

How Do I Build Discipline?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Exercise Snacks: How 10 Seconds Can Build Both Physical and Psychological Strength* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains why a goal too small to negotiate builds discipline, and how that discipline transfers. Search “exercise snacks” on the site to find it.

Discipline is acting from our values rather than our impulses. It grows less from motivation than from small promises kept, each one evidence that we keep promises to ourselves. Choose one value and one act so small the mind has very little room to negotiate. Exercise is one place to practice it. Music, a relationship, a rehab routine, or writing work the same way. A few words per space is enough.

STEP ONE The value	Start with what the habit serves. Discipline built on a value lasts longer than discipline built on guilt, which pairs a bad feeling with a good activity.
STEP TWO Too small to negotiate	A specific number, small enough to do between other things. The assignment is not to optimize. The assignment is to do ten.
STEP THREE The negotiator	The radio in the mind offers reasons to wait, do more, or do something better. We recognize its lines without automatically obeying them. <i>The overwhelmed one: “If I’m doing this, I should do that too.”</i> <i>The analyzer: “Would something else be more beneficial today?”</i> <i>The ambitious one: “Ten is too easy. I should do fifty.”</i>
STEP FOUR The choice to remove	Choice is liberation, and it can also be oppression. Some choices are worth removing so that congruence stops being up for a vote every day.
STEP FIVE What I call it	A word can change our relationship to the act. A “snack” feels small and accessible. “I get to” lands differently than “I have to.”
STEP SIX Kept promises	We tally fourteen days. The tally collects evidence. It is not a grade.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: TEN SQUATS

THE VALUE	I want to stay metabolically active through a day of sitting, so I will do ten squats.
THE ACT	Ten squats, whenever I think of it between sessions. No timer, no workout clothes.
THE NEGOTIATOR	“I already ran this morning. Maybe mobility work would be better today.”
WHAT I CALL IT	An exercise snack.
WHAT TRANSFERRED	Running bass scales with a metronome, the least exciting part of becoming a better musician, became noticeably easier. Not more motivation. Practiced discipline.

The value and the act

The simpler the goal, the easier it is to recognize when the mind tries to renegotiate it.

THE VALUE

I want to __, so I will __.

THE ACT

Too small to negotiate

Specific enough that I will know when it is done.

THE ACT, WITH A NUMBER:

THE MOMENTS IT CAN FIT INTO (BETWEEN MEETINGS, AFTER A CALL, WHILE THE KETTLE BOILS):

IF THIS ACT GREW LONG OR COMPLICATED, THE TEN-SECOND VERSION WOULD BE:

THE RADIO

My negotiator

Which voice usually wins the delay? Check the ones I recognize, then write its exact line.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ The overwhelmed one, who adds tasks | ☐ The analyzer, who looks for the better option |
| ☐ The ambitious one, for whom small is not enough | ☐ Another voice of my own |

ITS USUAL LINE:

WHAT I WILL SAY BACK, OR DO INSTEAD OF ANSWERING:

WHERE IT IS EASY TO LOSE THE INITIATION

Not because we lacked ten seconds. The conversation in the mind delayed us until the opportunity passed.

THE MOMENT I USUALLY LOSE IT, AND WHAT PULLS ME AWAY:

Removing a choice, and keeping count

THE CHOICE I WILL REMOVE

What choices would be good for me to remove if my goal were to be physically, relationally, and psychologically healthy?

THE CHOICE I KEEP REOPENING:

WHAT I WILL DECIDE ONCE, SO I STOP DECIDING IT EVERY DAY:

WHAT I CALL IT

Approachable instead of punishing. Both stories can be true. Which one do I want to live in?

ITS NAME (A SNACK, A PRACTICE, A GET-TO):

THE "HAVE TO" STORY, AND THE "GET TO" STORY:

FOURTEEN DAYS OF KEPT PROMISES

One check for each day the promise was kept. A missed day is information, not a verdict.

☐ Day 1 _____	☐ Day 8 _____
☐ Day 2 _____	☐ Day 9 _____
☐ Day 3 _____	☐ Day 10 _____
☐ Day 4 _____	☐ Day 11 _____
☐ Day 5 _____	☐ Day 12 _____
☐ Day 6 _____	☐ Day 13 _____
☐ Day 7 _____	☐ Day 14 _____

WHERE ELSE IT SHOWED UP

Discipline transfers. Small kept promises often show up in places that have nothing to do with the original act.

AFTER TWO WEEKS, WHERE ELSE DID I NOTICE FOLLOW-THROUGH?

WHAT THE SMALL VERSION TAUGHT ME ABOUT THE LARGE ONE:

The small version is not a warm-up for the real work. Often it is the real work.