

In this lesson, you'll learn why it's so important to track your progress when you're setting up new habits, systems, and routines. You'll also learn the ins and outs of *how* to do it so that it has the biggest positive impact and makes you a more productive and happy person.

So, let's go ahead and start with *why*. Why is it so important to track your progress when you're starting something new?

Well, you've probably heard the old phrase that "what gets measured gets improved." That's true. But it's much more than that.

Before you can improve something, you have to get it done in the first place. And what gets measured gets done. Tracking is a way to measure and hold yourself accountable to the goals you set.

It's a reinforcement of what you learned in Rule #01: No more zero days. When you track your progress, you build a record of your history. And that record is really useful. It either shows you a record of success or a record of failure. Either outcome is okay.

When you succeed, that record of success is a big confidence builder. There have been so many times in my life when I've wanted to take on a new challenge and thought to myself, "there's no way I can stick to this."

But because I'm active in tracking my progress with different goals, I can look back on some of my records of success, and it really boosts my confidence. It shows me clearly that I've succeeded at other difficult things before, so I can probably do it again.

But what about failure?

You might think that having a record of failure would be really de-motivating. But if you use it correctly—which means that you use it as an opportunity to learn, then it's actually very useful.

If you commit to a course of action and, after a short time, find yourself not sticking to it, there's a big lesson there, and it's not that you're just a failure.

Remember, we can program ourselves to do almost anything. So, what it means when you experience failure is that there's a bug in the programming. Now, it could be a number of different things.

Maybe you picked the wrong goal. Maybe you picked the wrong time to try to achieve the goal. Maybe you're just taking the wrong approach.

In any case, recording and recognizing that the plan isn't working the way you wanted it to at least puts you into problem-solving mode so that you can regroup and try again.

Without that record, you're far less likely to do the critical thinking that gets you closer to success. Instead, you just kind of beat yourself up and tell yourself you're not cut out for it.

So don't be afraid of recording your failures! Celebrate them and use them to learn. I like to call it "thinking like a scientist."

Scientists don't mind failure in their experiments because it gets them closer to the truth. It helps them see what to do next with more accuracy.

Finally, a great reason to track your progress that's often overlooked is that it makes success a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy by motivating you more with each update to the record.

We talked about the sunk cost fallacy in a previous lesson. Do you remember that? The sunk cost fallacy explains why we keep doing things that are bad for us even when we know we shouldn't. We keep doing it because, well, we always have and it's just easier to keep doing what we've already done. It's familiar.

Well, we also learned that phenomenon can be used for good. Once you establish a good habit or a good system, each iteration of it gets easier to do because you have one more instance of experience with it. It becomes normal.

Well, tracking your progress is a visual representation of that development which reinforces it even more.

Okay, so you've decided you're on board. You see the benefit of tracking your progress. Now... uh... what should you track?

You can't track *everything*! That would be a bit too much data. You'd spend all your time tracking, no time executing, and no time learning. No good!

So, you need to decide what's worth tracking so that you can focus your attention on what's most important.

As you've progressed through the course, you've probably developed a few ideas for what might work best for you.

Go ahead and make a list of those things.

The only rule you'll want to keep in mind when choosing is that it's best to track something that requires regular and repeated actions. Wherever consistency is most important, that's where you'll find the most value in progress tracking.

And it's even more useful when those consistent actions add up to a bigger outcome over time. It can be difficult to stay motivated when you know the results you're looking for aren't going to come for some time.

Track the stuff you know you need to do to get good results in the distant future but the actions are not very motivating right now.

Exercise is a great example. We all know we need to exercise regularly to live a healthy life, but damn if it doesn't take a long time to really see the benefits. And, even worse, you never even get to feel some of those benefits.

Exercise right now can prevent lots of health problems and diseases when you're older. But you don't have those problems now. And exercise will only ensure you never do. So, you never have the bad experience that motivates the good behavior.

It's really hard to stay motivated to do the work now for those kinds of benefits, even though we know that they're enormous.

By tracking your progress, though, you shift the focus—you shift the benefit to be something more immediate. It's ticking the box. Ticking the box is building the record of success and that's motivating in its own right.

Saving for retirement is another example. That's another one where the benefits are great in the future, but not so great in the present. In fact, it can be kind of painful right now by lowering our disposable income.

Rather than focusing on the benefits that come way down the road, you can turn your focus to the action of making consistent contributions. That's more motivating because you get the benefit of feeling good about doing something you said you would do right now.

And keeping a record builds that confidence over time so that you keep doing it as it becomes more and more a piece of your identity.

Studying in school could be one more example. Careful, deliberate study is not always so fun. But checking off your study session on a tracking sheet feels great

because it represents hitting a milestone that's going to help you complete a much bigger goal with great results.

The list of things you could track is endless, so it's really up to you to decide what you'll focus on.

On the other hand, there *are* some things you *shouldn't* track. Or, rather, there's one very common mistake people make when choosing what to track. And that is tracking something you don't have direct control over.

Now, there are lots of things that you don't have direct control of that are worth tracking, just not for the purpose of building confidence and consistency in your life.

An example that I used to struggle with is web stats. As a website owner, I used to obsess over the stats. How many people came to the site this month? How long did they stay? Where did they come from?

If the numbers were up, I felt great. If the numbers were down, I felt depressed.

These are all useful metrics to track, but they didn't actually give me any helpful information about what to actually *do* to improve.

What I started to do some years ago, and it has been much better for the site as well as my own sanity, is to track the things I *think* will influence those statistics. The things I can actually do and have control over.

I can't control how many people come to my site in a given month, but I *can* control how much effort I put into promoting the site. And I can't force someone to spend 10 minutes reading, but I *can* adjust my content and the layout in ways that I think will encourage them to stay longer.

Maybe you work in sales? Do you have daily or weekly or monthly sales goals? You might set yourself up with a goal to make a certain amount in sales per day. That's a great metric to track, but it's no good for building up consistency and it's definitely no good for building confidence, because you don't actually control whether you make a sale or not. The person buying does.

But what you do have control over are the things you do day in and day out that you believe will lead to better sales. If you set yourself up to track those actions—and those are the actions you have 100% control of—*then* you can build a lot of momentum.

The same goes for personal goals like weight loss. When you're significantly overweight, losing some of that weight is definitely a great goal, but it's not the goal that will actually help you get to where you want as fast as you could.

There are lots of scenarios where you could work really hard and not lose any weight. This happens all the time to a lot of people. They give up just before significant change starts to happen because they're tracking the wrong thing.

If, instead, you focus on tracking your actions like eating a certain number of calories per day and getting a certain amount of exercise, you can feel great about the progress you've made even if the weightloss doesn't immediately follow.

So, when you're deciding what to track, avoid focusing on things you don't have complete control of.

Now what about *when* and *how often* to track progress? Getting this right is important for long-term success.

The answer is that you should find a metric to track quote/unquote "as often as possible" but without letting it get in your way.

So, a daily goal is better than a weekly goal. And a weekly goal is better than a monthly goal.

If you're just starting out with this, I would highly recommend a daily goal because the feedback you get from a daily goal is much faster and more powerful when you're just beginning.

And the short timeframe between tracking points keeps you on a really narrow leash. When you know you have to produce some sort of result every day, you don't leave a pile of work that's too much to complete at once until the last minute. That's the risk you run by trying to start with a weekly goal or something even more long-term.

You might plan to track weekly on a goal that requires a week's worth of work to complete. But unless you're already really disciplined, you're likely to get sucked into more urgent tasks and either cram at the last minute, which is stressful, or just miss the deadline.

Instead, break that work up into daily tasks that keep you on track. Smaller milestones are better.

Of course, if you're committed to tracking your progress, then you're committed to finding the methods that lead to success for you so, like we discussed earlier, this is kind of a self-correcting problem.

Better to start with success if you can, though, right?

I also recommend sticking with one action to track when you're getting started. You might see a little success and decide, "Hey, this works really well. I should do it with everything!"

Not so fast! This is how you start to micromanage your life more than necessary which can lead to overwhelm and burnout.

Remember what you learned in an earlier lesson: one focus at a time.

As you get used to the regular tracking and find success with it, you can start to add more tracking points, but don't get carried away.

I've been doing this for years, and I've found that trying to track more than 2 things at the same time—one primary goal and one secondary—is about all I can handle.

And you really don't need to track a lot of different things. Just becoming extremely consistent in one thing ends up having a domino effect on many others. You naturally become more consistent in other areas of your life as a result of your consistent focus in one area.

Okay, there are two more things I want to go over before we wrap up this lesson.

First, let's go over *how* to track your progress.

This is really simple. The most important thing to remember is that tracking your progress is binary. You either met the goal or you didn't. Don't leave yourself any room to decide what success is or justify things in the moment.

Take what you learned from our very first rule about no more zero days and give yourself a tiny goal to complete on a regular basis. As you find more and more success with that, you can increase the difficulty, but try to engineer it in a way that is most likely to be successful.

Since this is more about building momentum and progress over the long-term, it's better to start too small than to start too big. You can stop to evaluate every so often and increase the difficulty when you've established yourself at a lower level.

And there are several great online or app-based solution you can use to do the actual tracking, but, honestly, a pen and paper is my favorite because it's so simple.

Again, remember that—at least in the beginning—this is all about building momentum, and that momentum is going to be built by seeing the progress you're making. There's no better way to visualize that progress than with a big ol' calendar with Xs on it. Something you can look at every day when you wake up or before you go to bed. It's really satisfying.

Now, as you continue to build yourself up and establish a long record of multiple goals, you might decide to move onto more digital solutions. Those are great, too. But when you're starting out, keep it simple. A blank calendar with Xs on it is all you need.

Alright, last but certainly not least, is deciding how long to track your progress for. Should you set a end date? Just go forever? How do you figure that out?

The way I approach this is to just guess. I guess how long I think it will take me to establish whatever I'm tracking as a habit, and then make that my goal. Thirty days is pretty typical for me.

But I rarely stop at 30 days because, over time, it gets easier and faster to record progress and the simple act of doing it helps reinforce the habit.

So, if I'm working on a limited project—something that has a defined end—and I just want to make sure I stay on track, I'll pick my end date and that'll be that.

But, for other long-term goals, I re-evaluate every 30 or so day—at least in the beginning to see how I'm doing and decide if I want to keep going.

For example, I started a big journey to better health almost a year ago. Part of that was counting calories every day because it was something I'd never done before.

Well, I only intended to do it for a few months until I got the hang of doing it in my head. But, over time, I got really fast with it and I also found that the practice of entering my calories at every meal was so helpful that I'm still doing it every day.

Basically, it's up to you to decide how long to track for. Make a guess at how long you think you'll need to do it in order to get what you want, and then re-evaluate. Sometimes you'll find there's no need to keep tracking. Other times, you'll realize that you might want to keep going forever.

Okay, this was kind of a monster lesson, so I hope you feel really confident now about how to get started—and keep going!—with your progress tracking.

Here's what we learned:

First, we learned *why* it's so important to track our progress. It's such a helpful way to visualize our effort towards long-term goals, and it's a great confidence building exercise since it gives us a record of our success.

Then, we went over what to track as well as what *not* to track. You can track just about anything, but you want to make sure that what you choose is something that you have complete control over so that you're never relying on someone or something else to be successful.

So, measure the actions you take instead of the results you get. If you don't get the results you want, you can change the actions you're tracking.

Next, we learned when and how to track our progress. In the beginning, the more often you can take a snapshot, the better. And nothing beats paper and a pen when you're starting out. Apps and other fancy things can come later.

And finally, we learned that choosing a time frame to track—like 30 days—and then re-evaluating to decide whether or not to stop or adjust or keep going is a good way to give yourself regular feedback and make any necessary adjustments.

So then, your job today is to take everything you just learned and set up your first tracking plan. What are you going to measure? How are you going to measure it? And how often are you going to measure it?

Once you have those answers, I'll see you in the next lesson.