

## THE BIG IDEAS

### 7 Psychological Forces

Of behavioral change.

#### Stepladders

Steps + Goals + Dreams.

#### Easy

3 ways to make it so.

#### Neurohacks

Trick your brain via action.

#### Engrained

Repetition. Repetition. Repetition.

*"Recent research shows that seven psychological forces support the ability of people to stick with their plans—in both life and work. The more of these forces people incorporate in their behaviors, the more likely they are to stick with something until they reach a goal."*

~ Sean D. Young, Ph.D.



## Stick with It

A Scientifically Proven Process for Changing Your Life—for Good

BY SEAN D. YOUNG, PH.D. · HARPER © 2017 · 304 PAGES

“People have trouble making lasting changes. They quit nutrition plans, don’t adhere to medication regimens, and can’t keep New Year’s resolutions to lose weight or stop procrastinating.

The advice offered up by recent bestsellers?

Charles Duhigg’s *The Power of Habit* and Gretchen Rubin’s *Better Than Before* insist that the secret to success in both your personal and business lives is to develop good habits. Yet they base this on just one study suggesting that habits account for 40 percent of behaviors in life and work. So what are we supposed to do about the other 60 percent of our behaviors?

Conventional wisdom also fails to solve the problem. It tells you the answer is to change who you are. If you want to stick with your fitness goals, learn to love exercising like Richard Simmons. To be a successful entrepreneur, become a creative genius like Steve Jobs. If you want to be a good salesperson, morph into a social butterfly like Mary Kay Ash. And the list goes on for people we’re told to become like.

Changing your character is easier said than done: every individual has a core personality that doesn’t change much throughout life. Fortunately, you don’t need to change who are as a *person* to make change last. You just need to understand the science behind lasting change and how to create a *process* that fits who you are. That’s what this book delivers.”

~ Sean D. Young, Ph.D. from *Stick with It*

Sean Young has a Ph.D. in psychology and a master’s in health services from Stanford. He’s now a professor at UCLA’s medical school and the Executive Director of the University of California Institute for Prediction Technology, plus the UCLA Center for Digital Behavior.

In this book, he shares his research on how to effectively change our behaviors and challenges some of the prevailing ideas about how to go about changing our lives. (Get a copy [here!](#))

As you know, I love drilling into the science of what we know works. I especially enjoy the thoughts of a researcher in the field. As a young researcher, Sean has created a model that has been proven to be super-effective in helping people “stick with it!”

I’m excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump straight in!

## THE 7 PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCES OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE

“I deliberately use the word *forces* instead of *principles* because psychological forces are constantly pushing and pulling people to make different choices. These forces determine what people do and how they feel. They create emotional, chemical, and neurological changes. One

*"In the 1930s, a team of Harvard researchers began a study that tracked the life choices of a group of Harvard undergraduates. They continued this study for seventy-five years. One thing they found was that strong social connections were the most important factor in achieving happiness."*

~ Sean D. Young, Ph.D.

set of forces might push you to sit on the couch, pour a glass of wine, and turn on the television. Another set of forces pushes you to put on a pair of running shoes and get some exercise. Which action will you take? Whichever one is pushed harder by these forces. But you can get these forces to work for you.

You can think of these psychological forces as akin to the physical forces that affect inanimate objects. To fly a plane safely, engineers, pilots and flight crews need to be aware of all the forces—such as wind and gravity—that push the plane down, lift it up, and shift it from side to side. The more that they can harness these forces to work in their favor, the more likely it is the plane will fly the way they want. ...

I describe the seven forces of lasting change, one in each chapter, using a framework I call SCIENCE. I call this SCIENCE, not because you need to be a scientist or doctor to understand and apply it, but so that you'll remember that these forces are based on thousands of validated, peer-reviewed, scientific studies."

Imagine trying to fly a plane.

You'd need to have a good understanding of how the forces involved work, eh? In fact, you'd want to understand the *four* forces that act on a plane: thrust, drag, lift, and weight (gravity).

Well... Sean tells us that there are *seven* forces at play when we're trying to change our behaviors. He sums them up in the handy-dandy acronym: SCIENCE.

Let's take a quick look at each element.

- 1. STEPLADDERS.** "Science shows that people have a better chance of success by focusing on small steps." But, Sean says, most people don't go small enough. As he says, "*Small means tiny.*" To help with the process of setting up "stepladders," Sean provides a cool model integrating Dreams + Goals + Steps. More on that in a moment.
- 2. COMMUNITY.** Short story here: Having social support is huge. Online. Offline.
- 3. IMPORTANT.** No big surprises, but if you want to make your exercise plan or new sleep habits stick, those behaviors need to be important to you. We need a clear WHY. (One of my favorite little practices is to leverage Michelle Segar's "[Chore vs. Gift](#)" idea.)
- 4. EASY.** "People often think they *understand* easy, but they actually don't." We need to make things REALLY easy. It's a lot like [Stephen Guise's](#) basic idea of "stupid small" on [Mini Habits](#). Think you've made it easy to win? Make it easier. Build momentum.
- 5. NEUROHACKS.** Traditional thinking tells us we need to get our minds right and then our behavior will follow. "Social psychologists now know that the truth lies in the opposite direction. People need to change their actions and their minds will follow. What you're doing is 'tricking' the brain into realizing that change is possible." <— That's what Sean calls a "neurohack." Sound like [The As If Principle](#)? Yep!
- 6. CAPTIVATING.** Gamification and rewards are nice. But the key is to make your rewards "captivating."
- 7. ENGRAINED.** "The human brain yearns to be efficient. It is designed so that people use the smallest amount of effort or thought to do things." How do you tap into your brain's ancient wiring to make a behavior engrained? One word (three times): Repetition. Repetition. Repetition.

Each of those "psychological forces" has it's own chapter. We'll explore a few in more depth.

P.S. The title of this book reminds me of "Make It Stick." That one's all about the science of how to learn effectively. One of the Ideas from that book (and from Learning 101)? Quiz yourself.

How about right now? POP QUIZ! Can you recall the elements of SCIENCE?

And, if you're REALLY feeling it, bust out one of the behaviors you want to change and map out how you can apply as many forces as possible to it!

btw: In our last Note on [Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People](#) he said: *"Learning is an active process. We learn by doing. So, if you desire to master the principles you are studying in this book, do something about them. Apply these rules at every opportunity. If you don't, you will forget them quickly. Only knowledge that is used sticks in your mind."*

That was Carnegie's sixth tip on how to get the most out of his book. His #1 tip? You've gotta REALLY want it. In other words, it needs to be Important.

## THE STEPLADDERS MODEL: STEPS + GOALS + DREAMS

"Stepladders is the theory that brings together dreams, goals, and steps. Stepladders teaches that dreams are important for motivation, but focusing entirely on dreams can lead people to plan steps that are so big that they quit doing things early. Instead, goals are key. You need to focus on completing small, concrete goals to calibrate the mind and apply stepladders correctly. That will make change more likely to last. ...

*"The lesson is on finding the right first step. Put all of your energy into achieving that first little step. Take the time to reflect on your progress. And then repeat."*

~ Sean D. Young, Ph.D.

It's important to understand that *stepladders isn't a formula for accomplishing dreams. It's a formula for keeping you on the path.* People who use stepladders are less likely to quit and more likely to keep trying to reach their goals—which should in turn help them reach their dreams."

Welcome to psychological force #1: Stepladders.

Science says that focusing on the steps involved in achieving a goal leads to better results. For example, research shows that women trying to lose weight who focused on the "dream" of losing weight (and how'd they feel, etc.), lost less weight than women who focused on their eating behaviors. (In fact, in one study Sean shares, they actually GAINED weight.)

→ *"Many studies confirm this principle: to change behavior, focus on the day-to-day process, rather than the outcome."*

We've talked about the importance of process vis-a-vis outcome goals many times. I love Sean's reflection on the SCIENCE of it and I also dig his model integrating dreams + goals + steps.

Sean tells us to start with a Dream—which he defines as a longer-term aspiration to achieve something you haven't done before. (If you've already achieved success in it in the past, that would be a Goal.) Then you break that Dream down into a set of smaller Goals. Then you map out the Steps you need to take to achieve the next Goal. Then you go execute the next Step and celebrate the wins in pursuit of the Goal in pursuit of the Dream! Process. Process. Process.

For example, I ran my first Spartan Race as an age group competitor last weekend. You may recall that I'm excited to be a World-Class Spartan Athlete (defined by qualifying for their World Championships by placing in the Top 10 in my age group in a qualifying event). That, using Sean's Stepladder framework, would be a Dream as I've never achieved that before.

Long story short, I had fun racing an 8-mile Spartan Super last week and was in the top third of my age group—clocking in about 20 minutes off the pace I need to be in the Top 10. (30 min faster than last year.) My intention with the race was to get a sense of how far I was from my Goal/Dream so I was a) happy with the results and b) even happier with what I learned.

The #1 thing I learned (about 3/4 of a mile into the Race when my body reminded me that I just ran more than I had in the prior year—lol) was that I need to train myself to be a runner.

Enter: A Goal. Actually a bunch of tiny ones. Current thinking: I want to be able to run 8 miles at a sub 7-minute pace. I need a little more data, but I think that might be enough to get me pretty close to where I want to be. (If not, I'll re-calibrate.) I've done that pace before so that's a Goal not a Dream.

I'm breaking that Goal down into a bunch of smaller, incremental Goals ([a la this +1](#)). The first Goal is to run a lap on the track (a quarter of a mile) in 1:45 seconds this Sunday at 9am. Pretty sure I can do that. Once I can do that, next Goals will be 2 laps in 3:30, 3 in 5:15 and 4 in 7:00.

Then, if all goes as currently planned (my hunch is things will change quite a bit as I get into it but this gets me going), I'll keep on adding a lap at that pace until I can do the 8 miles. Voila. Goal achieved in pursuit of Dream, with focus on an achievable process and much higher enjoyment and likelihood of success.

The Steps I'm planning to take include adding running to my daily hikes. Super-short story there as I craft a super-simple, fun, easy incremental approach: This week I'll run 1 min out and back from the base of my hike (after I've done my normal 5 min hike up as warmup). Then I'm planning to add a min out and back each week until I'm running ~2 miles a day and I've added ~15 min to my workout (keeping it under 75 minutes). All, of course, to be Optimized! :)

**Dreams + Goals + Steps.** ← What's one of YOUR Dreams? What are your domino Goals? And how about the Steps? Stepladder it!!

P.S. Stepladders is similar to the [Dominoes](#) we talk about in [The ONE Thing](#) + [Goals 101](#).

P.P.S. Back to my Spartans. The #1 thing I'm going to do differently next Race? Start with the group in the *front* and let THEM set the pace rather than with the middle of the pack like last time. Enter: Force of Community: You're the average of the 5 people with whom you race. :)

Other Community facets? Alexandra and Emerson race, too. And, I'll be working with my coach, Super-Spartan Pro Ben Greenfield to Optimize.

P.P.P.S. Sean went to UCLA as an undergrad where he studied music. As it turns out, he auditioned for and was invited to join the band that became Linkin Park. They were led by Brad Delson. He didn't just have a Dream ("I want to be a rock star!"). He had a Stepladder plan.

## EASY

"The psychology behind easy teaches that we need to retrain ourselves. Making something simple and easy is smart and will help people stick to things.

More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle said, 'We may assume the superiority *ceteris paribus* [other things being equal] of the demonstration which derives from fewer postulates or hypotheses.' In other words, the simplest idea is usually the best. Throughout the years, many philosophers and scientists—like Ptolemy, William of Occam, and Isaac Newton, as well as contemporary scientists—have said something similar. So if the smartest people agree that simple is better, it's time for us to listen to history and stop trying to make things so difficult."

~ Sean D. Young, Ph.D.

Welcome to the chapter on E is for Easy.

Short story: Good luck doing something consistently when you make it hard for yourself!! Make it EASY. Like super, jumbo easy to win! Sean offers three ways to make things easy:

- 1. CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT:** Examples: Don't bring junk food in your house and throw away the stuff you don't want to eat. Go to a gym close by that's easy to get to. Hide your smartphone when you want to go deep! Etc.
- 2. LIMIT CHOICES:** He talks about the same ideas we discuss in [The Paradox of Choice](#). Remember: When it comes to choices, less is often more!
- 3. CREATE A ROADMAP:** When will you do what? Break it down. Map it out. Crazy how simple plans increase performance by a ton!

P.S. We just talked about Occam's Razor and creating simple solutions to problems in [The Case Against Sugar](#) where [Gary Taubes](#) told us: "When Isaac Newton paraphrased the concept of

*"Reflect on the things you want to change and, like a researcher developing a behavior change intervention, use SCIENCE to create a plan for how you will use the seven forces. And there's no reason to wait to do this. Remember the Chinese proverb: The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second-best time is right now."*

*"The human brain is amazingly efficient. It is designed so people can do things without having to think. It rewards people for sticking to routines."*

~ Sean D. Young, Ph.D.

Occam's Razor, he did so by saying, 'We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances.' This was rule number one of Newton's 'rules of reasoning in natural philosophy' in his Principia. So is it necessary to posit multiple aspects of diet and lifestyle—multiple causes—to explain the presence of these chronic diseases that associate with Western and urban lives, or will one suffice? Sugar, for example."

## NEUROHACKS

"Conventional wisdom has it backward: lasting behavior change doesn't typically start with the mind telling the body to make lasting change; it starts by making a small change in behavior and letting the mind reflect on that change.

Self-identity is a key part of this process. People often decide whether to do something based on how they think of themselves. Will you finish writing a blog post or stop and have a cocktail instead? Will you push yourself to run another ten minutes or call it quits and walk? Will a person keep sober another day or give in to temptation and have a drink?

The answer depends in part on how people think of themselves and what they've done in the past in similar situations. If you usually keep writing a blog post until you finish then you'll probably finish this one instead of stopping for a drink. Part of the reason is that it's become routine for you. Another big reason is that by finishing your blog posts you have formed a self-identity that you're a 'closer.' Your past behavior shows that you complete your work before taking a break, and you need to remain consistent with that self-image of getting the job done before you play. Similarly, the answer to whether a person sticks it out for another ten minutes on her run or keeps sober another day depends on how she thinks of herself after looking back at past behavior. If her past behavior signals she's a fighter, then she'll want to maintain that self-image and stick it out and fight."

That's from the chapter on N for Neurohacks.

The Big Idea? Rather than try to \*talk\* yourself into a better way of being, ACT your way to it.

It's *The As If Principle* all over again. "Trick" your brain into thinking you're the type of person you want to be by ACTING like that version of you NOW. As William James said 100+ years ago: The fastest way to have a quality is to act like you have it.

We can also think of our [Identity](#) → [Behaviors](#) → [Feelings](#) model we learned from [Resilience](#) by former Navy SEAL (and current Governor of Missouri—I predict Presidency!) [Eric Greitens](#).

Don't let your feelings drive the show. And don't try to talk yourself into doing the right thing. Just DO IT. Then, when you do, FEAST on your success [Lanny Bassham](#) style. Recall in [With Winning in Mind](#) how our gold-medal winning mental toughness coach friend tells us to FEAST on our success. When we crush it what do we say to ourselves? "THAT'S LIKE ME!!"

Why? To build what he calls our "self-image" and what Sean calls our "self-identity."

*"That's like you to finish what you start."* *"That's like you to do what you say you'll do."* *"That's like you to \_\_\_\_\_."*

That behavior (and pursuant declaration) "hacks" your brain into thinking you must be that type of person. So, let's have fun hacking away!

P.S. Another cool little trick Sean tells us about is to use your passwords to reset your identity. He shares success stories of a guy going through a painful divorce who changed his password to "Forgive@h3r" and someone who wanted to quit smoking who chose: "Quit@smoking4ever."

I've been doing this for years. Years ago, I set my iPhone password to 12-13-14 to commemorate the date I rebooted our business from \$1m+ rev to \$0 then brought it back to \$1.5m+. I celebrated the courage and clarity it took for me to Turn Pro as a Philosopher.

*"The secret to making things engrained in the brain is based on repetition: repeating behaviors, especially if it can be done every day, in the same place, and at the same time, will teach the brain that it needs to remember this behavior to make it easier to keep doing it. It will engrain this behavior."*

~ Sean D. Young, Ph.D.

Now? Now my password is: ENJOYo. (As in: Enjoy NOW!)

Got any Goals you can convert into passwords as you get your Neurohacking on?

## ENGRAINED

"If you look back on your past experiences you might think you've failed at changing. Maybe you failed at learning a new language or sticking with playing a new instrument. Maybe you failed at getting people to buy a new product or technology you created. But don't worry about what happened in the past. It's not important now. We know it's possible to replace old behaviors with new ones. What's important today is not what you experienced in the past—forget that—but that you now have some clues and processes so that the next time you try to change something you'll be more likely to stick with it. Engrained is a powerful force to help you do this. If you want to get yourself to exercise every day, determine a time you'll do it (tomorrow), set an alarm or reminder, and follow through. The more you stick to it, the more it will become engrained in your brain, and the easier it will be for you to keep doing."

Engrained. That's the final piece in our SCIENCE puzzle. It's the happy place where we've used our willpower wisely to install good behaviors that run on autopilot. That place where it's harder NOT to do the thing than it is to do it.

How do we get there? Let me repeat myself: Repetition. Repetition. Repetition.

Don't feel like doing it? Doesn't matter. Win the "fight-thrus" that [Jason Selk](#) talks about in [Organize Tomorrow Today](#). Install the new behavior in your brain. Make it engrained.

So.... What's the #1 behavior YOU would like to Engrain?

Get your SCIENCE on and stick with it!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

If you liked this Note,  
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[Influence](#)

[The As If Principle](#)

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[The Power of Habit](#)

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## About the Author of "Stick with It"

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](http://optimize.me).