

MHPO-I **BASIC COURSE**

THE STRATEGIC HABITS WORKBOOK

**Create Habits
to Optimize
Your Wellness
& Performance**



Habits can be critical to your performance, well-being, health, and ability to perform mission essential tasks (MET). Habits also increase your efficiency so you can perform actions using little mental energy and free up your brain resources for more demanding tasks. Anywhere from 40–50% of your daily actions can be attributed to habits that you might not even realize you have or, in other words, while you're on autopilot.

Strategic habits help you to plan and optimize your habits so that they're helping you to live out your goals and values rather than self-sabotaging.

Your net worth to the world is usually determined by what remains after your bad habits are subtracted from your good ones.

– Benjamin Franklin

Habits self-awareness assessment

The first step to developing strategic habits is to evaluate your current habits or those you want to build. Good habits help you to live out your values and goals vs. bad habits that get in the way.

Name a target value or goal.

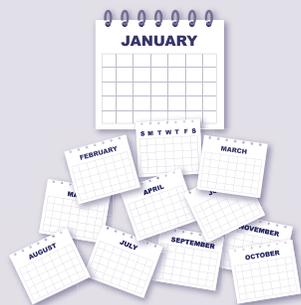
List the good habits you currently have (or want to build) that help you live out this value or goal.

List the bad habits you currently have (or want to avoid building) because they get in the way of living out this value or goal.

Choose one new habit you want to focus on developing for this workbook.

Strategic habit plan: When, Then, Because...Repeat

The key to habit formation is repetition. Habits form as your brain learns that when you act in a certain way in response to a cue, you get some type of benefit or reward, so you repeat the behavior. The more you repeat the behavior, the more your **strategic habit plan** (when, then, because) becomes automatic. It literally starts to get wired into your brain's neural pathways where you might not even be consciously aware that you're doing the habit; your strategic habit plan just goes on autopilot in response to the cue. This workbook aims to help you develop tactics to set yourself up for success so that you can repeat the "new" habit as much as possible for it to become automatic.



How long does it take to form a habit?

You might have heard it only takes 21 days to start a habit. It can actually take anywhere from 18–254 days—depending on the habit and the person—with the average being about 66 days. Each habit tactic below is designed to help you to get that number down.

Use habit tactics to create your own When, Then, Because...Repeat plan

Research shows that creating a “when, then, because” statement can help you make your desired habit automatic because it eliminates the mental energy of choosing whether or not to do the desired habit when the cue occurs. Compare the examples below.

Person 1: “**When** I get home from work, (**then**) I’ll go for a run for 10 minutes **because** I get to explore the neighborhood and feel great afterward.”

Person 2: “I just got home from work...should I go for a run now, watch a little TV, or get a snack first... what’s the weather like... I wonder what’s happening on social media, etc.”

Who is going to be more likely to consistently run so that they can make it a habit? Yup, Person 1!

Outlined throughout this workbook is each component of the

When, Then, Because...Repeat plan with research-based habit tactics. While you don’t need to apply each tip, consider which ones might work for your specific situation and desired tactical habit.





WHEN

This is the **cue** that triggers your strategic habit plan. A cue can be time of day, places, people, smells, feelings, thoughts, temptations, notifications, alarms, emails, text messages, or your phone buzzing.

Habit tactics

- ❑ **Build on current routines.** When trying to build a new habit, consider linking it to a current habit or routine you already have. For example, it will be a lot easier to remember to floss your teeth (new habit) after you brush your teeth (current habit).
- ❑ **Set up your environment for success.** Think of cues you can set up in your environment that will trigger you to do your new habit. For instance, put out your running sneakers the night before where you would almost trip over them, or place the fruit you want to eat for breakfast out where you can easily notice it each morning. Also, consider alarms you could set, notes, passwords, or pictures you can put up, or people who can help you remember to do your desired habit.
- ❑ **Remove bad-habit cues.** If you can, try to set up your life to remove or avoid the cues that lead to your bad habits. For example, take a different route if you have a habit of stopping for fast food on your way home. Or consider removing a social media app from your phone due to problematic use.
- ❑ **Repurpose bad-habit cues.** Some bad-habit cues are harder to remove than others. These might include habits you developed in response to feelings like boredom, frustration, stress, or general work-life situations. Try replacing your current bad habit with a good habit in response to these cues. For example, if you have a habit of going on social media after getting a frustrating work email, replace it with going on a mindfulness app. This will be hard at first, and you might falter and slip onto social media after a frustrating work email. Still, try the mindfulness app immediately afterwards to continue forming that good habit connection with the current cue.
- ❑ **Work with your schedule, not against it.** When building a new habit, identify the times and environments you're more likely to complete the action. When do you have enough energy to work out? When do you find it easy to focus your attention so you can set self-study time? In your daily schedule, what time are you consistently free so you can schedule a 10-minute mindfulness meditation? While planning the cue, also consider how you can successfully follow through with your plan in response to the cue.

Notes



THEN

This is the **action** of your habit plan. It can be a behavior, thought, emotion, or a series of thoughts and actions. The purpose of strategic habits is for the action to help you live out your values and goals.

Habit tactics

- ❑ **Optimize *resistance*.** If you want to do lots of reps during your workout, you *lower the resistance*: lots of reps is the goal when trying to create a new habit! Consider ways you can lower the resistance to make it easier to do the good habits you want to create—and raise the resistance to make it harder to do the bad habits you want to avoid. Try the **20-second rule**: set up your environment so that it takes 20 seconds or less to do the things you want to do, and make it as hard as possible to do the things you don't want to do. For example, have healthy foods prepared and easily accessible and keep unhealthy foods out of the house where you have to order or drive to get to them.
- ❑ **Start small.** The main goal when starting a habit is to get you to repeat the action in response to your cue as consistently as possible. A common mistake when creating a habit plan is making your action something that takes a lot of willpower to do. Make the target action easy enough that you would still do it if you were tired, stressed, and depleted with little or no willpower. For example, if your goal is to read 30 minutes each night before bed, start with the goal of 5 minutes. When motivation is high, you'll likely continue to reach 30 minutes, but when it's low, you can still make progress forming the habit by just doing the 5 minutes.
- ❑ **Use the power of peer pressure for good.** Others can be a great resource to help you stay committed to your new habit. For instance, if you make a plan to go to the gym with someone who is a gym regular, this shifts the resistance to encourage you to go because you'd need to awkwardly back out otherwise! When creating your “when, then, because” habit plan, consider who can be on your team to help you stay committed to building your desired habit.
- ❑ **Avoid or remove bad peer pressure.** Other people and environments can also get in the way of creating good habits. If you're trying to avoid alcohol, going to the bar or spending time with heavy drinkers can push the resistance in the wrong direction and make it really hard to stick with your habit plan. Which environments, situations, or people do you need to avoid to optimize your habits?
- ❑ **Make your choices automatic.** The beauty of when-then statements is that they eliminate the need to choose whether or not to do the new desired habit when the cue occurs. Another way to automatically choose to do the new desired habit is by linking it to your self-identity. For example, if you want to start drinking water instead of soda, start saying to yourself when tempted with soda, “I'm a water drinker,” or “Bens don't drink soda.” It might seem odd at first, but the more you say it and do the desired behavior to back it up, the more likely this will become a rule that becomes automatic.

Notes



BECAUSE

This is the **immediate reward** you get from the action. The reward can be intrinsic (something you enjoy doing in itself), internal (a feeling of pride or accomplishment), or extrinsic (such as the taste of a favorite food or the excitement of reading an entertaining post). After a habit is fully formed, the reward can no longer be present, and you'll still continue the habit.

Habit tactics

- ❑ **The reward must be immediate.** A common mistake some make when trying to create a habit is that they focus on long-term goals like losing 15 lbs for summer. While these can be good motivators, when trying to form a habit, the reward needs to happen right after you perform the action.
- ❑ **The reward doesn't need to be consistent.** You might be surprised to learn that people are often more motivated to continue an action when the reward doesn't happen every time or the type of reward is random. Think of rewards in the way a slot machine works: you get the reward enough to stay motivated to keep pulling the lever but you don't win every time.
- ❑ **The action itself can be the reward.** What do you already love to do? Can doing more of that help you to achieve your target goal or value? For example, if your goal is to exercise, and you love playing basketball, try to make playing basketball for a targeted amount of time your habit! Loving to do something, and making the time to do it are two different things. Creating a strategic habit plan and using habit tactics can help you optimize doing what you love to accomplish your target goal or value.
- ❑ **Try temptation bundling.** If you're having a tough time finding a reward for your desired habit, try connecting it to something you enjoy that might be unrelated. For example, if your guilty pleasure is a podcast or audio book, commit to listen to it only when running. Or if you like reading about sports, commit to only doing it after you practice gratitude. Just make sure you're being strategic and not creating a new, unintended bad habit.
- ❑ **Use your signature strengths.** Another way to build in a reward to your habit is by using your signature strengths. Signature strengths are the character traits that you're naturally motivated to use, and you feel energized and true to yourself when you apply them. By capitalizing on your signature strengths, you're more likely to enjoy doing your habit. For example, if your desired habit is to go for a run each morning, and curiosity is a signature strength, take different paths each run to explore your neighborhood.

Notes

Use HPRC's Signature Strengths worksheet to learn more about your dominant strengths.



REPEAT

The key to a habit being formed is repetition! As you keep doing your **When, Then, Because...Repeat plan**, expect that there will likely be bumps in the road. **Learn and grow from the process.** Do habit AARs to determine if you can tweak your habit to better achieve your target goal or value or if you might need to change your course of action.

Habit tactics

- ❑ **Use a TFF approach to maintain energy and motivation.** Make sticking to your habit easier by boosting your Total Force Fitness: get enough sleep, eat nutritious foods, exercise, practice gratitude, etc. Use HPRC's Total Force Fitness Inventory to help get you there.
- ❑ **Don't get overly specific on time of day.** A common push when creating goals is to get super specific. When it comes to building habits, it's best to set a more general time of day you want to do the desired habit vs. a specific time. For example, if you want to do PT each morning, setting a very specific time like 0600 is actually less effective than "in the morning," because if something happens and you get to post after 0600, you're now less likely to follow through vs. if your target was to do PT just after you arrive at post. Semper Gumby!
- ❑ **Use changes and Mondays to your advantage.** Research shows people are more likely to stick to a new habit when they start with a new beginning. Starting a new habit in conjunction with a birthday, PCS, promotion, new year, or even just the beginning of the week can help you follow through with your plan.
- ❑ **Trust the process.** If you can't get yourself to do the new habit at first, don't lose hope. Building habits is often a trial-and-error process that can take many attempts. Learn from your mistakes. If one thing doesn't work, try something else. Maybe you can break down the habit to make it simpler or find a different routine to connect it to. And try to enjoy the process of learning about yourself! Success or failure, you're still learning valuable information on what makes you tick!
- ❑ **Write your When, Then, Because...Repeat plan below.** Writing your strategic habit plan helps you to commit to it and makes you more likely to repeat it. Reflect on each of the habit tactics and create your own **When, Then, Because plan**—then keep repeating it!

WHEN... (cue)	
THEN... (action)	
BECAUSE... (reward)	
REPEAT!	