

In this lesson, you'll learn about routine triggers, why they're so important, and how to use them to hold yourself accountable and make yourself more productive.

Triggers are a critical piece of the puzzle in any routine because, when you build them successfully, they become an automatic starting point for your most important work. So, no matter how tired or unmotivated you might be on any given day, if you have a really strong trigger, it can jolt you to action even when you don't feel like taking action because it bypasses the part of your brain that makes active decisions.

That's really powerful.

I try to build and automate triggers for tasks and routines throughout my life, and one place I've seen it work incredibly well is in my morning routine.

Of course, this applies to any routine. It could be a morning routine, a bedtime routine, a routine at work, a routine at the gym. It doesn't matter.

But I'm going to illustrate this lesson with my morning routine.

You probably have a morning routine already, it just might not be the one you *want*.

A few years ago, I found myself with a morning routine that was a mess. I did the same thing every morning, but it was *not* helping me accomplish the goals I told myself I wanted.

I was exercising sporadically, getting lost on the internet and making myself late for work. Skipping chores that made the rest of the day less effective and less enjoyable.

Something really needed to change.

So, what I did—and I don't want to fool you by making it sound easy. It actually took a lot of work and a lot of trial and error. But what I did is I sat down and made a list. That list was all things that I knew *if* I did them first thing in the morning, it would set me up to be successful for the rest of the day.

Now, that list has changed a number of times since I first created it. That's part of the process—iterating and changing as you test it and learn more about how you tick.

My list included things like exercising so that I wouldn't skip it later in the day. I also wanted to start flossing because my dentist told me not doing it was like a ticking time bomb in my mouth.

And there were other little tasks like making sure the dogs were taken care of and cleaning up the kitchen and the living room. That was important because I often work at home in the dining room, and having a messy space around me while I tried to work was really distracting.

So, what I did was just make a list. Very simple stuff. Here are all the things I want to get done in the morning, and here's how much time I have to do them.

Then, I kept that list right in front of me all morning, each morning, as I went through the tasks.

This way, I had a constant reminder of what to do next whenever I finished one task. It kept me on track so that I wouldn't wander back into my old routine that was a lot more established.

Now, some parts of this list—I think there were about 10 actionable tasks on it at first—fit together perfectly. One thing naturally flowed into another, and there wasn't much need to consult the checklist.

And that's all this really is, right? A checklist. Simple stuff.

But understanding how one event triggers another can take a basic checklist and make it faster and automatic.

So, what I did next is I abandoned the checklist and went a few days without it to see how I'd do compared to what I said I wanted to do.

At first, I stuck to it simply because I remembered the steps and had a good flow going. But, after a few days, I did what pretty much anyone will do, and I got lazy and started falling back into old habits.

When I compared what I actually did in the morning—and the order and time I did it in—with the checklist, it was obvious that the plan had started going off track.

And what I realized through this experiment is that some work fits together really well, and other work just doesn't. Sometimes it's like oil and water. No matter how hard you work at it, you're never going to get them to mix well, and the triggers will just never be strong enough.

That's not the worst problem in the world if you're okay with carrying a list around with you at all times and regularly checking it to make sure you're staying on track. But let's face it, not very many people are on board with that idea.

What you really want is a sequence of events that fit together perfectly because the end of one task automatically triggers the next one.

Sometimes you're lucky, and you get it on the first try. Other times, you can force it just by repeating it over and over until you've beaten your own mind into submission.

But I've found that the best success comes when I just accept that some things don't fit together and never will. When you accept that, you start to naturally rearrange your work so that it flows smoothly and you stop fighting reality... which is exhausting.

For instance, I used to try to get a workout in and then take the dogs outside before hopping in the shower. When I created that order, it made sense on paper. But it didn't work in reality.

I could make it work in the summer, but going outside in the winter when I'm all sweaty just didn't work. I resisted it a lot because I would get cold quickly and I didn't want to put on more layers to stay warm and get those dirty and create more laundry for myself.

Too many barriers.

What made more sense was to take the dogs out after taking a shower and getting dressed. In the summer, I'll take a cold shower and the heat outside will bring my body up to temperature. And in the winter, I do the opposite.

Again, this is simple stuff. It's just rearranging tasks to fit where they naturally want to go rather than trying to force them into an artificial routine.

It doesn't matter how logical it is or how you justify it. Sometimes, reality is just going to smack you in the face and say, "No, this doesn't work."

I like to call this whole process building a "habit ladder." You know, when you're climbing a ladder, each next step is really unambiguous. There's nowhere to go but up and you don't need any instructions or reminders about how to climb a ladder. You just get on and it all makes sense.

That's how you want a routine to flow.

It makes sense, and it's so simple. But if you don't realize that ahead of time, it's so easy to get in your own way and start stepping over yourself. And when that

happens, you start falling back into old habits and routines that you were trying to break.

Pretty soon, you're back at square one.

So, here's what you can do to start using this lesson today.

First, you'll want to pick a specific routine to work on. It doesn't matter which it is since you can use this exercise over and over, but it might be easiest to pick the ones you've identified for other exercises in some of our prior lessons.

Is it a morning or evening routine? Is it work routine? Some other routine?

Once you decide, you'll have your scope defined. That'll make it easier to think through what you actually want to accomplish.

And that's what you're going to do next. What is this new or improved routine going to do for you? What's the end goal. Is it to save time? To reduce stress? To get better results? Define what that is so that you can figure out what steps you actually need to take to reach it.

Once that's all defined, you can go ahead and make that list. Write down the steps. What are the tasks you think you need to do to reach that goal each time you do the routine?

And remember: it doesn't really matter if you're right or wrong at first. This is just your starting point, so don't get hung up here. You're going to test all this later.

Now that you've got a list of things to do, go ahead and put them in order. What's the most logical way to group these things so that you can get them all done in the least amount of time and with the least amount of resistance.

Try to think about which tasks *have* to come before others, and consider them in groups. Try to organize them so that one will naturally trigger and inspire the next one.

Again, don't think too deeply about this. You're almost definitely going to get this wrong at first. That's why we have to test it in real life and find the problem spots.

Alright, that's pretty much it. You have your base plan in place.

Now, your job is to test it.

Spend the next few days carrying that list around with you so that you don't have to rely on your memory to keep you going.

You're going to find out quickly what works, what doesn't, what's missing, and what's extra that can get cut.

Don't be afraid to reorganize this list as soon as you identify something that doesn't work the way you expected it to. Again, this is not set in stone. It's just an idea that you're testing.

Try it for a few days and see what needs to be adjusted. You'll find out pretty quickly what does and doesn't work.

And, for fun, you might keep this list and compare it to what you have after a week just to see how different it is. It'll be a good reminder that your first guess is rarely the one that sticks.

Alright, give this all a shot and I'll see you in the next lesson.