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Five seeing habits

Every single day, my to-do list is a reminder of all the other projects I haven't started. The passion projects that I 'just don't have time' to do. And when I do have time? That familiar friend—fear—comes knocking at my door.This post originally appeared on the Crew blog."I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself."When Bonnie Ware, a nurse who cared for patients in their final weeks, published the most common regrets she heard, not chasing dreams was number one."When people realize that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honored even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made," she wrote.Every single day we choose how we spend what few hours we have. Yet, despite the constant warnings to chase after what we believe, we often fall victim to procrastination and a fear of even just starting.For myself, and the 95% of the American population who admit to falling prey to procrastination or even total avoidance of the things we want to do in our lives, 'time management' only goes so far. And when it comes to looking at why we fail to start, there are larger emotional and psychological reasons at play.Seeing and Helping the Future YouProcrastination isn't just simply us putting off things until a later date. It's purposefully putting aside important work knowing there will be negative consequences in the future.We aren't just being forgetful, or complacent. We're purposefully hurting ourselves by focusing on short-term pleasure at the cost of the long-term. Almost all studies agree that procrastination leads to to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and poorer well-being. In our professional lives, it can have dire consequences. In our new way of working, with increased autonomy to work when and how we want, your word is your reputation. And missing deadlines for no good reason, is really no good reason.Dr. Piers Steel, an organizational behavior professor at the University of Calgary, has proposed a simple formula to determine why we make certain choices.Breaking this down, motivation is the drive or preference for a course of action, or what economists call utility. At the top of the equation, expectancy is the odds of an outcome coming from your choice, while value refers to how rewarding that outcome might be.Underneath, impulsiveness is your sensitivity to delays (how easily you get distracted) and delay is how long you have to wait to receive the reward.So, all of our choices come down to the expectation of a good result vs. how long a task is likely to take us. Seems basic, right? We weigh the potential value against the effort involved. But what happens when our view of the potential value of what we're doing gets skewed?Recent studies into chronic procrastinators have uncovered what Dr. Fuschia Sirois, a psychology professor at the University of Sheffield, England, has called "temporal myopia," or the inability to see into your future.We all have a way of transporting our mind into the future, whether it's through planning and setting goals, or positive affirmations. But for procrastinators, that vision is blurry. It's more abstract and impersonal, and procrastinators often feel an emotional disconnect between who they are, and who they will become.Another obstacle is what behavioral economists call time inconsistency—the human brain's tendency to value immediate rewards more highly than future rewards. Add this all up and we're in a poor place to make decisions from the get go. Our motivation to start any task depends on us seeing value in it, yet we place more value on what is happening currently over what the future holds and justify this decision by emotionally disconnecting ourselves from our future self.It's why you might go to bed promising to change things for the better and wake up just to fall into the same old habits.Present you: 1. Future you: 0.Learning to Diet in a Candy StoreYet it's not only an internal struggle the causes our lack of motivation. The world we live in is motivationally toxic.In Dr. Steel's research he equates our day-to-day lives as trying to diet in a candy store and then being blamed for getting fat. We're being herded towards a place of consumption over and over. And consumption trumps creation.Everyday, products are made to compel you to use them. Nir Eyal's Hooked—a basic how-to guide for making products that pander to our impulsiveness and push us to return time and time again to things that we maybe 'shouldn't' be using—has become a staple in the business world. The survival of your business depends on people returning, time and time again. So it's no wonder that companies are scrapping it out to become 'sticky'. They need your attention and they know how to get it. This is nothing new.Ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle developed a word to describe this type of behavior: Akrasia. Simply put, Akrasia is being weak-willed—unable to see long-term value and giving in to instant gratification. Like binge watching TV instead of reading a book or working on a project you've meant to. Or ordering takeout instead of cooking yourself a healthy meal.It's why the ability to delay gratification is such a huge predictor of future success. Success takes hard work. Long hours of concentration with no promise of reward. Yet the world around us and what it's done to our brains makes it all too easy to just give in and take the low-hanging fruit.Humans are prolific procrastinators. It's easy to make plans and throw dates on your calendar, and...Read moreBuilding the Habit of Just StartingIronically, the guilt and frustration we feel from not starting is often worse than the pain of actually doing work.In the words of writer and theorist Eliezer Yudkowsky:"On a moment to moment basis, being in the middle of doing the work is usually less painful than being in the middle of procrastinating. It's that hump of 'just start' that is so hard to get over. Yet once we do, momentum takes over. We see immediate results from the work we're doing and instead of looking for ways to avoid it, we look at ways to finish.While there are some common 'cures' to procrastinating on work you've already started, such as breaking bigger goals into short, actionable items ("I will work on my paper for 1 hour at 1 I am on Tuesday" rather than "I'll work on my paper on Tuesday"), taking scheduled breaks, and rewarding yourself for completing sub goals as well as the full project, what about getting over the fear of just starting?Are there ways to combat procrastination, or even see it coming and adjust course?Procrastination is like bad signal or crappy Wi-Fi. Everyone deals with it, but most of us don't...Read moreSweat the Small Stuff (Because They Add Up)When we think about starting a new project, it's usually the huge milestones—the big ideas—that slow us down. We often forget about the smaller aspects—the little parts that go missed when we 're thinking about starting.When you allow the small losses to build up, such as sleeping in when you want to start work early, or letting yourself be easily distracted, you work towards embedding a process of small losses. But they won't stop there.In Procrastination and Obedience, Professor George Akerlof wrote that procrastination is the perfect example of where there are repeated errors of judgement due to us mistakenly ignoring their costs and benefits:"In this case, each error of judgment causes a small loss, but these errors cumulatively result in large losses over time and ultimately cause considerable regret on the part of the decision maker."There's a mental process called the Zeigarnik Effect, which kicks in when you are close to finishing a task, propelling you towards the finish line like you're running from a hoard of zombies. You feel as though you just cannot stop until you're done.We've all felt the feeling at some point, whether it's reaching the last chapter of a book or the last page of an essay, once we cross that threshold, it's easier to continue going. So why not switch your own process from small losses to small gains?Hemingway would always stop writing mid-sentence so that when he returned to the work the next day he could pick up where he left off, effectively forcing himself into 'must finish' mode.Use a Commitment DeviceJust starting is a mental battle, one that we sometimes have to turn into something physical before we can be victorious. One way to do this is by implementing a commitment device—some strategy that will make it damn near impossible for you to continue with negative behaviors.For Victor Hugo, the author of The Hunchback of Notre Dame, that meant locking all his clothes in a closet so he wouldn't be able to go out socializing or entertain and would be forced to write.For Douglas Adams, who wrote The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, it was being locked in a hotel room for weeks on end (something his publisher and editors apparently did regularly without much complaint from him (also, why is it always writers who need strange strategies to force them to work?)).Create the Right Environment to Get StartedLooking back at Dr. Steel's motivation equation, one of the main factors killing our motivation is impulsiveness. Look around you right now. How many things are within reaching distance that could potentially distract you? Our urges get the best of us, and creating an insulated workspace is often the easiest way to battle them. As my father used to say 'out of sight, out of mind'.For example, writer and artist Austin Kleon sets up two distinct work areas surrounded by things that help him just start: an analog desk with paper and pencils and art supplies, and a digital desk with his computer, MIDI controller, and tablet. Set up systems and processes in place where the goal isn't to 'create perfection', but just to create.This could include decluttering your workspace or setting small, easily achievable daily goals (such as committing to writing for 10 minutes each morning). Whatever your method (and there are plenty to choose from), the goal is always to get your mind in 'just start' mode, rather than 'must finish' mode.Don't Worry About Being PerfectIn high school, I almost failed art class because I wouldn't hand in projects. They were technically done. In my mind, they just weren't perfect yet.Eventually, the anger and fear of handing in subpar work went so far as to make me not even start on them. It's a common impediment to work. We fear the unknown and instead of going in blindly, spend more time planning.In Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, Betty Edwards discusses how we all draw and create freely as children, but around adolescence, most of us stop.The beginning of adolescence seems to mark the abrupt end of artistic development in terms of drawing skills for many adults. As children, they confronted an artistic crisis, a conflict between their increasingly complex perceptions of the world around them and their current level of art skill."This crisis isn't limited to just the artistic endeavors of children. As adults, when faced with a new task or goal, our current skill level usually doesn't relate to our vision of how we want the end goal to look.Think about if you ever wanted to build a website, or create a book. The daunting task ahead surely cast a cloud across your idea. Instead of the excitement of experimentation, we feel self-doubt and fear. The end goal, that perfect image of what we want to create is suffocating.As author and marketing guru Seth Godin describes it:"We tell people that the route to Carnegie Hall is paved with practice, practice, practice. But practice is another word for preparation. I'm not talking about being prepared. Preparation isn't the same as ready. Ready is an emotional choice, the decision to put something into the world... The paradox is obvious: the more important the idea, the less we can be ready. And so we fret that the world, or our market, isn't ready for the leap... Everywhere we turn, the doors appear to be closed, not open."Getting over the paralysis of perfect gives you the chance to try. To explore without the limitations of how you defined something in your own mind.The fear of starting is often so much less than the pain of actually working. Yet, our brains can fool us into thinking the opposite is true. And once we've engrained those beliefs it's hard to break out of them. But the greatest achievements don't happen without starting.If we want to create more than we consume, we need to build those habits every single day. When you look back, do you want to remember the things you wanted to do and never started, or the times you tried and made something you could call your own?Start. Every single day. Start and then restart. Let go of your fear and reconnect with the future vision you so badly.The Importance of Just Starting | CrewJory MacKay is the editor of the Crew blog. Crew is a creative marketplace connecting mobile & web projects with vetted, handpicked developers and designers. Image by Mangsaab (Shutterstock). Your willpower is limited, so when you decide to take on something new—whether it's an exercise routine or, say, cooking—you're at least in time limiting your ability to take on some other habit. But as New York Times writer and author of The Power of Habit Charles Duhigg explains, so-called 'keystone habits' create a chain reaction that can significantly influence the success of other habits. It's like making five good decisions for the price of one. So how do you identify your keystone habits? The New York Times examines why it's more difficult to exert willpower today than it was for our...Read moreWhere should a would-be habit master start? When I was reporting my book, The Power of Habit, this question was always at the back of my mind. My initial reporting focused on understanding the neurological structure of habits—what is known as the habit loop—which explains how habits can be created and changed. (See the video for a quick overview of the habit loop.)But our lives are filled with habits, and time is limited. Knowing how to improve behaviors doesn't resolve a central question: where to begin? Is it better to create an exercise habit, or reform eating patterns? Should someone focus on procrastination? Or biting their fingernails? Or both at the same time?The answer came when I was introduced to a concept called 'keystone habits.' Some habits, say researchers, are more important than others because they have the power to start a chain reaction, shifting other patterns as they move through our lives. Keystone habits influence how we work, eat, play, live, spend, and communicate. Keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything.This, then, is the answer of where to start: focus on keystone habits, those patterns that when they start to shift, dislodge and remake other habits.Identifying keystone habits, however, is tricky. To find them, you have to know where to look. There are three basic characteristics that keystone habits all share, and if you look for these characteristics, you can figure out which parts of your life can become leverage points for success.Characteristic One: The Science of Small WinsWhen Michael Phelps's alarm clock went off at 6:30 A.M. on the morning of August 13, 2008, he crawled out of bed in the Olympic Village in Beijing and fell right into his routine.He pulled on a pair of sweatpants and walked to breakfast. He had already won three gold medals earlier that week—and around adolescence, most of us stop: Phelps's first race—the 200-meter butterfly, his strongest event—was scheduled for ten o'clock.Two hours before the starting gun fired, he began his usual stretching regime, starting with his arms, then his back, then working down to his ankles, which were so flexible they could extend more than ninety degrees, farther than a ballerina's en pointe. At eight-thirty, he slipped into the pool and began his first warm-up lap. The workout took precisely forty-five minutes. At nine-fifteen, he exited the pool and started squeezing into his LZR Racer, a bodysuit so tight it required twenty minutes of tugging to put it on. Then he clamped headphones over his ears, cranked up the hip-hop mix he played before every race, and waited.Phelps had started swimming when he was seven years old. His coach, Bob Bowman, knew Phelps could be great, but to become a champion, he needed habits that would make him the strongest mental swimmer in the pool. So Bowman focused on giving the swimmer keystone habits that drew on what's known as "the science of small wins."Small wins are exactly what they sound like. A huge body of research has shown that small wins have enormous power, an influence disproportionate to the accomplishments of the victories themselves. "Small wins are a steady application of a small advantage," one Cornell professor wrote in 1984. "Once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion that favor another small win." Small wins fuel transformative changes by leveraging tiny advantages into patterns that convince people that bigger achievements are within reach.Which is exactly why Phelps's daily stretching routine and eating routine—and every other routine—served as a keystone habit: they created a mounting sense of victory. "There's a series of things we do before every race that are designed to give Michael a sense of building victory," his coach, Bob Bowman, told me. "If you were to ask Michael what's going on in his head before competition, he would say he's not really thinking about anything. He's just following the program. But that's not right. It's more like his habits have taken over. When the race arrives, he's more than halfway through his plan and he's been victorious at every step. All the stretches went like he planned. The warm-up laps were just like he visualized. His headphones are playing exactly what he expected. The actual race is just another step in a pattern that started earlier that day and has been nothing but victories. Winning is a natural extension."Keystone habits create small wins. So to identify the keystone habits in your life, look for those patterns that give you numerous, small senses of victory, places where momentum can start to build.Characteristic Two: Create New PlatformsThe second way that keystone habits create success—and can be identified—is by looking for patterns that create new platforms from which other habits can emerge. When Phelps was a teenager, for instance, at the end of each practice, Bowman would tell him to go home and "watch the videotape. Watch it before you go to sleep and when you wake up."The videotape wasn't real. Rather, it was a mental visualization of the perfect race. Each night before falling asleep and each morning after waking up, Phelps would imagine himself jumping off the blocks and, in slow motion, swimming flawlessly. He would visualize his strokes, the walls of the pool, his turns, and the finish. He would imagine the wake behind his body, the water dripping off his lips as his mouth cleared the surface, what it would feel like to rip off his cap at the end. He would lie in bed with his eyes shut and watch the entire competition, the smallest details, again and again, until he knew each second by heart.During practices, when Bowman ordered Phelps to swim at race speed, he would shout, "Put in the videotape!" and Phelps would push himself, as hard as he could. It almost felt anticlimactic as he cut through the water. He had done this so many times in his head that, by now, it felt rote. But it worked. He got faster and faster. Eventually, all Bowman had to do before a race was whisper, "Get the videotape ready," and Phelps would settle down and crush the competition.By establishing a keystone habit of visualizing victory every morning and night, Bowman and Phelps created a platform from which another habit—calming down and performing during a critical race—became effortless. The visualization keystone habit had prepared the soil from which other habits could grow.Characteristic Three: Establish a Culture Where Excellence Is ContagiousBack in Beijing, it was 9:56 A.M.—four minutes before the race's start—and Phelps stood behind his starting block, bouncing slightly on his toes. When the announcer said his name, Phelps stepped onto the block, as he always did before a race, and then stepped down, as he always did. He swung his arms three times, as he had before every race since he was twelve years old. He stopped up on the blocks again, got into his stance, and, when the gun sounded, leap!The final characteristic of identifying keystone habits is to look for those moments when excellence—or change, or perseverance, or some other virtue—seems to become contagious. Keystone habits are powerful because they change our sense of self and our sense of what is possible.For instance, during that race, Phelps knew that something was wrong as soon as he hit the water. There was moisture inside his goggles. He couldn't tell if they were leaking from the top or bottom, but as he broke the water's surface and began swimming, he hoped the leak wouldn't become too bad.By the second turn, however, everything was getting blurry. As he approached the third turn and final lap, the cups of his goggles were completely filled. Phelps couldn't see anything. Not the line along the pool's bottom, not the black T marking the approaching wall. He couldn't see how many strokes were left.For most swimmers, losing your sight in the middle of an Olympic final would be cause for panic.Phelps was calm.Everything else that day had gone according to plan. The leaking goggles were a minor deviation, but one for which he was prepared. Bowman had once made Phelps swim in a Michigan pool in the dark, believing that he needed to be ready for any surprise. Some of the videotapes in Phelps's mind had featured problems like this. He had mentally rehearsed how he would respond to a goggle failure. Most important, Phelps's keystone habits had established a certainty within his mind: he could succeed, no matter the obstacles. After all, he had always succeeded before. His self-image, all of his habits, were built around the certainty of overcoming any problem.As he started his last lap, Phelps estimated how many strokes the final push would require—nineteen or twenty, maybe twenty one—and started counting. He felt totally relaxed as he swam at full strength. Midway through the lap he began to increase his effort, a final eruption that had become one of his main techniques in overwhelming opponents.At eighteen strokes, he started anticipating the wall. He could hear the crowd roaring, but since he was blind, he had no idea if they were cheering for him or someone else. Nineteen strokes, then twenty. It felt like he needed one more. That's what the videotape in his head said. He made a twenty-first, huge stroke, glided with his arm outstretched, and touched the wall. He had timed it perfectly. When he ripped off his goggles and looked up at the scoreboard, it said "WR"—world record—next to his name. He'd won another gold.After the race, a reporter asked what it had felt like to swim blind."It felt like I imagined it would," Phelps said. It was one additional victory in a day full of small wins. It was a triumph of keystone habits, just another step in a lifetime of success. Title image remixed from Ken Kistler and Ljupco Smokovski (Shutterstock).Charles Duhigg is a reporter at the New York Times and bestselling author.To understand more about keystone habits, the habit loop, and how habits work (and can be changed) within lives, companies, and society, read The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business.Want to see your work here? Send an email to submissions@lifehacker.com!

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