

You Need to Condition Yourself to Make a Lasting Change

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One Saturday evening around 10:00 p.m., I ran into one of my neighbors at the grocery store. We were both buying ice cream. My neighbor is a very well-known businessman and someone I have always looked up to from a distance. We started chatting and he mentioned that he had just come from an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. This guy is probably in his early 60s, is very fit and enthusiastic, and he's the last guy you would ever expect to have substance abuse problems.

"I did not know you were an alcoholic," I said. I was honestly extremely surprised.

"I used cocaine every day for around six months. I did this around twenty years ago and then quit. I just go to the meetings every few weeks to continually condition myself to a state where I will never use again. The meetings keep me from ever going back," he said.

Walking out of the grocery store, I could not help but wonder why this guy was spending his Saturday night at an AA meeting if he had not had any substance abuse problems in twenty years. It just seemed extremely unusual that someone would feel the need to continually go to meetings to "condition" himself.

I started thinking about the word he used: "Condition." He was doing something regularly and over and over again to make sure that a new behavior that he wanted was conditioned. The more I thought about this, the more I wondered whether or not he incorporated "conditioning" into other areas of his life and if his process of conditioning himself was one reason he had become such a success. It is rare for someone to completely change a behavior:

- It is rare for a drug user to quit and then remain off drugs.
- It is rare for someone who is fat to change his or her behavior and become thin.
- It is rare for someone who is poor to become rich and stay rich.
- It is rare for someone who is unpopular to suddenly become popular and stay popular.
- It is rare for someone who is promiscuous to remain faithful.
- It is rare for someone who habitually quits [jobs](#) to remain in one job.
- It is rare for someone who has never worked hard to start and remain working hard.
- It is rare for someone who is not a leader to become a leader.
- It is rare for someone who is a bad parent to become a good parent.
- It is rare for someone who is cheap to become generous.
- It is rare for someone who is always depressed to become and stay happy.

When you think about it, none of these sorts of changes should be "rare"—but they are. Most people simply do not change, and they spend their lives and careers as the person they have always been. The reason I believe that people do not change is that they fail to "condition" themselves. The highest achievers out there are no different from you or me; however, what they do is condition themselves to have certain types of behaviors that others do not.

If you think about it, there are countless positive behaviors that you have conditioned in your life. For example, you probably brush your teeth at least once a day. You also probably take a shower or bath frequently. You also probably wear clean clothes most days. These sorts of things are all conditioned behaviors. You do them due to the society you are in; however, they are positive nevertheless. These sorts of conditioned behaviors help you. The key to reaching your greatest potential is to condition yourself to develop behaviors that will elevate you in your life far beyond where you currently are.

About three weeks ago, I walked into a Bikram yoga studio about twenty minutes from my house with my wife. It was a weekend and we were bored and looking for something interesting to do. It was the first time I had ever done a Bikram yoga class. Bikram yoga is a ninety-minute class that is done in a 105-degree room. It is really pretty exhausting in all respects. In addition to being a grueling cardio workout, the workout is also quite stressful on your joints and muscles. In fact, about forty-five minutes into the class I started to get dizzy and almost passed out a few times. I was seeing stars and swaying on my feet.

We had no idea what we were getting into. Prior to starting the class, we had to rent two towels and purchase two bottles of water. You sweat so much during the class that you actually need to stand on top of a towel because otherwise you would be standing in a muck of your sweat. If the instructors gave you enough water breaks, you could easily drink more than a gallon of water during the typical class.

After taking a shower, I sat down in the lobby of the studio. The yoga teacher came up to me and subtly encouraged me to do something called a "60-day challenge." The idea of this challenge is to spend the next 60 days doing yoga every single day of the week. The changes to your body and mind after doing a 60-day challenge would be profound, according to the teacher.

Normally, I would have laughed and told the teacher "no, that's all right" (and then probably proceed to discuss the insanity of such a proposition with my wife on the way home in the car). Here, however, I assured the yoga teacher that I would be back every single day for the next 60 days. In fact, I have not missed a single day since starting this more than three weeks ago. In addition to spending ninety minutes in this 105-degree studio each day, I am also running five miles each day and working twelve hours a day in front of the computer.

I decided to do the 60-day challenge because I was seeking a challenge for myself after watching my wife do a fitness challenge. At the time, my wife was on Day 75 of a grueling exercise regimen called P-90X on DVD. Here, some amped-up guy named Tony Horton led her in various exercises where she jumps up and down on one foot, does an insane number of

push-ups and pull-ups, and even does something with giant rubber bands. I purchased P-90X for her birthday. I have watched her do this exercise and it is crazy.

She recently completed the full 90 days of the program without missing a day. She made sure she did it wherever she was, even while traveling. I have to say that this exercise appears to really have made a big difference in her health and fitness. She even started skipping most dinners and, instead, puts a bunch of vegetables in a juicer.

What is most inspiring about my wife, though, is that she was able to condition herself to start the exercise and not quit. She conditioned herself to follow through. I have heard various statistics, but it is something like 95% of the people who order a self-improvement program never complete the course. I am sure this has something to do with the fact that, like so many of us, these people simply do not make the time and cannot condition themselves to adopt the new behavior.

One of the hardest things for any of us is to develop new patterns and ways of doing things in our lives. The reason I accepted this crazy yoga challenge was that I knew that it would develop a new pattern for my life and that this new pattern would be beneficial. I also knew that doing the yoga class only once, or sporadically, was unlikely to result in any serious and lasting change. Major improvements in our lives come only when we condition ourselves over and over again in one direction.

Since starting this ridiculously exhausting yoga class, I have noticed that new people show up every day. Most never come back after doing it the first time. Many people walk out (like I wanted to) after an hour or so of the torture and pain this yoga causes. Very few people stick with the habit of going day after day.

I have to say that the instructors who do the practice every day look great. They also appear much calmer and more level-headed than most of the students. While I do not completely understand it, there clearly do appear to be some very significant benefits to this sort of daily yoga practice.

One of the most difficult things for anyone to do is to get leverage over themselves and condition themselves to go in a new direction.

In my mind, the point of this Bikram yoga class challenge is to condition my mind to stick with something and change. Instead of doing this, I could have made a commitment and conditioned myself to spend an hour per day doing community service, or taking my dog on a long walk each day, or studying a language. That too would have benefits.

Getting leverage over yourself and creating a new life is never easy for anyone to do. In fact, it rarely happens. Very few people are ever able to make very fundamental transformations in their lives and become someone completely new and completely improved—and stick with it.

People may get more education, have new habits, but their fundamental relationship with themselves and the world does not change too much.

You need to get leverage over yourself and condition new habits and behaviors within yourself to make any sort of fundamental and lasting change. If you want to be in good shape, you cannot run out and exercise once and then say you are done forever. Instead, the conditioning needs to be part of your lifestyle. Success and achievement are part of a lifestyle. There are no short cuts. You need to condition yourself to adopt new patterns in your life.