

Podcast Episode #007

The Remarkable Power of Tiny Habits

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Announcer: Welcome to the Lift Your Life Project with Coach Pamela.

Pamela: Welcome to the Lift Your Life Project. I'm Pamela Mitchell, also known as Coach Pamela. This is the podcast devoted to helping you meld your personal self and your professional self into an enhanced version of your best self. My goal is to help you take control of your work and your life, feel more relaxed and confident, and experience the satisfaction and fulfillment of a sustainable, successful life.

Today we are talking about the remarkable power of Tiny Habits. This is such an important topic because so many times we think "I've got to make a really big change and if it's not a big change it's not going to make a difference."

What you are going to learn today is sometimes it is the tiniest things that can bring about the biggest shifts. To talk about this topic, I recently had a conversation with Dr. BJ Fogg, who is going to be joining us today. He is a psychologist and the director of the Persuasive Tech Lab at Stanford University. He is also the author of [Persuasive Technology, Using Computers To Change What We Think and Do](#), which is a book that explains how computers can motivate and influence people. You know he knows a lot about this topic.

He is also the creator of *Tiny Habits*, which is a fun and effective program that helps you easily create new behaviors in your life and ease is good. Over 28 thousand people have gone through this program, which is 5 days long, and less than 30-minutes total. Best of all, it's free.

Fortune Magazine selected BJ as one of the 10 new gurus you should know. Guess what, you're going to get to know him because we are talking to him today. Let's get this show started.



Welcome, BJ.

BJ: Thank you for having me.

Pamela: I'm so excited because the one thing about what you do in Habits is that when we approach wanting to make a change in our lives, we treat things like "I should drink more water or eat more fruit," the same as if we want to do something like lose 20 pounds or clean out our inbox or go to more networking events.

You have this behavior grid that outlines different ways that behaviors can change. Maybe you can tell us about that and why the kind of change that we want to make actually matters when we get started.

BJ: Yeah, there are some behaviors you want to stop doing or reduce. There are some behaviors you want to start doing. The way that you go about those is different. You can't lump all of behavior change into one bucket, and think there's one formula or approach for it.

My work focuses on helping people bring new behaviors into their lives. I do almost no work with stopping behaviors. It's a different approach that has its own levels of sophistication that I haven't studied. I think it's actually much easier to bring behaviors into your life than to stop a behavior that you've been trying to stop for a long time. I advocate creating lots of new habits in your life and you can dramatically change your life by creating lots of habits, including small ones.

Pamela: That's really interesting. Two things in terms of what you're saying. One is, if you create lots of new habits, in some respects maybe they can even crowd out the old habits, replacing some of those habits that maybe you want to stop doing. Have you had any experience with that? Is that just an anecdotal way?

BJ: Yeah, I think you're right, but I haven't studied it scientifically, so I can't really put a stake in the ground and say that's how it works. I think in my own life and based on anecdotes from people who have done *Tiny Habits*, for sure you can. It seems like you can create new habits that push out the ones you don't want. Or make the old behaviors inconsistent with the new identity that you're creating with the new ones and eventually that identity, the new identity wins over.

Pamela: That's really an interesting point about this new identity and creating habits that fit that new identity. In the work that I do and when people want to reinvent themselves, this idea of having a new identity is a really big shift. Then, sort of commensurate with that, they want to make a big change in their lives. Your work is really all about making



small, tiny changes. Talk to us about why that's a much more effective way to go than trying to make a big, huge change all at once.

BJ: It's much easier to make small changes in your life than big changes. The motivation level doesn't have to be super high. If you're trying to make a big, hard change, your motivation has to be high, it has to stay high.

Say, for example, if you decided you were going to run for an hour a day, starting tomorrow. You've got to be super motivated tomorrow, the day after, and the day after. The day that your motivation drops, or you have a competing motivation like you have to make cookies for your kid's bake sale tomorrow, guess what? You're not running that day and you feel like, "Oh, I failed." I didn't do what I wanted and a lot of people just pretty much give up at that point.

Whereas if you pick something really small, like "I'm going to do 2 push-ups every day," we could go further on that one because I do a lot of push-ups. Then it's pretty easy to get done, your motivation doesn't have to be super high. You can do those push-ups even if you have to cook cookies for a bake sale.

The way it works is change leads to change. In some ways it seems like it doesn't even matter the size of the change. If you can just start changing something, 2 important things happen. One is it frees you up to make other changes in your life. Think of it as you're building momentum. Two, you actually learn how to change. Behavior change is a skill. Third, you build confidence that you can change. The confidence that you get from making small changes is disproportionately large. In other words, by making small changes, it's easier to do, you'll learn how to change, and your confidence for change will go up from making even just a small simple change.

Pamela: The idea of a tiny, tiny change actually having a disproportionate effect on building your confidence is really interesting. Why is that?

BJ: That's such a great question. I don't know exactly the answer. What I do know from coaching thousands of people in *Tiny Habits* is that it absolutely is a phenomenon that exists. One of the things I advocate is if people could floss one tooth. If you're not flossing at all, start with flossing one tooth.

Pamela: One tooth?

BJ: One tooth, yeah. As people do that and if they're successful doing that, that second part is important. I get all these emails saying BJ, this is crazy, all I'm doing is flossing one tooth and I feel awesome and now I'm making other changes. This doesn't make any rational sense, but is this normal? I write back and say, "Yeah, that's normal."



There's something about how our brains are wired that when we feel successful with a change, even a tiny one, it then leads to other changes.

Part of that is as confidence goes up, what I see is that in the data that I get, I see about 15 to 28% of the people every week that ranges in there, have stepped up and made a big change in their lives as a result of making the small change like flossing one tooth. That's within 5 days. I see it over and over. Why? I don't know exactly why; I just know it happens.

Pamela: That's a pretty big phenomenon there. Do you think that it's that energy and that momentum that then starts to build on itself, or just the feeling that change is possible?

BJ: I think it's both of those. I think it's both of those. I do like the "floss one tooth" as a starting point for people who are feeling discouraged or defeated or just like they're not going to succeed. In part because I think in our culture it's built into us, you should be flossing.

Pamela: Right.

BJ: We get that at the dentist. Also, I really think there's something about looking at yourself in the mirror in the bathroom as you're flossing one tooth. You are seeing somebody in the mirror who is changing their behavior.

Pamela: What other kind of tiny habits do you recommend for people?

BJ: Well, first and foremost, pick small behaviors that you actually want in your life. Don't pick things that feel like an obligation or you feel like you should do. As you practice creating habits, again I think habit formation is a skill, it's something you can practice. It's something you can get really good at, just like playing the piano or cooking or dancing or playing chess. You get good by practicing in the right way.

You need to start practicing with behaviors you want, not that you should. That's first and foremost. Then if you make them really, really small, the *Tiny Habits* method, we call them tiny behaviors. Then those are much easier to do and they're not so dependent on motivation going up and down. "Floss one tooth" I think is a classic. Another classic is doing two push-ups. Another one that I think is very powerful, this is my favorite habit, and the recipe goes like this: after my feet touch the floor in the morning I will say "It's going to be a great day." So the new behavior is saying "It's going to be a great day." I know that sounds kind of a little goofy, loopy California-speak, but I'm a scientist and I'm very skeptical and critical of things, but that particular behavior seems to set you on an upward spiral for your day. I get a lot of reports on the impacts of that, how it just changes the direction of the day.



A lot of people report in that the *Tiny Habit* recipe goes like this: after my head touches the pillow at night, I will think of one thing I'm grateful for. Having that gratitude habit at the end of the day seems to change how people process the day. As they're going through the day, their brain is watching for things to be grateful for, so it can pick the right tiny behavior. They have this ripple effect or cascading effect. First and foremost, pick things that you want, pick behaviors you want in your life.

Pamela: Those are such great ones. One of the things that I always recommend to my clients is this gratitude list and I like the fact that you've broken it down to an even smaller tiny habit because I tell them to come up with four things more or less for the challenge and the practice of training their mind to notice the good things.

BJ: Yeah.

Pamela: It is a practice, to your point, and it really does shift our experience of our life and our mindset.

BJ: Yeah, I think absolutely. Those behaviors, it's not like an hour of running. It's not like a lot of exertion. By doing very effective small things and by doing a lot of them, you have a huge impact on life. Even the one, good, small one has an impact. Then if you do five, or ten, or twenty, or eventually dozens. It adds up and your life gets transformed.

Pamela: Let's talk about that. Let's talk about adding on. At what point do you add on to this tiny habit and approximately how many can you have going on at one particular time?

BJ: Well, let me start with the second one. You can have hundreds and hundreds. In fact, we do in our lives.

Pamela: Really?

BJ: Yeah, every day that we go through. The way you tie your shoe is a habit, where you put your socks in the drawer is a habit, which chair you sit in. It goes on and on and on. How many can you acquire at once? I think you can acquire certainly three. That's what the *Tiny Habits* method has you do, work on three tiny habits during the week. I think you can get 12 or 20 in a week if you are skilled at the method.

Going back to the first part of the question: basically, how do you grow them? One of the key things is to always have the habit be the tiny behavior and not raise the bar on yourself. Let me explain why. Let's go back to flossing one tooth. After you floss one tooth for a while, it gets easier and easier to floss one tooth. You know exactly where the floss is. You know how to wrap it around your fingers. You know which tooth. It just gets easier. The more you do a behavior, the easier it gets. Eventually it will take relatively



less effort to floss all your teeth. Once you get skilled at it, you can floss all of them pretty easily and no big deal.

However, in the *Tiny Habits* method, you always see the habit as just one tooth. Whenever you do more, you count it as extra credit. That's an important framing. It means the day that I'm in a super big rush and have to run out the door for something, if I just brush my teeth and I think okay all I have to do is floss one tooth, fine, I just floss one tooth and I go and it's good for me. I succeeded. Whereas if I had raised the bar on myself, like I have to floss all my teeth, I might be tempted to skip it. Then if I go, I didn't do the habit. By keeping the bar low at that tiny behavior level and doing more when you want to and doing more when you can, you don't raise the bar on yourself. There's something about training the behavior change in that way that keeps you succeeding day after day. When you do more, you kind of see yourself as an 'A' student or one that's doing extra credit.

Pamela: That's really huge because one of the things that I read when I was going through your work is that habits are never permanent, that they're always on a continuum. So if you're raising a bar on yourself and then all of a sudden you don't meet that, then it can knock you back off the whole pattern of the habit.

BJ: Yeah, exactly. There's something weird about our culture. I wish somebody would explain it. To me what we've got is we tend to be very black and white thinkers, like either we're doing it or we're not doing it. Either we're exercising or we're not. When we have a single failure, often people just say, "Uh, well I blew it. I give up."

Part of what I've learned and part of what the *Tiny Habits* method teaches is you're practicing and you're revising. You're practicing this new habit and if it doesn't work, you just revise it. Say "Oh, maybe I put it in the wrong spot of my day, maybe I made the behavior too big." You don't look at when you don't do your intended behavior as a failure. You look at it as an opportunity to redesign. Basically you're designing habits into your life just like you'd arrange furniture in a room. If you put a chair in a corner and the next day you say "you know what, it doesn't really work in that corner," you don't get down on yourself or give up. You try a different corner, a different part of the room. That's the same way to think about practicing habits and revising habits. It's practicing our lives. It's really part of the skill of behavior change. Successful habit formation is to see it as a design problem and not as a motivation problem.

Pamela: Wow. That is a big shift from the way that our culture views things because we are very much like, "you either win or lose and that's it." The idea that there's really no failure. It's really about gathering information, using what information to tweak, revise, and then the next day seeing what works. That's a very neutral, non-judgmental way of approaching things. That's not generally how we do that.



BJ: No, no it's not. Ten years ago I didn't know this. I've learned it over time. I've been teaching it and see how effective it is. I don't know why our culture is wired in this very black and white, very brittle way. We are for some reason. One thing I encourage people: you celebrate the upside, you recognize your successes, but when you have setbacks, you don't say "Oh, I did bad." You say "Oh, that means I just need to redesign. I need to figure out what piece didn't work and just change it."

It's really a behavior change, at least bringing new habits into your life in this way. There's no guilt associated. There's no real sense of failure. It's all outside. You recognize the successes and you don't feel guilty or bad or weak or lacking willpower. That doesn't happen because, frankly, it's not a result of willpower being weak. It's just that you don't have the right design, the right recipe yet. You just keep coming around, frankly. You keep playing around with your behavior until you get the right thing that works.

Pamela: I love that. Oh my God, I could talk to you forever about this topic.

BJ: We should talk again at some point.

Pamela: Yeah, we should. I will have you back on the show because there's so much more to cover in this. We will definitely have you back. However, I want to close by asking you two things that you do to lift your life.

BJ: Oh my gosh. I think that one of them absolutely is be out in nature. In fact, I moved up to Sonoma County by a river so I could be out in nature very, very easily. You don't have to move to do that, but just getting outside. Actually, we have tons of house plants too, but for me, it's getting out in nature. Something about that. The other thing is dancing.

Pamela: I love that! What kind of dancing?

BJ: Any, well, mostly just on my own because there's not any formal dance opportunities that are easy. Last night I was working out in my garage and I started the workout with a dance and I ended it with a dance. I just had 80's music on. There's something really powerful about dancing, even if you're dancing by yourself. In some ways that's even better because you can just really let go, like crank up the music and then just dance.

Pamela: Ah, you are a man after my own heart because that would be me cranking up the music, dancing through the kitchen and singing along and all of that. Love, love, love that.

Well, thank you BJ so much for being on the show. We will definitely have you back to talk more about how we can make change in our lives by using *Tiny Habits*.



BJ: It's fun to talk to you. Thank you so much.

Pamela: Wasn't that a great interview? BJ has so much interesting stuff to say. And if you want to learn more about *Tiny Habits*, you can visit his website at tinyhabits.com and actually join the next time he has the course!

That's it for this segment of the Lift Your Life Project. Be sure to visit our website at liftyourlifeproject.com/podcast, where you can download a transcript of today's episode and get more tips from my conversation with BJ Fogg.

Also, if you have a question for a future segment of Ask Coach Pamela, go to liftyourlifeproject.com/question, where you can leave me a voice mail. If I select your question to be answered on a future episode, I will send you a free gift of Reinvention Cards. Definitely go! Add your name and leave me a question!

You can also connect with me on social media on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram @TheCoachPamela. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review for us on the show on iTunes. Your feedback really does make a difference.

Today's lift off inspiration comes from William A. Irwin who says, "Learn to use 10 minutes intelligently. It will pay you huge dividends." Imagine how many tiny habits we can get into 10 minutes. Yeah, right?

Okay. Thank you today for listening and remember, why settle for good when great is waiting? Take one small step this week to lift your life. Bye for now.

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