

Chapter 4

Habits: The Key to Greatness

It started as a simple thing. I just decided to be honest. I had gotten to the point where I would tell every person I knew a slightly different story just depending on who they were. It was like having a million faces. The more I was straightforward with people, the easier it came. Before too long other people noticed too. It seemed that my dad trusted me with more things, and gave me more freedom. My friend Julie started asking me for advice. She asked me how I got my dad to let me do so many things without having to answer a million questions. I just told Julie to tell it like it is, even to her parents.

Marisol, 13

What Are Habits?

Habits are your daily actions, the way you usually behave. A habit is an action that shows some part of what cannot be seen, your character. So, if a person says, *You have a wonderful character*, she is judging your character by the way you behave. Your habits are a big part of your character. In fact, habits in some ways make people who they are.

Imagine that someone is in the habit of getting up at 6:00 to walk the dog and to go running. And someone else jumps out of bed 10 minutes before class begins and rushes to school, arriving late every time. What is the big difference between these two people? They say *the early bird catches the worm*, and she probably also has time to get herself ready for the day. One way—getting up a



little earlier—helps to start the whole day off right, while the other makes for chaos and commotion from the first moment you open your eyes.

So why is it that there are people who get up late and rush around trying to make it to school and to work on time? It is because waking up early is a hard habit to create; it takes self discipline to make yourself get up early. It's important to mention that sleeping in a bit on the weekends, or when you don't have to be somewhere, is just fine. We're talking about getting into the habit of getting up on time when you must be somewhere, like school.

If habits make up a big part of my character then I am sunk, you may think. We have good news. Bad habits, although hard to change, are not permanent fixtures in your life unless you choose to keep them. Like Marisol, if you see a habit that you don't want, you can turn it around. As we mentioned, good habits are hard to create, but with work and determination you can totally change your habits—it's up to you!

Plant an act; reap a habit.

Plant a habit; reap a virtue or a vice.

Plant a virtue or a vice; reap a character.

Plant a character; reap a destiny.



A Look Under the Microscope

Daniela, a ninth grader, was brave enough to allow us to tell you about some of her habits, good and bad. Here is what she told us (although we suspect that she might have changed some of these habits right before she knew we would interview her):

Good Habits

👍 I am clean. I usually keep my room and my school things organized. I always take a bath or a shower at night, and I

brush my teeth after eating breakfast and dinner, I hate it when they feel slimy.

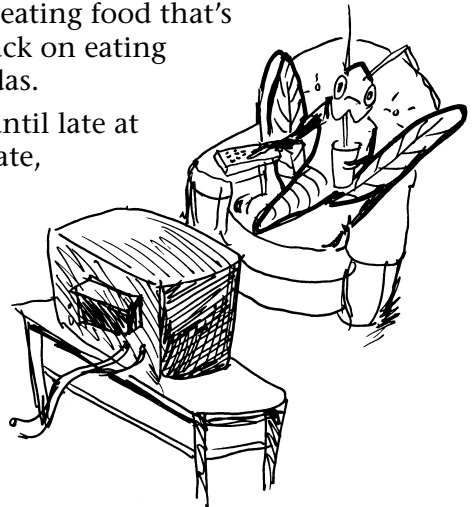
- 👍 I get good grades but I am not so sure that my study habits are the greatest—I guess that should go in the other section.
- 👍 I am trustworthy, I don't usually say I will do something and then don't do it. I get really mad when people do that to me.
- 👍 I am reliable, if someone is depending on me I will always be there.
- 👍 I don't make fun of people at school behind their backs. Someone did it to me once and it really hurt, so I never do it to other people—even when my friends are doing it.
- 👍 I am good about watching my little brother when my mom needs my help. Most of my friends aren't as nice about baby-sitting and they complain.



Bad Habits

- 👎 I never have enough time to do everything.
- 👎 I am usually 10 minutes late, even to things which are really important to me.
- 👎 I think I watch too much TV.
- 👎 I eat junk food too often and sometimes I get headaches which I think is from eating food that's not good for me. I need to cut back on eating chocolate, cookies, chips and sodas.
- 👎 I put off doing my school work until late at night when it's hard to concentrate, sometimes I even do it in school right before it's due.
- 👎 I stay up too late and then I'm tired in school the next day.

As you can see, you have to be careful what habits you practice. Practice is great as long as you are practicing habits you feel good about. It doesn't



take very long to change a habit, just a lot of will power and patience.

Practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent.

Susan, mom of 4 and speech pathologist

Easier Said than Done

Good habits are easier to talk about than to form. It is easy enough to talk about being honest, on time, neat and friendly, but much harder to do. If good habits were easy to form, then everyone would have them—but they don't. The truth is that a good habit is like a reward because it becomes part of you and part of your good character.



After talking to Daniela, we also had the chance to talk to a young man named Mike. Here is what they told us.

William: *So Mike, do you think that habits are important?*

Mike: *Yeah, habits are pretty important. Last year I got lazy and started to put off my schoolwork to do other things like watch TV and hang out with my friends. It hurt my grades and now I'm trying to catch up.*

William: *Daniela, what do you think about habits?*

Daniela: *Habits are not the most important thing about a person. I mean, if my best friend gets into the habit of eating tons of junky food I'm not going to dump her. But if she starts to lie to me or to talk behind my back all the time and I can't trust her then I might think twice about staying friends.*

Mike: *I agree with Daniela. Habits are important in the sense that you want to get things done and to have your act together. But if you have a friend who is disorganized or something as long as he is a good person you are not going to say, Hey I can't be your friend because you're so scattered!*

William: *Back to Daniela's comment. Is it possible that if your friend is lying and talking behind your back that in some way even this is a habit?*

Daniela: *I guess you're right. I just didn't think about it that way. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the most important thing about*

someone is more than just habits, it's like who they are.

William: *If you wanted to get into a new habit how would you go about it?*

Mike: *First of all I have to want it. I mean I have to want to change. I can't change just to make someone else happy, it has to come from me. Then I would start little by little. You can't make a big change overnight. Like with my studying, this year I decided to limit watching TV to one program a night. That was it. I'd watch a program and then do my homework. If I was hardcore and dropped all TV my studying probably wouldn't have lasted.*

Daniela: *Same with me. I wanted to join track but I was way out of shape. So I had to start training. I didn't go from zero to 100 in a day. Some people can do that, but not me. I had to work up to it. I agree with Mike, though. You have to want something bad enough to make a change.*



Let's Get Real: How to Develop a Good Habit

We would love to tell you how easy it is to develop good habits, but we can't. The truth is that good habits take time and energy to create, and sometimes you have to change a bad habit in order to make a good habit. Only the strong and the brave should read on from here.

You're still reading. That's good. You are ready now to get down to work.

1. **Decide What's Important to You:** What is most important to you? What do you want to be able to do in the future? Write down exactly what habit you think you need to get where you want to go, or rather, to achieve what is important to you. Do you want to go to college? You need good study habits. Do you want to be a good athlete? You need to train, to eat and sleep properly. Do you want to learn to play the guitar? You have to practice every day. Do you want to save money for a car? You have to make a budget and stick to it. You decide! Remember, you're the one making the choices.

Example: I am going to get up every other morning and run three miles before breakfast because I want to be a faster and stronger cross-country runner.



2. **Decide What You Are Willing to Sacrifice:** What will you have to give up? As they say, No Pain No Gain. Most of the time you will have to sacrifice something in order to get something. Which is more important to you? Which one will help you become the person you want to be? Some of the things you may have to sacrifice are: watching TV, going out with your friends after school every day, talking on the phone at night, buying new clothes every month, or eating your favorite junk food on a daily basis. You don't have to give up everything. You decide what will make it work for you.

Example: I am willing to sacrifice eating some junk food, and going to bed too late. I will also have to sacrifice some of the TV I watch at night because I won't have time to do homework in the morning before school. This way my grades will get better, and I won't feel so tired at school.

3. **Determine Not to Give Up:** How long will you have to work at it before you get into the habit? It depends on you. For most of us, it takes a month or so to turn an action into a habit. Are you strong enough not to give in and go back to your old habits? We recommend that you try to change one habit at a time, and gradually you will have created some excellent habits! Trying to change every habit from bad to good at once is totally overwhelming. If you lapse back into your old habit (the one you are trying to re-make), don't give up. You will just have to keep on trying until your new habit becomes second nature to you. Don't worry, it will.

Example: I slipped yesterday and slept in, after talking on the phone half the night. I'm not going to give up, though. Tomorrow I will get up and start again. I really have to make it to school on time, or my tardies are going to hurt my grades.

4. **Tell a Friend:** Tell a friend or a parent (anyone you trust and talk to every day) about what you are doing. Tell them about the habit you are working on and your plan. Then tell them how you are doing on it—when you lapse and when you have a victory. Maybe you will encourage your friend to join you!

Good Habits Reap Good Character

Good habits show good character, and can help you to create your life the way you have dreamed it could be. Does that sound unlikely? Just talk to anyone you truly respect and admire. Ask that person how he or she was able to achieve the things he has achieved.

It's also important to remember that every person is different. What is perfect for one person is not necessarily right for another. For example, one person may make a great athlete, another a teacher, and still another a scientist. Developing good habits means that you create habits which help you to become the type of person you admire. You are the artist behind your life story; by your attitude and character you create opportunities and experiences.

That does not mean that if you have developed a great attitude and fantastic habits that your life will go smoothly all of the time. Life can be hard, but when you develop your character (your mind, your attitude and your habits) you have some tools to help you to cope with tough situations. Remember, no matter what you go through you are the only one who can choose how you will respond.

We want to challenge you to create good habits that will help you to be the person you dream you can be, and to fulfill your dreams.

Dream? Hmm, we'll talk more about that later.

Journal

Who do you admire the most? What are two habits that person possesses? If you do not know the person personally try to guess at his or her habits by what you know. Are these habits that you would like to develop also (if you don't already possess them)?



To Do

1. Make a list of your own habits. What good habits do you have? What bad habits do you have? Are there any good habits that you don't have that you would like to develop? Are there any habits that you would like to get rid of? Here are some areas to think about:



- Ⓔ **personal hygiene habits:** Do I shower enough and wear clean clothes?
 - Ⓔ **study habits:** Do I have regular study patterns or is it a daily battle to get all of my homework done?
 - Ⓔ **health habits:** Do I eat enough healthy food? Do I eat a lot of junk food?
 - Ⓔ **relationship habits:** Am I trustworthy? When someone tells me a secret, do I tell other people? Am I reliable?
 - Ⓔ **recreational habits:** How do I spend my free time? How many hours of TV do I watch a week? Are there other skills and talents I would like to develop in my free time?
 - Ⓔ **family habits:** How do I usually treat the other members of my family? Am I respectful and nice to be around?
 - Ⓔ **money habits:** Am I good with money? Do I save money well or do I have a hard time budgeting my money?
2. Pick one habit that you would like to try to change and write it down. In the next week try to change that habit to a good habit, and report back to a good friend or a classmate about your progress!
 3. For several days pay attention to the habits of other people. Then, with your classmates, make a huge list of all of the good habits and the bad habits you have observed. After writing down 10 or more habits to fit under each category (good and bad) make a poster to put on the wall in your classroom that shows these habits in some way (on a list, illustrated, a collage from magazine pictures, etc.). Where do you see yourself reflected in the habits poster on the wall?


Some people think that an action becomes a habit after you have done it 12 times, just think, only 12 times to make a new habit, that's not so hard after all, is it?



Key Ideas

- Ⓔ A habit is something that a person creates. Both good habits and bad habits are created by lots of practice (that is, doing them over and over again)!

- ☞ Good habits are the key to being a successful person. Without taking the time to create good habits, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill your dreams.



**Time invested in improving ourselves
cuts down on time wasted
in disapproving of others.**

Anonymous

