

**Sriram Krishnan:** Hey, everyone, welcome to another exciting episode with Aarthi & Sriram. Today, we have somebody who generally needs no introduction. I'm pretty sure he has sold more copies of any book in the last few years, and maybe the Bible, and you could not have missed his work at all if you've been towards any e-commerce booking store. He's been a friend for a long time and inspiration and we're really [00:00:30] excited to show the one and only [James Clear](#). James, thank you so much for being here.

**James Clear:** Hey, pleasure to talk to you both. Thanks for having me.

**Sriram:** All right, we're going to start you off with a few softball questions, it's going to get you warmed up. Teach us how to write and market the number one best-selling non-fiction book for several years in a row.

**James:** Oh, man, [chuckles] I don't even know that I know. I've been very fortunate. It's been a wild ride. I do have some lessons I think that will [00:01:00] probably apply to launching pretty much any product. The way I think about it right now is like 50% of the success of a product is the positioning of it. The example that I give is, there's a chapter later in *Atomic Habits* where I talk about [deliberate practice](#).

It could have been a book about deliberate practice, where I talked about habits, but instead, it was a book about habits where I mentioned deliberate practice. I think the difference in how those two books would sell is enormous [00:01:30] because just by virtue of being part of society, and growing up in culture, you know that good habits are favorable, and bad habits are unfavorable.

I don't have to convince anybody to have that desire, I'm just tapping into a desire that's already there. Whereas deliberate practice, yes, I know you need 30 seconds to unpack it and explain it, and you don't get that with people. When people are looking at your book or any product really, I'm not standing next to them. They've never heard of me, they don't have any context, so they [00:02:00] need to be able to look at the cover of the book, what I call the frame of the book; the title, the subtitle, the reading line, basically anything you see on the cover, and get in five seconds why they would buy it.

Now, not everybody in the world is going to buy *Atomic Habits*, but I think most people can look at it and at least be like, "Oh, I understand why that's useful. I understand why people would want to buy it." The positioning of the product I think is really crucial. Then the only way that a product can sell tens of [00:02:30] millions of copies is word of mouth. It has outpaced my ability to market it.

I have a large audience, very fortunate. It's been a long time, a lot of years and I've been writing for over a decade now trying to build a huge email list and have a good platform to launch the product. I did everything I could. I view product launches as almost similar to launching a space shuttle where it's like or satellite, you got to put a lot of effort in to get it off the launching pad and to get it up into orbit, but then if you can go high enough, it [00:03:00] stays in orbit on its own. That's the power of word of mouth. If you don't get it off the pad enough, then it just crashes back down to earth.

The product launch is about getting into orbit but once it's up there, it's really just word of mouth that's doing it. The only way to get word of mouth is to, I like [Seth Godin's definition](#), or he says, you want to create something remarkable, and that means that it's worthy of remark. It has to be so good that people want to talk about it. They have to love it so much that [00:03:30] they feel like, oh, man, I need to tell somebody about this. The only way you can do that is by creating something great, creating something that people value or that people find genuinely useful in their life.

I'd say positioning is crucial, and then you have to have this philosophy where you're always trying to outpace the value that you're asking for. You can imagine the value that a product creates and then the cost that it is to acquire that [00:04:00] product. Not just money, but also, in my case, the amount of time that it takes for someone to read the book. You've got the value they get from the book, subtracted by the time and the money that they had to put in to get it, and whatever that difference is, is goodwill.

I'm always trying to have this huge surplus of goodwill where people feel like it's such a good value, it's such a good trade to read the next thing he writes, or to open the next newsletter or to buy that book, that it's like, yes, of course, [00:04:30] I would do it. I think if you have that philosophy of always giving excess value and having the surplus of goodwill, and if you position your products well and you do a good launch and try to get it up in orbit, if you can do all those things, then maybe word of mouth will take over and it'll run on its own.

**Sriram:** You touched on many things. In some ways, I think what you do is what Aarthi and I aspire to do in many ways because you added so much value for close to a decade, maybe longer with your newsletter. [00:05:00] You have a really large audience there. *How did the idea of a book come about?* You had this amazing newsletter and I remember talking to, I think [Ryan Holiday](#), who's a mutual friend of ours, of the modern-day [Marcus Aurelius](#) about your journey from having an inbuilt audience to writing a book. What caused that [unintelligible] book?

**James:** It's a good question. I didn't really start out with some big grand vision. What I knew was that I wanted [00:05:30] to be an entrepreneur and I tried a couple different things early on, a very standard entrepreneurship story. I floundered around for two or three years. It was really two years before I found my footing and started writing at [jamesclear.com](#). One of the best pieces of advice that I got early on was to try things until something comes easily. That doesn't mean that it's going to be totally easy, it just means that the results are coming faster than maybe they did in other areas.

For example, by the time I was two years in and launched [00:06:00] [jamesclear.com](#). I had probably started three to five different websites and given each one a run for a couple of months and tried to see, "Can I build an email list? Can I get people to buy a product or sign up for something?" I was just doing some web design stuff in the background, like taking freelance clients to make ends meet. Then eventually when I started writing about habits, productivity, strategy, and decision making, all the stuff that I kind of write about now, for some reason, those [00:06:30] topics just resonated with people better and the growth was much easier.

It was obvious pretty early on that, "Oh, this is going well compared to the old stuff." I think you need to look for those signals of progress early. Then as the site started to grow after-- I started zero, a year later I think I had 30,000 or 33,000 subscribers, something like that. After two years I was at 100, and then after three years, I was around 220. That was around the time when [00:07:00] I started getting interest from agents and publishers. They were reaching out to me a little bit and were like, "Hey, have you thought about writing a book?" I had some friends who had done it at that point and they were interested, and it seemed like a natural next step.

I never set out and said, "Oh, I really want to be an author." As I explored the option more, it was like, "Yes, I think this is something I would like to do." Then once I accepted the offer and decided to do it for real, I got really serious about it and it became [00:07:30] the all-consuming thing that I did for the next two or three years. It wasn't something that I just-- I wasn't planning to do it, but once I decided to, I took it seriously.

**Aarthi Ramamurthy:** It's interesting that when you talk about-- I haven't written a book, Sriram actually has. He's written a technical book. It's funny because the way you describe leading to book writing and the process of it is very similar to how founders think about [00:08:00] starting startups. You started out being like, "I wanted to be an entrepreneur." To me, it's interesting to see the comparisons because you're experimenting in the early days, you're trying out multiple websites, you're trying to see what's sticking, you're trying to measure growth, you're trying to figure out what the natural [product market fit](#) is, and eventually, reading into the book and then investing in that as the project. It's just I would've never thought of it as a way to compare these two.

**James:** I don't know if most authors think [00:08:30] about it that way or if that's how people feel, but I would say that that's true, how my path played out and that that is the way that I think about it. There are a couple of elements I feel are important details there. The first is I want to choose projects and to create a business that I'm genuinely excited about or genuinely interested in.

I almost feel that is the first enormous hurdle to clear no matter what kind of business you're building, is you have to genuinely be into it because if [00:09:00] you are interested and engaged, the opportunities for improvements are almost endless. You'll always be finding different things to capitalize on or look forward to tweak or improve. If you're not genuinely interested in it, then even the obvious improvements are going to feel like a hassle. Everything's going to feel like a little bit of a burden. In order to do that I am not smart enough to figure out what those things are right away.

I need to test and iterate and try different things. As you mentioned, [00:09:30] try a variety of websites or write about a variety of topics. One interesting little detail about building a business in that way is you need your brand to be somewhat flexible early on. That's a tricky thing because really good branding is an important piece to the process. I do think it often sets at least some guardrail for what the business is going to be. It doesn't mean you could be anything. I debated naming my website something I still think I still have somewhere, a spreadsheet, like 400 names [00:10:00] for the topic or something.

**Sriram:** I just-

**James:** Eventually-

**Sriram:** James Clear is a fantastic name. It sounds like an action hero from a thriller. He can't do that, right?

**James:** Yes. Maybe I got lucky with that. I feel like I was just like, you know what? If [Oprah's](#) name is good enough for her and [Seth Godin's](#) name is good enough for him, then I'll just stick with James Clear for now, and I can write about whatever James Clear is interested in. Then maybe later if I figure out what that is, I can double down and create an actual brand around it or something.

**Aarthi:** That's great. [00:10:30]

**James:** Now, again, I didn't know that at the time, but what ended up happening was James Clear the brand became the overarching thing, and then Atomic Habits, the product got the name rather than the business getting the name. That's just because I ended up being an author. Again, "I didn't know that's what I wanted to do, but you do need some, you need a willingness to experiment, a thirst to find what you're genuinely interested in, and enough flexibility along the way for the brand to take that shape as you discover.

It's like the strategy emerges [00:11:00] as you take action rather than having a grand plan and figuring it all out ahead of time.

**Sriram:** Okay. This is something I was really looking forward to asking you, and you should just get into as much detail as possible. You mentioned this as the space shuttle launch. You've written a book, it's a fantastic product we've all read. It's an amazing book. One of the things I loved talking to you about earlier was the process of actually getting the launch done and marketing it.

Could you just walk us through [00:11:30] what you did, what worked, what didn't work because I think a lot of people listening to this are like, okay, I have something in the works? How do I get my book, my podcast, my creation out the door? What did you do?

**James:** It's a crucial question. I think it's really important to take it seriously and to get it right. First of all, this is a two-person operation. I was so low for the first I don't know, five years of my career, I think. Then when I signed the book deal, I got an advance and I [00:12:00] used some of the money from the advance to hire my first employee. Lindsay, she still works with me and she's a crucial part of this process. It was a two-person launch. I was writing the book and then we started planning the launch.

While I was always collecting ideas, I was looking at what other people were doing and how launches were going and all that stuff. I was just trying to back into what you do to build a successful launch. I was just paying attention to what was going on and taking notes and stuff. I took all those notes and [00:12:30] we had a big meeting for a couple days, and this was about 15 months before *Atomic Habits* came out. I think that's the first thing, is this was a 15 month planning process to launch the book. A lot of the time I'll hear from authors and they'll be like, "Hey, my book comes out in six weeks." What should I do?" There's still plenty to do, but you're 15 months behind where we were.

It's not totally realistic to think about being able to do the same thing in that short amount of time. There was very little that we did that other [00:13:00] people don't already know about or do. It wasn't like I came up with some brand new strategy, but what having a long timeline allowed us to do were some things that required a lot of elbow grease and just were very manual and unsexy and most people don't do them because they just require a lot of time.

For example, podcasts were a big part of the launch strategy. By the time the book came out, I had already recorded 75 podcast interviews and had asked all of them to [00:13:30] release within the first two weeks of the book coming out. Then I had another 25 that I recorded that month when the book launched. We had a hundred podcast interviews come out within the first month of the book being out.

**Aarthi:** Why is it important for folks who don't know? Why is it important to compress everything around the launch time frame?

**James:** This is just my theory. I don't know if other people feel the same way, but I think it's really crucial to have what I call a concentrated strike and you want all of the energy to be jammed into this really short window. Part of [00:14:00] the reason is that it makes it feel bigger than it actually is. If you have a hundred interviews and they're spaced out over two years and one drops every couple weeks, I don't know, it's always there in the background and something you hear about, but it never really bubbles up to the front of your consciousness.

If a hundred interviews all come out within the same two weeks span, then you're like, "My god, this guy's everywhere." I actually had somebody tell me that I was hearing from people on Twitter, "jeez, I can't get away from this guy".

[crosstalk]

It's like that's [00:14:30] the point to try to be everywhere during that window of time. In order to get that many, again I didn't have a book out. I was relatively unknown, why would a hundred people have me on their podcast? Well, we went through all of iTunes and all the top charts and all that stuff. Developed a spreadsheet of 300-400 podcasts that we thought, that already interviewed people, so we were only pitching interview shows, that would already be a good [00:15:00] fit for the topic.

Then we wrote up individual emails to all 300 and however many of those people and that takes a long time to write all those and so we needed months to do that. Then once we had all the drafts written, then we stacked them all and sent them all, like six months before the book was going to come out. Then we recorded them all three months before and then we asked them all to release that month. Not everybody released exactly the one we wanted, but most people were willing to do that [00:15:30] but you need to

reach out to 300 to get on 100 and you got to, so it just takes a while and most people are not either patient enough or don't start soon enough to have enough time to do that.

That's just one example that we applied to most of the launch was, let's just do the unsexy thing and take our time and make sure that it all comes out at the same time. I also had my audience, of course, so we emailed them when the book came out and all that. Tried to do a little bit of a pre-order push **[00:16:00]** with my audience and then I had all the external marketing stuff hit once the book was out.

The day the book came out, I was on [CBS This Morning and did a four minute segment](#) with them. A couple hours later, that segment got posted to YouTube and then we emailed that segment out to my audience, like a couple hours after that. That was the launch day email and I really think that made it feel like a thing, it wasn't like, I don't know how many people bought because of the TV segment.

**[00:16:30]** It was probably, I've tried to estimate it in so many different ways. It was probably almost certainly over a thousand, but probably less than 10,000 copies, somewhere in that range, for the segment. It was definitely valuable, but it's not like it sold a million copies on its own, but having the YouTube clip really lended an air of credibility to the whole launch where it wasn't just like a guy launching his book, it was like, no, this is a thing and so we used that on social media and used it to emailing my audience and so on.

Then of course, once you have that **[00:17:00]** credibility, then you can leverage that into other things, whether it's segments on other TV shows or bigger podcasts or whatever. *So emailing my audience, the TV segment and podcasts, I would say those are the three biggest pillars of the launch.*

The other thing that we did was reached out to a bunch of people who we thought, so it was, let's just call them influencers, for lack of a better term, reached out to a bunch of influencers who we thought would enjoy the book and **[00:17:30]** asked if they wanted a copy and only if they opted in and sent us their address themselves did we put them on the list and send them one.

Same story though. We sent all those copies out right around the same time that all the podcasts were launching. Everything's happening in the same moment and I think the final thing I'll add to this, because I think that probably gives you a pretty good picture, is you want that concentrated strike because it makes it feel like a bigger thing because you're everywhere in that tight window of time but I think you can do. **[00:18:00]** even better than that general principle, which is you can try to limit it to an echo chamber, so to speak.

You can try to be big in an industry in a concentrated strike in a short window of time. Then I think it really feels bigger. What we did was try to come up with audiences where we felt like it was a good fit for the book. Then I had a list of things and we picked a couple. I can't remember all of them, but I think like CrossFitters were one, venture capitalists were one. I think parenting**[00:18:30]** and Mommy blogs were another one. We reached out to the influencers in those spaces, asked if they wanted a copy. Whoever opted in and said yes, we put them on the list and we sent the books out.

Now, it turns out that the parenting and mommy blogs didn't really do that much. The venture capitalists, I think they just get sent a lot of stuff and so it didn't really take off in that area but the CrossFitters was a really good fit. I think, partially, they get sent lots of supplements and workout gear but they very **[00:19:00]** rarely get sent books. That was interesting enough that they were like, "Oh, this is cool. This is something different." The book is just a really good fit for anybody in the fitness industry and so they got it.

If you are really into CrossFit and you follow a bunch of the top CrossFitters on Instagram and stuff, there were like five or 10 or dozen of them that all posted about the book within the same month span. That makes it seem really big in your industry. It's like not only are you seeing him on podcasts or hearing

[00:19:30] about it on TV or whatever but the thing you care about all the big people in that space were talking about at that time.

Once we found a little success there then we did a second round and reached out to bodybuilders and Powerlifters and other people in the fitness space. I think that idea of like let's do a concentrated strike, but let's do it within a targeted area and have all that action happen at the same time, then it seems even bigger. It's all about trying to create the appearance [00:20:00] that this thing is huge. If you can do that enough and it's all in the same tight window then I think you do hit exit velocity and you get into orbit and then the word of mouth starts to take over.

**Aarthi:** This is such a *masterclass*, this whole segment I feel like we just struck gold because our audience are usually folks in tech, young founders, people who are trying to figure out what they want to go build and there is a lot of talk about building things and then there is [00:20:30] this part about go to market or marketing it. I think you just provided this comprehensive masterclass on how to go launch something in a really interesting impactful way. Thank you. This was great.

**Sriram:** I remember talking to you about this over the years and I remember being like, wow, I would've never guessed the CrossFitters book bestseller product market fit but that's amazing. By the way, you brought up something I wanted to ask you about. You actually nearly changed [00:21:00] one aspect of my professional life in a deep way, you may not know it and not outside the book. We met a couple of years ago and you mentioned you going on this TV network and promoting it, and I actually Googled you. I actually saw all these clips and we'll try and maybe edit one of these clips together in this episode and you are fantastic.

I remember asking you because I had a bunch of TV coming up and I want to ask about how to be good when you get interviewed on TV and you gave me some fantastic advice, which I've tried to follow. [00:21:30] Trust me, I'm not as good looking and polished as you were that morning but for the audience here who might want to be on a morning show or have a segment, how do you get there and once you're there, what do you do?

**James:** Yes, so I can't remember exactly what I told you, but I'll go over some things, but if I forget something or there's something specific you want, let me know. The way it first happened for me was actually a little bit of luck. I had been writing articles for years at this point, [00:22:00] three or four years, maybe longer. Let's see, it was probably six years. I've been writing on the blog for six years. One of the articles I wrote was called [The Physics of Productivity](#), and I just took Newton's three laws and tried to twist them or apply them to productivity and just, I don't know, write some semi [unintelligible] blog post.

It did fine when it came out, but it was just sitting there in the background. Then one year, a journalist at the *New York Times* found it and they didn't [00:22:30] write a huge thing about it or anything. They just mentioned it in one of their articles and linked to the original. Well, it happened to be that a producer at CBS was reading that article as they were researching a segment and they clicked on the link and came to the original blog post and that was how they reached out to me. They're like, "Hey, would you be interested in talking about this on the segment next week?"

This was like 10 months before the book came out. I said, "Yes, sure I'll do it." We did that [short segment](#) and I really tried to prep for that and nail that one [00:23:00] because I thought, if I can do a good job with this, maybe I can ask them to have me back when the book comes out. I remember hearing this story that [Martin Short](#) was a great late night TV guest and people always loved having him on their shows because he would just crush it with his segments.

The story is that he would script out the entire thing beforehand. He would write everything that he was going to say and then he would get on stage and just play a relaxed version of himself. [00:23:30] I'm not an actor so I don't resonate totally with all that, but I took that idea to heart and I scripted the whole four-minute segment that we could do. Now, I ended up scripting out like six minutes worth and I told them, here are the questions you can ask, here's the response I'll give and I did the whole thing.

I sent it over to the producer. I got the impression that they never get stuff like that. It was probably a little over the top, but I actually think he appreciated it [00:24:00] because I basically did his job for him. We did the pre-call and he never confirmed like, "Hey, this is what we'll do," but then we went through the pre-call and everything that he did prepared me for the segment. I could tell he was just walking through the document I had sent him. I was like, okay, all right. This is what it'll be like.

I was still very nervous to get on national TV for the first time, but it took a little of the edge off because I knew it was coming. [Gayle King](#) did that interview [00:24:30] and only later did I find out that anchors often just go rogue and do whatever they want for the segment. She didn't follow the script exactly, but at least it created a frame for the interview. I tried for each answer to have-- The problem with TV is it's not like a podcast, it's not like this where I am going to have a lot of time, you have an hour to unpack all the nuance and detail. With TV everything gets compressed and so a long segment is like four minutes. You're lucky if you get that [00:25:00] time.

Sometimes it'll be like two and a half or something and it's so tight that there's no way to have a conversation of any substance. You have to resort to [sound bites](#). I was asking myself going in, if I can only say two or three sentences, what is the sentence I'm going to say? Somebody's in the background and they pause for a second and look up at the TV or watch like the rest of the clip.

You try to come up with those sound bites that like stop people in the middle of their morning and get them to watch just for a minute. [00:25:30] Anyway, so prepping ahead of time having those sound bites. Then no matter how the conversation goes, I just try to go with it, I try to find a way to work that sound bites in. I usually have like two or three, maybe four things and I'm like, I want to try to get this example in or get this sentence in.

That approach has worked pretty well for me. After doing that first segment, the first thing I did as soon as the we ended and cut to the commercial was I went right over to Gayle and [00:26:00] I said, "I got a book coming out in 10 months, this is a lot of fun, I would love to come back to do it." She was like, "We'll have you back. The only thing I ask is that we're the first interview. Don't go to anybody else."

Then I got her email and followed up that day and got it on the calendar and made sure everybody, the publisher and everybody was aligned and we locked it in. That was the way that I got on there for launch day. I do think that that ended up being really valuable. I did the same thing, [00:26:30] when it was launch day and time for that segment, I came up with exactly the lines I wanted to hit and the sound bites I wanted to say. I think that all went a long way to that clip really helping us.

**Sriram:** I remember you mentioning the two people I want to mention. One is Martin Short because actually there's a [great article](#), I think it says A New Yorker, a New York mag which talks about Martin Short being everyone's favorite late night show guest. Because the thing about Martin Short is he's usually a stand-in. He's the guy the late night shows usually get when somebody else cancels, [00:27:00] some celebrity cancels and they get him in at the last minute to substitute.

Producers love him, because he basically, like you said, has 10, 15 pages of material, which you just pitch to them and then you have the story show up. He's amazing. The other interesting person, by the way, on late-night shows who actually follows a very similar process is [Tom Hanks](#). There's a recent episode with

[Tom Hanks on Dax Shepard's podcast](#) where you would think that freaking Tom Hanks would just [00:27:30] show up on a late night show and he'd be good to go, but he's not.

He calls the producer the previous day, he pitches him, hey, here are all my funny stories and quips and anecdotes and he tries to read, is this funny? Then he has this compressed type file that he goes on Fallon or Kimmel with. I was like, this is Tom Hanks in 2022, who should be top of the game and here is preparing with some junior line segment producer and very, very--

**James:** It's [00:28:00] interesting, the better someone is at their job, the simpler it often looks the more effortless it seems, but it's almost always the case that there's a lot of iteration and refinement and effort going in ahead of time. All of these actors know the deal. They know that they're producing a TV show, they're creating entertainment and it's supposed to appear as if it's just like this casual conversation, but it's a product in itself.

I don't think a lot of the time as an entrepreneur or as an author, you don't really think about that. You think we need to market our [00:28:30] product, but the *marketing is also a product itself*. Approaching it with that lens and taking it seriously I think it just goes a long way to getting a better result.

**Sriram:** I want to come to you a little bit. *Atomic Habits*, which has so many amazing things. I think one of the key takeaways I had is [focusing on systems and process rather than the outcome](#) is obviously one common one, but the other part of it is also how you identify. Do you identify as a [00:29:00] writer as opposed to being like, hey, I want to have a bestseller up someday? I had a question for you.

You've had such an interesting career. Like all-American athlete, weightlifter, newsletter writer and now every year I look at Amazon you're number one. Question A, do you now identify as a writer? Number two, now that you have a bestseller out, I assume it's not going to be the only book you ever write. Do you feel [00:29:30] pressure to now live up, be like, "Hey, this book is the greatest selling album of all time. Now I have my sophomore album." How is that going to be?

**James:** People are just destined to be disappointed. Now, on the identity piece, I definitely identify more as an entrepreneur than as an author. I still feel that way. I can't deny that I'm an author now because the book exists. I guess that is part of who I am, but I didn't set out with the quest to try to have that be part of my identity. [00:30:00] I think that speaks to the process that I talk about in *Atomic Habits*, though, which is that your [habits are how you embody a particular identity](#). Every day that you make your bed, you embody the identity of someone who is clean and organized. Every day that you study biology for 20 minutes on Tuesday night, you embody the identity of someone who's studious.

All of your experiences in life matter, but your habits, by virtue of the fact that they get repeated again and again, [00:30:30] they end up providing the bulk of the evidence. That's what I say in the book, like every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become. These habits keep casting votes and adding votes to the pile and eventually, you shift the story in favor of that element or that aspect of your identity.

It's like a painting that's like endlessly being retouched each day you're shaping it a little bit. Eventually, you get to this point where you're like, yes, I guess I am, that thing. In my case, it's like I kept writing day [00:31:00] in and day out, and then a couple years later, it's like oh, I guess I am an author. You're always providing some evidence there. Once you start to identify in that way, once you start to see yourself in that way, I think it becomes easier to stick to the behavior, to some degree.

The type of person who views themselves as a runner, they don't have to motivate themselves to go for a run in the same way that somebody who's just getting started does. It's like, no, this is just part of who I am. [00:31:30] It's what I do each day. I think, specifically, once you take pride in that aspect of your

identity, you really are motivated to stick to it. If you take pride in the size of your biceps, you never skip arm day at the gym. If you take pride in how your hair looks, you have this long hair care routine, all these habits associated with it, you do it every day.

The more you take pride in that aspect of who you are the easier it becomes to stick to it. Almost once it's part of your identity, you're not even really [00:32:00] pursuing behavior change anymore, you're just acting in alignment with the type of person that you see yourself to be. Now, ultimately, and this is something I mentioned at the end of the book, there's a potential pitfall here which is that the tighter you cling to your current identity, the harder it becomes to grow beyond it.

We all have examples of stuff like that. You can imagine a surgeon who has been doing it a certain way for 25 years and has great outcomes with their patients and [00:32:30] then a new technology comes along and there's a way to do the surgery robotically or just in a different style and they're like, "I'm not going to do that. I know this way works really well." Then five years later, they find themselves behind the curve or the teacher who has their lesson plans they've been doing for a decade and doesn't want to integrate YouTube or new technology or whatever into the curriculum. Again, five years later, they're behind the curve.

The tighter you cling to what you currently are the harder it becomes to grow. In the early [00:33:00] days, the more you foster and build that identity, the easier it becomes to stick with the habit. I think it's really useful early on, but then you still need this mindset of growth, evolve or die, and adapting and being a lifelong learner. In my specific case, now I have this identity as a bestselling author and does that threaten me or does that scare me in some way?

I'm trying to keep it pretty light. I think the way I'm currently looking at it is, [00:33:30] it can just be a project that went really well. It doesn't have to be more than that. It doesn't have to be some, I don't know, all-consuming thing for my ego or all-consuming thing for who I am and what my worth is or value or whatever. It's just that I had a project, I was excited about it. I tried to do a really good job on it.

It took me five years and it was great. It went really well. Now I'm going to focus on the next project and hopefully, I can find something I'll be excited about and do my best on it and we'll see where that one ends up. I'm not going to try to turn it into something more [00:34:00] than that because I've seen it go both ways, but for good or ill, it can consume you too much. I'm just trying to keep it in a balanced zone and not let it become more than it needs to be.

**Aarthi:** Just rewinding back all the way, what got you started into writing about habits, your newsletter? Why this topic? Back at that time, 2011-2012, this wasn't [00:34:30] really a hot topic. Now, this is the world that we live in. We look at [Andrew Huberman](#), you look at [Rich Roll](#) and there is a lot of conversation around how you have to live your life in the sense of what is the optimum way to work out, habits and all of that. What got you started with this whole journey even before the book and everything?

**James:** As I mentioned, early on in my entrepreneurial career, I was experimenting with different businesses and business ideas [00:35:00] and stuff. Once I started James clear.com. First article I wrote was November 12th, 2012. I was like, I'm going to try to write a new article every Monday and Thursday. I ended up doing that for three years. That was the habit that launched my career.

Another interesting thing about writing this book is that and I think this made the book better, I had to practice the principles in order to complete the project. Obviously, I had writing habits, but I also had other habits for growing my business. I have health and fitness habits in the gym. [00:35:30] There are all kinds of different habits that I had to build in my personal life.

I think because I was forced to practice the ideas and not just think about them, it made the content better. It's hard enough to come up with a good opinion, you need to have a well-informed opinion on something, but ultimately, anybody can have an opinion. It's much harder to execute on it. I struggle with all the same things everybody else struggles with. It's like, do you procrastinate on habits? Sure, all the time. Have you focused too much on the goal and not enough on [00:36:00] the process? Yes, absolutely.

In a way, *everything I write is just a reminder to myself to return to the fundamentals* or to emphasize a different part of it that maybe isn't natural and to focus on that a little bit more. Mostly, *I'm writing for me and my struggles and it just happens to be that those are fairly universal struggles* that a lot of us have but the same way that I tested different websites to start my business, as I started writing [00:36:30] every Monday and Thursday, I tested different topics too. Early on I wrote about how to have better squat form in the gym. I had an article that I wrote about healthcare, then I also wrote about habits and creativity and productivity and a lot of the topics that I write about today.

For some reason, I just started to follow my nose a little bit and it was like, whenever I write about habits, or strategy, or decision making, or productivity, those topics, it seems like people resonated more. [00:37:00] There's this big circle of topics that I was interested in and then the overlap of the Venn diagram was like, "These are the things that other people are also interested in hearing from me on." The rest of the stuff was like, "Well, maybe just keep that to yourself." As I started to discover that through experimenting with different topics it was like, "Okay, I should just-- I'll keep writing about habits. That's something I'm interested in and they want to hear more about."

That momentum cycle, that kind of feedback loop just fed itself where I'd write an article on it, and I'd send it out and then I'd [00:37:30] get positive feedback in my email inbox a couple hours later, and that would give me enough energy to be like, "Okay, people are enjoying this. Let me try to do it again next week." Then you do that for a year or two and it turns out you got 100 articles on habits and you are in a position to write a book on it.

**Sriram:** You must have had thousands or hundreds of thousands of people reach out to you about the impact that your book had or maybe questions and thoughts. I think a lot of us can assume some of the more common ones like getting fit, better diet, better sleep, [00:38:00] maybe some professional habits like writing a book, et cetera. I am curious about what are the more interesting, maybe personal, family, more human habits that maybe you didn't expect people to pick up or you get asked about.

**James:** You're right. Probably the biggest category is health and fitness stuff. That's the, I don't know, canonical example of building a good habit or breaking bad one. Then there's lots of productivity stuff for the workplace. On the personal side, [00:38:30] habits of affection, I guess you could call it getting in the habit of giving your spouse a kiss the first thing when you wake up in the morning or the last thing you do before you go to sleep. It's a really small thing. It is a good example of a small habit but I think the collective impact of that can be useful or, this is one that my family practices which is, when we sit down to dinner each night, we say one thing we're grateful for that happened that day.

The interesting thing about that habit, it's so small, it doesn't take long at all to do it but it's almost never stuffed. It [00:39:00] takes money or requires, I don't know. It's never things that take very much stuff, anybody could do in any circumstance. You're like, I'm grateful for a hug that my daughter gave me, or I'm grateful that we went on a walk outside today, it's always stuff like that. I think the collective impact of habits like that is also that you realize that there's always something to appreciate, even on the bad days.

It feels small on any given day, it doesn't seem to count for very much, but it helps shape your [00:39:30] mindset in the long run. I think things that are interesting.

Those are some personal ones. The other category of habits that I find interesting that I don't think is discussed enough is, I guess we could call them meta habits almost, they're habits that are upstream from other habits.

For example, the habit of reflection review is a good one. I have a weekly cycle. I do a weekly review every Friday, and that's pretty basic business stuff, revenue expenses, a number of **[00:40:00]** new email subscribers, just trying to get a beat on where things are at in the business. Most days there isn't really anything to report on that, it looks mostly the same each week, but every now and then, a couple of times a year, there'll be some weeks where you're like, something's up here.

It just throws a little bit of a flag up and you're like something that needs to be addressed. I think having that habit of reviewing allows me to identify problems earlier. It's upstream from a lot of other actions and behaviors. **[00:40:30]** I also have one that's at the end of the year. I do an annual review and that's more broad. That's not just business stuff, it's personal and a number of workouts and new places visited and all that kind of stuff.

Another interesting way to think about habits that are upstream is, are there things that you can do that set the menu, so to speak, for what you're going to choose over the next hour? My classic example here, I don't do this every day. **[00:41:00]** Maybe I do it 70% or 80% of the days, which is I try to leave my phone in another room until lunch each day. That sets the menu on what I choose to do in the morning. If I can leave my phone in another room, then it's only 30 seconds away.

I have a home office, but I never go get it. I'm like, man, that's so interesting because it was right next to me. I check it every 3 minutes. Just by shaping that a little bit, it's like having the phone in the room is not as upstream for more **[00:41:30]** productive behavior. I think trying to think about your habits in that way can be a useful frame that maybe people don't use frequently .

**Sriram:** The second is very interesting because there was a thread in the [conversation you're having with Ryan Holiday](#), which you want to pull on, which is, we live in a world of abundance. I can pull out this device and I have access to more information than anybody who came before me in humanity, and so much of what people want is driven by [mimetic desire](#). **[00:42:00]** For example, I see this really fit person on Instagram - I want those abs, I see my peers are making more money - I want that. How do you think about A) I want to build a habit to do this, accomplish this, versus, hey, maybe you should be happy and satisfied and like you said, grateful with where you are, and maybe the person 10 years ago would be really happy with what you've gotten so far. How do you maybe reconcile or are these two in opposition at all? **[00:42:30]**

**James:** Yes, it's a really tricky question. On the one hand, it's tricky, because the bar is always changing. Speaking for myself, I have different things that I'm optimizing for now than I was 10 years ago, so the things that I wanted, they shift over time and so, in that sense, it's always going to be impossible to be there and to be totally done and content because what you'll want in 10 years is going to be different than what you want now.

Sometimes that means that you've upgraded **[00:43:00]** and it's more luxurious and more materialistic or whatever but other times, it just means that you're in a different season of life. Ten years ago, I didn't have a family and didn't have kids, so I wasn't optimizing for time with them the way that I am now and that's not materialistic, that's just life-changing and entering a new season. Yes, part of it is shifting. The core thing that I think you're asking here is and the way that I would phrase it is, do you have to be *dissatisfied to be driven*? Which is an interesting thing, it's like, **[00:43:30]** where does ambition come from?

Is it the gap between what you have and what you want or what you have and what you envision and is that gap necessarily there for an ambition to exist at all? Does there have to be some desire to get to a place that you are not at right now, for you to feel the urge to move at all and at some level, I think it probably does but I also think we can frame it in maybe a more advantageous way, or at least, think **[00:44:00]** about it in an advantageous way.

If you take like an acorn, or a seed, for example, and you planted into the ground, and it grows up to sprout out of the ground, and then to be a sapling, and eventually, to be this enormous oak tree, at no point do you-- You don't look at the acorn and criticize it for not being an oak tree yet, you don't look at the sapling and be like, what a loser, you haven't achieved anything yet. It's like it's exactly what it's supposed to be at every stage along the way, **[00:44:30]** it's perfect as an acorn, it's perfect as a sapling is perfect as a great oak and yet, it never stops growing because that's just what an acorn does, that's what an oak tree does is *it continues to grow*.

I try to look at myself in that way too where it's like, there's no reason to be dissatisfied with your current state, you can be an acorn or a sprout or a sapling or an oak tree, and you can be perfect at each stage along the way but I'm going to continue to grow because that's just **[00:45:00]** what I do. That's part of who I am and part of what I'm interested in and so maybe that connects in some way to the identity piece as well that we talked about.

If you identify as someone who is a lifelong learner or who enjoys the process of growth, then I think you can continue to be ambitious and to find ways to improve without necessarily hating yourself along the way or feeling guilty about not being there yet or something like that. I think that's part of it. The other thing that you mentioned though, **[00:45:30]** which I think connects to habits in an important way, is this idea of mimetic desire and imitating the people around you or the habits of those around you and first of all, I think that's a very natural thing to do.

I'm someone who would consider myself to be very results-oriented and the natural thing that you do is you look at people who have the results that you want to have, and then you start asking how do they get those? What can I do and maybe I should have the habits that they have and that'll get me there. I think it's a totally normal process to go through and it also is **[00:46:00]** pretty logical, even if you scale it down to a survivalist or a very basic level, you look at somebody who has food or our ancestors did a 100,000 years ago and you're like, oh, they're eating berries. What did they do? They foraged from the berry bush, so I'm going to go forage from the berry bush too.

It's like you're imitating them, but you're doing it because it makes sense. In most areas of life, I think that thing applies, but the modern world is very complex and very complicated **[00:46:30]** and there's almost infinite paths available and so I think it's really easy to just settle into these grooves and fall into these ruts of what other people are doing and then be like, oh, I should imitate that too, but you don't realize the wealth of other options that are available than just almost infinite number of paths that you could take.

In most areas of life, there might not be a 1000 ways to do something, but there's almost always more than one way, and I think a lot **[00:47:00]** of the time when people select their habits, they are implicitly imitating the people around them and it's the habits that they feel like they should have because society applauds it or their parents want them to have, or their peers are encouraging them to do, but one of the most important things is to choose the habits that you actually want to have.

One of my core habits is working out and I like lifting weights, but not everybody wants to train like a bodybuilder, and that's fine. You can kayak or rock **[00:47:30]** climb or go for runs or cycle and there's almost an infinite list of ways to live an active lifestyle. You should choose the version of that habit that is

most enticing and exciting and appealing to you, and that should be the case for all the habits that you select.

You should choose the version that is most appealing to you and that is the [second law of behavior change in atomic habits](#), which is to make it attractive and so select the version of the habit that best fits your interests and desires. If you do that, then you're in a much better [00:48:00] position. Sometimes it might mean that you're still imitating what the successful people in your industry are doing, but not necessarily other times it might be something that's just a better fit for you. I don't necessarily think there's anything on the surface that's wrong with imitation but it can definitely lead you astray if you just blindly fall into it.

**Aarthi:** Oh, that's great. So good. It's December now. It's time to think about resolutions for next year and so this question is a little bit [00:48:30] personal but I've been thinking a lot about this and ever since I read your book, this is something that's just stuck to me as a part of like, what do you pick as habits as a part of your core identity? I wanted to go ask both of you, and I'll chip in too, on what are your top three habits that you've picked up that you're really proud of and it can be something temporary that you do right now, this year, whatever that can be.

For me, the top three for me, [00:49:00] I'm one of those people, James, who you said, if you're a runner, you don't really think of running as something different. I've always seen it myself as a runner. We have two small kids under the age of four, and so it's been a little tough and so I pride myself on that identity of always having an active lifestyle. I try to follow Huberman's podcast, and one of the things he said was like he wears a weighted vest when he goes on these long walks if he can't get a run in. I was like, oh, that's [00:49:30] great.

Just having an active lifestyle and doing something active every day, something I've picked up. It's just something I used to feel really bad about because I'm like, oh, I'm not getting a long run and that sucks but now I've just found a way to make it a part of my identity to just be active every day in whatever form like you mentioned. That was one. Two, we have two small kids, and we are just starting to see them interact with each other.

I've realized that it gives me incredible happiness to [00:50:00] see them both just play with each other, talk to each other in the morning. It's just goofy, they just run around, crawl around, one is 11 months old. I just make it a point to just do that every morning to just get them both together in the same room and just interact with each other because it just sets me up with the right mood the rest of the day. That's just been really great.

Three, I think that this show that we do together; we've always wanted a project that Sriram and I work on together, and this [00:50:30] just feels like a fairly, we put in a bunch of hours into it, but it's still pretty easy and it's removed from our day jobs that it just makes it something for us to have fun with and stick around and just do. We've been doing this for two years, almost to the day now every week. It's something that I feel really good about it being a part of the core identity. That's mine. James, what are your three top habits that you feel really good about?

**James:** It's a good question. I have all kinds [00:51:00] that I like, I mentioned that, saying what you're grateful for at dinner and so there's all sorts of little things like that I like. I think if the first question, by the way, whatever this answer ends up being, for each individual person who's listening, the first question is like, what am I optimizing for. Sometimes you're optimizing for money, sometimes you're optimizing for time, sometimes you're optimizing for, I don't know, like relationships, all kinds of things.

You just have to decide what it is for you, and then the habits can fall in line with that. I think the first question is, what am I optimizing for? Maybe the second [00:51:30] question is, can my current habits carry me to my desired future? Once I know what I'm optimizing for, am I on a path? Am I on a trajectory to get there? If not, then something needs to change. For myself, I would probably say my most important habit, just talking personally here individually, is working out. I've said this before, but I don't think that I would be an entrepreneur if I didn't exercise regularly.

I just, entrepreneurship can be a rollercoaster ride, and the highs are high [00:52:00] and the lows are low, and I just need something that rebalances me. There are a lot of days when I felt like this day was a total waste. Work-wise, I didn't get anything done, but at least I got a good workout in. At least I can go to sleep and feel decent that night, so exercise. Writing obviously is the one habit that's changed my career.

In my particular case as an author that's very straightforward and obvious. I would say that that's the one thing that has shaped my outcomes the most. [00:52:30] Upstream from that is reading and the habit of reading. There's this quote about [Emerson](#) where it said like, "He read the way that a hawk flies over a field searching for prey." I feel like that's how I read books. I don't really read them for leisure, I'm reading them to extract, prey or to find ideas.

I often don't finish books or I often dive into articles or blogs or PDFs or podcasts or what, it doesn't really matter where it's from, but having a habit [00:53:00] of learning something every day or of trying to consume something valuable each day, that has been an enormous benefit to me. It's also something I mentioned, pick habits that you enjoy. I like that part of the process.

I like learning new things and so it's fun for me to do that and I get a little bit of a rush whenever I learn something and then I'm able to connect the dots to something I previously have read or learned. I feel like, oh, now I have something to write about. Now I can be the bridge and talk about how these two things connect. [00:53:30] I would say that those are probably the three most important ones in my life. Not really a surprise, but those three take presence.

**Aarthi:** That's great. Sriram, what's yours?

**Sriram:** Oh, gosh. It's going to be bad compared to both of yours. I think a couple of things I started doing recently. One is looking at sunlight, first thing you wake up in the morning, it really does wake you up and it's helped me, my sleep, and just my normal day-to-day energy levels tremendously. The second one's something I've been doing for a while and I can't remember who [00:54:00] I read this from, but I have a little spreadsheet where I have at a few simple columns, which is like sleep, diet, exercise, family time, breathing time.

I have a score from zero to one and I don't have to fill it in every day, but I try and fill it in enough days. Over time, the idea is like, not to do some complex like mathematical analysis, over time, and you can see, okay, if you're having some good days and bad days and it just really gives you an excuse to reflect on your week, month, year. I've been doing it for a couple of years now and I can see, oh, I was unhappy [00:54:30] then, but I can also see my diet was way off or my sleep was way off. You can start seeing these patterns and anything is just like a tool to be, oh, wait, I should probably fix that because I spot these now. I know we have a few minutes left and-

**Aarthi:** Wait, the third one?

**Sriram:** Oh, the third one. Oh, my God. I'll think of one later. I think I've done two. I'm giving myself marks for two. We will go to the third one later. We have a few minutes left. I want to ask you you've written a lot about weightlifting and working out such a highly recommend people go read, but in a couple minutes you

have, [00:55:00] people who start off 2023 getting fit, et cetera, what would be the two, three practical things that you would urge them to do?

**James:** Again, those first questions: who is the type of person I want to become? Then what habits reinforce that identity? Do you want to become a runner or weightlifter or do yoga or whatever it is, but figuring out what that is for you, similar phrase, what am I optimizing for? Let's start there. Then I like to say [00:55:30] there's this implicit assumption when people build new habits. We don't necessarily say it's specifically, but especially for ambitious people, you start to think about what you achieve and then the natural feeling or question in the back of your mind is like, what could I do on my best day? How can I achieve peak performance?

Instead, I think it's more useful in the beginning to ask yourself, what can I stick to even on the bad days? Because if you can stick to it, even when the circumstances aren't ideal, now you have a baseline. Now you've maintained [00:56:00] the habit. Once you maintain the habit, you have a lot of places you can go. There are all sorts of things you can optimize and improve. I think you need to standardize before you optimize. Start by figuring out a way that you can master the art of showing up each day. Then there's all sorts of ways that you can improve it or scale it up or increase the scope or whatever. Another phrase that I like to keep in mind is reduce the scope, but stick to the schedule.

It's very easy to fall into this story of, oh, man, I love [00:56:30] getting my workout in. Takes me about 45 minutes and then you wake up on Tuesday and it gets out of control and you're like, ugh, I don't have time now I only have 15 minutes. Why bother? I'm not going to be able to do the whole thing. If you stick to that philosophy of reducing the scope, but stick to the schedule now it's okay, what can I do in 15 minutes so that I make sure I get a workout in today?

I think that's a much better place to be in the long run, even if you're not doing as much as you had hoped, you're maintaining the habit and you're reinforcing the identity and you can go [00:57:00] to bed that night and look at yourself in the mirror and be like, "You know what? Circumstances weren't ideal. Situation wasn't optimal, but I still figured out a way to be the type of person who doesn't miss workouts."

That counts for a lot in the long run. I think focus more this year on identity and mastering the artist showing up and reinforcing that behavior and maybe a little less on worrying about the results or how quickly they come or what goal you achieve. If you can commit to the process early on [00:57:30] and start to reshape or reinforce that identity, the results will come soon enough.

**Sriram:** I love it.

**Aarthi:** Great.

**Sriram:** James, amazing as usual, whenever you write another book or project, you should come back on and it's going to be amazing. This is a blast. Thank you so much. This is amazing.

**James:** Thank you, both. It was a pleasure to talk and happy to come back anytime. Thanks again.

**Aarthi:** Awesome.

**Sriram:** Thank you.

**Aarthi:** Thank you so much, James.

[00:57:56] [END OF AUDIO]