# HEROES
## Ordinary Men and Women Who Dare to See or Meet the Call of a Possibility Bigger Than Themselves

I have had the pleasure to follow James Clear's work for several years. I made a Gmail folder, as his work began to make a "dent" in my own thinking and incrementally increase my work/life productivity.

When I started the "Conversations with Heroes" project, I wanted to share heroes who are impacting the world, one compounded idea at a time. Heroes that worked at their craft with a deep commitment to serve and multiply others. James is simply that possibility.

I hope you enjoy our interview as much as I have and take his work into your communities, families, places of worship, work, and yes, even James' favorite, the gym!

*"I don't have the natural talent of Kobe Bryant or the sheer brilliance of Mozart, but I'm willing to put in my "10 years of silence." I've only been writing on this site for 9 months, but I see this as the beginning of a 30-year project for me. And because I'm in this for good, I can win with commitment, grit, and unwavering consistency."*
**…James Clear**

This hooked me years ago from James and humbles me still today - to quiet the ego and do the work that is required to be extraordinary.
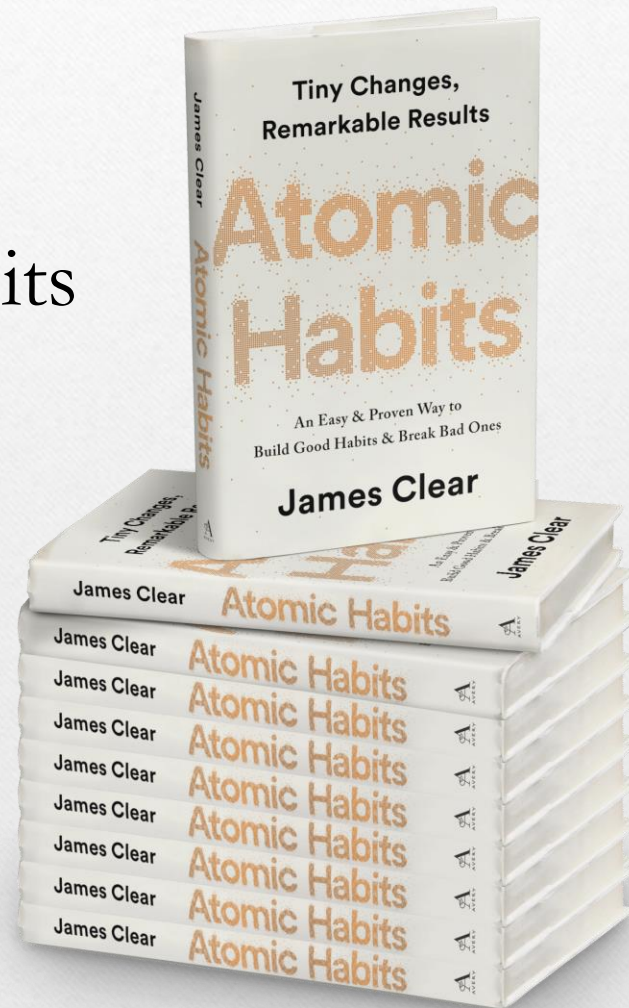
*"On belay?" "Climb ready?" Climb on."* **…Ralph Campbell**

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# James Clear

**Author:** Atomic Habits

**Creator:** The Habits Academy

**Education:** Denison University Columbus, OH

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# James Clear

*"…to offer a playbook guided by science and practical experience for how to improve oneself…how to stay on track, how to act, how to get better, how to improve, and how to keep my habits dialed in"*

# Ralph Campbell

*"… to leave a positive mark on peoples' lives so that, together, the difference we make for others can never be erased."*

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# PRINCIPLES

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# #1: "INCUBATION OF SKILLSETS"

**CAMPBELL:** Tell me a little bit about your background and any formal education you've had.

**CLEAR:** As an undergrad, I was a science major, which, looking back, was one of my first entrepreneurial endeavors. I knew that I was interested in science, and I tried to go the conventional route. I took a couple of classes in chemistry and physics and biology, but I just wasn't feeling any of those majors. I went to Denison University, a small liberal arts school in Ohio, and I found out that I could design my own major, which is exactly what I decided to do. Most of my coursework was in chemistry and physics classes, but I also threw in a little bit of biology and anatomy. I called it biomechanics. I love it because I was given the freedom to investigate topics that I wanted.

After undergrad, I went to graduate school to get an MBA. That was an interesting time because it gave me two years to really think and consider what I wanted to do. I knew that whatever courses I took in business school would be useful, but I didn't know I was going to be an entrepreneur. As part of my graduate assistantship, I worked at The Center for Entrepreneurship, and I was tasked with analyzing venture capital investment, so I tracked a large portfolio of companies. Through this assignment, I was able to see what people were launching and trying out. That's how I got the itch to try my own thing. Throughout those two years I developed a set of ideas. For about a year and a half after I graduated, I probably tried four or five of those ideas. Many times, it was just a website—setting it up and seeing if anybody was interested or if I could drive a little traffic to it. But I also tried out other ideas like iPhone apps. I did freelance for a little while and taught myself how to do web design. I now refer to that period as the period where I incubated my skillset. It really was that progression from starting as a science major, having a couple of years to think in business school, deciding I wanted to start my own thing, and then the year and a half when I tried a bunch of other ideas. Eventually, I circled back to science—the science of peak performance, habits, human behavior, and decision making. I've been working in that arena for the last five or six years now.

# #2: "CONCENTRIC CIRCLES"

**CAMPBELL:** Can you unpack some of the content on your website and what you've spoken about—the idea of concentric circles? For the person who's never heard of concentric circles, what's your idea behind it, how did you design it, and why is it so powerful?

**CLEAR:** Just for a bit of clarity, I've used the idea of concentric circles in two different ways. Are you referring to identity-based habits or just to making an impact in general?

**CAMPBELL:** More impact in general.

**CLEAR:** Got it. Like many people, I'm very interested in how I can do work that matters? How can I try to make some kind of impact or leave a small dent in my corner of the universe to make the world a slightly better place? And since those questions consumed me, I naturally started to ask myself some questions like "How can I do that?", "What's the most effective way to spend my time?", "How exactly does the world change?", and "How do other people leave their mark on society?" When you ask yourself those questions, it's so easy to think that you need to do something really grand, whether it's launching some nonprofit or doing something that appears very public and sexy with big donations or going to a foreign country to do mission work. But, in fact, I think often the world changes in concentric circles. So it's often best to start with yourself—to start at the core and then work your away out from there. That was one of the reasons I started writing about habits to begin with.

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**CLEAR:** Most of my writings are messages to myself. **I write to remind myself how to stay on track, how to act, how to get better, how to improve, and how to keep my habits dialed in.** And it just so happens that many other people are also interested in these questions. So, what I'm trying to offer is a playbook guided by science and practical experience for how to improve yourself. Assuming that each person can commit in a small way to getting better, then we can start to work our way outward on those concentric circles and get to the next layer. You may say, "All right, now that I've gotten myself sorted and dialed in, let me focus on helping the people around me." Once we have a small, tight-knit group of friends and family who are all improving, then we can start to shift our focus on wider world issues and try to make those better as well. That general approach seems to be pretty effective, and it also gives people a reason to have and show more personal responsibility. That's very important because in an ideal world, everybody takes long term responsibility for their actions and focuses on improving themselves each day. I truly believe that if we had that sort of world, a lot of a problems we currently have would resolve themselves organically. It's an effective way to approach the process.

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# The Layers of Behavior Change

The person that you believe that you are.

"I'm the type of person who never misses a workout."

**Your Identity**

The actions you take.

"I can do 100 pushups in a row."

**Your Performance**

**Your Appearance**

The way the world perceives you.

"It looks like you've lost 10 pounds."

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# #3: "SHARING WITH THE RISK OF BEING JUDGED"

**CAMPBELL:** When I was younger, back in the 90s, I did a workshop called Lifespring and it was really about uncovering some of the conversations out of which we live our lives. One of the things we talked about was the distinction between playing on the field, being accountable, and putting on the pads versus being a bystander in the stands. I love hearing how you wrote that.

**CLEAR:** I love the speech "The Man in the Arena" by Theodore Roosevelt. In it he explains that he would much rather be the man in the arena who gets beaten up and dirty and torn down than to be the person in the stands watching. That resonates deeply for me. I used to think that a lot as an athlete. I played baseball throughout college and I would say, "If we're going to lose the game, I want to be the person that's out there." I'd rather be the pitcher on the mound and shoulder that burden and responsibility than to have watched the loss from the bench. I think that's a good principle to apply to life in general—it's better to share your work and face the possibility of failure than not to share it at all. I think that it's a challenge every creator faces: either you can keep your ideas inside of you and stay protected and play it safe or you can share those ideas with the world and run the risk of being judged. Basically, your choices are 1) do I want to be ignored and keep ideas inside or 2) do I want to risk being judged and make ideas public? I think the only way that we can make some kind of positive impact is to share with each other, and that's why I lean heavily toward the side of sharing with the risk of being judged.

# #4: "WHO INSPIRED MY WHY"

***CAMPBELL:*** Who are some of the early pioneers in the field that you're studying now who have inspired your "why"?

***CLEAR:*** That's an interesting question because I have been inspired by pioneers in a couple of different fields. First of all, a little bit about my approach. First, I am an idea agnostic, so that means I don't have an allegiance to any particular field. If an idea comes from neuroscience, or biology, or psychology, or philosophy, I don't care where the idea comes from as long as it's a good idea. Secondly, I'm a tech entrepreneur in a lot of ways so I'm focused on scale and reach. I often say that I optimize for reach not for revenue, so a lot of the choices I make are to try to impact as many people as possible, not necessarily to make as much money as possible. In many cases that Venn diagram—between impact and revenue—overlaps, but not always. So, I've been influenced by two different sets of people who are pioneers.

If we look at philosophy, I'm inspired by some of the people who pioneered it like Marcus Aurelius or Aristotle. But, if it's related to habits and the science of behavior change, most of that work has been in the last 100 years. I'm also influenced by people like B.F. Skinner, Edward Thorndike, or James Watson. There's a long, long list of those who have iterated and built upon each other's work. Many of those people and the science that they developed are part of the book that I just finished writing.

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## #4: "WHO INSPIRED MY WHY" *continued*

*CLEAR:* The people I am inspired by in my approach to business are mostly online writers. If I were living in a different era such as in the seventies or eighties, then I'd be extremely influenced by writers for the New Yorker or The Atlantic or The New York Times. But because society has changed now and the ability to publish has become more egalitarian, a lot of the people who I looked too early on were other bloggers.  In particular, when I got started around 2010, Chris Guillebeau (The Art of Non-Conformity) and Leo Babauta (Zen Habits) were the two bloggers who I looked to.  They had really big sites and were growing quickly. Leo writes about habits and Chris writes about travel, totally different topics than I do usually. But, they gave me a roadmap for what it would look like to share work on a wide scale and on how to approach it. The Internet has provided and promoted new strategies and models for consideration of ideas, so these men were a good model for me when I was getting started.
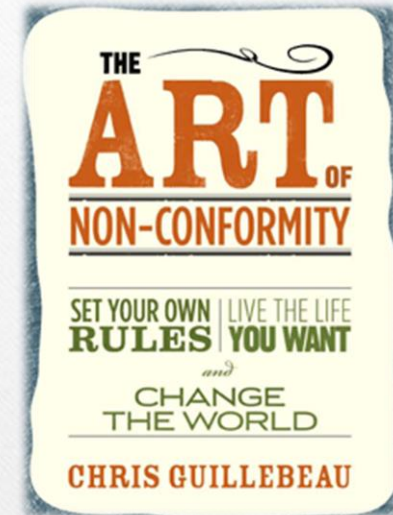
# #5: "BLOGGING"

**CAMPBELL:** I remember when blogging became popular and was part of that whole disruption curve. After a while, it leveled out because so many people were blogging. I guess the interesting ones stuck and then others jumped to other domains.

**CLEAR:** Blogging has matured a lot. It used to be like a personal journal and anyone was able to post personal thoughts online. Just the fact that anyone could do that was interesting. Now blogging has matured and for many, it has become just a new form of media or like a new media company. The blogs that are really big are sort of a new age, morphed form of what it would have looked like to create a magazine or newspaper back in the day. If you talk to the people behind a lot of those blogs, they approach it that way. Some bloggers have staffs of writers or well thought out content calendars. Blogging is very strategic now; it's not a personal journal, and the level of quality for the work has changed significantly in the last five or six years that I've been writing. It used to be simply based on word count—if you wrote a post of 2,000-3,000 words that was noteworthy in itself because very few people were spending the time to write 2,000 words on a topic. But now, the length is not the critical issue; it's the quality. A good writer will treat it like a journalist does for the New York Times and spend 15, 20, 30 hours on a single post. That's shifted the landscape a lot.

**CAMPBELL:** And it continues to shift—you're spot on. A lot of the books I've read over the years started out as articles or as a blog post. A good example is work by Greg McKeown. I don't know if you've read his book ***Essentialism****,* but it started as an article and people loved the idea, so he turned it into a book.

**CLEAR:** And then media changed a lot, too. We have podcasts and social media and all that. A lot of the rising stars now are not only bloggers, they have become social media stars.
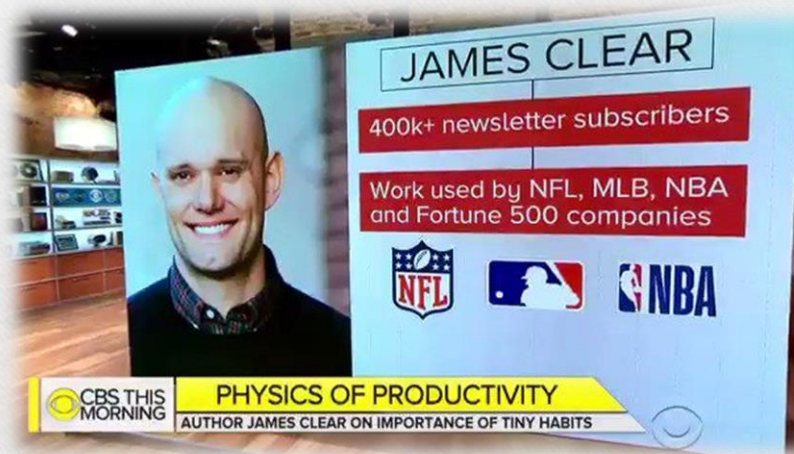
# #6: "PODCASTS – 550,000 AND COUNTING"

**CAMPBELL:** Yes, like Gary Vaynerchuk and the like. Let me ask you a side question on the whole idea on podcasts. Three years ago, podcasts numbered nearly a quarter million and now we're at 550,000 and counting. That's a 100% increase in three years. What is your take on it: do you think they're valuable? I think it's saturated but I'm biased because I know exactly who I want to follow and I know exactly what I'm into. So, for someone like me, an active learner, I can find what I'm looking for, but the average 12-13-year-old who's in "curiosity mode" and who goes searching for podcasts and there's 550,000 of them, what's your take on where we're going with podcasts? Do we have too many or is that it now?

**CLEAR:** My first thought is that it's maturing as well. Just like the quality bar is rising for blogs, the quality bar for podcasts is rising significantly. We've seen this with some of the most popular ones. These NPR-style podcasts like "Serial" and "S-town" are essentially a professional radio show. So when you look at that aspect, it raises the bar of what independent producers have to put out as well. The same way bloggers have content calendars and staffs of writers, podcasts will increasingly have staffs of producers, more carefully thought out segments, better sound design and production, and so on.

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## #6: "PODCASTS – 550,000 AND COUNTING" *continued*

***CLEAR:*** The other piece is format. In order to stand out in a crowded sea like that, one must really have a good angle. For example, there are a ton of interview podcasts now and most are 30-60 minutes long. But then there is someone like Tim Ferriss, who has a very big audience and has a ton of reach himself. But, even Tim has to innovate. When Tim started his podcast, he was one of the first people doing these super long, 2-3-hour podcasts. While getting interesting guests is a huge part of it, Tim was also able to find a way to make the podcast a little bit more unique. His podcast was the only place to go if someone wanted to listen to an in-depth conversation with someone interesting. That's a small thing but finding a way to stand out a little bit is important.

*CLEAR:* Then I see a lot of podcasts that are carving out a niche for themselves by having an interesting idea to hinge on. For example, there are book-related podcasts, and one of them is all about self-help books. Each week the hosts focus on a new self-help book. They read the book, follow the lessons presented in the it, and on the podcast discuss the principles and talk about how they applied it. That's a very simple idea that I can explain to you in one or two sentences, but it gives people a hook, a reason, to listen. So I think you'll increasingly see podcasts that will be 1) of high quality; 2) increasingly specialized and talk about niche topics; 3) marketed strategically to attempt to gain a mass audience; and 4) unique in a way that makes them stand out from the crowd. They don't have to do everything unique; for instance, Tim's podcast is still just an interview podcast but it's got a little bit of an edge or angle that makes it different and gives the audience a more compelling reason to listen.

*CAMPBELL:* Some using social media like Adam Grant and Malcolm Gladwell have advertisers. They spend 2-3 minutes of their podcast on a commercial talking about the advertisers. But because Malcolm is so interesting, I'm actually listening to the commercial, which I never listen to on TV.

*CLEAR*: The medium is maturing so users have to figure out the business model. That style of native advertising that sounds organic, like a testimonial and interesting, is a fascinating thing to watch. I'm not sure where it will all go, but I don't think it's tapped out. It's going to continue to grow.

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# #7: "BOOKS YOU'VE GIVEN MOST AS A GIFT"

**CAMPBELL:** What is the book or books you've given most as a gift, and why?

**CLEAR:** The book I've given away most is The Manual for Living by Epictetus. A lot of people who talk about the stoics and ancient philosophers talk about Meditations by Marcus Aurelius, another great book. But I think Manual for Living is more practical. It can be read in an hour and it's filled with ideas and insights that should remind us of ourselves. You could probably read it every week and it would still benefit you. I'm just a big fan—I like the way he writes and the ideas that he shares.

# #8: "TREAT FAILURE AS SCIENTISTS DO – IT'S JUST A DATA POINT, NOT A FINISH LINE"

*CAMPBELL:* How has failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success in life? I know that's a big word nowadays and it's getting watered down, but it's just a word I'm using now.

*CLEAR:* I have two thoughts. The first is that it's only failure if you stop there. If you don't stop, then it's just learning. So, in that way, everything that I'm working on has been a product of failure. For example, the workout program that I did in the gym yesterday was, to some degree, informed by the workouts that I did previously that didn't work. All of those failures, if we want to call them that, were just learning opportunities that gradually nudged me to the place that I am now. And, you can see that in a thousand different ways in business and sports and in other areas.

## #8: "TREAT FAILURE AS SCIENTISTS DO – IT'S JUST A DATA POINT, NOT A FINISH LINE" *continued*

***CLEAR:*** Because I've had so many failures we literally do not have time to go through them all. But I will tell you about one that has helped a lot—one meta-failure, which is in sports. One of the great things about sports, in my opinion, is it teaches how to fail publicly. If you are on a sports team and you're playing and make an error, it feels bad.  It does not feel good to perform poorly in front of other people, especially when you care about the outcome. And that is great. It's great for everybody to learn that you can make a mistake and that the world keeps turning and it will not end because of your mistake.  I think the sooner children can learn that in their lives—and I was fortunate enough to learn it very early on—the more resilient they can become because they realize this was a mistake but there's always the next play. So, my focus needs to shift to the next play and being able to do that is a way of teaching yourself that failure is just part of the process of learning. Learning that concept early on in sports allowed me to internalize that thought and use it in the classroom, in business, and in personal relationships.  From a high level, I think that's useful.

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***CLEAR:*** The second thing I wanted to say is related to your comment that the word failure is being watered down as a term. I do think we can over-glamourize failure.

**CAMPBELL:** I didn't mean in a negative way. We use it so loosely that it loses its distinction power. That's what I meant by it.

***CLEAR:*** Especially in the startup community there is so much talk about how important it is to fail, that everybody needs experience, and that people need to embrace failure and so on. All of those things are true to a certain degree. But talking about it so much can glamourize failure and make it sound like that's the goal. It's not the goal. Failure always sucks. It does not feel good. And nobody wants to try incredibly hard to do something and have it not work out. But we just need to remember that it's part of the process of learning and not the endpoint. The phrase I like to use is "treat failure as scientists do." When scientists run an experiment and get a result that disagrees with their hypothesis, it doesn't mean that they failed. It's just a data point. And that, I think, is a good way to look at it: failure is a data point, not a finish line.

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# #9: "ATOMIC HABITS"

**CAMPBELL:** Let's talk about your book, <u>Atomic Habits</u>, that you've been writing for quite some time. I remember emailing you about it 7-8 months ago. I think you were close to the end of your writing journey. I'd like to hear the thought process that got you to actually write a book about habits?

**CLEAR:** I think the stat is that 88% of all people say they want to write a book. Do you know how many of those actually follow through and finish the book? I think that number is probably quite different.
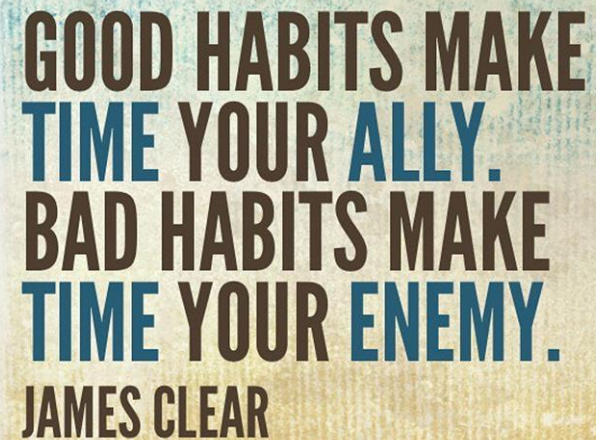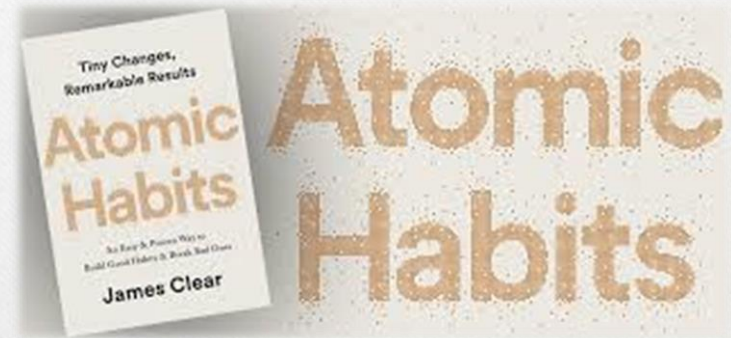
*CLEAR:* There are two things that led me to write the book. The first one was just a natural progression. I started writing at www.jamesclear.com. I wrote two articles a week for three years and the audience continued to grow quickly, hitting 50,000, then 100,000, and finally 400,000 email subscribers. I started to sense that "there seems to be something here." People seemed to be interested in my work. I had readers emailing me saying, "Do you have a book and what else can I read?" Those enquiries were all sorts of signals to me. Publishers started to reach out, book agents started reaching out, and there were a lot of boats going in that direction that sparked my interest. I began to think, "This is something I should do."

*The second reason and this is the real reason anyone should write a book, is I thought I had something to say and to add*. I believe, in my particular case, and I don't know if you want to call it a secret sauce or skill, that I can take complex topics and then distill them into easy to understand language that's practical and simple to apply. I try to be a bridge between scientific research and practical application in daily life.

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**CLEAR:** There have been some very good books written about habits in the past, especially *The Power of Habit,* the most recent one. Actually, in the process of writing my book, I came to respect Charles Duhigg and his book even more because he did a very good job explaining the science of how habits work. One critique of his book I have is that it doesn't give the reader a playbook for practical action sets. It talks about how habits work but doesn't necessarily talk about what to do to build better habits. It has a few ideas about how to build better habits, but it's not focused on that. I thought I could fill that gap. I can pick up where he left off and my book, *Atomic Habits,* that's what it's about**.**

GOOD HABITS MAKE TIME YOUR ALLY.
BAD HABITS MAKE TIME YOUR ENEMY.
JAMES CLEAR

ImageQuote

**CLEAR: It's about how to build a system of changes that naturally lead toward better habits and away from bad ones. It's rooted in the science of habits and the evidence of how habits work, but it's also focused on the practical application and simple steps that the reader can take to build little habits that compound and accumulate over time. Once I had that idea and felt like I can make a difference, I thought I should go ahead and write the book.**

**CAMPBELL:** I love the concept of your book. I believe that many people who write books haven't spent a lot of time or have actual practical experience in the domain that they write about. They know the theory behind it and they do all the amazing research, but Charles Duhigg can't speak about it as deeply. Charles is a researcher, writer, journalist, and a damn exceptional one at that. Charles hasn't, I believe, gotten his hands dirty and been on the field in a number of the things he's covering from a practicality standpoint. Many writers, I have noticed, have a lot of theory and sound concepts, but to me it does not always stick because people tend to follow people who have practiced or experienced, in part, what they write about.

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# #9: "ATOMIC HABITS" *continued*

***CAMPBELL:*** For instance, I enjoy Tim Ferriss. Tim is a guinea pig, he's on the field saying this worked, this didn't work, try this and don't try that. Gary Vaynerchuk is full of energy and can be all over the place, but there's something about Gary that there's some authenticity to his concepts and he's up at 2:30 – 3:00 am inspiring people. He's pushing the envelope and there is something powerful about that kind of that fire and passion that is so contagious and inspiring.

***CLEAR:*** I try very hard to have both. First, anyone can have an opinion, but it is a lot of work to have a good opinion, a well-researched, well-formed opinion. So, with anything that I write, I try to have in depth research, scientific support, and a lot of thought behind it. And for the writing to be good, for the storytelling to be good, I don't just want to be someone with an opinion, I also want to be a practitioner. That's why I trained hard with weight-lifting and competing and why I do travel photography and focus on that art form. In a certain way, I do have this meta-habit in writing, so I can talk about that and talk about my career as a writer. Each one of those is a little entry point to not only talk about what it means to build better habits but also to experiment with it and try it out. I think that it's really important to have those areas where you're not just in the Ivory Tower, you're also focused on how to implement it and how to live it out in daily life.

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**CAMPBELL:** That sticks out for you. You've amassed over 400,000 people subscribing to your newsletter. Everyone has an email and a lot of people are gathering data to get this audience, but then who keeps the followers? I think of people like the Malcolm Gladwell's and Adam Grant, people who keep having content, meaningful content, and relevance to people, so that's refreshing to see what you're doing.

## #10: "MY HEROES"

*CAMPBELL:* This project exemplifies my definition of heroes: "Heroes are men and women who dare to see or meet the call of a possibility bigger than themselves". Based on this definition, who are a few of your heroes growing up and what would identify them as heroes now?

**CLEAR:** While growing up, my heroes were all personal ones. They were family members of mine. My grandfather played a very important role in my life. He was the leader of our family, our tribe. I had an interesting childhood. All my relatives lived within twenty minutes of each other, and every Sunday, for 18 years, we would go to my grandparent's house and have dinner. Along with me were my family and all my cousins, so we had about 15-20 of us getting together every Sunday for dinner. And that was normal to me. I didn't even think about it, but now that I know how most people spend their weekends, I'm like "oh wow, most people don't do that". My grandmother was a saint for cooking for 20 people every weekend, but it was an interesting way to grow up and my grandfather was the one who made that whole ship run. Looking at him and watching him as a leader of our family, I internalized some of his approaches. He also was very playful and funny, and he loved giving gifts. He also loved playing practical jokes and so I tried to not take myself so seriously. **My parents have been incredibly supportive, not only of my writing or what I'm working on now but really any project that I dove into. They're my biggest fans. Just knowing that your parents have your back really accounted for a lot. I would say those are my first heroes, my true actual heroes in life.**

## #10: "MY HEROES" *continued*

**CLEAR:** When it comes to professionally, I'm careful about not putting anybody on a pedestal too much. What I love is watching greatness, and so I love watching LeBron James play basketball or Tom Brady play football. It's not necessarily because they're heroes of mine but because I love to see what it looks like when you are excellent in a particular field. While I certainly hope they're good people, I don't know them personally, and I'm not really that focused on trying to emulate them in every aspect of my life. I just appreciate the fact that they're great athletes. The same is true for someone who is an amazing writer, chess player, negotiator, or a really great friend and is just really good at listening. People don't necessarily need to be a hero of mine, but I just try to appreciate the areas where people are excellent and see what I can internalize and learn from that particular slice of their life.



"I like criticism. It makes you strong."

LeBron James
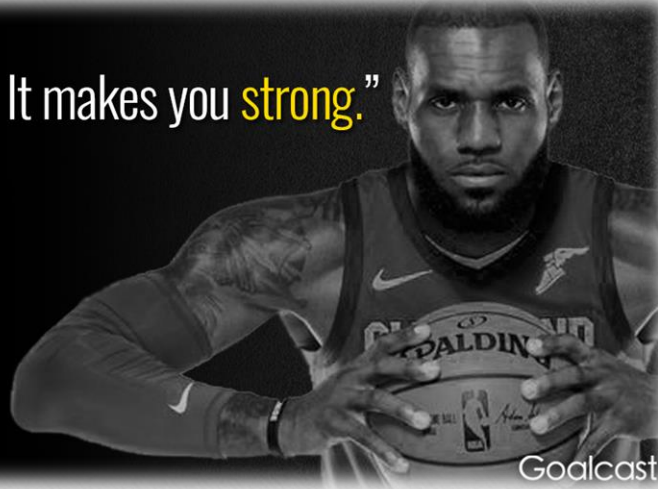
Goalcast

## #11: "MENTORSHIP"

**CAMPBELL:** Do you have any co-collaborators you worked with on this book you just finished? Anyone you've had as a mentor in this process or did you just do it yourself?

**CLEAR:** First, from a logistical standpoint, all of the writing that's on my site, all of the writing that's in the book, I've done myself. I have editors at the publishing house and my assistant, Lindsay, has worked hard on the book as well. She usually reads drafts and does some research and stuff like that but all the ideas in the work come from me. I think that's important. I am just trying to build, and I want [www.jamesclear.com](www.jamesclear.com) to be sort of an archive of everything I've created in my life. I want to look back and say, "Here's what I built; this is what I shared," so I think it's important that it comes directly from me.

I actually feel little allegiance to my ideas. What I mean by that is, I believe deeply in them, and I'm always trying to update and improve them. Everything that I share, I've learned from somebody else. I think the credit should be given to the people whom I've learned from, the people that came before me, everybody that I've read, and people that I've talked to. To that end, I have developed a tight-knit group of somewhere between 8-15 people who are my peers and have also written books or have also built successful businesses. While I wouldn't necessarily call them mentors in a formal sense, multiple times a year we'll hang out. We'll get together for a few days, and invariably those are the times my best ideas come from both for business and for writing. Developing a kind of tight-knit group of other peers whose work I respect, that's my form of mentorship.

# #12: "EXPAND YOUR PETRI DISH"

*CAMPBELL:* Daniel Chambliss, author of *The Mundanity of Excellence,* shared that part of his growth was going to events and doing things outside of his domain. He would deliberately and intentionally do things that professors wouldn't do and learn from those people who excelled in whatever their sport or profession was, and he would take some of that sauce and it made him a better writer, better father, and better teacher.

*CLEAR:* That strategy is a great idea, I believe there are stages. The first stage is to "do the reading." but the idea is, in any field, you have to establish a baseline. For example, for me writing about habits, I need to read all the basic stuff to make sure I have a good handle on behavioral psychology and cognitive psychology. It's almost like getting a master's or specialty in those areas so that I understand where ideas are coming from. You need to have a good, solid foundation. Then, after that foundation, doing what the writer is recommending, reading widely, and going to conferences outside your area of expertise is incredibly useful. Almost always, the innovative ideas come from some sort of overlap of something--your area of expertise and something unrelated or surprising. And the only way to get exposure to those potentially unrelated or surprising innovations is to read widely and expand your petri dish in which you grow your ideas. In my opinion, I think that's really useful. My orders would be to first develop an expertise and then expand and explore broadly.

# #13: "CURIOSITY, LEARNING, AND PUTTING IN YOUR REPS"

***CAMPBELL:*** If you're speaking to young leaders who are hungry to be superlative performers in their chosen professions, what are some of the non-negotiable skills you think these young leaders need to be good at in the near or immediate future?

***CLEAR:*** Well, I don't know if they're skills or if they're traits, but curiosity has to be near the top of the list. They must get interested in something, be curious about something, or just want to know more. Many people I see just don't seem to want to know, which is just mind-blowing to me.  I may be a little on the extreme end of being curious or the ability to be fascinated with almost anything, but I think it's crucial because it's only through curiosity that people learn. If you're not interested, it's really hard to learn anything. This brings me to the second skill which is increasingly important, and that is learning quickly and reinventing yourself.  The world is moving faster and faster.  I guess we should say the social world or the created world, whether that's the structures we've created for business or society, is also moving quicker.  And it's almost always because of technology and increased connectedness.  But the faster the environment shifts, the faster the strategies that previously worked become outdated.  In a world that moves so quickly, the right idea does not stay the right idea for very long. You basically need to be a learning machine. People always need to be updating rather than stagnant and people also need to always be reinventing themselves, their ideas, and their business and work, so as to stay relevant. Now, having said that, in the introduction to *Atomic Habits* I say, there's a lot about the world that changes, but this is a book about what doesn't change. It's about the fundamentals of human behavior, it's about things that humans can build a family around, a life around, and a business around.  It's about the pieces of human nature that people can rely on and how these things influence our life and work.

***CLEAR:*** I do think there are core fundamentals that we have to keep coming back to. The same way that if someone wanted to get in shape he needs to keep showing up at the gym. That's just a basic life cost of entry. We also need to be willing to update and improve and expand.

I've mentioned curiosity and learning so the third non-negotiable is putting in your reps. That's kind of the phrase I use for just showing up and falling in love with boredom. I think one of the greatest threats to success is not difficulty or challenge but boredom. We try something for a little while, we get some results and it becomes ordinary and we get bored with it and we stop. I had a friend who I trained with in the gym who is incredibly strong. He could squat 500 pounds, and his training was going well. He was getting stronger. I saw him a couple of months later and asked how it was going. He said, "I've been defuncting for the last 4-6 weeks and haven't really done much." I said, "are you still working that program that was working so well for you?" He said no. I asked him, "Why did you stop?" He said, "I don't know." The answer is that he just got bored with it. It was still working, he was still getting stronger, but he stopped doing it because it became expected. You can see that attitude in so many areas of life. For me, I know what led to the growth of my business. It was writing two articles a week, every Monday and Thursday for three years. There were many weeks in the middle where it felt very boring, but I found a way to press on. Mastery requires that we find a way to discover something new to be in awe about—a new detail, a little piece of the process that fascinates us, or something that we get curious about. And, if you can do that, you can fall in love with boredom and continue to put your reps in. It's really not that complicated. You just need to stick with it. Yet, that is so easy to say and so hard to do over a time span of three, five, ten, or twenty years. The people who do stick with it get incredible results but those who do are much less than you think.

# #14: "TINY CHANGES, REMARKABLE RESULTS – DECISIVE MOMENTS"

**CAMPBELL:** Is there anything else that you wanted to include that is of interest to you?

**CLEAR:** Sure, I'll just talk a little bit about *Atomic Habits* and why I think the book can be useful for people. The title is *Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results*. It's about small habits that compound over time. The little choices that we make each day, like what to eat, investing a little bit more, going to the gym, or writing a little bit and how those choices, which are seemingly insignificant in the short run, end up becoming far more powerful when they compound over time.
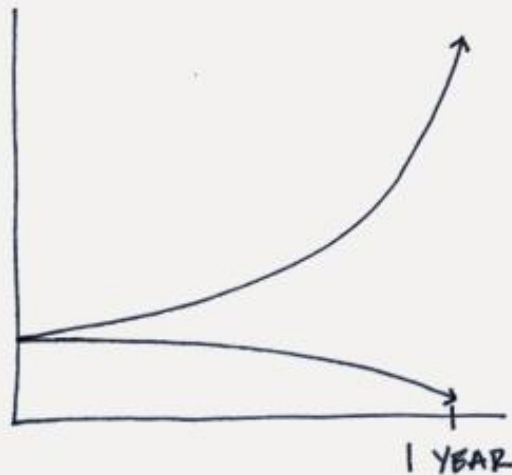
The
most important
part of
any new habit
is getting started
— not just the
first time, but
each time.
—James Clear

# The Power of Tiny Gains

1% BETTER EVERYDAY

$$1.01^{365} = 37.78$$

1% WORSE EVERYDAY

$$0.99^{365} = 0.03$$

1 YEAR

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# #14: "TINY CHANGES, REMARKABLE RESULTS – DECISIVE MOMENTS" *continued*

***CLEAR:*** One idea from the book I think that people will find useful is a concept that I refer to as "decisive moments." There's a time each evening, around 5:15 or so, where my wife will come home from work and either we'll change into our workout clothes and go to the gym, or we'll sit on the couch and order dinner and sit around and watch TV. How we spend the evening is really determined by that two- minute span of whether we change into our workout clothes or not. If we change, I know everything that comes after, such as getting in the car, driving over to the gym and getting under the workout bar. All of that stuff is already pre-decided. And this is one reason habits can have an outsized influence on our lives. Little habits, like the two minutes that happen at that decisive moment, end up shaping the next two-three hours that come afterward.

You can relate to this idea in small ways all throughout the day. For instance, take the habit of pulling your phone out of your pocket. It only takes two seconds to do that, but as soon as it is done, that action ends up shaping the next 20-30 minutes. Some people end up checking email and responding to job related things, browsing social media, or playing a video game. All of those things are more conscious choices, but they were shaped by that one little habit of pulling the phone out of a pocket. This is one of the key lessons of the book, which is there isn't really that much to do.

## #14: "TINY CHANGES, REMARKABLE RESULTS – DECISIVE MOMENTS" *continued*

***CLEAR:*** There are probably 5-8 of those decisive moments throughout anybody's day. If you could just master those little two-minute segments, you end up shaping the twenty minutes, the hour, or the other hours that come afterward. You really can sit down and identify where the decisive moments in your day are. For me, another one is each morning either I sit down and open up the document where I'm going to write the next article, work on the next chapter of the book, or go to ESPN and check like the latest sports news. If I can just master that first decision, then I'd get that whole hour back. So, that concept and trying to master the first two minutes of each decisive moment can end up having a very outsized influence on your life. Each two-minute decision is a fork in the road. And when we stack them up and they branch out, we get the difference between what it is to live a good day, what it is to live an average day, or what it is to live a bad day. And they are mostly decided by those 5-8 choices. That is literally just one of the chapters in the book, so I think that folks will find that little ideas like that are useful and if they want to learn more, the best place to go is www.atomichabits.com.

# #15: "PRUNING, ESSENTIALISM, AND BUILDING A SYSTEM"

**CAMPBELL:** What's your niche for presenting to people about your work?

**CLEAR:** Like I mentioned earlier in the interview, I optimize for reach rather than revenue, and the way that I can reach most people is by writing online. www.jamesclear.com is the best way to find my work and to see more from me. I do corporate work. I usually do speaking events at corporations and teams about once a month or maybe ten a year. I like that pace. I'm not looking to do more than that. There's a speaking page on the website, so people are welcome to check out www.jamesclear.com/speaking and then, of course, I am on Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. www.jamesclear.com is the best place to go and you can dive in and from there decide how you'd like to see more of my work and if you want to work together, feel free to reach out.

# #15: "PRUNING, ESSENTIALISM, AND BUILDING A SYSTEM"
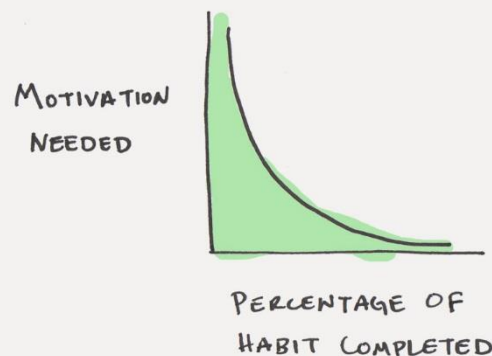## continued

*CAMPBELL:* How can people sustain the work they do? Where do you believe you will be in five years in your ability, as concerning the work you're doing?

*CLEAR:* I think there are two answers to that. The first answer is continual pruning. One of the challenges of reaching more people or achieving more success in a career or in continuing to advance is that more and more opportunities come your way, opportunities for interviews and speaking gigs and additional book deals. I'm just giving examples for what it's like for my career, but you can imagine this for any career. A lot of those things are exciting, but you must be careful not to always just chase the new thing or say yes to any opportunity just because it's there. Instead, you need to make sure you're asking yourself some questions such as "Is this what I really should be focused on?" or "Is this the most essential thing for me to be working on?" This is not a one-time procedure; it's a continual process of pruning things down and pulling yourself back to center and making sure you're getting your reps in and staying focused on what matters.

***CLEAR:*** The second answer is the way to stay on track. The way to sustain an effort in any field is one of the core philosophies of Atomic Habits which is building a system, rather than focusing on a goal. People have all kinds of goals or results that they want to achieve, including things such as the amount of money we want to earn, how we want our bodies to look, the types of things that we want to achieve in our creative work, just to name a few. But the goal is not what determines the outcome; in fact, achieving a goal is only a momentary change.

**Motivation Needed to Perform a Habit**

MOTIVATION
NEEDED

PERCENTAGE OF
HABIT COMPLETED

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**CLEAR**: You can set a goal to clean your messy garage and then find some burst of motivation on some Saturday and clean the whole thing out. But if you don't change the systems behind it, if you don't change the habit that led to the messy garage in the first place, then three months from now you're going to have another pile of clutter to clean. That's one of the counterintuitive things about long-term improvement in any field. We think we need to change our results but what we really need to change is the system behind them. It is treating the symptom without addressing the cause. This perception is one of the core reasons I wrote *Atomic Habits*.

One of the main things that the book focuses on and one of the core philosophies I try to adhere to in my life is "how do I improve my system each day, and how do I do something that improves my ability to repeat these things again and again?" There are many ways to do that. One, consider the people you surround yourself with and the environment design which can include the items on your desk at work or on your kitchen counter at home. Or examine the strategy that you take or how big your habits are and whether you can do them 98% of the time without fail. The point is it's not about the goal, it's about the system.

***CLEAR***: It's not about the outcome, it's about the thing that drives the outcome. And if you can keep your focus on those thoughts, it gives you a lot of flexibility because systems don't have to look a particular way. Figure out how to make one work for your life, because doing so also gives you a very robust system that keeps you on track. Always surround yourself with five, six, or seven different ways that something can happen and you're not relying on everything to go perfectly to stick to a goal. Don't rely on getting an optimal amount of motivation to make something happen, instead, focus on adding one more little piece to the system that nudges you in the right direction.



BREAK BIG HABITS DOWN
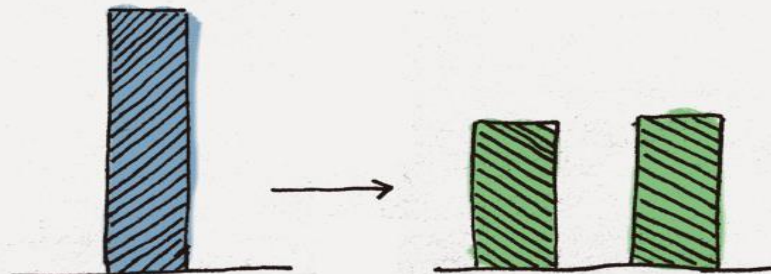
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*CAMPBELL:* Like athletes that execute their system…

*CLEAR:* Yes, eventually once you have lived within a system long enough and enough evidence is accumulated, it becomes part of your identity. You're no longer trying to achieve behavior change. You're acting like the type of person you already believe yourself to be. **The goal is not to run a marathon. The goal is to become a runner. The goal is not to learn to play an instrument, the goal is to become a musician. Once you adopt that identity, it's not hard to do the running each day. This is just who you are and that's a really powerful place to be!** It ends up being a resilient set of personal beliefs because you don't feel as if you need the motivation to **make the right thing happen**.

**#16: "CONVERSATIONS WITH HEREOS: Ordinary Men or Women Who Dare to See or Meet the Call of a Possibility Bigger Than Themselves"**

*"Ralph, I enjoyed the interview and appreciate your ability to capture and distill my ideas on habits into a powerful and useful format. I think nearly anyone will find it useful."*

**James Clear - November 2018**

This interview took place in the summer of 2018 as James was finishing his two-year journey of writing Atomic Habits. His original goal and agreement with his publisher were to finish the book in a year. But true to the principles of Atomic Habits - it's not about the goal, it's about the system - he renegotiated and finished the book in two years.  And….the NY Times, Amazon, Wall Street Journal bestseller and Goodreads Choice Award semifinalist for 2018 Nonfiction Book of the Year…..well, let's just say he doubled down on himself and it  paid off!

My commitment is to interview 100 Heroes in the world by my 50th birthday in July 2019. It's a stretch, but I'm half of the way there! I'm learning and growing so much along the way and am reminded weekly, that everyone has a story to tell that is manifestly important.

I'm also looking within, as I ask questions I'm also humbly pondering, "how does what I know get in the way of what I don't know, but maybe need to learn?" and "can I find the ways in which I am an obstacle to what is most important to me?" I will share my own personal insights in future "conversations with heroes" postings.

The interviews and the project will be up on social media, discussed on podcasts, websites, and any other medium where people want to simply enjoy reading and learning about modern-day heroes. Why? It allows me every day to live, and through others, share my "why": "To leave a positive mark on peoples' lives so that, together, the difference we make for others can never be erased."

Thanks for coming along for the journey! **Ralph Campbell**

Learning Optimized

# James Clear

James Clear is a writer on habits, decision making, and continuous improvement at jamesclear.com. He is the author of the New York Times, Amazon, and Wall Street Journal best seller, Atomic Habits. **You can read more at jamesclear.com**

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