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## Book Review: Tiny Habits: The Small Changes that Change Everything

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## Book Review

### *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes that Change Everything*

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Fogg, B. J. (2019). *Tiny habits: The small changes that change everything*. London, U.K.: Virgin Books.

*Tiny Habits* by B.J. Fogg walks the reader through his method for healthy habit formation by learning to break down the approach into smaller steps. Instead of approaching habit formation as an immediate lifestyle overhaul, Fogg proposes starting small by introducing a small piece of the habit. For example, Fogg wanted to create the habit of flossing, so he began by flossing a single tooth every day. He did this until flossing one tooth was a part of his routine, and then he began to slowly add in more teeth until he was in the habit of flossing his entire mouth (p. 79).

Fogg is the founder of the Behavior Design Lab at Stanford University, where he studies, researches, and teaches about human behaviors. The focus of his work is on habit formation and eliminating bad habits. This book asserts that it is important to keep changes small and expectations low so that one does not have to rely on the unreliable nature of motivation (p. 2)

Fogg's book begins by breaking down the components that he asserts make habit formation possible: motivation, ability, and prompt (shortened to the acronym MAP). Motivation refers to an individual's willingness and desire to take action to form a behavior; without motivation, an individual will not want to act. Ability is a person's capacity to take action. If someone has a high motivation to learn to bake but does not own an oven, then they do not have the ability to form a baking habit. Finally, one is not likely to take action to form a habit if they have no prompt, which is anything that reminds an individual to do their habit. A prompt can be anything from a phone alarm to a sticky note that immediately precedes the desired habit. Think the bell ringing to Pavlov's dog. To design a prompt, a person must decide where a habit fits best into their life. For example, if one wants to teach themselves a new language, they need to figure out what time of day they learn best and have the most energy to devote to studying. If one consistently works 8-hour shifts and is not motivated at the end of the day, then they would likely need to make time in the morning to study instead. Once a time is decided, a location and an effective trigger need to be established. In the above example, a

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sticky note on a textbook may be enough to remind the person that they need to study, or they could set an alarm on their phone if they need it to be a stronger prompt.

The beginning chapters break down the three components of MAP further. Each chapter explores what the components mean and how to design them into your life so that the habit fits in naturally and thus will be sustainable. Motivation and ability exist along a spectrum where high motivation and high ability puts individuals in a state where they are capable and willing to act as long as they have a prompt to remind them to do so. However, if either motivation or ability is too low, then no prompt will be effective enough to drive a behavior or habit because the individual is not willing to act.

Following the discussion of how MAP is used to design a habit, Fogg then breaks down why habits must start tiny. An individual cannot use MAP to design a habit if they do not know what habit they are trying to start. People tend to choose large goals as habits when they should break down these large goals into small manageable chunks. For example, many people will say they want to start a habit of being healthier, but that could entail numerous life changes like eating better, working out more, meditating, etc. Fogg has the reader look at this larger aspiration and pick a smaller part to focus on, like exercising more, and then has the reader break it down even more. The goal is to make the habit as specific as possible. The more specific a habit, the easier it is to add it to one's life. Take a desire to exercise. First, make the goal as specific as possible. So, the generic exercising more can be specified to walking daily. Now that it is more specific, you break it down to smaller more manageable increments. In this case, it could be walking daily becomes walking for just 10 minutes after dinner every day. 10 minutes is short for most individuals, so it is the best place to start to make the habit sustainable at first. If one were to set the bar too high, such as walking for an hour after dinner every day, they would quickly burn out and give up on their goal and habit. After the participant consistently follows this habit using the MAP method to design it, they can begin increasing the length of their walk time to 15 minutes as they become more comfortable and confident in their abilities. They can keep pushing the limits of their habits once they have firmly established their base habit, which can only be done by starting small.

Fogg also applies his tiny habit method not only to habit formation but also for eliminating negative habits. The same MAP method for creating habits can be used to slowly remove unwanted behaviors in small increments. For example, if a woman wanted to reduce the amount of sugar in her diet for health reasons, she would start slow. She has the motivation (her health), and she can eat less sugar, even if it is difficult. Then, she needs to find a prompt that reminds her to grab a healthy snack instead of a sugary one. In this case, she used to have a prompt that when she opened her fridge or freezer, she would see the sugary snacks she kept in her kitchen, prompting her to want to grab and eat those snacks. By changing out sugary foods for healthy foods, she would see vegetables and fruits and be prompted to eat those instead. First, she decided she would not eat dessert one night each week. Then, she slowly began saying no to desserts on more nights of the week, and then she began saying no to sugar while at work. Eventually, her small habit of not eating sugar for one evening snowballed into a bigger transformative lifestyle change of cutting out sugar every day.

The most important thing that *Tiny Habits* emphasizes is keeping one's goals small and how you must remain adaptable. Remaining adaptable means an individual needs to constantly be analyzing their habit and adjusting it to better fit into their lives. If after following MAP a person's habit still does not seem to be taking root, he needs to revisit the MAP's components and see what is not working. For example, an individual wants to wake up early but keeps sleeping through their alarm. First, they should analyze their motivation. If they are trying to start a new habit for the sake of another person and have no personal connection to the habit, this habit may not be a good fit and should be reconsidered. Then, they should analyze their capacity and their prompt. They may need to reevaluate why they sleep in so late normally (stress, late bedtime, etc.) and adjust that, or try different alarms. Fogg treats habit formation as a constant, on-going process that needs to be flexible to be successful.

As the book continues, Fogg explains the need to create an emotional connection to your habit and to turn it into a positive experience if one wants the habit to take root. An emotional connection is a positive association that one has when they do their habit. They should feel joy and a sense of accomplishment, which Fogg says is achieved through something he calls Shine (p. 143). Shine is created through celebration and acknowledgment of achieving one's goal of doing their habit. Celebration, like the habit formation process, needs to be flexible and comes in many different forms. When building the habit of flossing, Fogg would put his hands on his hips and smile in the mirror (p. 131). However, this may not create the same sense of Shine in everyone, so he encourages trying different celebrations to find what works. The celebration simply needs to be something easy enough to do wherever the habit takes place, and it must be done immediately following an action. If one waits too long between their habit and celebrating, the Shine loses its strength and does not help form an emotional bond with the habit. The celebration is then tied back to the need to start small. By keeping actions small and rewarding oneself with something as simple as a smile and a thumbs up in the mirror after completing the action, it becomes easier to listen to a prompt and to want to continue a habit. Once the action becomes a habit, one learns to push themselves and expand the habit so it does not have to stay tiny.

*Tiny Habits* is written to be accessible to any audience. Fogg uses a conversational tone and uses examples from his own life, as well as others who have applied his methods to their lives. This tone allows the reader to not get bogged down in complex terminology while simultaneously not feeling like they are being talked down to by Fogg. It is easy to see the applications of starting tiny in one's own life and easy to see the best way to get started. The book also includes various infographics and pictures to emphasize his ideas and methods. These images make it easy to follow Fogg's ideas. He makes it feel practical to start a tiny habit and provides worksheets at the end of every chapter for the reader to fill out and practice creating a tiny habit formation.

While *Tiny Habits* is not explicitly related to finances or mental health, this book would be well suited for someone trying to gain control of their finances or mental health but who feels overwhelmed by taking the first step. For financial and mental health professionals and their clients, this book would be a good tool for those who have tried to make changes but have not been successful. By introducing tiny habits and the MAP method, financial professionals

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can give their clients a starting point to begin managing their money or finding more routine. For example, eating at home has the dual benefit of being healthier and being cheaper than dining out. However, cooking can seem like a daunting task, especially for those who did not grow up learning to cook. Instead of telling a client to eat at home more, have them start by turning on a single oven burner for a few seconds, then turning it off, and celebrating. This gives the client a sense of purpose in the kitchen without being too big of a step that they get overwhelmed and shut down. Then, they can add a pot of water to the stovetop, then they can throw some pasta or vegetables in. Soon enough, the simple task of turning on the burner can turn into a full habit of cooking at home. This was a similar method that Fogg had success with while working with a client with bipolar disorder who was trying to add more routine to her life but felt incapable of making permanent changes (pp. 175-176). *Tiny Habits* can help clients get to the root of why certain tasks seem difficult and give them an easier way to approach change.

The goal of creating a tiny habit is that it will spiral into something more, branching off into more and more small habits until the individual has begun a full transformation in their life. This book provides the framework for breaking down big taunting tasks into smaller steps that naturally fit into anyone's life and grow on their own. For someone who struggles to make concrete changes but wants to, *Tiny Habits* would be an invaluable tool. Creating and aiding our clients change is the cornerstone of financial therapy, thus financial therapists may benefit in reading this book and aiding their clients in implementing the MAP method to make the tiny changes that will have a ripple effect on their well-being.