

Leaving Bad Habits Locked Down as Our Road Map to Recovery Becomes 'Clear'

By Ella Walsh



Boris Johnson recently told a Downing Street news conference that the coming months would be 'seasons of hope, looking and feeling incomparably better for us all'. But just how difficult is it going to be to return to a 'normal' routine as workplaces and universities start reopening?

The succession of three national lockdowns, particularly over the winter months, has had unsettling long-term effects on students. Students are reported to be drinking more, sleeping in, and procrastinating about their work; they are also increasingly anxious about their futures. Second year NTU student Charlotte discussed some of these behaviours in an interview. "I'm sleeping in all the time, because there's nowhere that I have to be", she said, "which is bad because I don't get a lot of stuff done, and it makes me less productive". This is understandable, yet could it be the case that 'because there's nowhere that I have to be' is being used so frequently as an excuse, students have developed a set of bad habits during lockdown? Now that the government's roadmap to recovery has been revealed, perhaps it is time to eliminate these negative habits and focus on new methods of doing things that will enable students to achieve more post lockdown.

Atomic Habits by James Clear encourages and explains ways to make 'good habits inevitable and bad habits impossible.' He highlights that even completing small tasks throughout the day can help to release dopamine: the chemical that allows people to feel rewarded. Having a daily routine of manageable tasks at university could therefore be crucial in maintaining a positive outlook.

The book features easy to read chapters on a range of interesting subjects such as self-control as well as fixing and controlling bad habits. Small changes to everyday life, what he calls being '1 percent better per day', can have a dramatic and lasting effect over a longer period. While most people feel overwhelmed at the thought of drastically changing their waking alarm to hours earlier, the book suggests tricks and tips on how to improve gradually, leading to a better chance of the good habit sticking.

One trick is to 'Habit Track'. Clear states that writing down habits 'provides visual proof that you are casting votes for the type of person you wish to become.' Students that struggle with a routine should begin writing down the time they physically get out of bed each morning. This gives immediate gratification which sparks the urge to improve and stick to the new habit.

Procrastination can be a problem for important tasks. So, when starting a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to do. The example given is 'study for class' becomes 'open my notes'. This 'gateway' habit then leads us down a productive path - in this case: doing work. Once a good habit is initiated, even if only for two minutes, it is much easier to maintain. Clear says that by doing this 'You are taking the smallest action that confirms the type of person you want to be, making it satisfying'.

As a student I found that this book was particularly motivating for me during the lockdown months. I tried and tested a few of his ideas, one being 'making a cue invisible'. I read that 'One of the most practical ways to eliminate a bad habit is to reduce exposure to the cue that causes it'. Focusing on this made me more aware of the cues around my house that were triggering bad habits, enabling me to take action by removing them.