

Our Habits Determine the Outcome of Our Lives

By *Harrison Barnes*

When I was younger, I was reasonably good at tennis and would have been capable of being an exceptional player if I had developed the correct habits. By the age of 15 I had developed a serve so strong that even professional tennis players had difficulty returning it with any consistency. The problem with this serve was that I only got it in around 30% of the time (and I had a horrible second serve). I also had an extremely good forehand that was devastating to my opponents. In a similar manner, the forehand--when I hit it my hardest--did not go in nearly as much as it should have.

During my eighth grade year, I was regularly beating players in my age group who were ranked in my state. On at least a few occasions, I beat tennis players who were considered among the top 20 or so in the state for my age group. My father realized I had a lot of potential and after I completed eighth grade, he took me to a private tennis instructor and arranged for me to get at least a few lessons per week for the entire summer.

I started playing with the instructor and I remember him telling me that I had the potential to be very good but I would need to develop different habits.

- Instead of hitting the ball hard, I had to start lobbing it more often, making it harder for kids my age to return.
- Instead of hitting harder serves, I had to concentrate on getting them in.
- Instead of using a two-handed backhand, I needed to learn a one-handed backhand.
- Instead of standing upright when I hit the ball, I needed to concentrate on leaning forward.
- Instead of standing upright after a shot, I needed to get down lower on my knees.

What the pro was talking about was the need to develop *new habits* and ways of playing. He told me that if I did not develop these sorts of habits, I would never be a great player. I doubted the pro at the time and did not believe him. I ignored his advice and believed that my current habits and ways of playing were very good. *After all, I had beat lots of exceptional players. Even the pro had trouble returning my serve. Maybe he was trying to sabotage my game because he was jealous!*

I started skipping the tennis pro's scheduled lessons. I fought his efforts to change my game. I believed I would be just fine the way I was.

When I got into ninth grade, I tried out for the varsity tennis team. During the winter, I had been playing in an indoor club and had played tennis against many of the varsity players—some of whom were now seniors and, therefore, much older than me. Since I had been able to beat many of these players, I figured I would have no problem making the varsity tennis team.

When I tried out, I made the varsity team—at least, *I thought I had*. Then, about a week after everyone had been cut, the coach came up to me after practice and told me she was cutting me. She told me that I would “lose more than I won,” because of my bad habits. Furthermore, she said that if I wanted to be on the team the following year, I would have to spend the year working on the same things the pro the summer before had told me I would need to work on. Essentially, I was cut because I had such bad habits.

Sadly, instead of working on my habits, I quit tennis and never played again all through high school. Why? I was afraid to change my bad habits and work on good habits.

How many things have you quit in your life because you could not develop good habits? How many times have you given up on something because you could not change?

Let me tell you about an experience I had with habits that changed my life. The same year I was bumped from the tennis team, I also failed ninth grade—and received one of the biggest wake-up calls of my life. I was taking Algebra and Spanish that year. Each night there was homework in these classes, and I did not do the homework. Why? When I was little, I had taken all of these IQ tests and been told how smart I was. I'd also gotten very good grades before then without studying. Who needs homework?

So, instead of doing homework each night, I watched television and did other things. Within a few months, I was way behind in my classes and could never catch up. You can never catch up in a class like Algebra or Spanish if you do not do the homework and memorize what you are supposed to. This is what happened to me.

This is what happens when you do not develop good habits. You fail at things that you should be succeeding in. You fail not because you are not smart enough or talented enough—you fail because you develop bad habits.

When I started my next year of school, my father required me to study from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. each night. I was not allowed to watch television or anything else. He required me to develop good habits, and these habits ended up changing the direction of my life. To my astonishment, within the next several years, I had become a great student, was considered smart, and was a completely different person. This was all because of habit.

I have been taking yoga lessons recently and am enjoying it. Yoga is actually a very complex discipline, and the postures involved in yoga can take years to develop. Last night, I was in a class and the teacher stopped me in the middle of a pose. The teacher told me to do only half of the pose until I was able to do the entire pose correctly. The message was: *Do not develop the habit of doing something the wrong way. Start from the beginning and do only as much as you can do correctly. Once you have developed the correct habit, then and only then should you attempt more.*

When most of us think of habits, we think of the sorts of habits that hurt us—things like smoking cigarettes, driving too fast, and so forth. We rarely consider other, more helpful habits we develop, such as flossing our teeth, stopping at stop signs, or showering each day. There are tons of habits we can develop that can help us a great deal, such as saving money, working a certain amount each day, exercising a given number of hours per week, meditating, taking self-improvement classes,

reading, and more.

Setting goals and taking consistent action toward those goals is an example of a helpful habit.

The beauty of habits is that unlike anything else in this world, they can help us make massive and profound transformations in everything that we do. Power comes from taking a small action each day toward an objective. In order to achieve any goal of significance, you need to take smaller and smaller steps toward it each day. You need to refine what you are doing.

One of the most important things you can ask yourself is whether your habits empower you or hold you back. The habits you have and adopt will determine the outcome of your life. Similarly, a lack of habits will dramatically affect your life. Habits will determine whether you are

- successful or unsuccessful
- happy or sad
- rich or poor
- healthy or unhealthy
- excited or bored
- alone or with someone
- in peace or stressed out

In fact, the more you examine your habits, the more you will realize that these habits are having an impact on what happens in your life. Some people have bad habits; other people seem to have no habits at all.

In truth, the only difference between those who have failed and those who have succeeded lies in their habits. Good habits are the keys to all success. Bad habits are the unlocked door to failure. Thus, the first law I will obey, which precedes all others, is—I will form good habits and become their slave.

Og Mandino, [The Greatest Salesman in the World](#)

There are many people who are happy to tell you what you need to do in order to be successful. There are also thousands of ways to be successful in all sorts of businesses, professions, and more. While knowledge and information about what you need to do is required for you to be successful, the important thing is focusing on what you need to do consistently to be successful. What actions do you need to take on a consistent basis to be successful?

There are people in the world who talk about and hope that they will achieve certain results in their lives, and there are those who just go out and achieve those results. There are lots of people out there who are happy to talk about what they would like to see happen in their lives. Most of these people are on the sidelines of life. The difference between those people who achieve what they want in life and those who merely talk about what they want is habit.

THE LESSON

Bad habits will cause you to fail at things at which you should succeed. Develop habits that empower you rather than hold you back. Habits make up the only real differences between those who succeed and those who fail at life. Habit separates those who achieve what they want in life from those who only talk about their goals.

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