

Meathead Hippie Episode #77 with James Clear on Habits, Crushing Goals, and Never Missing Twice

Emily: Welcome back to Meathead Hippie podcast. I'm your host Emily Schromm, personal trainer, nutritional therapy practitioner, serial entrepreneur. I like to stay busy, but podcasting is one of my favorite things to do. I went completely online. So I started off in person doing one-on-one's, started doing some online challenges, and continued to do one-on-one's and then really had this vision of going completely online. And it sounded so fabulous that I would be a completely online trainer, and then I realized, "Oh my god, I miss people." So I started this podcast, Meathead Hippie. I am the ultimate Meathead Hippie, because I really really love biceps curls and getting jacked, but I also love to talk about the weirdest things (laughs) which if you've followed me for a while you know. So we're gonna talk about a little but of all of it today, because I have an incredible guest, James Clear. We will talk to James about how I found him. It is the quote - I mean I'm getting this tattooed, like this is my favorite thing in the world to talk about. I don't even wanna spoil it, but it is so powerful when you learn about habits, and he just released a book "Atomic Habits." Mine is on my way, and I can't wait to read it. The reviews are already incredible. This guy is a world-renowned speaker on habits and not overthinking it and making changes in your life, and this could be with business, with fitness. He's my favorite newsletter that I'm on because he- and he talks about it, about creating content and building his brand, and although it is relative for people who are just starting off, it is also very relevant for people who are so lightyears ahead in doing all the things, and starting a business, and growing their business. We can never learn enough about the basic of habits and humanity and how we are in our day to day operations and how important each step is. And this was such a huge piece of my Don't Overthink It program, this mindset program that I just ran. I will do another one if you're interested in a little more one-on-one training with me that I don't do a ton of, but with this program it is a must. Please just shoot us an email and as always all of our programs, the EmFit Challenges that help people cut sugar and learn how to be fat adapted, the version 1 and version 2 EmFit Challenges, 21 days, 21 dollars, and also the strength programs can all be found on my EmilySchromm.com, and I truly think this is the missing piece. Go buy his book. Tell me what you think of him. Go follow him. James Clear. He is just fantastic, and I just died when he told me his spirit animal. It was just so perfect. He's just so great. So I've been holding this podcast until the book was released, and now I can finally release and now you guys are gonna love it. It's one of my favorites. We have so many good guest. I don't know if you just listen or if you have listened or what's coming. We have somebody that's broken the world record of traveling across Antarctica. We have just powerful people, and I just wanted to end 2018 in a very inspiring way. I just love my job and seriously enjoy. I'm gonna stop talking. Time for James Clear. See you guys soon.

I'm Emily Schromm, the ultimate Meathead Hippie. Welcome to the show.
(upbeat fun music)

Emily: James Clear, I jumped at the opportunity to get you on Meathead Hottie, because I have asked you in the past and you were busy writing this book. You said water this book is written, then yes. So now this book has been written. It is about ready to thrive and I am just so glad that I got to snag you to be a guest on this cause you're one of my favorite emails to open up, favorite newsletters. I just love what you do, so welcome.

James: Oh thank you so much. Yeah, I'm excited to talk, and thank you for being patient too. The book is done and here we are.

Emily: Does it feel so good that the book is done?

James: Oh yeah, it feels great. I kind of have this brain where I'm good at things that are daily or weekly, like you know writing an article every week or going to the gym a couple days a week, like that's kind of in my wheelhouse, and anything more than, I don't know, two weeks, seems like a really big project to me. And this was like, here's a book deal. Spend the next two years writing this and that's just like way too big for me to be able to handle well. So I struggle with long-term projects, and this is definitely the biggest and longest term project that I've worked on it. It took me three years to write, research and finish the book, and so yeah it feels good to be done. It feels good to meet your demons in a certain sense, and most of all though, I'm proud of it. I'm proud of the book that we finished, and I feel like that's something good to show to the world.

Emily: Oh, of course you do. This is so great, and it's so good. It's refreshing to hear you say this, because you have mastered, just like you said, the daily tasks, which is what we're going to talk about. Habits, motivation, all of the things I think so many of us when we're starting something have a hard time implementing. So I would be very curious, because I also am very similar, if it's too daunting, I just get like paralysis. I get so claustrophobic, and like ah, like I just avoid starting. Do you have any advice, we're just gonna jump right into this, do you have any advice to help with not the daily habits, which you have clearly mastered with Atomic Habits and the book, but with this kind of the opposite, the long-term big projects?

James: Well, my challenge is that I get into this perfectionism loop where if I have a lot of time to work on something, then I think, "Okay, you know, I'm gonna spend two years on this. It has to be really great." You know, like before I just had a quality bar and I wanted to do it well, but now if I'm gonna spend this much time and invest this much energy, then I have to do it, you know, perfectly or as well as I could. And of course, that's impossible to do and one of the challenges writing the book was it just kept expanding in scope. So I started and it was gonna be a book about habits, and then it was gonna become a book about human behavior, and then it was gonna be- It just kept getting wider and wider, and eventually- and this is part of the job of my editors do, which I think they're really helpful at, you know I had to come back what was important and focus on the fundamentals. And I think that is probably true in a broader sense for any big project. When you're feeling paralyzed, you likely need to come back to the fundamentals and focus on taking the first step again. And that sounds simple, but it's hard to remember in the moment. When you're feeling overwhelmed and you're feeling like there's a lot to be done or you want to accomplish this big task, it's very easy to get overwhelmed by the size

and scope of the project. So you know, in a way we could say that building my website was a really big project cause that took a couple years as well, but I never looked at it that way. I was able to look at it in a different frame, and that helped a lot. So rather than thinking about, "I want to build a website that gets millions of visitors," I focused on how I can write the best article every Monday and Thursday, and so by chunking it down and just focusing on the fundamentals, writing one good article, I ended getting to that result, but I never made it about that result. And so I think there's something there too about shifting your frame of reference, and making it more about the process and whatever the next step is that you can control and less about the ultimate outcome, because it's really easy to- Outcomes only happen like once on the timeline, you know, like they're very- they can be very distant milestones, so if that's all you think about, it just feels like you're delaying gratification all the time. That's not very fun. But you're focused on the next step and enjoying the process, and doing the process to the best of your ability, then you kind of get to enjoy that moment while also moving in the right direction.

Emily: I love that. For your book, what did you feel like your fundamentals were overall? So you have this big- cause I think this is also for so many people that are getting into their own industry, whether they're doing it as a career or if they are just trying to like, like you just said, build the website, you see something, you're like, "Oh, I wanna add that. I wanna add that. I wanna add that," and then it just turns. I love that cause it's so my issue. What were the fundamentals for you with that book? Like what did you just keep coming back to?

James: Well there were two things that really helped me in the writing the book and also were a challenge. So my first challenge was I've been writing about habits and improvement for years now, and so I had, when I started the book I felt like I had 30 or 40 ideas that all kinda fell under the umbrella of better habits, but what I didn't understand, and I didn't know this when I started out, but what I didn't understand at the time was I was unsure about how they all connected. So when you run a website or a blog, you can write one article, and you can link to two or three others ones. So it becomes kinda like a spiderweb, but a book is not like a spiderweb. A book is like a number line. It goes chapter one, two, three, four and so you have to like take all of these little points out of the web and lay them down in a row, and it took me a while to figure out how to organize those concepts. So that was a challenge for me, but once I did that then I was able to return to some of these fundamentals that you're mentioning and so a few of the fundamentals that I covered in the book, really there are like four kind of major levers, I guess I would call them, or four laws of behavior change that people can use to build good habits and break bad ones. And so moving the spiderweb into the number line got me those four big laws, and the once I had those I was able to just kinda dive into each one and utilize some of the concepts and applications that I had talked about and written about previously. So the first law, for example, is make it obvious. And building a good habit is often about what our environment presents to us and is obvious to us, so what are the things that are on your kitchen counter at home or your desk at work or in the common room in the office. These are all obvious cues that can either nudge us in a positive direction or a negative direction. So anyway, once I had those fundamental laws then I could talk about how to apply them.

Emily: I like that cause there's so many subliminal messages in our life and our- I mean that's marketing and advertising so if we switch that conversation and take it into our kitchen home or

bring it into our bathroom it's- we're so aware of everything even though we're not really aware. I think that's great. Well that's cool. Can I tell you about how I found you?

James: Yeah, let's hear it.

Emily: So do you remember your article about zen and the art of archery?

James: Yeah, yeah.

Emily: Yep, so this was sent to me, and it is still- I think I'm gonna get this tattooed, not the quote but some sort of bow and arrow, but everything is aiming. I read that article. It's been saved forever. I just, I'm obsessed with it and I would love, I guess kind of going back even further, did you always write? Is this something you personally found on your own journey because it was something you had a hard time with, with habits and clarity or is this the type of person you are? I'm very curious.

James: Yeah. If you were to talk to any of my teachers or professors from high school or college, none of them would have said, "Oh, he's such a great writer." I was like average at best. I've kinda like become a writer by doing it every week. I never set out to do it. What I set out to do was to be an entrepreneur. I wanted to have my own business and be able to work on projects that excited me and interested me, but I didn't start out being like, "Oh, I want to be an author." It just happened that I tried a couple- So I've been an entrepreneur for about eight years now. The last six years have been at JamesClear.com and writing about habits, but the two years before that, the very first two years, I tried a bunch of different business ideas, most of which flopped, and I realized that the reason things weren't going well and nobody was buying anything was I didn't know how to get the word out. I didn't know how to market stuff. And so I started writing just to build an email list and be able to reach people for my work, for the business that I was trying to build, and as I started doing that one of the good pieces of advice that I got early on was "try things until something comes easily." And so I kept trying different things, and then suddenly it was coming easier because I was able to build an email list, and for whatever reason I seemed to be better at doing that than some of the other marketing ideas that I had tried. And then I had this Word document of like 60 pages or so of my thoughts on habits, and it was just a persona document about what I was doing and why I was building certain habits and how I was going about it, and eventually I was like, "Okay, this is 60 pages long. I should publish like something out of this." So I just grabbed one article and that was the first post I put up on JamesClear.com November 12, 2012 and ever since then I just did an article every Monday and Thursday. That was the true that thing that came easier than other stuff. Like as soon as I started writing about that, growth took off faster than anything else I worked on so I was like, "Well, maybe I should focus on this."

Emily: It came easy. I do like that advice cause it means it's flowing from you, right? It's not something that we think we should do and then it becomes more authentic just in its execution.

James: You have to work just as hard. It's just that the results come faster, you know? Like you're gonna be- I feel like this is true for many different industries, but there are all kinds of

people who are working hard every day, but where do you choose to apply the effort determines a lot about how far you go. So if you're the type of person who's gonna show up and put energy and effort into something, it also makes sense to be sure that you're getting as much leverage out of that as possible and this was just an example of I worked hard on a lot of things that didn't go that well and then I switched to something that moved much quicker.

Emily: I love that. With Monday and Thursday, was the one of those things that you had to create the habit and then it became easy or was it just it felt good right away?

James: I think the supplies, I mean I kind of I love weightlifting so I kind of bring everything back to fitness at some point, but I feel like all of the lessons I learned in the gym applied to other areas of my life as well, and this is one example of that where I can't predict which days I'm gonna go in the gym and set a PR. And if you try to train like that and only go on the days where you felt good, it would never work because you wouldn't be there constantly enough to actually get-

Emily: PR

James: The results, yeah, and writing for me was the same way. I had to show up every Monday and Thursday. I couldn't predict which days I was gonna have a good idea or produce like compelling article, but I knew that if I showed up and wrote two great articles a week, or try my best twice a week, then by the time I got to the end of the month, I would have one or two that were really good. And so it was only by developing that consistency and letting the frequency drive it rather than the quality- I think in any endeavor you have choices. You can either choose to optimize for quality, in which case you say doesn't matter when this gets out. We're just gonna make sure it's the absolute best thing we can make. You can optimize for frequency or for schedule and say it doesn't matter how good or how bad this is, something is getting out on Monday. And you can optimize for scope, and you can say it doesn't matter how quickly we do it or how good it is, but it has to be this big or this extensive. And for me, I chose to optimize based on frequency, especially early on. That was the one that, as long as I wrote an article every couple days, I was developing my taste, I was developing my voice and that was eventually led to better results too.

Emily: And that's good you had to let go of that perfectionism, right? So that, was that a hard transition just cause you're like, you know.

James: It was. The way that I learned to get around it was by saying something has to get out on Monday and Thursday, and I also have this internal quality bar, this internal perfectionism thing where I want to be good enough. So I had to say well if I can only write one good paragraph today, then that's what's getting out. It has to get out today, and I feel like it needs to be of a certain quality so I have to reduce the scope. So that was the one that I like accommodated on and I stuck with.

Emily: I like that. I love that, and I'm curious- We just, I just have a ton of aspiring and new budding entrepreneurs as well. I think I would love to know any word of advice for those two

years that you had where you were like, "Ugh." You know, I'm sure it was like, "This is not what I wanted." It's just not it. It's just not it. It's just not it. Do you have any words of advice as people are navigating those two years outside of just find what feels easy?

James: Well- Oh sorry go ahead.

Emily: No go ahead.

James: Well so, it took me about 18 months before I was making enough money to like pay my bills where I was like were I would say, I was full-time because I had saved some money up so I could just focus on the business, but I wasn't at break even until about 18 months, and looking back that's actually kinda fast. It felt incredibly slow at the time. And so for anybody going through that and feeling that right now, yeah I guess I would say it's like two years. I look back at those first two years now and refer to it as the period where I incubated my skillset.

Emily: I like that.

James: I needed to learn that stuff. I didn't know anything in the beginning. No you know, like when you start, you have to start at the beginning. That's just how it goes. So I had to learn how to build a website and create an email list and you know, I had to learn what all that stuff was. I didn't even know what, like how do you even build a website. Now it's even easier than it was then, but there's a lot of questions. Whether it's technical stuff or things specific to your business and the supply chain or whatever you're trying to service or create, there's going to be a bunch of just fundamentals like that, that now are implicit knowledge for me and so I don't have to think about them or worry about them that much. That's the other thing that's really hard about starting business is that there's all this work in the first year or two that you don't have- It's like a one-time cost. There are all these upfront costs that have to be paid early on both in knowledge and in time and money, and once those are paid, then you have suddenly more space to actually do the work and get paid for it. But before those are paid, you don't have a business so it's- That part is frustrating. It's almost like you need to work twice as hard in the beginning because you have all these new things that you haven't learned yet.

Emily: Yeah. No, that's so true. And then it, like you said, it moves so slow, but it's kind of like that the article that I found you in, Zen and the art of archery, right? The whole ability to just perfect the routine before you even release the arrow, and that's why I'm- Can you- I'm gonna butcher this story because-

James: We should tell the story.

Emily: We should tell the story, yes.

James: So the story is that, and I believe the Japanese archer's name is Awa Kenzô, so he's this like famous archery master in Japan. And there's this guy Eugen Herrigel, who went over there. He's a professor at a university and while he's a visiting professor, I think he's originally from Germany, he decides, "Oh I wanna get exposed to Japanese culture and life." So he starts taking

archery lessons and he just happens to go to this archery master Kenzô to take lessons from him, and for the first seven years that he's over there, this guy has him shoot into a bail of hail that's like six feet away. And he's like, "You've got to be kidding me" at how boring and fundamental this is. And so one day, he finally gets to step back a little bit further and his arrows are flying all the way, like all across course and they're- you know, he's not hitting the target. And so he's getting really frustrated and he looks at the master and says, "The problem is my aim." And his master says something to the effect of, "If you're an expert it's not about where you aim, it's more about how you approach the shot." And he was like all annoyed at him, and he was like, "Well if that's the case, then you should be able to hit it with your eyes closed." And so the guys look at him and he's like, "Meet me in the archery courtyard tonight." And so the sun goes down. It's dark outside. All the lights are off, and they walk over to the practice range and the master picks up the bow and arrow and steps up and goes through his normal shooting routine, taking the right steps, breathing appropriately, drawing the bow back, and then he fires an arrow out into the dark. And later the professor said that he couldn't see it, but he knew that it had hit the target because he could hear it thump in. Then right as soon as he fires the first arrow, he pull out another one, goes through the same shooting routine, fires it off into the night. And then the professor gets up and runs across the courtyard, flips on the light over the target and not only had the first arrow struck into the black of the center of the target, but the second arrow had actually gone in and splintered part of the first. And it's such a beautiful story, not just because it's awesome, but also because the point is that where the arrow lands is actually out of your control once it's released. So the only thing that matters is everything that precedes the shot, not the the shot itself. And these archery masters have this philosophy where they say, "Everything is aiming." It's not just about what you look. It's not just about looking at the target. It's about how you breathe, how you pull back the bow, how you set your feet, and everything that is associated with how you approach the shot. And I think that of course has applications to many areas of life, that we are so focused on looking at the center of the target that we don't think about everything else that's preceding the shot, about where our feet are and how we're breathing and how we're holding the bow, and that if we instead released our need to look at the target so much and stop focusing on the results all the time and focused on the process and the approach that precedes it, oftentimes we would find that the arrow flies straight anyway.

Emily: It's so good. It's my favorite, and then that's when I felt like, "Yep, James Clear, we're getting you on this podcast." (laughs) That was a long time ago. It was before even Meathead Hippie was Meathead Hippie, but I just I can't wait, and this is the coolest story. I was just in San Francisco with my sisters. I had this little sister weekend, and I have two older sisters, really tangent, I'll be quick but, my oldest sister, we were at this coffee shop and there's this bookshelf where if it has a yellow sticker than you can take it. And so she went and got this book and I was like, "Oh that's so fun you can get a free book." I was like, "Go pick me out one," and I was finishing up emails and then we were gonna go out to eat. And she comes up, and this is literally not even a week ago, she hands it to me and she says, "Here you go" and I look at it and it's Zen and Art of Archery and I was like, "What."

James: Wow, that's crazy.

Emily: I was like, "Are you kidding me?" So I told her the whole story about the blog post someone had sent me that was yours and then me getting it- I ended up getting it on Amazon after that blog post, but this was like a vintage book and I just, like this is so ridiculous. I was just like so excited, even more, to interview you because of that full circle that happened. Question that came up while you were telling the story, I was always think I love this quote "the grass is greener where you water it" and how many times I see more and more, just especially with social media as great of a tool as it can be, just how it can so easily push us, like we can't focus on anything because we see something else, like this constant comparison method, but also this constant- So I would love to talk about kind of the opposite, well maybe it is the same as habits, but like when you are trying to find your own or you know, water your own lawn, how do you- what tools do you use to make sure that we're not just constantly looking and second-guessing ourselves? And once we do decide, how do we avoid that?

James: Yeah, we kind of live in this interesting time. We face an interesting challenge, which is that the things that stand out on social media are the things that get spread because they're rare and interesting and they stand out. And in a world of 7 billion people, you're gonna be able to find at least a few thousand that are better than you in any vertical of life, and because they are so good, those few thousand people will get shared more than others because they're interesting and rare. But you're not just following them on social media. You're also following and being exposed to the other few thousand people who are great in this other vertical next to them and then the vertical next to them. And so pretty soon you feed is just filled with what feels like, what looks like normal every day life because you're seeing it every day, but it's actually like the rarest of the rare among the 7 billion, and it's very easy to feel like people's daily lives are sexier or more impressive or wealthier than your life is. This is particularly difficult on social media because almost always, and this is true for the regular news cycle as well, the event is the thing that gets shared and not the process behind the event. So to bring it back to the story we just told, the arrow hitting the bullseyes, that's the news story. The breathing and the feet and the set up, it's not interesting. You know, like you hear about when a Broadway show becomes a hit. Nobody is talking about the musician or creator writing the show for two years beforehand. So that challenge, the separation between process and outcome is I think difficult.

Emily: Like the overnight success, right? So the people, I always hear stories of- and same for you. This book is lie gonna just take off and I know you already have an incredible audience, but even with your book, they're gonna read it and be like, "Where'd James Clear come from?" You're like, guys I've been doing this for six years. You've been doing it for so long, so I do appreciate that perspective.

James: There's an analogy that I use in the book- And I'll come back to your original question in a second- About heating up an ice cube. So if you have an ice cube on a table, you walk into a room, it's cold and you can see your breath, say it's like 25 degrees. And then you heat up the room to 26 degrees, and then 27, 28, 29, still nothing's happened to the ice cube still on the table. 30, 31, and then you go from 31 to 32 degrees and suddenly there's this phase transition. The ice starts to melt, and it's a one degree change, seemingly no different than all the changes that came before it, but suddenly everything is different. And I think a lot of the time progress and life is like that, where you're kind of stuck on what I would call the plateau of laden

potential. You're making these changes, and it can feel very frustrating to do that, to put all this work in, but complaining about not getting results because you worked hard for a few months is kind of like complaining that an ice cube hasn't melted when you've heated it from 25 to 31 degrees. Like the work isn't wasted. It's just being stored.

Emily: Love it.

James: So, so often we are not patient enough with ourselves, and because we are inundated on social media and the news cycle with all these results, you feel like why isn't this ice cube melted yet? I've been running for a month, why can't I see changes in my body? And as soon as you get locked in that type of results only mindset, it gets very easy to let good habits kind of fade away and try to chase whatever the next quicker, faster, get rich quick, lose weight fast scheme is rather than committing to the habits and results- sorry the habits and the process, not the results.

Emily: That's a perfect analogy. I really love that.

James: Okay, so your original question was about ignoring the kind of tide of social media and everything that's like the next-

Emily: The noise.

James: The noise, yeah, the noise of everybody else's stuff. Keep your- When I was in grade school, our teachers told us, "Keep your eyes on your own paper," and I feel like that still applies as an adult, you know. It's so easy to spend all your time looking at other people's feeds and other people's papers rather than thinking about your own process. So there's a story I really like about this general philosophy. There's a woman named Martha Graham in like the mid-1900's. She was a choreographer. She did the choreography for Oklahoma, famous Broadway play in like the 40's and 50's. And Oklahoma was her first big success, like really blew up, and she was of course happy that it did well, but also kind of annoyed because she had been working for like two decades before that and she thought that some of the other plays and choreographies that she had done were better than Oklahoma and they didn't catch anybody's eye. And so she's talking to a friend about this, and she's like, "You know, I worked so hard on these other things and they didn't do anything, and then this one, which I thought was okay, blew up. So I kinda feel like I'm not made for this work anymore. I kinda feel like I'm uncalibrated. I can't figure out what is good and what is bad." So anyway, her friend looked at her and said, "You have something inside of you that is unique that can only be shared with the world if you share it. If you choose not to share what you have, whatever your creation is, whatever you're going to about the world, it will not be created by anyone else. Your unique perspective, your unique time, this little window in history that you have will be here. So you can, if you want, choose to stop and switch to something new but in many ways it is not your responsibility to judge or determine whether your work is good or not, or whether it should be successful or unsuccessful. Your only job is to do the work." And there's another famous quote about art, creating art like that where it's like, "Make good art. Put it out into the world. While everyone else is deciding whether it's good or bad, make more art."

Emily: I love it.

James: That's kind of the point. We get so worried about what other people are doing or how they're grading our paper that we paralyze ourselves, and prevent us from just doing the next set of work. We're focused on judging it, but it's not your job to judge it. It's your job to do it.

Emily: You had a great newsletter of people who create art. I think it was seven people.

James: Yeah.

Emily: Different quotes from the same concept. It was just like, You just keep doing it. Don't stop. I love it. That's great. I think with me and my audience and the people that are out here, who are listening, it's just so good because it's refreshing to know that we're not crazy and in our own head. I think we feel like we're on an island and these thoughts and these comparison methods and the battle with ourselves of like, "Why am I doing this? What is this purpose?" I think we tend to think we're alone in that, and I think all of us do have those. Even I'm sure when you were writing the book there was moments of that. So I think making sure it's humanized that doubting is such a part of the journey.

James: Yeah. Everybody faces doubt and uncertainty, you know? This is one of the funny things, I wasn't expecting this when I started writing about habits, but when you write about habits and creativity and productivity and performance, you know every week I'm trying to find new stories and new examples and a lot of them are similar fundamentals and principles. And so I'm writing about these and sharing them each week and each month, and so many times I get emails from people who say, "I feel like you wrote this article just for me," which is particularly hilarious when you get like 20 people who all say that. You're like, okay clearly I couldn't have written it just for all 20 of you and what I take away from that, being on the backend is everybody is dealing with the same problems. We feel like our problems are unique because we assign them to our specific home or work or the specific name of the person that's in our life versus somebody else's life, but at their core all the problems are very similar. And in a way, I find that very inspiring, you know, kind of like unites us. We have a shared humanity and these shared burdens that we all deal with from time to time. And knowing that other people are going through that same process of doubt and uncertainty and questioning whether their work is good enough or should be shared doesn't necessarily make it easy to deal with when you have to face that, but at least you know that you're not alone.

Emily: Yeah. Are you ready for my questions? These are gonna get good.

James: Alright, let's do it.

Emily: So this is through my private Facebook group that we, I mentioned that you were coming on and so many good questions. I will try to tap into a few of them. This one I like a lot because I think it's a little bit opposite. So this is from Kelly. She says, "I tend to start a new habit that is good for me (walking, running every day). I stick to it for a long time, almost too

long and then I'll start getting sick of it because my life seems too routine. How do you break those molds of becoming too much of a hamster in a cage?

James: Yeah, so this is a great question. So this is something I cover in the second half of the book in a chapter called the Goldilocks Rule, and one of the main challenges is in the beginning a habit is new but it's kind of difficult because you haven't formed it yet. So you need to focus on building this new routine and as long as you choose something that is small enough and not overly intimidating or hard to stick with week in and week out, it's actually, it can be a little bit fun, because it's new but it's not pushing you so hard that it's impossible to do. So like say, for example, that her example of going for a walk or something every day, that's great. If you wanted to do say 100 push ups a day, you might be able to do it for a week or two, but soon it's gonna start getting, it impinges on the rest of your life. It's gonna require a big lifestyle change. So anyway, you start small and you're able to stick with it. But at some point, a habit once it's repeated enough becomes automatic, and when it becomes automatic, it no longer is interesting. We start to fall into this loop of like boredom, and for whatever reason the human brain seems to be wired to seek novelty to some degree. And there's a famous quote by Machiaveli where he says, "People desire novelty smooch that hose who are doing well want it as much as those who are doing poorly." And so even when things are going well for us, we still are like, "Well maybe I should try something new cause I'm kinda bored." So there are two things that I mention in the chapter. The first one is a way to prevent boredom, and that is by adhering to what is called the Goldilocks Rule. So the Goldilocks Rule essentially states that humans experience peak levels of motivation when they work on a task that is just beyond their current ability, not too hard, not too easy, just right. And so for example, imagine you're playing tennis. If you're playing a tennis math and you're playing against like a pro, like Serena Williams or something, then you might-it might be cool for a minute because you're getting to play Serena, but if you're really trying it's gonna be frustrating pretty soon. Your'e gonna lose every point. Similarly, if you're playing against like a 4-year-old, again it might be cute for a second, but if you're actually trying to play, it's gonna get boring cause you're gonna win every point. But imagine you play someone who's just on your level of ability. You win a few points, you lose a few. You have a chance to win the match, but only if you really try. And that's kind of in that Goldilocks zone, where it's like, "Okay, now I feel really motivated. I'm fully engaged." Sometimes we'll call this flow or being in the zone. Scientists have actually tried to map the level of motivation, and they find that it happens when you're about 4-5% beyond your current ability, so you're taking on challenge that's just on the edge of what you can do. Now in daily life, it's rarely possible to figure out how to be 4% beyond what you're capable of, but I think as a general rule this principle of let me try to take onto something that's just a little bit of a challenge, and you can also use a rule of thumb which is half of the time you should be succeeding, at least half of the time, and then half of the time you should be, you know, strutting or trying to make it work. And if that's true, you have just enough winning to feel motivation and not get dejected and depressed, but just enough wanting to be like, "Okay I need to really stay engaged."

Emily: The 4-5% is super cool cause I think in our head we probably think it's 20% and so if it's not 20% it's not good enough, right? (laughs)

James: This is a lesson about building better habits though which is that even when you hear and know that you should start small, it's still real easy to start too big. So if people say things like, "I want to build a better habit like going for a run each day, but I know that I should start small so I'm only gonna run for 10 minutes." Well, even that is actually way bigger than what you should actually be starting with. Instead the habit should be something like put on your running shoes and get out the door, because the thing about most habits, well almost any habit, a habit has to be established before it can be improved. So we're so focused, again, on the result, on the target, on the bullseye, and we think about what we want to do in a broad sense that we don't think about all the little logistics that are associated with what I call the first two minutes of the behavior. So I like to suggest people adhere to the two minute rule, which is most habits cannot be accomplished in two minutes or less, but everyone can be started in two minutes or less. So if you had a goal of like, "I wanna read a book every week," well how can we scale that down to the first two minutes of the behavior, so that becomes read one page each day. Sometimes this sounds like a trick like, "Okay, I know the real goal is to run a mile. I know the real goal is to read a book. So why would I just follow through if I know I'm just trying to trick myself?" But if you feel like that, my suggestion would be to actually limit yourself at that point. So you have to stop reading after one page, or you have to walk back inside after getting your running shoes on, stepping out the door and walking 100 steps or whatever. I had a reader who did this. He ended up losing 100 pounds, and he went to the gym every day for five minutes and he had to leave after 5 minutes. But if you think about it, what he was doing, he did this for like six weeks, and then he was like, "I'm coming here all the time, I might as well, you know, figure out a better program to do or whatever." And this is the exact opposite of what most people do. He mastered the art of showing up, and once he knew- and there are all these details that have to happen early on, like when are you gonna go to the gym, which gym are you gonna go to, what route will you take to drive there, what time of day will you do this, and will you do it with something else? Like all these little logistical things that he was able to figure out over those six weeks just by going for five minutes, and then once it was a habit and he mastered the art of showing up, he could focus on optimizing and improving from there. So I think- so that's the first lesson is starting like that and by combining that, building a habit in a small way with the Goldilocks Rule of when we try to increase by 4-5% each time, you can help to overcome what this reader was talking about, which is that after a while you start to get bored. You know, if you only went to the gym for five minutes for two years. Well, yeah he's gonna be pretty bored, but once he had that established, then he starts focusing on, "Okay how can I expand the routine? What type of exercises should I do? Can I mix it up?" Whatever. So I would say the most of the time, once a habit gets established, you need to find ways to continue to move the needle that 4-5% so that you can stay in some kind of zone of difficulty or zone of motivation rather than getting bored.

Emily: Do you think six weeks is better than the typical three week rule that we hear about?

James: Yeah, so there's no. You hear 21 days, 30 days, 100 days, all the type of stuff. So I have two thoughts on this. The first is there have been research studies done that show on average it takes about two or three months to build a new habit, 66 days is the number you'll hear quoted a lot because that was the average of this particular study. What most people don't say is that the range was quite wide in that study. So for a very simple habit, like drinking a glass of water at

lunch each day, people did that in 18 days or 21. So it was very short. It's almost three weeks. But then for other habits, it took people almost eight months. So that's the first point. There's nothing specific about that, but the second point, I think this is actually the more crucial thing, when people ask questions like, "How long does it take for a new, to build a new habit?" the implicit assumption behind the question is well how long do I have to work to get to this finish line, and then when once I get to this finish line I'll be done and a habit will be built. But the true answer to how long does it take to build a habit is forever, because when you stop doing it, it's not longer a habit, so the real way to think about it is not as a finish line to cross, but as a lifestyle to live. And this is another reason why I think small habits are so important, because if you radically transform your habits, you're asking yourself to radically transform your lifestyle and radically shift your identity, and instead I think it's much more powerful to upgrade and expand your identity, to slightly change your lifestyle the same way that you would retouch a painting. You know, you're not going to change the whole painting at once, but you can work on this little portion by making a small improvement. And as you do that over months and years, eventually you end up with a very different picture. But the point is that they should be small and consistent rather than some radical shift and that these are permanent lifestyle changes rather than a 30-day sprint and then you're done.

Emily: Yeah, and then you're just fixed, right?

James: Right. (laughs)

Emily: I have a bunch of questions and I think they're all tied in. So Leslie, Trisha, it is this concept of you know all in, all out. So I think I'm just gonna paraphrase some of these. These three weeks. I did it and now I'm all out, and seeing that as self-sabotage. For them, they're saying maybe I'm self-sabotaging this. Maybe I don't think I'm worthy of this change. But I feel like what you just said, it's just we're over, I guess that's a horrible thing to say, over estimating oversells in a way, so maybe we're picking too big of goals or we're just, you know after three weeks, just like you said with the running or anything, that's too big, at some point it's gonna die off. So is that the whole concept behind the all in, all out personality type that you see?

James: So you do see this a lot. People fall into this all or nothing pattern with their habits and I think one, it's a- there's a little bit of a disconnect in how we think about habits anyhow they actually compound and add up over time. So it's so easy to over estimate the importance of like one defining moment or one radical change and underestimate the importance of making slightly better decisions on a daily basis, and part of that is because the brain has trouble conceptualizing what compound interest or compound results look like. On any given day, it's very easy to dismiss one small choice, what I call in the book a 1% improvement or 1% decline. You know, if you eat a burger and fries for lunch today instead of a salad, it doesn't feel like very much. The scale probably isn't any different at the end of the day. You probably don't notice that much difference during the meal on later that afternoon. It's a very minus shift, and so because it's easy to dismiss, it's also easy to repeat day in and day out. It's only when you're one or two or five or 10 years later that you fully see the effects of how you habits compound over time, and in many ways our results are just a lagging measure of our habits. You know, how clean or dirty your home is a lagging measure of what your cleaning habits have been like over the past few

weeks. How much money is in your bank account if a lagging measure of what your spending habits have been like recently, and how healthy you are or aren't is a lagging measure of what your fitness habits have been and so on. So my point here is that people look at the results. They look at how much money in the account or what the scale says or how clean or dirty the room is, and what they want is to change the results, but what we actually need to change is not the results but the process behind the results. If you set a goal to clean your room and you get really motivated, then you'll have a clean room for now, but if you don't change the sloppy packrat habits behind the room, then eventually two weeks three weeks from now you're gonna look at a dirty room again. So you treat a symptom with cause. And I think this all or nothing mindset is somewhat a product of that. It's a product of saying what I want to change is the result and getting obsessed with that and thinking I need to follow this diet plan to the tee, and if I'm not super strict with it then this can't be worth it because I'm not gonna get the result that I want. You know, like a lot of the time people would say- I actually haven't even seen any diets like this where it's like just do this diet one day a week, but if you did that it would be one day better than what you have right now. And that doesn't feel like it would do anything, but if you can continue to inch that up to the point where hey, maybe a year from now you're eating four days a week rather than one day a week in a health fashion, that's a really useful beneficial change even though it didn't feel like it at the time. So the first thing is shifting your mindset and realizing how small changes can add up and compound over time. The second thing that I like to use is just a mantra that I have, which is never miss twice. So, so often what happens with the all or nothing mindset is that you stick to a program, a diet plan, or a workout program or whatever for a week or two. Then you have one mistake. You either go to happy hour with friends or life is crazy one day and you have to miss a workout, whatever. But it's never the first mistake that ruins you. It's the spiral of repeated mistakes that follows. And so if you can cut that off at the source and get back on track as quickly as possible, then you can find that you're basically building a new habit streak and you can look at the- I also like to look at things on a much longer timescale I think than many people do. So for example, the all or nothing looks at it only on a most instantaneous timescale. Did I do this this week or not? But instead, you can like for example, for my workouts I've been asking myself, "How many weeks per year do I workout?" which is like a pretty broad timeline to look at, but I don't feel bad if I have to travel for work or go on vacation for a week and I don't get a lot of training in, because if I get to the end of the year and I've got my 40 weeks in or whatever it is, then that's still a really good percentage in the long run. And so the all or nothing mindset kind of sabotages that and thinks only about the streak and the perfection of it. So anyway, my mantra is never miss twice.

Emily: I love it.

James: So if I fall off course, how can I put all my energy into the next instance? You know, if I eat an unhealthy meal, well that wasn't ideal but how can I make sure I eat a healthy meal the next time? Or if I miss a Thursday for writing an article, I wish I would have published then, but how can I make sure I don't miss Monday. And so as long as you never miss twice- what's interesting about that is even if you just follow that strategy you would do it 50% of the time. You know, you would do it once and then you would miss, and you'd be like, "Well I can't miss twice." Then you just keep repeating that little strategy, but yeah so all or nothing is something a

lot of people deal with but I think shifting the way you look at it and trying to view things on a broader timescale can help.

Emily: So many gems. I love it. I really am gonna use that never miss twice because it's just an easy way to say new day, just get back and it takes the pressure off perfectionism which tends to stop many of us in our tracks. Because of this is called Meathead Hippie and we've talked about you've mentioned lifting and your workout routine, I'm just very curious as a trainer what type of lifts do you love to do?

James: Sure. So I came into lifting, as an athlete, I played baseball all the way through college and we did mostly strength training and powerlifting kind of stuff then. My dad did a little bit of Olympic lifting, so I got exposed to that early on, and now that I'm done with my playing career I was looking for another competitive outlet, so originally I joined an Olympic weightlifting team, did a few competitions with them which was fun. I've done some powerlifting competitions more recently and that's most of my training now is powerlifting style. I could probably use more rowing and cardio and sprint work than I do, but I haven't been doing as much of that recently.

Emily: (laughs) I feel like I'm- You know know what though, I have a feeling it's because sometimes the kind of big projects like writing a book feels like you just ran. You just ran in your head over and over.

James: Oh, I've been panting at the end of some of these chapters. They've been- I just park on the far side of the parking lot now and that's my cardio.

Emily: Yeah, yeah. People say what are you doing for cardio? I'm writing.

James: Yes, exactly.

Emily: I love that.

James: That sounds strenuous. Great.

Emily: Well, please come to Denver. If you ever come, let me know. My gym will be open by the time all of this is out and I would love to lift with you at some point before-

James: Oh, thank you. I would love that too.

Emily: Well very cool. I think the only other question I have for you, James, before we close out- So that was the Meathead. The Hippie, I ask all my guests what their spirit animal is or if they know their spirit animal. I've got some very fascinating answers

James: Hmm. Spirit animal.

Emily: Are you into personality tests and those types of things?

James: Uh, well so I mentioned- I had a chapter in the book on personality and habits and how we can choose the right habits for our personality, and I don't- but I haven't been able to find. Aton of science around it, but I do think that it's something that's promising. Actually, the powerlifting coach I work with, he now has an entry form where any of his clients fill out a personality test and then they try to match them with the right trainer based on their personality, so they'll work well together. Yeah, it's kind of cool. I think there's probably a lot of applications for that across different industries.

Emily: Do you know what the personality test is that he uses?

James: They use Pick 5.

Emily: The Pick 5, cool.

James: Yeah, and so actually if you're interested in more of that stuff, if you go to AtomicHabits.com, which is the site for the book, if you go to AtomicHabits.com/personality I have some of the best personality tests listed there for people to try out. There are a variety of different ones. But anyway, okay spirit animal. So my first answer was going to be a deer, but mostly because I spent a lot of my childhood on my grandparent's farm and I would always try to find deer in the woods and a couple times ran across them down there. It was just a very cool experience to be face to face with like a 10-foot buck. So that was gonna be my first answer, but then for some reason my second answer was a Weimaraner, which is like such a strange specific choice. But I don't know. They're small. They're fast. They're sleek. I think they look nice. I'm into it. I think it's good.

Emily: God that's so accurate cause I just- I'm really good at- I love dogs. I was on my way to vet school, worked with dogs my whole life. I even washed dogs for a very long time, so I'm like very good with breeds of dogs and I just think that you just hit the nail on the head with Weimaraner.

James: (laughs) There's no way that these are the correct answers, but those are the ones that came to me.

Emily: Well that's the- it means if it's your gut instinct, that means it's right. So you're a bit of the two. That's so good. I love it. Well James, again, it's such an honor to finally have you Meathead Hippie but just for me personally to talk to you. I think you're fantastic. I think everyone go get this book, AtomicHabits.com, and I know that you'll have a ton of resources there so they can dig around and start to get to know you and all the work that you've been doing for the last six-ish years and just so great to connect.

James: Yeah, thank you so much. I appreciate the opportunity.