

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

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Ep. 178: Made New Year's Resolutions? An Expert Shares Scientific Strategies To Achieve Lasting Change

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INTRO (male voice): Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today, I'm excited to be with Katy Milkman. Katy is an expert on the science of behavior change. She's a professor at the Wharton School and the author of the Wall Street Journal bestselling book, *How to Change*. She is also the co-founder and co-director of the Behavior Change for Good Initiative. Katy has worked with Google, the White House, Walmart, and the US Department of Defense on creating positive and lasting change. She's published over 60 papers in leading academic journals. One of my favorite quotes about Katy is from University of Pennsylvania professor Angela Duckworth, and I quote, "in a thousand ways, she has helped me find hacks to make my life easier and better." I'm excited to find out how we can all achieve our goals and make our own lives easier and better. Welcome, Katy, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Katy Milkman: Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

LT: It is my pleasure. Katy, what are some of your favorite stories on people successfully changing their lives and accomplishing their goals?

KM: It's such a wonderful question. I think my favorite story about someone who changed their life with some of the tools that science says can really help us is someone named Nancy Strahl. And she was actually a guest on my own podcast, *Choiceology*, a number of years ago. And she talked about an incredible traumatic experience. She dropped her son and her husband off at the airport for a fishing expedition, drove home and started feeling nauseous. And it turns out she was at the beginning of having a stroke. And she went to the hospital eventually, and the stroke was so serious that she ended up paralyzed and was told she would never regain mobility. Her change story is really about pursuing the enormously important goal of getting through a really arduous set of rehabilitation programming in order to regain the ability to walk and the ability to take care of herself. And you'd think that nothing could be more important, and really nothing was more important to her than that end goal, and yet the daily tasks she had to accomplish in order to make progress were unpleasant.

KM: In the moment, it was not at all enjoyable, even though it was the most important thing to her in the world. And she wasn't making good progress on at-home physical therapy. And so, she actually found a gamification solution that was being offered by a professor at the University of

Massachusetts at Amherst that helped her do those rehab exercises in a virtual reality environment where it felt like she was rowing down a river, getting rewards, collecting trash from the water, leveling up. And it changed her life completely to find a way to make it fun, to pursue this enormously important goal. And she made tremendous progress once she found this program, and today actually, she rose every day on the water in real life, not in a virtual reality environment, because of her success. That's probably my very favorite story of change as someone who was not seeing the progress they wanted, understood that it was the misery of the daily chore they had to pursue, even though the goal could not possibly have been more important. They realized there needed to be a connection between the daily experience and joy, frankly, or the long-term goal wasn't enough pull...

KM: Even though it was everything. I love that story because it just illustrates, if you think about something less important in the long run, but still important, like saving for retirement or getting in shape or achieving things at school, those things are not as important as regaining your physical mobility, right? But we think of them as big enough goals to pull us forward. And yet we struggle with the daily chore of getting the things done that we need to get done. And when you see that even for Nancy, when it was all or nothing, it wasn't enough, it starts to make sense why we would actually need to find ways to make it more enjoyable. And that's one of the key lessons from the science to pursue our goals on a daily basis to get anything done.

LT: We are all so familiar with Nike's famous maxim of, just "do it". How well does that work?

KM: It doesn't work very well. The evidence that I like best on this comes from Ayelet Fishbach at the University of Chicago and Kaitlin Woolley at Cornell have some work showing that people think just do it is the right strategy. They look for efficient solutions to their goals, to their New Year's resolutions, etcetera, and they think that's how they should pursue change successfully. But a small percentage of people recognize that it's quite important to make it fun to pursue your goals. And those people, one, tend to do a little better. But more importantly, in random assignment studies where people are encouraged to either pursue their goals in a way that's fun or a way that's efficient, that's where you see the big and important difference that we know is causal, that people encouraged to pursue goals in ways that are fun, persist longer. And even if it's not as efficient to pursue your goal in a way that's fun, because most of our important goals require persistence, we actually get farther when we're thinking about making it less of a chore to pursue change.

LT: Everybody assumes without really thinking about it, that change requires self-control, willpower and discipline and that the people who achieve change are the ones with the most control, willpower, and discipline. Is that true?

KM: It doesn't really seem to me that that is borne out by the data. So, there's a really nice study that was done by one of my colleagues, Angela Duckworth, that actually looks at what are the features we see in people who appear self-controlled. So, the people who we think of as the most self-controlled 'cause they're accomplishing the most, it seems like they actually rely less on self-control and more on habit on a daily basis. And so they're falling back on strategies that they've adopted and they're not really making self-controlled choices. So, the person who gets up in the morning, goes straight to the gym and then to the library and gets everything done, checks off all of the items on their to-do list, it's not that they're making willful, effortful decisions with each of those moments when the path could go, I could go to the gym or I could sit in front of the TV or I could go to the library or I could go out drinking with my friends. There aren't these self-control

choices being made. It's rather habits because these people's lives have been structured in a way where they're making the right choice and putting it on autopilot over and over again. And I think that's another way that we can achieve our goals.

KT: There's sort of two paths. One is first, you need to make it fun. And then once you've done that repeatedly enough, it can become a habit and then you no longer are making those conscious choices. So, there's sort of the two-step process you could think about in that case that sets you up for success so that your habits are supporting you as opposed to ever having to rely on willpower.

LT: Katy, can you talk more about making hard things fun?

KM: One of my favorite strategies for doing this is something I've studied that I call temptation bundling, which is a very specific tool for making chores feel more enjoyable. And it is essentially linking something you love doing with that chore. So, if the chore for you is, say, working out, which is an experience that I've had, like I wanted to get in shape or stay in shape, and I just can't motivate myself to get to the gym or on the elliptical, whatever it is. But I found that if I only let myself watch lowbrow TV shows that I loved while I was working out, everything changed. The equation changes. Now I'm actually looking forward to going to the gym at the end of a long day, finding out what happens to my favorite characters. Time flies while I'm at the gym. And PS, I waste less time at home on junk TV in the bargain. And it turns out we can create these kinds of temptation bundles where we link something we love to a chore in lots of contexts. It's not just about exercise, though. That, I think, is a particularly natural setting and it's one where we've done randomized controlled trials to show that it can help people exercise more, to link temptations with their workouts. But you can think about only opening a favorite bottle of wine when you're cooking a fresh meal for your family or only letting yourself listen to your favorite podcast while you're doing chores at home.

KM: So, there's lots of different ways that we can temptation bundle. And another context where you can think of that is just making things more fun through making them social. I have a recent experiment that I ran in collaboration and led by, I should say, Rachel Gershon at UC Berkeley, and also with Cindy Kreider at Washington University at St. Louis, where we showed that people who are rewarded only if they exercise with a friend, exercise 35% more than people who are rewarded every time they exercise, whether or not it's with a friend. So doing that in tandem, that tandem goal pursuit increases success. And when we unpack what's going on, there's actually two key elements. One is that they find it more fun to work out with their friends, but the other is also the accountability. And so, thinking about can you pursue your goals in tandem with someone else? Can you make that chore more fun, not necessarily by bundling it with TV or treats, but social experiences is another important way that we can think about temptation bundling.

LT: Is there a specific time that helps when we think about achieving goals? How can we use time in our favor also?

KM: This is one of my favorite topics 'cause I've done some research with Hengchen Dai of UCLA in particular on something called the fresh start effect. And everyone listening will be probably familiar with the biggest fresh start effect, which is at New Year's, we are extra motivated to pursue our goals. It feels like a fresh start. We turn the page on the last year, we can sort of look back and say, oh, it's January 1. And last year, I didn't achieve my goals. But it's a new year, it's a new me, this year will be different. We feel more disconnected from our past selves when we pass these

temporal landmarks that feel like new beginnings in our lives. And January 1 is the best known and the New Year's resolution trend is driven in part by the fresh start effect in addition to lots of marketing and social norms. But there are other moments in our lives too that feel like fresh starts and that give a similar boost in our motivation and likelihood of pursuing goals. Actually, Mondays are a standard fresh start that gets us all juiced to pursue our goals. Birthdays, really any marker that feels like a new beginning, whether it's after celebrating a holiday that we associate with new beginnings, or if it is, you've just come back from a vacation, whatever feels like a new beginning on your mental calendar. And the way we think about our lives, by the way, is as if we're characters in a book, right? They're chapter breaks.

KM: So, you probably can think of the big chapter breaks, like the years in Boston, or when I was a student at University X, those are sort of chapters. But we also have minor chapter breaks within the bigger life chapters. And every single chapter break comes with the sense of a fresh start. And so those are ideal moments in terms of our motivation, it seems, to pursue goals. So, there's lots of different ways to quantify this. And we can increase the likelihood people will try to start pursuing a goal just by pointing out a fresh start date on the calendar that they might not have noticed and making it more salient to them. So, I think it's a really exciting thing to understand how time can shape our motivation. And then, of course, the question is, what do you do with it? And the big problem with New Year's resolutions is a lot of people feel motivated on January 1st, they set a resolution, and then on January 2nd, they're not as motivated anymore and it all falls apart. This is part of why understanding the science of successful change is important, not just understanding the ebbs and flows in our motivation.

LT: And how can we turn something into a habit so it's not just a one-day initiative, like a January 1st initiative? And I love the example from Wendy Wood of the popcorn study.

KM: Yes, I love Wendy Wood's work. So, Wendy Wood is a brilliant psychologist at University of Southern California, emeritus now, who has a great book called Good Habits, Bad Habits. And she has done, I think, the most important work on the science of behavior change. And in one of her studies looking at popcorn eating, she shows that you can get people basically to sort of automatically eat stale and not so tasty popcorn if you put them in an environment where they're used to eating popcorn. If you put popcorn eaters who always go to the movies and get popcorn into a movie watching scenario or situation and you offer them stale popcorn, they just sort of eat it habitually. But if you put them in a classroom where they're given stale popcorn, they're not used to watching movies in that environment, so it's not a habitual behavior, you give them the stale popcorn, they realize they should stop because it's disgusting. So, if you're in a situation where your mind just naturally says, this is what I will do, you're not making a conscious decision, a deliberate decision. And by the way, this goes back to what we were talking about earlier, about self-control and willpower.

KM: So, if it's a good habit, that's exactly what you want. You don't want to have to make a conscious choice each day about will I go to the gym? Will I hit the books? You want that to be on autopilot. Bad habits like eating terrible popcorn, whether you've thought about it or not, you don't want to short circuit that decision-making process because you want to deliberate and make the right choice to avoid the unhealthy and not so tasty snack that's been put in front of you. So, we do want to create environments where we put good habits on autopilot and avoid environments where bad habits are on autopilot. And there's lots of research showing basically repetition. It's sort of like practice, you want to learn how to play an instrument, you sit down and you play it over and over

and over again, right? You play the piece over and over and over again. And then eventually, you can play it without thinking. Habits are similarly created, you repeatedly engage in the behavior. And that ideally is in a situation where it's rewarding so that you keep coming back, you say, oh, I want to keep doing this, I'm going to keep doing it. The more you repeat, the more likely it is to start becoming a habit. And so, making it fun is one way of making the habit feel rewarding.

KM: You can track your behavior. That's another kind of self-reward that feels good to be able to say like, yes, I've done this this many times, and I'm tracking it. To try to better understand how habits are formed I teamed up with a bunch of wonderful researchers led by Anastasia Buyalskaya and Colin Kammerer at Caltech. And we analyzed data on how long it takes people to form habits in different contexts. So, we had large data sets of gym goers and also caregivers in hospitals sanitizing their hands. And we looked at how quickly over time those people became predictable in their patterns of behavior, how quickly they form predictable habits. And what we see, and I think this is really important to note, is that it depends. So, there's no universal constant, despite the fact that lots of people like to tell you there is, in the more complex environment of gym attendance and also where you can't repeat many times a day, it takes order of magnitude months for most people to form habits. But in this setting where you're forming a habit around hand washing, which is a much simpler set of behaviors and something actually you can repeat many times a day, it takes order of magnitude weeks for people to form habits.

KM: And so, what that also highlights is in terms of repetition and reward is that you shouldn't expect this will instantly work. If you work on this for a week, you're rewarding yourself for the habit that you're hoping to put on autopilot after the new year, and you're not yet feeling like it's effortless or low effort to make the choice that you want to put on autopilot, it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. There's huge variability in how long it takes across people. And it can, like I said, take months for something like exercise to start really feeling habituated. The key is to try to keep engaging with that behavior by making it fun so that you will persist. And then eventually the effortfulness of the choice will decline as you continue. So, we need to repeat, rinse and repeat as many times as possible and try to make it fun so that that won't feel like a chore and a burden.

LT: And how about when we fail? Many people completely abandon the effort if they fail the first or second time.

KM: There are a lot of things to keep in mind about failure. The first is that it's common. It's the norm when we're trying something. If you're pushing yourself to achieve a new goal, the best goals are things that stretch you, those are the ones that actually tend to produce the best long-term results, but they can also produce setbacks. And you have to anticipate that that's part of the journey and try not to be discouraged. There's really wonderful research led by Carol Dweck at Stanford University on the importance of having a growth mindset. When you think about goal pursuit, a growth mindset would say that I am not fixed. She's mostly looked at this in terms of intelligence. But there's many other settings where you can have a growth mindset. Recognizing that your abilities in, say, school or academic performance aren't fixed, but rather something that through effort you can grow changes the way you interpret failure. If you think of yourself as fixed and only capable of so much, when you have a setback, you'll say, this is just who I am, this is diagnostic of my lack of capacity. But if you have a growth mindset, you'll recognize that through effort, almost every ability we have can grow and improve.

KM: So, if you have a setback in school, for instance, and you think of intelligence not as fixed but

as growable, you'll instead recognize that this is an opportunity to learn and improve as opposed to diagnostic of your fixed capacity. And adopting a growth mindset tends to lead to better outcomes for students, for instance, in school and in many settings. Any situation where you're trying to stretch yourself, when you recognize that it's a process and you can learn and grow, you can get better at whatever it is you're trying to pursue. And that's roughly true, right? Maybe you can't grow your height, but almost every trait is some combination of natural, maybe genetic ability, plus effort. And effort is what you can affect. And through a recognition that failure is an input that helps us learn and grow, you can actually improve your ability to learn and grow. So, try to adopt a growth mindset when you're pursuing your goals. And there are some other tricks as well in the literature about giving yourself some slack, for instance. But my favorite piece of advice is just recognizing that failure is an input to help you grow and improve.

KM: So next time you can make a better plan.

LT: Essentially, be kind and generous to yourself.

KM: Yes. And be strategic. Learn from setbacks. Recognize that there's information there that can help you be more successful in your next attempt as opposed to being discouraged. And don't let the same problem arise many times in a row.

LT: Katy, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

KM: First, fresh starts are moments that feel like a new beginning in life. They come at these new beginnings and they motivate us to pursue change. Second, you can't just rely on that temporary motivation and expect it to get you all the way to a goal. You need to be deliberate about how you are going to pursue change and make a plan so that when it's January 2nd and the motivations of the fresh start date has waned, you have something to carry you forward. And then third, I would say try really hard to make it fun to pursue your goals in the moment so that it doesn't feel like a chore and you'll want to keep doing them, because of your present bias you will actually look forward to it. And it is through enjoyment and repetition that we can put our healthy, positive behaviors on autopilot and make them habits. That might have been four.

[laughter]

LT: Thank you, Katy. This has been wonderful. I really love your book, How to Change.

KM: Thank you so much for having me, Lynn. It was such a pleasure.

LT: Indeed. A pleasure on my side as well. Thank you, Katy.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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