Engineer Life: Set Up Habit Changes So It's Hard to Fail

In his [excellent ebook](#) about changing habits, blogging friend [Scott Young](#) described the process of forming habits as walking home through fresh snow. The first person to go through the snow has to forge a path through the snow, and it's difficult … but others will follow in that path and it gets easier and easier.

Photo by [chicadecasa](#)

Forming a habit is a matter of forging that initial path until it's harder *not* to take the path. Who wants to forge a new path through the snow?

But let's take that concept a little further: what if you engineered it so that even the initial person forging through the snow would rather take that path than another, because it would be harder *not to take the path*.

Engineer your habit change so that it's harder not to form the habit.

Why habit changes fail
I think I can safely say that all of us have attempted and failed at creating a new habit or changing an old habit at a few points in our lives. It can be hard to change old ways and create new ones.

The problem is that creating a new habit can be difficult. The reason: negative feedback.

Negative feedback is when we do something, and it is painful, or difficult, or we get criticized, or in some other way get a bad feeling rather than a good one. Difficult exercise, for example, contains inherent negative feedback, as it is more difficult than sitting on the couch. Quitting smoking contains negative feedback, because you suffer withdrawal pains and urges.

Positive feedback, on the other hand, is when you get compliments from friends and family that you look thinner or healthier, or the satisfaction from the number on the scale dropping. It's the encouraging comments I get on this blog. It's the great feeling when finishing a good run or a 5K.

But when the negative feedback makes the habit change difficult, especially in the first few weeks, habit changes often fail. That's because it's easier to quit the habit change than to keep doing the new habit, because of the negative feedback. It's easier to take a puff from a cigarette than to suffer withdrawal pains. It's easier to sit on the couch eating potato chips than to go out for that run.

Habit changes fail because the negative feedback from doing the new habit outweigh the positive feedback, and it becomes easier *not* to do the habit.

Engineer the habit change

So how do we overcome this problem? Think of it from an engineer's point of view:

1. When negative feedback outweighs positive feedback, habit change fails.
2. To make the habit change successful, positive feedback has to outweigh negative feedback.
3. **The solution**: increase positive feedback and/or decrease negative feedback until the ratio favors the habit change.

Think of it this way: if you want to take a certain path in the snow, put obstacles along all other paths so that it's difficult to go anywhere but the path you want to take … and have the path you want to take shoveled, so that it's easy to take that path.

You can engineer your habit change so that it's harder to quit than to do the habit.

How to do it
You have four options in your custom engineering solution. In each, I'll give some ideas, but you'll have to come up with ideas of your own to fit whatever habit you're trying to change.

1. Increase positive feedback for the habit. Some habits have instant positive feedback, but often the positive feedback is delayed. It takes awhile to lose weight. It takes awhile before your blog starts getting encouraging comments. This delay in positive feedback is what causes many people to fail, because in the crucial first few weeks they are getting mostly positive feedback.

Instead, find ways to have instant positive feedback. The more, the better. Add as many of these (and others you can think of) as possible to increase chances of success. Some examples:

- Creating a log or journal of your habit let's you feel satisfied that you're actually doing the habit.
- Joining an online forum, where you can receive positive feedback from others going through the same thing. Quit smoking forums or running forums are two examples I've used. The [Zen Habits challenge forum](#) is a great idea.
- Join a real-world group, such as a book club, a running club, a class, etc., where you can get similar feedback from people.
- Reward yourself, early and often. Small rewards are appropriate, but celebrate every little success.
- Email or talk to people about your habit change, giving them daily updates. If people expect the daily updates, you will feel motivated to do your habit so you can tell people about it.
- Blog about it. If you have a few readers, they will most likely be encouraging.

2. Decrease negative feedback for the habit. First you have to list the negative feedback for your habit. For quitting smoking, there are urges and withdrawal pains. For exercise, it can be an exertion, which takes effort and energy. Analyze the negative feedback for your habit, all of them, and see how to decrease them. Some ideas:

- For quitting smoking, reduce urges and withdrawal pains with nicotine gum or patches.
- For exercise, reduce exertion by only doing a little bit in the beginning.
- For eating healthy, reduce the negative taste feedback by eating healthy treats, such as berries, or adding a little bit of good fat or a little salt to make things tastier.
- For reducing sweets, reduce urges by eating little treats, such as a bit of dark chocolate, or fruits.
- For developing the reading habit, reduce boredom (if that's the problem) by reading exciting and fun books. Thrillers are favorites of mine.

3. Increase negative feedback for not doing the habit. You want to make it hard *not* to do the habit. As hard as humanly possible. So to do that, you need to put all kinds of negative feedback on yourself for *not* doing the habit. Some ideas:

- If you join a forum or a real-world group or give people you know regular updates, or update your blog readers (see ideas in #1 above), you will face the embarrassment of having to tell people you didn't do the challenge.
- Get a partner or coach or trainer, or your spouse, to make sure you do the habit, and to nag you if you don't.
- If you're trying to develop the reading habit, remove all other temptations.

- If you're trying to exercise, get rid of the TV and Internet and make your house uncomfortable, until you do your exercise. Once you exercise, get your cable TV box or Internet modem back from your neighbor who was holding it for you.
- If you're trying to quit smoking, tell your kids not to let you smoke.
- I'm sure you can think of many others — get creative!

4. Decrease positive feedback for not doing the habit. What tempts you not to do your habit today? Give this some thought, and then decrease those positive things. Some ideas:

- If you're trying to exercise (a common example), there is often positive feedback from not exercising, because it's relaxing to stay home. So if that's the case, reduce the relaxation at home. Get your spouse or kids to nag you. Get your mom to call you. Remove the cushions from your couch. Be creative!
- If you're trying to stop procrastinating, the positive feedback for procrastination is the fun of going on the Internet (for example). Well, disconnect from the Internet or use a utility to block the sites that waste your time.
- If you're trying to wake up early, there is of course the positive feedback that comes from sleeping in. Set up multiple alarms all around your room. Have people give you wake-up calls, so you can't sleep. Have people waiting for you at the track for your morning run, or waiting for your phone call for an early business call.

Final word: In the end, be sure that you've engineered it so that it's harder not to do the habit. If you fail, just add more of any or all of the above four options and try again. Don't give up!