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# **BUILDING HABITS FOR MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLNESS**

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**Dr. Jennifer Londgren**

# **Building Habits for Mental and Emotional Wellness**

**Biblical Wisdom, Practical  
Principles, Clinical  
Insight**

**Dr. Jennifer Londgren**

*“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”*

1 Corinthians 10:31

*“Our lives are fashioned by our choices. First, we make our choices. Then our choices make us.”<sup>1</sup>—Anne Frank*

Habits are the small choices that we make every day. All of us have different habits and behaviors about how we wake up in the morning, how we greet our families, the supplements we take, our hygiene practices, our routes to work (if we even have to leave our homes), how we cook food, how we tidy our houses, and how we connect with our loved ones. All our habits and behaviors look different. They say that habits account for about 40% of our behavior on a given day, and most habits are automatic. You don't think about them; you just do them. It's kind of like flushing the toilet. You don't make a conscious choice as to whether or not you should flush; you engage in this habit mindlessly. If you have small children, you know that flushing the toilet isn't an automatic human behavior. It

has to be taught in young ones. When we want to develop a good habit or break a bad habit, it's really important that we start to develop an awareness of what we actually do.

Awareness is the first step. I started to notice that every time I changed my clothes, I threw them on the floor or on a bench in my bedroom. When the pile became a certain height, I put the clothes away. Changing clothes and throwing them on the floor became so automatic that I wasn't even aware I was doing it. I distinctly remember looking at the floor and making myself pick up my clothes immediately. I am currently teaching the same methodology to my own children. When we change, we deal with our clothes immediately, whether it is throwing them down the laundry chute or putting them away.

It's critical to understand the science of habits and use it to our advantage. Helpful habits can become automated too. If we want to direct our behavior toward our values, we transform our intentional behaviors into habits, making them so deeply ingrained that we no longer have to be intentional about them at all. Consider the values exercise you completed in chapter 3. If you haven't done this, take

some time to reflect on two or three of your core values. When you have clarity in what matters to you, you can develop habits that help support the things you care about. The beauty of deliberately cultivating habits in line with our values is that they can persist over time with almost no further effort, on good days and on bad, when we're really paying attention and when we're not. No matter how frazzled we are in the morning, we always remember to brush our teeth and to fasten our seat belts as soon as we get into the car. The ability to form values-connected habits not only makes our intentions durable, it frees up our minds for other tasks as well.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reflection break**

Take some time to write out four habits that you would like to build and four you would like to stop.

Four habits I would like to build:

Four habits I would like to stop:

Some examples that I have worked on are flossing my teeth every day, drinking more water, writing thank-you notes, watching less TV, engaging in less social media, and reading every day. Habit development that is a continued evolution is moving my body every day for 30 minutes and meal planning every week.

**When you want to engage in a new habit, make it pleasurable and desirable.** When I think about working out, there is still an aspect of shame and pain associated with going to the gym for me. I think about myself needing to leave my warm, cozy house and running on a treadmill in too tight clothes. I think about the fit and beautiful people at the gym who will look me up and down and think about what a lost cause I am. In reality, I know this is not true, but there is still an aspect of resistance to going to the gym for me. It doesn't sound fun. I resist going because it is associated with pain and discomfort.

When I really thought about how to make the experience of going to the gym desirable for me, I made a few shifts to make it fun. Now the first thing I do when I go to our local YMCA is sit in the steam room. I live in

Minnesota, and it is cold here for much of the year. Going into a warm, quiet steam room by myself is an absolute treat. I leave my house in the cold weather, drive across town, and immediately go to the steam room and get warm and cozy. That is the reward I get for going to the gym, and it has rewired my association. I usually row or go on an elliptical machine, and I turn the television channel to Home and Garden Television (HGTV). This whole ritual of going to the steam room and then watching HGTV while I work out has completely transformed how I view the gym. It has caused me to associate my time there with pleasure and relief instead of thinking about it as painful.

Whatever new habits you want to build, make them fun! If you associate a behavior with pain, you are much less likely to do it. If you associate a behavior with pleasure, the odds are you will likely engage in this behavior. The same goes for getting together with people. If you think about getting together with friends or other couples as a painful chore, you are less likely to do it. One thing my husband and I agreed upon is that if we host, we are not going to stress out about it. We tend to host quite a

bit, and we save a lot of time and energy not fretting about every imperfection of our house but instead focusing on the joy of connecting with friends and loved ones. Instead of agonizing over making everything perfect, we have fun planning food and drink menus and coming up with fun games and activities.

As you consider the habits you would like to develop and those you would like to stop, think of ways you can make them pleasurable and think of how you can make those you want to stop painful.

### **Make good habits obvious and bad habits hard**

Every time I've gone to the dentist since I've been a child, I've felt embarrassed about my lack of flossing habit. When the dental hygienist asked if I flossed, I replied, "Umm, sort of?" as my gums bled. I like to floss. I identify as a flosser. Yet it seems that in my adulthood I could never make the habit stick. It wasn't until I made flossing so easy and accessible that it was impossible not to do it. How did I do this? I bought several flossers and consistently keep one



on my nightstand. Every night when I read in my bed (the book I am currently reading is also readily available on said nightstand), I floss my teeth. The last time I went to the dentist I could confidently say that I had flossed my teeth every single day. It's not that I have amazing willpower or discipline to do this; it's just that I made it super simple and removed any possible barrier.

Make good habits easy to do. Researchers have referred to the impact that environmental defaults can have on our decision-making as choice architecture. You can set up your environment to help make good choices really easy. How you organize furniture, what you display on your shelves, the sensory experience of your space, and the availability of items all make a difference. It is important to realize that you can curate and be the architect of your choices. You can design for default. Make good habits so easy to do that you can't possibly not do them.

It's important when you are developing new habits to remove any barriers you might have. Want to eat healthier? Buy healthy food, cut it up, and put it in to-go containers

or in the front of your fridge. Put the fresh fruit or the avocados out so you will easily see them and consume them. Have good books on hand, position your piano or instruments in a high traffic area in your home, or get a really great beverage container that holds water.

With all change, you have to start really small. I have a tendency to overwhelm myself. Whenever I want to eat better, I buy a ton of vegetables and throw away anything processed and then lament that we have no food and order a pizza. The vegetables sit in our veggie drawer until I find them squishy and soggy several days later. Whenever I want to work out more, I lift or run really hard until I'm too sore to go back to the gym or I see I haven't lost any weight in two solid weeks of working out. Then I quit. When I want to drink more water, I force myself to drink a gallon, and then I hate it and go back to what I always do. In all the wellness and habits literature, starting small is a huge theme. Start so small you can't fail. If you do fail, then you weren't starting small enough, and you need to go back and start even smaller. This seems really dumb at first and

like you are trying to trick your brain, but in my experience, it does actually work.

Small changes that add up is a concept called the “aggregation of marginal gains.” When you start making small changes, they add up to a big change. As Jim Rohn said, “Success is a few simple disciplines, practiced every day; while failure is simply a few errors in judgment, repeated every day. It is the accumulative weight of our disciplines and our judgments that leads us to either fortune or failure.”<sup>3</sup> For a change to be sustainable, it has to be integrated into your life. You start by saving one extra dollar a month. You start by taking one deep breath. You start by having one more carrot a day or drinking one more glass of water a day. Like I said, I have the tendency to go big and then get discouraged and stop. For anything to be sustainable, start small, start where you are.

## Reflection break

1. Where can you improve your life by 1%?
2. How can you strengthen your faith by 1%?
3. How can you improve your marriage by 1%?
4. How can you improve your relationships with your children by 1%?
5. How can you improve your health by 1%?
6. How can you increase your joy by 1%?

A critical part of habits also goes back to the idea of identity. We as humans strive to operate in alignment with how we define ourselves. I define myself as a boring mom, so on weekends you can typically find me reading a book with a cup of tea and being in bed by 9:30 P.M. I don't identify as someone who is wild and crazy, and my behaviors are reflective of that. When thinking about any

sort of goal you might have, don't ask yourself, "What do I want to do?" Instead ask yourself, "Who do I want to become?"

Any sustainable behavior change has to be an identity change. The goal is not to run a marathon; the goal is to become a runner. The goal is not to write one book on self-care; the goal is to become a writer. The goal is not to learn how to play one instrument; the goal is to become a musician. It's not about accomplishing a goal; it's about who you become in the process. As you continue to reflect on this, think about ways you can serve God and spread the gospel. How can you continue to develop into the person God has created you to be?

So many people have things they want to accomplish, but after they accomplish their goals, they feel a sense of emptiness or disappointment that meeting that goal didn't bring them the happiness or the satisfaction they were expecting. Many of the men who were involved in first landing on the moon became alcoholics after that historic event. What did they have to look forward to? As a Christian, you can instead focus on God's love and will for

you rather than relying on accomplishing big goals to make you happy. The biggest goal that could ever be accomplished has already been finished. It was finished through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection from the dead. Because of what Jesus did for you, eternal life in heaven is yours! You can approach your goals with confidence, knowing that the battle has been won. Second Timothy 1:7 says, **“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”** With God's help, focus on developing a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline. Remember that your goals are founded in Christ.

I remember when I completed my doctorate, I almost felt a sense of emptiness and a loss of identity after my dissertation was complete. I had spent the past four years working toward this goal, not to mention the six years of undergraduate college and my master's work. Once my dissertation was complete and I was a doctor, I felt like I had lost a part of my purpose. It wasn't the grand satisfaction and relief I was anticipating. Instead of being grateful to God and honoring him with the process, I was searching for my own fulfillment and my own glory.

I know now that it was God's process of teaching me and stretching me to lengths that I never knew were possible that was so rewarding. It didn't matter as much that I was done with my degree; it mattered that I had improved along the way. Instead of waiting to accomplish your goal to feel happy, embrace the process.

### **Habits and systems**

Once you have an idea of who you want to become, it's critical to develop a system to help get you there. In *Atomic Habits*, James Clear says, "We don't rise to the level of our goals; we fall to the level of our systems."<sup>4</sup> This is incredibly important when we are analyzing what we do. What is your system for making these changes sustainable? Is your system for eating dinner to see what happens around 5:00 P.M. and decide if you want fast food or something to quickly air fry? Is your system for reading a book to think, "I should find a good book" and then never really following through? Many times we have great goals that we want to achieve but no system to get us there.

I focus a lot on systems in my own life. Every time I start a new semester of teaching, I typically call my first week back my “system setting” week. I develop a plan for morning routines, getting kids to school, doing household chores and homework, keeping up with work obligations, and meal planning. I think about when I can get my workouts in. My husband and I both study and analyze what works in our systems and what doesn’t work. We absolutely are not robotic about it, and many of our systems are definitely works in process. We are still working on systems for our kids putting their winter gear away consistently and for meal planning, etc. If you focus on systems instead of outcomes, the outcomes will take care of themselves.

### **Reflection break**

What is your system for

- improving your life by 1%?
- strengthening your faith by 1%?



- improving marriage by 1%?
- strengthening relationships with your children by 1%?
- improving your health by 1%?
- increasing your joy by 1%?

As we consider the habits that we engage in, remember that we must obey God (Acts 5:29) and act with a spirit of humility (1 Peter 5:5). God reminds us to stay away from the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 and to imitate him (Ephesians 5:1-33). He tells us to walk in love and **“to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives”** (Titus 2:12). We want our behavior to reflect the will of God because we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand for us (Ephesians 2:10). We want our behavior to reflect godly living and putting God first, and we trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. God

will make straight our paths (Proverbs 3:5,6). All our habits and behaviors are not done for our own glory but for the glory of God. John 15:8 reminds us, **“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”**

**Citations:**

1. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994).
2. David, *Emotional Agility*, 153.
3. Jim Rohn, *The Art of Exceptional Living* (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: Sound Wisdom, 2022).
4. James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (New York: Avery, 2018), 27.

## About the Writer

**Dr. Jennifer Londgren** is the program coordinator for the alcohol and drug studies program at Minnesota State University-Mankato. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist, a nationally certified counselor, and a board certified telemental health provider. Dr. Londgren's mission is supporting those who serve others, and she frequently presents to educators and mental health providers on topics related to wellness, self-care, resiliency, and innovative-teaching strategies. Jennifer is married to Trevor and has four children: Jack, Kate, Anna, and Henry.

## About Time of Grace

Time of Grace is an independent, donor-funded ministry that connects people to God's grace—his love, glory, and power—so they realize the temporary things of life don't satisfy. What brings satisfaction is knowing that because

Jesus lived, died, and rose for all of us, we have access to the eternal God—right now and forever.

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Thank you!

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