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Dr Hazel Wallace: Hello and welcome back to another episode and a brand new season of The Food Medic podcast. Can you tell I'm very excited? We are now on Season 6, which is incredible and although I say this every season, I absolutely loved recording this one and it may be our best yet. So whether you're listening to this on your commute, on the beach, on a run, on the sofa, thank you for having me in your ears and I hope you enjoy the show. So if you're new around here, I should probably introduce myself. My name is Hazel or Dr Hazel, if you like. I'm a medical doctor, a nutritionist, author and founder of The Food Medic. On this podcast, we hear from a range of people with expertise and experience in health and nutrition, who provide evidence based advice on how we can live healthier lives. To give you a bit of a teaser of what's to come on this season, we're going to be discussing a range of topics from health behaviours and habits, maximising performance and recovery, wearables, burnout, which has been a big thing for me this year and for many of us, sobriety, gut health, mental health, resistance training, and CrossFit. Again, if you do enjoy this podcast, it would mean so much to me if you could spare less than 60 seconds of your time to leave a rating and a review and share it with someone you think might enjoy it too. For more from me, you can visit our website on thefoodmedic.co.uk or find me on social under Thefoodmedic, Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. So without further ado, I'm very excited to introduce my first guest, who I literally fan-girled over during this podcast but I was just too excited to finally have him in the same virtual room as me. Ladies and gentleman, it is Mr James Clear.

If you haven't heard of James before, he is a writer and speaker focused on habits, decision making and continuous improvement. His book, 'Atomic Habits', is a New York Times bestseller and more than one million people subscribe to his weekly newsletter at jamesclear.com. His work has appeared in Entrepreneur Magazine, Time Magazine, The New York Times, and on CBS This Morning. His strategies have been used by coaches and teams in the likes of NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB. I've been following his work since the early days, back in 2013, I think, and I'm still a mega-fan. So, grab a pen and paper, or open up your Notes app, because there are so many great takeaways from this episode. I hope you enjoy.

[AD break]

(TC: 00:04:21)

Dr Hazel Wallace: So, James, the reason that I really wanted to have you on the podcast to have a chat, obviously you've published an incredible book but I first came across your work when I was back in medical school and I want to say it was 2012, maybe 2013 and I'd signed up to your newsletter and it was probably the only non academic reading I was doing at the time, but it really helped me get through med school and just build healthy habits into my day. So, first of all, I just want to thank you for that and for supporting me there but off the back of that I'd love to, kind of, start with that and how you really got into writing about habits and talking about it and where your journey first began.

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James Clear: Yes. You've been with me for a while. Thanks for following for all those years. I'm glad you have found it useful. I got started because I wanted to be an entrepreneur. I didn't intend to be an author or to have a career as a writer but I knew that I wanted to run my own business and I knew that I wanted to have the flexibility to work on projects that excited me. So for the first couple of years that I tried that, I mostly just stumbled around and didn't make a whole lot of progress and tried a bunch of ideas that didn't really go anywhere and eventually, I realised that one of the reasons I was struggling to make a lot of progress, is because I was creating things but I didn't have an audience. I didn't have anybody to share the new thing I made with and so I would put energy into trying to, like, build this product or build this business and then I thought, 'Well if I make it, then people will find it.' but that obviously was not true. And so I started writing and blogging and building an email newsletter, so that I would have an audience that I could share whatever the next product was that I was going to work on and along the way this funny thing happened, which is it turns out I like writing. And initially I wrote about just, kind of, whatever was interesting to me and habits were part of that but I also wrote about fitness and weight training and other stuff that people seemed to not be as interested in. And so, gradually, I found out that the thing that I was both interested in and that people wanted to hear from me on, was writing about habits and strategy and decision making, and so now I have continued to write about those topics that ultimately have culminated in the publishing of Atomic Habits.

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Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I think all great things often start like that, where it's a happy accident and then that led you to writing 'Atomic Habits'. Why atomic?

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James Clear: So, I chose the phrase atomic and 'Atomic Habits', specifically, for three reasons. So the word, atomic, has multiple meanings. You know, the first meaning is tiny or small, like an atom and that is part of my philosophy or approach, as I think habits should be small and easy to do. The second meaning of the word atomic is the one that usually gets overlooked. So it's like the fundamental unit in a larger system, like atoms built into molecules and molecules built into compounds and so on and I think your habits are kind of that, you know. Each one is sort of like a little atom or a little, you know, gear, in the overall system of your day and you put them together and you end up with your daily routine. And then for the third and final meaning, is the source of immense energy or power and I think if you combine all three of those meanings, you understand the narrative arc of the book or one of the core ideas of the book, which is you want to make changes that are small and easy to do and then you layer those, on top of each other, like units in a larger system. And if you can do that, and do it consistently, then you can end up with some really powerful and remarkable results. So I think the word atomic, and the phrase 'Atomic Habits', sort of, encapsulates all three of those meanings.

(TC: 00:08:06)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I would agree. And you mentioned the word 'systems' there and I've written down one of your quotes, so that I don't mess it up but one of the quotes that you've said, that's often quoted online, is, 'You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.' which I love but can you tell us what you mean by systems versus habits versus goals?

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James Clear: Sure. So, if we put a little, like, deeper explanation on each of those terms. So, what is your goal? Your goals are your desired outcome. Right. It's like the thing that you're shooting for. The target. What is your system? Your system is the collection of daily habits that you follow and if there is ever a gap between your goal and your system, if there's ever a gap between your desired outcome and your daily habits, your daily habits will always win. Like, almost by definition, your current habits are perfectly designed to deliver your current results. So, you know, let's say whatever system you've been running for the last six months or twelve months or whatever, that has carried you, somewhat inevitably, to the results that you have today. Now, you know, of course, there are other things in life that influence your outcomes, like luck or randomness, good luck or bad luck but by definition, those things are not under your control and in the long run, your life bends in the direction of your habits. It bends in the direction of the system that you've been running. And so, if you want to influence the outcomes in your life, to the best degree possible, it actually isn't that much about the goals. It's much more about the system that you're following. You know, in a sense, setting the goal is kind of the easy part. Like, I can set a goal right now to sell ten million books. It took me, like, three seconds. I mean the goal is not really the hard part. It's building the system of habits that carry you toward that goal and I think this one of the, and (TC 00:10:00) it's kind of one of the great ironies of life, that we all so badly want our results to change.

You know, we all so badly want to make more money or to lose weight or to have peace of mind or whatever the outcome is that we're shooting for but the results are not actually the thing that needs to change. It's kind of like, 'Fix the inputs and the outputs will fix themselves.' Fix the habits, redesign the system and the outcomes will follow naturally.

(TC: 00:10:26)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. Absolutely. And when it comes to building habits and thinking about how we're going to get to that goal and the system we're going to take, you talk about laws of behaviour change in the book and how you can, kind of, simplify or I guess, focus on how those habits can work for you and make them sustainable. Can you talk us through the four laws that you chat about?

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James Clear: Sure. So, let me back up for just a second and just describe, like, a habit from more of a scientific standpoint. I like to divide habits into four stages. I think if you understand those four steps, you've got, like, not only more of a scientific understanding of what a habit is or how that behaviour works, but you also have four different places where you can intervene and that's the four laws of behaviour change that you're mentioning. So, before we get to the laws, the four steps are Cue, Craving, Response, and Reward. Cue, Craving, Response, and Reward. And so, the cue is something that gets your attention. So, like, if you walk into the kitchen and see a plate of cookies on the counter, that is a visual cue. That starts the habit of eating a cookie. And then the second stage, the craving, that is a prediction that your brain makes. So, for example, as soon as you see the cookie, you don't even really have to think about it, but your brain automatically is making a prediction. Something probably like, 'Oh that would be sweet, sugary, tasty, enjoyable.' and it's actually that prediction that motivates you to take the third step, which is the response. You walk over and pick the cookie up and you take a bite. And then finally there's the reward, 'Oh, is it, in fact, sweet, sugary, tasty, enjoyable.' And not every behaviour in life is rewarding, right. Sometimes things

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have a cost or a consequence. Sometimes they're just, kind of, neutral and don't really mean a whole lot. But if a behaviour's not rewarding, then it's unlikely to become a habit.

You need that kind of positive emotional signal for your brain to be like, 'Hey, I want to repeat this again in the future.' So, Cue, Craving, Response, Reward. From those four stages, we can, I like to say we, like, operationalise this. How do we turn it into something actionable? And that's what these four steps are. So, if you want a good habit to stick, there are, kind of, roughly four things that you want to do and you don't have to do all of these, all the time, but the more of them that you do, and the more of them you have working for you, the more likely it is that a habit will stick. So, there's one for each stage. The four laws of behaviour change are, 'Make it obvious'. That's the first law. You want to make the cues of your good habits obvious, available, visible, easy to see. The second law is to, 'Make it attractive.' and we talked about that craving. You want your habits to be attractive, appealing, and the more attractive or appealing or exciting, enticing, the habit is, the more likely you are to feel motivated to do it. The third law is to 'Make it easy.' The more easy, convenient, frictionless, simple, a habit is, the more likely you are to perform it. And the fourth and final law is to, 'Make it satisfying.' The more satisfying or rewarding or enjoyable, a habit is, the more you have a reason to repeat it again in the future. So, make it obvious. Make it attractive. Make it easy. Make it satisfying. Those are, kind of, the high level view of the four laws of behaviour change and how to get a good habit to stick.

(TC: 00:13:43)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Amazing. And I guess, let's try and apply this to health behaviour and the reason I'm picking health behaviours is, obviously this is a health focused podcast, but also I find that when it comes to improving health, you're not getting those rewards, like you mentioned, instantly and that can often put people off sticking to the habits. So, say I want to start running. How would you apply those four laws to building in a daily running practice?

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James Clear: Yes. Great question. So, first I should just say, what you just mentioned, about the rewards being delayed. Very common thing with many different types of habits, not just health habits but also a hallmark of any compounding process, which is the greatest returns are delayed. And so delaying gratification, this is kind of one of the biggest challenges when it comes to building habits and one of, I think, the distinct differences between what is a good habit and what is a bad habit, usually the things that we call bad habits, reward us right away in the moment, so that immediately they have a little bit of a reward but in the long run they have a cost. And your good habits are the exact reverse. In the immediate term, they tend to have a cost. You know, it takes effort to sweat and go to the gym right now but in the long run, a year or two from now, you are much fitter because of it. And so it's that kind of misalignment of whether the behaviour rewards you immediately versus in the long run, that helps us define what makes some habits good and some habits bad. So, let's take your example of building a running habit and just run through those four steps. So, how can we make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, make it satisfying. Right, well

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if you want to make it obvious, one thing that you could do is set out your running shoes and your running gear on the night before. So, when you go to sleep, you wake up and it's the first thing you see. It's sitting right by your bed or they're sitting right by the front door. Wherever makes sense for you but trying to make it as obvious as possible.

Some kind of reminder in the physical environment that, 'Hey I want to go for a run.' Making it attractive. So, you can imagine a scenario where, let's say you go to bed tonight and you're like, 'Alright. I listened to this guy talk about habits on this podcast today. I'm going to go for a run tomorrow.' and you set your alarm for 6.00am but then 6.00am rolls around and your bed is warm, it's cold outside, you're like, 'Well, I'll just press snooze.' But if you send a text to a friend today and you say, 'Hey, can we meet at the park at 6.15 and go for a run?' Well, now 6.00am rolls around and your bed is still warm and it's still cold outside but if you don't get up and go for a run, you're a jerk, because you leave your friend at the park all alone. So, you haven't made the run, itself, necessarily any easier in that situation but you have made it more attractive, to get up and go for a run. You've kind of changed the calculus that's going on in your mind, about whether you want to do it or not. Make it easy. Now this is one where we would scale the run down. So rather than, you know, worry about running for 45 minutes or doing some kind of full workout or whatever, we could say, 'The goal is just to run around the block once.' Or we could make it even smaller and say, 'The only objective is to get your running shoes on.' Once you've tied them, everything after that is considered a bonus. And sometimes people resist that, a little bit. I like to refer to this strategy as, in the book I call it the two minute rule, which is you take whatever habit you're trying to build and you scale it down to something that takes two minutes or less to do.

So, run for 45 minutes becomes put on my running shoes and people are, like, 'Okay. You know, I know the real goal isn't just to put my running shoes on four days a week. I know I'm actually trying to do this workout. So, if this is some kind of mental trick, then why would I fall for it, basically?' But I have this reader. His name is Mitch. I mention him in the book and he lost a bunch of weight. He's kept it off for over a decade now and when he first started going to the gym, he had a rule for himself where he wasn't allowed to stay for longer than five minutes. So he would get in the car, drive to the gym, get out, do half an exercise, get back in the car and drive home. And it sounds ridiculous, right. It sounds silly. Like, obviously this is not going to get the guy the results that he wants, but if you take a step back, what you realise is that he was mastering the art of showing up. Right. He was becoming the type of person that went to the gym, four days a week, even if it was only for five minutes and I think that's a deep truth about habits. Something that people often overlook, which is a habit must be established before it can be improved. Right. It has to become the standard in your life before you can worry about optimising and scaling it up. So, in the case of this running habit example, I think scaling it down and putting your shoes on and just viewing that as a victory, makes a lot of sense, because if you can't become the type of person that puts your running shoes on four days a week, then the idea or the theory or the hope of being the kind of person to run 45 minutes, four days a week, I mean that's way down beyond this.

So, let's just focus on getting that first step nailed and then we can worry about expanding up from there. And then the fourth and final, 'Well I'll make it satisfying.' as you mentioned, one of the challenges is that your body looks exactly the same at the end of the run as it does when you left. So, you have no physical

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evidence, right away, that that was worth it and this (TC 00:20:00) is one of the reasons I recommend using certain things like a habit tracker, which is just saying, 'Hey, after each run, just get a little calendar out and put an X on that day.' And then at the end of the month, you can add up how many workouts you did and compare that to the last month and so on. And putting an X on a calendar is a small thing but it adds a little bit of feeling, a little bit of emotion, to the moment. It gives you a signal of progress. And one of the most motivating feelings, to the human mind, is the feeling of progress. You know, if you're moving forward, even if it's slow, even it's in a small way, that feels good. You have every reason to continue and so, I would say those would be, like, four quick ways that you can apply it.

(TC: 00:20:42)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I love them and I'm a big fan of habit trackers. I think it's like when you have a really long to-do list and you tick everything off, that feeling of satisfaction but you mentioned, kind of, I guess the size of the habit. When it came to running, you know, don't aim too big. Do you think that's where a lot of people fall down? Do we try to tackle too many habits at once? Or try to make the habit too ambitious?

(TC: 00:21:09)

James Clear: Yes. I think it's very common. I mean, I know I've done it a lot. You know, I should say, as we were talking through all this, I'm basically talking through all the mistakes I've made. Right. Like, these are all things that I've struggled with as well. I think one of them is, when you think about a change, and you start to envision it and what your life could be like, you get excited about what that could be and about how great things could be and what you could accomplish. And it's very easy in those moments to, overly ambitious might be, I don't know, I don't know that I love the way to phrase that, because I think it's great to be ambitious but it's easy to bite off a little too much, too soon. And you convince yourself that, 'Oh I should be running for 45 minutes, four days a week.' and you know, maybe that's where you end up, but that doesn't mean that's where you have to start and I think the most important thing, early on, is establishing some type of consistency. Trying to make it part of your new normal. Building a lifestyle that you can sustain. And, usually, to be able to sustain that new lifestyle, the change needs to be non threatening, in a way. It needs to be, like, so easy, that you can't really say no to it, because what ends up happening is everybody thinks about what they want to achieve on their best day, but the question you need to ask is, 'What can I stick to on my worst day?' Because when you're really exhausted and tired and busy and life is creeping in, 'Okay, are you still going to be able to maintain the habit that day?' because it's actually the bad days that help keep the streak alive. It's finding a way to show up, when it's not perfect, that allows you to maintain that consistency and build the habit more-

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Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes and I guess for people who are trying to integrate a new habit into their lives, they've not done it before. One method is habit stacking. Can you chat us through this process?

(TC: 00:22:56)

James Clear: Sure. So, when you're looking to build a new habit, one of the most effective things that you can do, is have a clear time and space for where you establish that habit and there are actually quite a few studies that show that if you pick a specific time and place to do something, you're more likely to follow

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through. So, you know, if you say, '7.00am in my basement is where I'm going to work out.' or, '6.00pm in my living room is where I'm going to read.' or whatever, you're more likely to follow through if you have that clear plan. Now, habit stacking takes that a step further and so this is an idea that BJ Fogg, a professor at Stanford came up with, which is instead of just taking a time and a place, can we take a behaviour and pair our habit with a new behaviour. So, you can imagine you already have a bunch of habits that you do each day. Like a lot of people, for example, they make a morning cup of coffee. So, let's say that the new habit that you want to build is you're like, 'I'd like to get into meditating more.' Well you can stack those habits together. You can layer them on top of each other. And so Doctor Fogg's example, or his little framework is, you say, 'I will perform the new habit after I do my old habit.' So, for example, it might be like, 'After I make my cup of coffee, I will meditate for 60 seconds.' So, by stacking those two things together, you give yourself a very clear time and place, a very clear behaviour to link the new habit to. And, you know, you're more likely to do it if you have a very consistent and obvious place to insert that behaviour into your life. Now, once you get good at this, you can start to stack multiple things together.

So you could say, you can imagine a little morning routine, that is a habit stack that has, like, multiple pieces. It might be like, 'After I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for 60 seconds. After I meditate for 60 seconds, I will write my to-do list for the day. After I write my to-do list for the day, I will prioritise the items and begin working on the first one immediately. And so now you have just this little stack of behaviours, that you do the same way each time and it, kind of, gets the momentum going and it's a very clear and clean path for you to follow each morning.

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Dr Hazel Wallace: I guess it becomes almost automated then, in that it just seamlessly falls into place every day.

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James Clear: Right. The thing that I like about it, is that it takes decision making off the table. A lot of people wake up each morning and they're wondering, 'Oh. I hope I feel motivated to work out today.' or 'I wonder when I'll have time to meditate today?' and if you already have a habit stack built, you don't need to decide. You know, you just, 'After I've made the cup of coffee, that's when I meditate.' It's already done. So, removing that amount of friction from the decision making process and from the behaviour, you can just do the actions, not to worry about when or where they're going to happen and it makes it a little more likely that you'll follow through.

(TC: 00:25:51)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I don't know if you've an answer for this but is there any evidence to say that people are more likely to stick to habits at certain times of the day? Like first thing in the morning?

(TC: 00:26:00)

James Clear: I think that it depends on the habit but the general answer is yes. So, I think the question of, 'Are some times better than others for this particular habit?' whatever the one is we are talking about, I think the answer to that is definitely yes. Like, you can imagine-, say you have a young parent who is trying to meditate. Well, 7.00am or after you make your morning cup of coffee, that might be a good time for most

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people but if you have a two year old and a four year old, running around, and you're trying to get them dressed, then that may not be a good time to do it each morning. And so you need to find a different time, when it makes sense for that habit to, you know, have the space that it needs to be established. I don't know about specific research studies related to doing things earlier in the day. I'm sure there are some out there but I will say, from a practitioner standpoint, from, you know, just my personal experience of working on it, what I found is that with most things the longer the day goes on, the more likely it is, it's like you increase your surface area for interruptions. And that could be related to work or personal life or whatever and so, generally speaking, I think it's when it's possible or if it makes sense for the habit, it's a better move to do it earlier in the day, because you have fewer things that you've been exposed to that could take you off track.

(TC: 00:27:15)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I agree. I think everything that I try to implement, tends to be first thing, because otherwise it rarely gets done. But you did mention, kind of, children and family there and that's also an important factor to consider, because the people in our lives also shape our habits, which can be tricky. It can work in our favour but it can be tricky if they reinforce habits that may not support our goals. So, what advice would you have for people who feel that way?

(TC: 00:27:46)

James Clear: Yes. So, I think, I want to say two things here. The first thing is you'll often read different frameworks or ideas or approaches, and sometimes you're like, 'Oh well, this is obviously written by somebody who doesn't have a family.' or 'This isn't going to work in my situation.' or whatever and family is just one of those constraints, by the way, it's not the only reason that a plan may not work, right. We can come up with an infinite number of things that could possibly, you know, mean this isn't a good fit for your life.

(TC: 00:28:13)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Of course.

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James Clear: But my response to that is, that's fine, that it doesn't work perfectly for you, because no matter what the plan is, even if it does sound like it'd be a perfect fit for your life, you still need to have the willingness to experiment and implement it yourself. Because ultimately all of these plans are just-, I mean they're just words on paper at first. So, if you don't have a willingness to experiment and to try to figure out what version of this is going to make sense for me, then it actually doesn't matter how good or how bad the plan is, because you have to have a willingness to take action and a willingness to experiment, for any of this to work. So, the idea that you'll be able to find a perfect plan for you, it's unlikely and it's not a fruitful way to spend a lot of time and energy but if you look at the plan and say, 'Okay. This is a starting point. How do I turn this into something that works for me?' Then, I think, you're in a much more powerful position to actually make it work. Second thing is, you're right. Our family and friends dramatically influence our habits and this is actually one area, that since the book has come out, I think is even more important than I realised. So many of the behaviours that we stick to, day in and day out, especially those that we stick to for years, almost always there's a social component involved in that. So, let's say for example that you walk outside and you see that your neighbour is mowing their grass and you think, 'Oh, I need to mow the lawn or trim

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the hedges or weed the garden.' and partially, you do that, because it feels nice to have a clean lawn and to have, you know, a garden that looks nice but mostly you do it because you don't want to be judged by the other people in the neighbourhood for being the sloppy one.

And so it's actually the social pressure of being part of that neighbourhood (TC 00:30:00) group, of being part of that tribe, that gets you to stick to the habit and this is true for almost countless numbers of habits. And so I think the punchline is, 'You want to join groups, to join tribes, where your desired behaviour is the normal behaviour.' because if it's normal in that group, it's going to be very motivating for you to stick to it. Because we don't just do behaviours, we don't just follow habits, for the results that they give us. We also follow them because they are a signal, to the people around us, that we belong or that we get it. We understand what it means to be part of this tribe and, you know, this is why you see people join a CrossFit gym and then they think they're going for working out but three months later, they all are eating a Paleo meal plan. They have a certain brand of knee sleeves and they bought these new workout shoes and, like, all that stuff is just additional signals, to the other people in that group, that they get what it means to be a part of that tribe. And so, whatever tribes that you expose yourself to, whatever groups that you become a member of, you're going to start to soak up some of those behaviours naturally and so I think it makes sense to think carefully about what groups we're a part of and what the social norms are there.

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Dr Hazel Wallace: Absolutely, because there will be situations where your close friends and family may have different desired behaviours and outcomes and so creating your own tribe is also, I guess, important and an option for people who feel like-, well maybe the people in their lives don't have that shared interest. And when it comes to things like exercise, that definitely comes to mind for me. I joined-,

(TC: 00:32:42)

James Clear: I think that's true and I also think, you know, sometimes it gets thrown out like, 'Oh, get rid of the toxic people in your life.' and so on and yes, if somebody is truly toxic, I think that's certainly a good strategy but I don't know that just because you have an ambition or you have something that you want to achieve or a lifestyle change you'd like to make, I don't know that that means you have to fully get rid of all the people in your current life or even just some of them. Instead, what you're kind of hinting at here, and what I would agree with, is we need to find a sacred space where that new habit is protected. You know, you don't need everybody in your life to also get into running if you would like to build that as a new lifestyle behaviour but maybe finding a group, so that you have a sacred space where that habit can live and be protected, and for an hour a day, yes you are surrounded by people who have the behaviour that you want to have. And then for the other 23 hours, you can continue to live your life as normal but when you're trying to make that behaviour change, you've got a safe space for it to happen in.

(TC: 00:33:40)

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Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I agree. And I guess, now, like, a lot of socialising exists online. Partly because of the pandemic, but also because of social media. So, how do you think social media/technology can help support our habits?

(TC: 00:33:57)

James Clear: I think it's huge and I think it can be even more powerful than most people realise. Almost nobody thinks about it this way but when you choose the people to follow, on Twitter, or Instagram, or wherever, you're choosing your future thoughts and nobody thinks about it like that. They just think, 'Interesting celebrity. I'll follow them.' or 'There's my friend.' or whatever, but these are the people that determine what you see in your feed, what kind of information you come across, and almost every thought that we have, is downstream from what we consume. So, if you're consuming better thoughts, if you're coming across better information, then you're significantly more likely, it's almost guaranteed, that you're going to start thinking some of those things yourself. You're going to have a response to the information that comes across your feed. And, for that reason, I think it makes a lot more sense to spend, almost what we could call, like, an unreasonable amount of time, curating and carefully selecting the people that you follow on social media, because you're selecting your mood, your emotions, your thoughts, for all the days in the future that you browse that feed and see that information. And that's just more from, like, a passive standpoint. If you start to actually interact with some of these people, and develop, you know, relationships or friendships with them, then I think that becomes even more deeply true. So, I think my primary encouragement would be to be very selective about who you follow and to think carefully about what kind of information flows you're creating.

(TC: 00:35:31)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. That's so true and I guess, following on from that, it can be difficult to say no to things or just simply avoid the daily distractions, from others, that take us away from focusing on what's important to us. So, how can we learn to say no to unnecessary distractions, to be more productive?

(TC: 00:35:52)

James Clear: Well, I think the first thing is understanding or knowing what you're optimising for. So, that question, 'What am I optimising for?' is something that I think most people don't take time to seriously consider it and seriously answer that question. If you know clearly what you're optimising for and what's important to you, deciding to say no becomes easier, because you know what you're prioritising. The challenge is when you only sort of know what you're optimising for and a lot of things sound roughly equal, in weight and importance, and then it becomes much harder to say no, because you're not quite sure if it really matters or not. So, the first thing is knowing clearly what you want, knowing what you're optimising for. Once you know what you want, then I think the next step is to, sort of, the phrase I like is, 'Work backwards from magic.' So, you know, what is the magical outcome? What is the ideal outcome, for this thing that you're optimising for? And then let's work backwards from that. What steps need to happen? How many reps do you need to put in? Or how much time each day do you need to spend on this? Who do you need to meet? What type of skills do you need to build? Like, all these questions can be answered as you're working backwards and trying to figure out what are some potential paths that could take me there and I don't think you need to have one perfect path, to the thing that you're optimising for. In fact, I would almost

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encourage you not to have one perfect path and be flexible with how you may end up, you know, meandering toward this thing that you really want.

But if you know what you're optimising for, and you work backwards from it, to figure out what you need to do, and how much time you need to be spending on it, and so on, and you develop or at least have a rough idea of multiple pathways that you can follow to that successful outcome, then you have a much clearer picture in your mind of what you should be spending your time on and what's important to you and why you're going to be doing those things. And once you have a clear vision in your mind of what's important to you and where you should be spending your time, then when the opportunities come your way or different questions get tossed into, you know, your field of vision, it becomes much easier to say yes or no to it, because that vision that you have, becomes a filter for all the opportunities and all the things that come your way and you can run it through this little mental picture that you have and think, 'Does this help me get closer to what I want? Does this help me get closer to what I'm optimising for or not?' but it's when you don't have a clear vision for those things, that it becomes much harder to say no, because pretty much everything sounds roughly the same when you're not quite sure what you want.

(TC: 00:38:25)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. It's getting clear on those, kind of, values and goals. One of the things you say in the book, is the greatest threat to success is not failure, it's boredom and I guess one of the topics that often comes up, I know on my platform, is the question around staying motivated when you get bored working on your goals. Especially if the goal is something that requires a process of, as you mentioned, compounding habits over a period of time and it takes time, despite what many people say, you know, it only takes 60 days to build a habit or all of that or it's a variable and it's easy to lose interest, I guess, if you're doing the same thing every day.

(TC: 00:39:12)

James Clear: Well, you know, longevity is it's own form of greatness. Being able to do the reasonable thing longer than most people will do it, is going to lead to outcomes that are better than what most people are getting. And so, getting bored with what you're doing, or giving up after a relatively short period of time, or even a moderate period of time, is only going to lead to fairly mediocre results. Now, the challenge with this though, is that it's very hard to beat the person who's having fun. You know, in a world with seven billion people, you're going to find, at least a few, who the thing that feels like work to you, it feels like fun to them and if it feels like fun to that person, then they're much more likely to stick to it. And so, in a sense, I think the first (TC 00:40:00) quest is to try to find things that feel like fun to you, that, you know, you really enjoy at least the majority of the process, if not everything. For myself, you know, books turn out to be one of those things. Writing a book is really a hassle for a lot of people but I find a lot of it fun and so it's very easy for me to work on it a lot, because I find it enjoyable. However, for that phase of building the first draft, where it does feel like a slog to me, and I can feel like I'm getting bored with it, or it's just, like, getting repetitive and tedious, what do you do in those situations? How can you keep yourself motivated when, you know, you know this overall is going to be something that you like but for this moment, it doesn't feel like it.

And, I think just knowing that those periods come, and will occur, is helpful, by just realising like, 'Oh, that's where you're at in the process. Oh, you're dealing with that phase. That's fine. Everybody deals with that. It's

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all part of it.' That can be helpful. But the other thing that I've found very useful for me, is scaling down. So, the idea of maybe doing the whole first draft sounds boring or sounds repetitive or sounds tedious, and I'm not motivated to do that but if I scale down and I say, 'Hey, in this chapter, in this section, I've got this one idea that I'm toying with. Can you write a better title or subtitle for that section of the book? That's a really small thing. Can you just do that?' and when I'm toying with that little individual idea, I'm like, 'Yeah, actually, this isn't as boring. This is kind of interesting. It's, like, just one little problem.' And so, it's getting really granular and finding that small detail to remain fascinated with, that helps me overcome that general feeling of boredom. When the whole thing starts to feel a little boring, can I scale it down and find a little detail that's fascinating? I've done something similar in the gym. You know, I've been training for over a decade now, and naturally if you're going to be working out for many years, there are going to be some days where you're like, 'Man, I'm doing the same exercises. I don't really feel like doing this.' but the key, for me at least, is the same story. Let's scale it down and try to find a little detail, of the form or of the technique, to focus on and let's just try to make that the thing that you play with today, and by finding those little granular elements, it helps keep you engaged. Gives you something else to focus on.

(TC: 00:42:17)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I agree. It's interesting you brought up the training thing. I've recently, I say recently, it's been about two years now, three years nearly, I joined CrossFit, because I was in that same situation where I just felt like I was going to the gym and not very motivated or I found it interesting any more but I think the habit of training, most days, especially in a CrossFit box as well, is compounded by what you mentioned earlier. In that, like, when I go there's a social element and now when I socialise outside of the gym, it's often with people who do CrossFit as well. So there's, kind of, lots of ways that it tied in. It was changing the environment, training with people who had similar interests and there were lots of things that just came together but I haven't invested in any knee sleeves or I haven't joined any Paleo communities, as of yet.

(TC: 00:43:13)

James Clear: That is the good example, though, of how it can help solidify the habit, because now not only do you train with those people, you're also friends with them and it adds some additional social pressure, might even be the wrong word, because that pressure, kind of, has this negative connotation but the idea is that, 'This is what the people I hang out with do.' and so it's easier to stay aligned, because it's like, 'Not only am I doing this because these people work out but I'm also doing it because I want to hang out with my friends.' and that helps keep it solidified.

(TC: 00:43:43)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. 100%. I'm interested to know what habits you're currently working on.

(TC: 00:43:48)

James Clear: Yes. I'm doing a new style training in the gym right now. Still weight training, strength training, but just a little bit different workouts and it's five days a week, whereas in the past, I usually was doing three or four days a week. So, that's just a little bit different. And then I'm working on a second book. So sticking with writing habits is something that's, like, very important for that I'm continuing to focus on and probably the biggest change with that, is my life is choppy now. When I wrote 'Atomic Habits', I had

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this period where for, like, six months, I just basically wrote all day long. I was, like, ten or twelve hours a day, just writing and editing and revising and that was how I finished the book and I don't have the space to do that now, with my current schedule. And so, this book's going to need to be written in a new way and so it's figuring out how to write a book in, you know, one or two hour chunks rather than ten hour chunks. And so, I guess mostly what I'm saying is I'm not really building that many new habits, as much as I'm building old habits in new ways now, and kind of finding a way to fit those habits into the current season that I'm in. And I think a lot about that. About what season of life am I in right now and how do my habits need to adjust, to best fit that season and I think that's something that we all, you know, we all go through different periods and so you may find that, if you want to reclaim a lost habit during a previous season, it may need to take a different shape, now, than it did previously.

(TC: 00:45:12)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. That's really interesting. So when can we expect this new book or is that all tbc?

(TC: 00:45:18)

James Clear: Yes. It's still a long way out. The first one took me five years to write. Hopefully this one won't take quite as long but when it's ready, I'll be letting everybody know about it. So, hopefully you'll find out.

(TC: 00:45:30)

Dr Hazel Wallace: And in the meantime, where can people find more about you and the work that you're doing?

(TC: 00:45:35)

James Clear: Yes. If you enjoyed this conversation, I think the most straightforward thing-, well if you want more information on habits, then 'Atomic Habits' is the best place to look and you can find the book at atomichabits.com but if you're, more generally just, kind of, interested in my thoughts and would like to browse more of my writing and work, you can go to jamesclear.com and if you click on Newsletter, you can sign up for my weekly newsletter, which is called '3-2-1', and each issue has three short ideas from me, two quotes from other people and one question to think about. Anyway, I think if you've enjoyed the conversation, you will genuinely find those to be helpful.

(TC: 00:46:11)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes they are. I'm so impressed that they're still going, especially on top of book writing. That must be a challenge.

(TC: 00:46:19)

James Clear: Yes. I like some parts of it more than others but most weeks it's a lot of fun. So, I'm very fortunate to have the setup that I do.

(TC: 00:46:26)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Amazing. Well, thank you for giving us your time today. I'm sure there's so many people listening who've got a lot from this conversation. I know I have. So thank you.

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(TC: 00:46:36)

James Clear: Wonderful. Thanks for the opportunity.

(TC: 00:46:39)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Wow. What an episode, hey. If you did love it, just as much as I did, I would love if you took the time to leave a short review and a rating and we'll see you again next time. Before you go, I do want to remind you of a quick question that James asks in that episode. What can you stick to on your worst day? And how can you show up when things aren't perfect?

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