturally into the routine’s location and flow, and they support the routine’s purpose.

Keystone routine	Natural stack
Morning Anchor	After I drink my water, I’ll write one line in a gratitude journal
Daily Planning Block	After I choose my top three, I’ll block 90 minutes for #1 on my calendar

Keystone routine	Natural stack
Evening Shutdown	After I set my phone on the charger, I'll read two pages
Movement Block	After I finish my workout, I'll fill my water bottle for tomorrow
Creative Block	After I finish, I'll write the first line for tomorrow's session

The stacking sequence

Add one element at a time, and give each one about a week before adding another:

1. **Week 3:** Add one tiny stack to your keystone.
2. **Week 4:** If both are stable, consider a second.
3. **Beyond Day 28:** Continue adding at a pace of roughly one element every one to two weeks, always checking stability first.

Beyond stacking: the ripple audit

Sometimes compounding happens without you adding anything. A consistent evening shutdown might mean you start going to bed earlier without deciding to. A morning movement habit might mean you start drinking more water. These are ripple effects, and they're worth noticing because they strengthen your identity and motivation.

Each week, ask: *What else has changed since I started this routine?* Record anything you notice — energy, mood, sleep, focus, relationships, how you talk about yourself. Some weeks you'll notice nothing. Other weeks, you'll be surprised.

Chaining routines

Longer term, keystone routines can connect into a daily structure:

- **Morning Anchor** sets the day's priorities.
- **Daily Planning Block** protects time for them.
- **Evening Shutdown** closes the loop and prepares the next morning.

Each routine cues the next day's routine. This is how disciplined people's lives often look from the outside: not a series of heroic efforts, but a few reliable routines linked together. Build the chain one link at a time — a new routine only after the previous one is stable, which usually takes weeks, not days.

Protect the core

As you add, keep the original routine sacred. If you ever feel the routine becoming too heavy — you're starting to skip because it's too long — remove the most recent addition first. The keystone habit is non-negotiable; the stacks are optional.

Example: Grace's compounding

Imagine Grace, whose keystone is an Evening Shutdown. Weeks 1 and 2: write tomorrow's top three and put the phone in the kitchen. Week 3: she stacks "read two pages in bed." Week 4: she notices she's falling asleep 30 minutes earlier on most nights and has started waking before her alarm. She didn't set a sleep goal. The routine produced it. That's compounding.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 4.4: My Habit Stack**. Run the four-point readiness check. If you're ready, write one stacking statement using the "After I..., I will..." formula and add it to your routine starting today. If you're not ready, write what you'll stack when you are and the date you'll re-check. Then complete the ripple audit: list any changes you've noticed since Day 1.

Module 5: Consistency Under Pressure

Every habit hits resistance: the novelty wears off, life gets busy, and a missed day threatens to become a missed month. This module prepares you for the dip, gives you a recovery protocol for slips, teaches you to ride out urges, and shows you how to track progress without turning it into a source of shame.

Lesson 5.1: The Dip — Why Week 3 Feels Harder

Right around now — the middle of the course — many people notice something discouraging. The routine that felt exciting in week one now feels ordinary. The results they hoped for haven't fully arrived. Life has started pushing back. Motivation is lower than it was on Day 1.

This is normal. It's so common that it's worth giving a name: **the dip**.

Why the dip happens

Several forces tend to converge in the second and third weeks:

- **Novelty fades.** New routines come with a burst of energy simply because they're new. That burst doesn't last.
- **Results lag behavior.** The changes that matter most — strength, skill, calm, output — usually build slowly and may not be visible yet.
- **Automaticity isn't there yet.** Remember Lally's UCL study from Lesson 1.4: habits typically take weeks to months to become automatic. At this point, your routine still takes some effort, but it no longer has novelty to carry it.
- **Life intrudes.** Over any three-week period, something unexpected is likely: a work crunch, an illness, a family event, travel.

The dip is not a sign you're doing it wrong. It's a sign you've moved past the easy part.

Seeing the dip coming

Knowing the dip is coming lets you prepare instead of being ambushed. Common early warning signs:

- You start negotiating with yourself again ("I'll do it later").
- You shift toward the minimum version more often without a clear reason.
- Your check-ins get skipped or delayed.
- The identity statement starts to feel less true.
- You catch yourself thinking, "Maybe this isn't the right habit for me."

None of these mean you should quit. They mean it's time to use the tools in this module.

Five dip strategies

1. Lower the bar, keep the anchor. It's completely fine to spend a week doing mostly the minimum version. The anchor stays alive, the identity stays intact, and you can scale back up when energy returns.

2. Reread your Evidence Log. Your log from Module 2 is exactly for this. Read the entries from week one. You'll be reminded that you were once uncertain and did it anyway.

3. Reconnect to your value. Go back to your value → identity → habit ladder from Lesson 2.1. The habit may feel dull right now. The value behind it usually doesn't.

4. Add a small novelty — not a new habit. Change something within the routine: a new route for your walk, a new playlist, a new notebook, a new location for your planning block. A little freshness can restore energy without adding load.

5. Lean on your people. Tell your accountability partner you're in the dip. Just saying "this week is hard" out loud often reduces its pull.

The "is this the wrong habit?" question

During the dip, many people conclude that they chose the wrong target. Sometimes that's true. Usually it's the dip talking. Use this test before changing anything:

Question	If yes...
Is the habit still connected to a value I care about?	Keep it; the dip will pass.
Is the minimum version genuinely doable most days?	Keep it; the dip will pass.
Has my life changed in a way that makes this routine impractical (new job, new baby, injury)?	Redesign the routine, don't abandon the target.
Have I done the routine for less than 30 days?	Keep it; it's too early to judge.

The rule of thumb: **redesign before you resign.** Change the time, the place, the size, or the anchor before you change the habit itself.

Progress you can't see

Many benefits of consistent behavior are invisible in the short term. A useful way to picture it: an ice cube in a cold room doesn't melt as the temperature slowly rises from 25 to 26 to

27 to 31 degrees Fahrenheit. Then at 32 degrees, it starts to melt. The earlier degrees weren't wasted. They were necessary. Keep adding degrees.

Plan your dip response now

The best time to plan for the dip is before you're fully in it. You'll create a "dip card" — a short set of instructions from your current self to your future struggling self. Keep it where you'll see it.

Example dip card:

You're in the dip. That's expected. Do the minimum today — shoes on, 10 squats. Read three entries from your Evidence Log. Text Sam "hard week." Tomorrow try the park route instead of the street. You're a person who moves every day, and you're proving it right now.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 5.1: My Dip Plan**. Rate your current motivation and effort, list which early warning signs you've already noticed, choose the three dip strategies you'll use, and run the "wrong habit?" test. Finish by writing your personal dip card and putting a copy where you'll see it during your routine.

Lesson 5.2: Never Miss Twice — The Recovery Protocol

You will miss a day. Probably more than one over the next few months. That's not pessimism. It's planning. The disciplined people you admire miss days too. What separates them isn't a perfect streak. It's what they do the day after.

Why one miss doesn't matter much

Recall Phillippa Lally's 2009 habit study from Lesson 1.4: missing a single opportunity to perform the behavior did not materially affect the habit-formation process. One day off doesn't erase the progress you've built.

What *does* matter is the story you tell yourself about the miss. If one skipped day becomes "I've blown it, I'm back to square one," the second miss follows easily, then the third. That's the Collapse pattern from Lesson 1.1. The miss isn't the problem. The meaning you attach to it is.

The rule: never miss twice

James Clear popularized a simple rule: never miss twice. If you miss a day, the very next opportunity becomes your top priority. One miss is an accident. Two misses is the start of a new pattern.

This rule works because it's forgiving and firm at the same time. It gives you permission to be human, and it draws a clear line before the slide begins.

The Recovery Protocol

When you miss a day, follow these five steps, ideally the same evening or the next morning.

Step 1: Name it, without drama. Write one sentence on your tracker: "Missed Tuesday." No adjectives. No "again." No "because I'm useless."

Step 2: Find the break point. Ask: *At what point did the routine break down?* Common answers:

Break point	Typical cause	Typical fix
Anchor didn't happen	Schedule changed	Add a backup anchor
Anchor happened, didn't start	Friction or resistance	Shrink the first step; prep it the night before
Started, didn't finish	Too long, interrupted	Use the minimum version; define an earlier finish line
Forgot entirely	Cue not visible	Add a visual cue or reminder
Chose not to	Low motivation, competing priority	Revisit identity, dip card, or reschedule

Step 3: Make one adjustment. Just one. Change the thing at the break point. If you try to overhaul everything, you're back to the Sprint.

Step 4: Schedule the comeback. Decide exactly when your next session will happen and at what level. The comeback session should almost always be the **minimum version**. You're not trying to make up for yesterday. You're just restarting the chain.

Step 5: Use your after-a-slip script. Pull out the script you wrote in Lesson 2.4. Say it, and mean it: "You missed yesterday. That's normal. Today is the comeback."

What NOT to do after a miss

- **Don't double up.** "I missed Monday, so Tuesday I'll do twice as much." This turns a small slip into a punishing session that makes Wednesday harder.
- **Don't restart the count from zero in your head.** You haven't lost 12 days of progress. Your tracker will show 12 marks and one blank.
- **Don't wait for Monday.** The fresh start is the next opportunity, not the next week.

Using fresh starts wisely

Research by Hengchen Dai, Katherine Milkman, and Jason Riis on the "fresh start effect" found that people are more likely to take on goals around temporal landmarks such as the start of a week, month, or year, or after a birthday. You can use this in your favor — for example, starting a new tracker page each week. But don't let it become a reason to wait. Tomorrow morning is also a landmark.

Planned misses

Some misses can be anticipated: travel, holidays, surgery, a wedding weekend. For these, choose one of three options in advance:

1. **Travel version:** A modified routine designed for the situation (a 10-minute hotel room workout; reading on the plane).
2. **Minimum-only period:** Commit to the minimum for the whole period.
3. **Planned pause:** Decide the specific dates you'll pause and the exact date and time you'll restart. Write the restart in your calendar.

A planned pause with a scheduled restart is not a failure. It's a strategy. An unplanned drift is where habits get lost.

When to rest

If you're genuinely sick, injured, or dealing with a crisis, rest is the right call. Mark the day with an "R" instead of an X. Rest days are part of taking care of yourself, and taking care of yourself is the point.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 5.2: My Recovery Protocol**. Write your personal five-step protocol in your own words, identify your two most likely break points and their fixes, and plan how you'll handle any known disruptions in the next 60 days (travel version, minimum-only, or planned pause with restart date). If you've already missed a day during the course, run the protocol on it now.

Lesson 5.3: Urge Surfing and the Ten-Minute Rule

Some discipline challenges aren't about doing a new habit. They're about *not* doing an old one — not checking the phone, not snacking at night, not opening social media during focus time, not hitting snooze. These moments come with a distinct feeling: an urge. This lesson teaches you how to ride it out without fighting it.

What an urge actually is

An urge is a wave of wanting that rises, peaks, and falls. It often feels like it will keep growing until you give in. In practice, urges usually crest and subside if you don't feed them — especially when you don't act on them and don't obsess over resisting them.

The problem is that most people only experience the urge up to the point where they give in. So they never learn that it would have passed on its own.

Urge surfing

Urge surfing is a technique associated with the late psychologist G. Alan Marlatt and his colleagues' work on mindfulness-based relapse prevention, including research by Sarah Bowen. Rather than pushing an urge away or giving in, you observe it with curiosity, like a surfer riding a wave instead of fighting it.

A simple four-step version you can use anywhere:

- 1. Notice and name it.** "There's an urge to check my phone." Naming creates a small gap between you and the urge.
- 2. Locate it in your body.** Where do you feel it? A tightness in the chest, restlessness in the hands, a pull in the stomach? Describe the sensation in neutral terms: "Tingling in my fingers. A bit of tension in my jaw."
- 3. Breathe and watch.** Take slow breaths and notice how the sensation changes. Does it get stronger? Shift? Soften? Rate it from 1 to 10 every 30 seconds or so. You're a researcher studying the wave, not a victim of it.
- 4. Let it pass, then choose.** When the intensity drops, decide deliberately what to do next. Often the decision is easy once the peak has passed.

This takes practice. The first few attempts may feel awkward. Each time you ride out an urge, you gather evidence that you can.

The ten-minute rule

For moments when a full urge-surf isn't practical, use the ten-minute rule:

“I can have it — in ten minutes.”

You’re not saying no. You’re saying *not yet*. Set a timer. Do something else in the meantime, ideally your replacement action from Lesson 3.3. When the timer ends, you’re free to choose. Often the urge has faded. If it hasn’t, you can make a conscious choice rather than an automatic one.

This works because it removes the fight. Your brain doesn’t have to face a permanent “no,” which tends to intensify wanting. It only has to wait.

HALT: check the underlying need

Many urges are signals of a different need. The acronym HALT, widely used in recovery communities, is a quick check:

- **H**ungry?
- **A**ngry (or frustrated, stressed)?
- **L**onely?
- **T**ired?

If the answer is yes to any of these, address that need directly. The late-night snack urge might really be tiredness — the fix is going to bed. The social media urge might really be loneliness — the fix is texting a friend.

Build your urge playbook

Identify your two or three most common urges and plan for each:

Urge	Usual trigger	Underlying need	Response plan
Check phone during focus	Hitting a hard part of the task	Relief from difficulty	Ten-minute rule; write down the hard question instead
Snack after dinner	TV on, bored	Stimulation or tiredness	Brush teeth after dinner; herbal tea; go to bed if tired
Snooze alarm	Warm bed, dark room	Tired	Earlier bedtime; alarm across the room; light on immediately

Handling “just this once”

The most dangerous thought in discipline is “just this once.” It’s persuasive because it’s often true — just once rarely matters. The problem is that it’s true every time, so it can become a pattern. A useful reframe: *“I’m not deciding about this once. I’m deciding about all the times like this.”* Ask what you’d want the policy to be.

Important note

Urge surfing and the ten-minute rule are self-help tools for everyday habits like phone use, snacking, and procrastination. If you’re dealing with compulsive behaviors, substance use, or urges that feel overwhelming or harmful, please reach out to a qualified professional, who can offer support these tools aren’t designed to replace.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 5.3: My Urge Playbook**. Fill in the playbook table for your two or three most common urges, including their trigger, underlying need (use HALT), and response plan. Then practice urge surfing at least once today and log the experience: what the urge was, where you felt it, its intensity every 30 seconds, and what you chose afterward.

Lesson 5.4: Tracking Without Obsession

What gets measured gets noticed. Tracking your habit makes progress visible, keeps you honest, and gives you data to improve your system. But tracking can also backfire: it can turn into a scoreboard for self-criticism, or a streak you’re so afraid to break that one miss feels catastrophic. This lesson helps you track in a way that supports discipline instead of undermining it.

Why tracking helps

- **It’s a visual cue.** A tracker on your wall or desk reminds you to act.
- **It’s evidence.** Every mark is a vote for your identity, visible at a glance.
- **It’s satisfying.** Marking a box is a small, immediate reward — which helps, because the real benefits of most habits are delayed.
- **It’s data.** Patterns show up that you wouldn’t otherwise notice: you always miss Thursdays; minimum days cluster after late nights.

The three tracking levels

You don’t need a complicated system. Choose one of these and keep it:

Level	What you record	Time
Simple	✓ / ½ / ✗ / R	5 seconds
Standard	Mark + one word about how it felt	15 seconds
Detailed	Mark + feeling + duration + what got in the way	1 minute

Most people do best with Standard. Detailed tracking is useful when something isn't working and you need to diagnose it.

Streaks: helpful and dangerous

Streaks — counting consecutive days — can be motivating. There's a reason "don't break the chain" is popular advice. But streaks can also create an all-or-nothing trap: when a 40-day streak breaks, some people feel like they've lost everything and give up.

Use a safer metric alongside the streak:

Consistency rate = days completed (any level) ÷ days since starting.

A consistency rate of 85% over 60 days is excellent — and it survives a miss. When your streak breaks, look at your consistency rate instead. It will barely move.

The weekly review

Your daily tracker collects data. The weekly review turns it into improvement. Every seven days, spend 15 minutes on these questions:

1. **Count:** How many ✓, ½, ✗, and R marks this week? What's my consistency rate so far?
2. **Pattern:** When did I miss or use the minimum? What do those days have in common?
3. **Friction:** What made the routine harder than it needed to be?
4. **Win:** What went well? What's my best Evidence Log entry this week?
5. **Adjust:** What's one change for next week? (Just one.)
6. **Ripple:** What else has changed in my life since I started?

Schedule the review. Sunday afternoon or Friday at the end of the workday are common choices. Put it in your calendar with a reminder.

Signs your tracking has become obsessive

Watch for these, and scale back if you see them:

- You feel anxious or ashamed looking at the tracker.
- You do the habit mainly to avoid breaking the streak, even when rest is needed.
- You're tracking many metrics and spending more time logging than acting.
- A single miss ruins your whole day.

The fix is usually to simplify: go back to Simple tracking, focus on consistency rate instead of streak, and reread Lesson 2.4's good-coach script.

Track inputs, not just outcomes

If your habit is connected to an outcome — weight, savings, word count, sales — it's tempting to track the outcome daily. Resist that. Outcomes fluctuate for reasons outside your control, and daily outcome tracking can make a perfectly good routine feel like it's failing. Track the *input* (did I do the routine?) daily. Check the outcome occasionally — monthly is often enough — and treat it as information about whether the routine needs adjusting, not as a verdict on you.

Making the tracker visible

A physical tracker often works better than an app because you see it without opening anything. Print the 28-Day Tracker page from your workbook and put it where your routine happens — on the fridge, beside your desk, on the bathroom mirror. If you prefer digital, put the tracker app on your home screen dock (Lesson 3.3).

Example: Ravi's review

Imagine Ravi, who's building a Daily Planning Block. His week-three data: 5 ✓, 1 ½, 1 ✕. Pattern: both the ½ and the ✕ were on days when he had an 8 a.m. meeting. Adjustment: on early-meeting days, his anchor becomes “after I sit down in the meeting room” and he does the minimum version on paper before the meeting starts. One change, directly from the data.

Today is also Day 20 or 21 — time for your Week 3 Review.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 5.4: Tracking and Weekly Review**. Choose your tracking level, calculate your consistency rate so far, and answer the six weekly review questions for Week 3. Check yourself against the four signs of obsessive tracking. Schedule your weekly review as a recurring calendar event for the next eight weeks.

Module 6: Making It Last

The final module turns a 28-day installation into a long-term system. You'll make your routine more rewarding, run a thorough Day-28 review, decide when and how to add your next habit, and build a maintenance plan that protects your discipline through busy seasons and big life changes.

Lesson 6.1: Making Discipline Rewarding

Here's an uncomfortable truth about most good habits: the costs arrive now and the rewards arrive later. You feel the effort of the workout today; the fitness shows up in months. You feel the boredom of the planning block today; the calmer weeks show up gradually. Our brains tend to weigh immediate experiences more heavily than delayed ones, so good habits start at a disadvantage.

This lesson helps you close that gap by adding immediate rewards to your routine — without undermining the habit itself.

Temptation bundling

In a 2014 study, Katherine Milkman, Julia Minson, and Kevin Volpp tested *temptation bundling*: pairing something you want to do with something you should do. Participants were given access to engaging audiobooks they could only listen to while at the gym. Those in the bundling group visited the gym more often than a control group, although the effect faded after a Thanksgiving break — a reminder that tools like this work best as part of a larger system.

The formula:

"I only [thing I enjoy] while I [habit I'm building]."

Examples:

- I only listen to my favorite podcast while walking.
- I only drink my fancy coffee during my planning block.
- I only watch my comfort show while on the exercise bike.
- I only use my good pen and notebook during my creative block.

The key word is *only*. If you can get the reward anywhere, it doesn't pull you toward the habit.

Immediate rewards that don't undermine the habit

Choose rewards that fit the identity you're building. A hard workout rewarded with a large dessert every day can pull against the reason for the workout. Good immediate rewards are:

- **Small** — a minute or two of pleasure, not a major indulgence.
- **Immediate** — during or right after the routine.
- **Aligned** — consistent with the person you're becoming.

Routine	Aligned reward
Morning movement	Hot shower with music; favorite breakfast
Planning block	Good coffee; crossing off the first small task
Creative block	A few minutes reading something you love afterward
Evening shutdown	Comfortable clothes; tea; a book in bed

Celebrate the moment you finish

BJ Fogg emphasizes the role of *celebration* in Tiny Habits: creating a small positive feeling immediately after the behavior helps wire it in. It can be as simple as a fist pump, saying “Yes!” or “Done,” smiling, or a brief moment of pride.

It may feel silly at first. That's fine. The goal is to create a quick positive emotion associated with finishing. Pair it with your identity phrase from Module 2: “Done. That's what a writer does.”

Make progress visible

Visible progress is its own reward. Ideas:

- **The tracker itself.** Crossing off a box on a wall calendar is surprisingly satisfying.
- **A jar or clip system.** Move a marble, paperclip, or coin from one jar to another each time you complete the routine.
- **A running total.** Pages written, kilometers walked, sessions completed. Totals only go up, which is motivating in a way that streaks aren't.
- **A milestone list.** Decide in advance what you'll do at 10, 25, 50, and 100 completions — something meaningful but aligned (new running shoes at 50 runs; a new notebook at 50 writing sessions).

Intrinsic rewards: the ones that last

Over time, the strongest reward shifts from external to internal: the calm of a planned day, the energy after movement, the satisfaction of progress on meaningful work, the pride of being someone who keeps promises. These rewards are always present, but they're easy to miss. Build the habit of noticing them.

After each routine, take five seconds to ask: *What's one good thing about having done this?* Over weeks, this trains your attention to register the benefits, which strengthens your desire to repeat the routine.

Avoid the reward trap

A few cautions:

- **Don't make the reward bigger than the habit.** If the reward becomes the point, the habit falls apart when the reward loses its appeal.
- **Don't reward only perfection.** Minimum days deserve a celebration too — arguably more.
- **Don't use rewards to cover up a routine that's wrong.** If you truly hate the habit even after weeks, consider redesigning it (Lesson 5.1's "redesign before you resign").

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 6.1: My Reward System**. Write one temptation bundle using the "I only... while I..." formula, choose an aligned immediate reward and a celebration phrase, and design a visible progress system (jar, total, or milestones). Set milestone rewards for 10, 25, 50, and 100 completions. Practice the five-second "one good thing" reflection after today's routine.

Lesson 6.2: The Day-28 Review

You're approaching the end of the installation period. Before you move on, it's worth pausing for a thorough review. Not to grade yourself, but to understand what you've built, what's working, what isn't, and what you've learned about how *you* build discipline. That self-knowledge is one of the most valuable outcomes of this course, because you'll use it for every habit you build from now on.

Begin this lesson on Day 24 and complete the full review on Day 28.

Part 1: The numbers

Start with your tracker. Calculate:

- Total days completed at full or standard (✓)
- Total minimum days ($\frac{1}{2}$)
- Total missed days (X)
- Total rest days (R)
- **Consistency rate:** $(\checkmark + \frac{1}{2}) \div (28 - R)$
- Longest run of consecutive days
- Number of times you missed twice in a row

Look at your numbers without judgment. A consistency rate of 70% or higher over the first 28 days is a solid foundation. Below that, you’ve still gathered valuable data about what gets in the way.

Part 2: The patterns

Look across your tracker, Evidence Log, and weekly reviews:

- Which days of the week were strongest? Weakest?
- What were the most common reasons for misses or minimum days?
- Which environment changes made the biggest difference?
- Which tools did you actually use (identity statement, scripts, dip card, recovery protocol, urge surfing, rewards)?
- Which tools didn’t help you?

Part 3: The identity check

Go back to your Identity Audit from Lesson 2.2.

- Reread your limiting beliefs. Which ones feel less true now?
- Rate how true your identity statement feels today, from 1 to 10. What was it on Day 4?
- Do you still need a bridge statement (“I’m becoming...”)? Or can you drop the bridge?
- Read your Evidence Log from start to finish. Choose the three entries that feel like the strongest proof.

Part 4: The ripple check

What has changed in your life since Day 1 that you didn’t directly target? Consider energy, sleep, mood, focus, relationships, confidence, how you talk about yourself, and other habits that shifted on their own.

Part 5: Retake the self-assessment

In the workbook, you’ll find the Start Here Self-Assessment you completed before Lesson 1.1. Retake the same questions on Day 27 or 28 and compare the scores. Look for

movement, not perfection.

Part 6: Your discipline profile

This is the most important part. Based on everything above, write a short profile of how you build discipline best. For example:

I do best with morning routines anchored to coffee. Environment changes matter more for me than willpower — especially keeping my phone out of the bedroom. I respond well to accountability; my weekly check-in call made a big difference. My biggest risk is late nights, which lead to skipped mornings. My minimum version saved me during week three. I don't like streaks; consistency rate works better for me.

This profile becomes your instruction manual for every future habit.

To write yours, complete these sentence starters and then smooth them into a paragraph:

- My best anchor is...
- The environment change that mattered most was...
- My biggest risk (the situation most likely to break my routine) is...
- When I slip, what gets me back is...
- The tool I'd keep if I could only keep one is...
- The kind of support that works for me is...

Example: a hypothetical review

Imagine Elena, whose keystone was a Morning Anchor. Her numbers: 19 ✓, 5 ½, 3 ✗, 1 R, for a consistency rate of $24 \div 27$, about 89%. She missed twice in a row once, during a family visit. Her pattern: every miss followed a night past midnight. Her strongest environment change was leaving her running clothes on the chair. Her identity statement went from a 4 on Day 4 to a 7 on Day 28. Her ripple: she's drinking less coffee because she has more natural energy. Her decision: continue and strengthen, with an added "in bed by 11:30" rule on weeknights — not a new habit, just a protection for the existing one.

Part 7: Decide what's next

Based on your review, you have three options:

1. **Continue and strengthen.** Most people should choose this. Keep the routine running, keep tracking, keep the weekly review. Aim to reach 66 days (Lally's median) before judging automaticity.
2. **Redesign and continue.** If your consistency rate was lower than you'd like, identify the weakest lever (identity, environment, or routine) and make one major redesign.

Then run another 28 days.

3. **Continue and add.** If the routine feels stable and your consistency rate is high, you may be ready to add a second habit. Lesson 6.3 shows you how.

Celebrate

Whatever your numbers, you spent 28 days deliberately building discipline. You learned a system. You gathered evidence. You know more about yourself than you did a month ago. Mark it. Do something that feels like a genuine celebration — aligned with the person you're becoming.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 6.2: The Day-28 Review**. Fill in every section: the numbers, the patterns, the identity check, the ripple check, and your retaken self-assessment scores. Write your discipline profile in at least five sentences. Choose your next step (continue, redesign, or add) and plan how you'll celebrate.

Lesson 6.3: Adding Your Second Habit

Back in Lesson 1.3 you created a Later List — all the changes you wanted to make but deliberately set aside. Now that your keystone routine is installed, you can start working through it. The goal is to add habits in a way that builds on your foundation instead of cracking it.

The readiness test

Only add a new habit when your keystone routine meets these criteria:

- ☐ Consistency rate of 80% or higher over the last two weeks.
- ☐ No “missed twice” in the last two weeks.
- ☐ The routine starts without much internal debate most days.
- ☐ You have a clear recovery protocol that you've used successfully at least once.
- ☐ Your life isn't about to enter a known high-disruption period (a move, a new job, a new baby, a major deadline).

If you can tick at least four, you're likely ready. If not, spend more time strengthening. A strong single routine beats two fragile ones every time.

Choosing the second habit

Go back to your Later List and rescore each item on the Ripple, Control, and Daily-able criteria from Lesson 1.3. Also add a new question:

- **Fit:** How naturally does this connect to my existing keystone routine?

The best second habits often fit into, or right next to, your keystone. For example:

Keystone	Strong second habit	Why it fits
Evening Shutdown	Consistent bedtime	Shutdown already prepares for sleep
Morning Anchor	Morning walk	Same time, same energy, same identity
Movement Block	Protein-focused breakfast	Supports the same goal, same time of day
Planning Block	End-of-week review	Same skill, same tools
Creative Block	Reading in your field	Feeds the creative work

Two ways to add

Option A: Stack it inside the keystone. If the new habit is small, add it as a step in your existing routine (Lesson 4.4). This is the lowest-effort path.

Option B: Build a second routine. If the new habit is bigger or belongs at a different time of day, build it as its own routine using the same process: identity statement, environment design, anchor, seven design specs, three levels, recovery protocol. It's a mini version of this entire course.

The mini-installation process

For a second routine, run a condensed 28-day installation:

Days	Focus
1-3	Write the identity statement; do the two-minute starter daily
4-7	Environment design: cues and friction
8-10	Design the full routine with seven specs and three levels
11-21	Run the routine; apply dip and recovery tools as needed
22-28	Add rewards; run a Day-28 review

You already have every tool. The second time through is usually faster because you know your discipline profile.

Protect the keystone

When you add a second habit, your keystone routine is at slightly higher risk because your attention is divided. Two rules:

1. **If the keystone starts slipping, pause the new habit.** Drop the new one to its minimum version or pause it entirely until the keystone recovers.
2. **Keep the keystone's minimum sacred.** Whatever else happens, the keystone minimum gets done.

The pace of change

How often should you add new habits? There's no universal answer, but one small change every four to eight weeks is a sustainable pace for most people. Over a year, that's six to twelve new habits — each installed well, rather than twenty started and abandoned. That's how discipline compounds over years: not through dramatic overhauls, but through one well-installed routine at a time.

Breaking a bad habit as your second target

If your next target is reducing an unwanted behavior (late-night snacking, doomscrolling, excessive spending), invert the tools:

- **Identity:** "I'm someone who..." statements still apply ("I'm someone who goes to bed rested").
- **Environment:** Make the cue invisible and the behavior hard (Lessons 3.1–3.3).
- **Replacement:** Choose a specific replacement behavior for the same cue.
- **Urges:** Use the urge playbook from Lesson 5.3.
- **Tracking:** Track the replacement behavior, not just the absence of the old one — it's easier to count what you did than what you didn't do.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 6.3: My Next Habit**. Run the five-point readiness test for your keystone. Rescore your Later List with the added Fit criterion and choose your second habit. Decide whether you'll stack it or build a second routine, write its identity statement and two-minute starter, and pick a start date. If you're not ready, write the date you'll re-run the readiness test.

Lesson 6.4: Discipline for Life — Your Maintenance Plan

The final lesson addresses the question that matters most: how do you keep this going after the course ends? Most habits don't fail in the first month. They fail later, quietly, when

life changes and the routine doesn't adapt. This lesson helps you build a maintenance plan so your discipline survives the seasons of your life.

The maintenance mindset

Maintaining a habit is different from building one. In the build phase, the goal is repetition. In the maintenance phase, the goals are:

- **Protection** — keeping the routine alive through disruptions.
- **Adaptation** — adjusting it as your life changes.
- **Renewal** — keeping it meaningful, so it doesn't become a chore you resent.

The four life seasons

Your routine will go through different seasons. Plan for each:

Season	What it looks like	Maintenance strategy
Growth	Stable life, good energy	Scale up; add a new habit; raise the standard version
Steady	Normal busy life	Maintain the standard version; weekly review
Storm	Crisis, big deadline, illness in the family, move	Minimum version only; weekly review becomes a 2-minute check-in
Rebuild	After a storm or long break	Restart at the minimum; rerun environment design; scale up slowly

The most important skill is recognizing which season you're in and adjusting *before* the routine collapses. Trying to run a Growth routine during a Storm is how many habits die.

The monthly check-in

Replace the weekly review with a monthly check-in once your routine feels stable (usually after the second or third month). Every month, spend 20–30 minutes on:

1. **Consistency rate** for the month.
2. **Season:** Which season am I in? Which season is coming?
3. **Environment:** Has anything changed at home, at work, or in my schedule that affects my cues or friction?
4. **Identity:** How true does my identity statement feel? Does it need to evolve?
5. **Meaning:** Is this routine still connected to what I care about?

6. **Next move:** Scale up, hold steady, protect, or rebuild?

Warning signs of drift

Drift is slow. It rarely announces itself. Watch for:

- The minimum version becoming the default for more than two weeks without a clear reason.
- Skipping your weekly or monthly review.
- Environment changes creeping back (the phone slowly returns to the nightstand).
- The identity statement starting to feel like someone else.

When you see two or more signs, run a **reset week**: a mini version of Module 3 (environment redesign) plus Module 5 (recovery protocol), and restart at the minimum version.

Life transitions

Big transitions — a new job, a move, a new relationship, a new baby, retirement — often break habits, because they change the contexts that trigger them. Wendy Wood's research suggests that these moments of disruption can also be opportunities: when old cues disappear, it can be easier to build new habits in the new context.

When a transition is coming:

1. **Identify which anchors will change.** New commute? New morning schedule?
2. **Choose a new anchor in advance** in the new context.
3. **Rebuild the environment** in the new space during the first week.
4. **Drop to the minimum** during the transition, then rebuild.

Evolving your identity

Over time, your identity statement may need to evolve. "I'm becoming someone who moves every day" might become "I'm an athlete." "I'm someone who plans my day" might become "I'm someone who runs my life on purpose." Let the identity grow as the evidence grows. Revisit it every few months.

Your discipline system on one page

Your maintenance plan brings the whole course together into one page you can keep:

- **Identity statement**
- **Keystone routine** (when-then statement, three levels)
- **Environment rules** (top five from your checklist)
- **"I don't" rules** (up to three)

- **Recovery protocol** (five steps)
- **Dip card**
- **Review schedule** (weekly or monthly)
- **Season strategy**
- **Next habit** and target start date

Print it. Keep it near your routine. Reread it at every monthly check-in.

Example: a Storm season, handled

Imagine Daniel, six months after finishing the course. His father is hospitalized and Daniel spends three weeks travelling back and forth. His keystone, a 25-minute Evening Shutdown, is impossible to run in full. Because he has a season strategy, he doesn't agonize: he declares a Storm, switches to the minimum version (write tomorrow's single most important task on his phone's notes app before sleep), and replaces his weekly review with a two-minute Sunday check-in. When life steadies, he enters Rebuild: one week at minimum, then standard, then full. Without a plan, those three weeks might have ended the habit. With one, they were just a season.

Action Step

Complete **Worksheet 6.4: My Maintenance Plan**. Identify your current season and how you'll recognize the next Storm. Write your monthly check-in date and questions into your calendar. Complete the one-page Discipline System summary. Then move to the final page of the workbook, **My 30/60/90-Day Plan**, and map out your next three months.

Closing: The Person Who Keeps Their Promises

You started this course with a definition: *discipline is the ability to keep a promise to yourself when your mood no longer supports it*. Over the past 28 days, you've built that ability — not by becoming a tougher person, but by becoming a better designer of your own life.

Look at what you've put in place:

- **An identity** you're growing into, backed by a log of real evidence.
- **An environment** that makes the right choice the easy one and the wrong choice a little harder.
- **A keystone routine** with a clear anchor, a precise design, and a minimum version that survives your worst days.
- **A recovery system** for dips, slips, and urges, so a bad week doesn't become a lost month.
- **A reward and review system** that keeps the routine meaningful and helps it evolve.
- **A maintenance plan** for every season of your life.

Most importantly, you now have a discipline profile — a practical understanding of how *you* build habits. That knowledge doesn't expire. Every future habit will be easier because of it.

What to do next

1. **Keep going.** Your routine is installed, not finished. Keep running it through Day 66 and beyond, and let automaticity keep building.
2. **Keep reviewing.** Hold your weekly review for the next two months, then shift to monthly.
3. **Follow your 30/60/90-Day Plan.** It's the bridge between this course and the next chapter.
4. **Add slowly.** When the readiness test says yes, pick one habit from your Later List and run the mini-installation.
5. **Revisit this course.** You have lifetime access. Many people find it useful to reread Module 5 during hard seasons and rerun the full 28 days when starting a major new habit.

A final word

There will be days when you don't want to do it. That's not a sign that the system has failed. That's the exact moment the system was built for. On those days, do the minimum,

say your identity phrase, and put a mark on the tracker. That small act — repeated over months and years — is what real discipline looks like.

You don't need to be perfect. You need to be someone who comes back. Every time you come back, you prove it again.

Now go cast today's vote.

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