

EP: 49 How to build habits for a healthier lifestyle

MERYL: Hello everyone. This is your Rebel Nutritionist and wow. I am super excited to have our guest on today. This is going to be a really super energized podcast I have with me today.

Tamsin Astor who's a PhD and the **founder and chief habits, scientist of Yoga Brain Coaching**. She is known for giving our clients the tools to shift their minds.

Organize their vision and improve their habits to create an efficient, productive business. We make 35,000 decisions every day, which leads to **decision fatigue**. Gosh, don't you all know that too well. And doctor Astor, helps her clients reduce the amount of overwhelming decision-making they do by harnessing their goal-achieving machine AKA the brain.

It's also increases their time and energy for fun. And God only knows we need more of that. Both time, energy and fun. Tamsin Astor, holds a PhD in neuroscience and psychology and a post-doctorate in education. She also has certifications in yoga, mindset, and Ayurveda.

She is an executive coach and author of the book **Force of Habit Unleash Your Power By Developing Great Habits**. And with that welcomed Tamsin

TAMSIN: Thank you so much for having me Meryl. It's so exciting to be here. I love having conversations with powerful women.

MERYL: Yes. Yes, this is definitely going to be an awesome conversation. So well, I, I almost don't even know where to begin, but I think we have to begin with you call yourself The chief Habit Scientist.

So tell us, what does that mean? What do you do? Tell us a little bit about your work.

TAMSIN: So when I decided to launch a business as a coach. Coach, to me, didn't describe enough of what I do and who I am, because I very much **believe in the value of weaving together, what I call the qualitative and quantitative information** about how we engage in the world and how we show up.

So what I mean by that, the quantitative the number on the scales, the number in the bank account, the number of calls you're doing, the number of clients you're serving and then the qualitative, how do I feel about this? When this client turns up in my inbox or on my zoom call, do I go, oh, yay. Or do I have this kind of contraction and owner?

Not them again. Right. Right. Or like when the doctor tells me I should be eating wild Alaskan salmon, but when I eat it, I feel nauseous. I get diarrhea or whatever. Right. But they're telling

you it's healthy, but like, it doesn't actually feel good in my body or it makes me feel lethargic. Right. So **balancing those two pieces of information together**.

When I got certified in Ayurveda one of the main features and focuses. And Ayurveda is this thing called the Dina Charia, which is your daily routine, your daily habits. And that was what really led me into ayurveda was **the realization that I had given up my daily habits in service of my children, my clients, my then-husband, and everybody else**. And I'd forgotten to prioritize my rhythms and routines.

And so, as I was reflecting on the way that I weaved the east and west together, I was like, oh, I'm all about habits. Right. I'm a habit scientist. Like that's what I help people do. And because I have the mindset of, I am the CEO of my business and my life. I am the Chief habit Scientist. I encourage my clients to do is to become their own habit scientist, right.

Is I give people tools. I get them inspired. I get them thinking about their vision. Why do they want to change? What's the point of changing? What's that big why? And then they go and play with it in their life and they become their own habit. Scientist.

MERYL: That is awesome. That resonated on so many levels.

So I guess going, let's go to the most elementary of this. Let's talk about what are habits.

How do you define habits?

TAMSIN: I love this question. So what people get confused about habits is they think of habits as being just the one thing, the habit, the behavior, but what trips people up and slows down that creating a good habits or that changing of habits that aren't working is that habits are actually made up of three parts.

The cue, the thing that triggers the whole. The actual behavior itself, and then the reward you get out of doing the habit. So **there's a three stage process** and that **reward will feed the queue and we'll create a loop**, right? The more you do these things in a particular order, the more that a cue triggers the behavior and you like the reward, the more that **this will create an automation** and that's where the neuroscience. And my background comes in because what I understand is how these different processes occurring in different parts of the brain and where most people get stuck is they go, oh, I'm going to create this new habit, but they forget that they need to look at **what's triggering the habit and what they're getting out of it**.

MERYL: You know that I, I'm just thinking about all the clients that, that I deal with and that we come into contact with and how powerful that is, because it, it sort of goes back to the conversation that I have with people in terms of. **We often know what to do, but we don't do what we know**. Right.

And so, because I mean, seriously, people come in and say, **I know I should be eating healthy, I just don't.** Right. Or, and I want to speak to that because that definitely ties into that reward piece. And then of course the whole right. This diet culture I need.

To do this. I need to change this habit. And yet people are stuck I think some of this and I, and I don't want to belabor that because I do want you to address that. But some of it goes back to right. Like, I feel like I have to be deprived and I have to be starved in order to see that that's part of it.

And they can't create a habit around that because that's certainly not sustainable.

TAMSIN: Right, right.

MERYL: **People think it's the food that makes the difference when it's not the food, it's the habits that they have around eating food is that correct?**

Yeah. And you know, the next thing I was going to say that also factors into creating habits long term or not is **you don't operate in a vacuum**, right?

Right. Your physical environment is going to affect what happens, the people you are hanging out with. Right. We are the average and objectively of the five people we spend our most time with. So if you're hanging out with people who are I think the way I talk about it in my book, *The Force of Habit*, or with clients is the enablers or the supporters, you know?

So you've got the person, he goes, I've quit sugar. And that, and then you've got the person go have a doughnut, have a donut, have a donut. Right. You've got those enablers. And then you've got supporters going more like the sort of when Harry met Sally, which will date me is the, oh, what is she having?

Can I have some too? Cause they're seeing the effect of the cutting out of sugar is having on you, you know? And you're glowing and all of that. Right? So you don't operate in a vacuum. So **what you're doing in your physical environment, how you arranging your house, how you all meal planning, how you are creating that environment is really, really key.** And then **who you are hanging out with** is also a really big part of it.

MERYL: Wow. That's yeah, I that's so true. So let's talk about the environment or in what you're doing, right. so we give people strategies, right. And we really try and set the goals small, right.

Because you can't do too many things at once. How do you recommend, like in terms of changing habits? Right? Because we're, so I always say humans are so stuck. It could be, it could be a negative habit. What, it's so hard to change because we get stuck, like you said, and the reward and whatever, what is the first, like most elementary thing that we would need to

think about if I say to someone, okay, well yes, you're coming to me because you want to get healthier.

You want to lose a little bit of weight and I'm saying, well, right, well, we need to look at sleep and we need to look at movement and we need to look at food and, oh, wow. Now this gets overwhelming. Let's just chunk this down into one thing. What are some of the, I guess the most is there, is there **a basic thing that we start with?**

The two approaches to starting to change habits

So that people don't feel overwhelmed when we are talking, because what happens is as they start to realize, oh my God, I have to change all of these things. And that's overwhelming. So I'm going to do nothing because it's more overwhelming to change just to figure out where to start. Right.

TAMSIN: So **there are two approaches** that I would say to people, one is.

And I, and, and the way I do it in my coaching and my writing is **I talk about the big vision and I talk about it is the telescope versus the microscope**, right? So the microscope is, how am I spending my time now? What am I eating? How am I sleeping? Am I exercising? Who am I spending time with, et cetera.

Right? That's the microscope of that daily moment to moment experience. Then you've got the telescope of the big, why, why do I care? But my body is healthy. Why do I care that I'm well slept. Why do I care that I reduce my cholesterol? Right. And what we know is that when people get really into strong communities that have the same habits.

The same values as them, and they can **tie their daily behavior to that big vision that other people around them are also moving towards**. When you see all the research, if you know people with chronic heart disease and all of those things who are struggling with cultivating the habit, getting into community, **getting into support community is really, really key**.

One piece, right? The second piece is, as you kind of highlighted is if you try and change all those habits at once, it's just not going to work. Right. And there's so many myths about 21 days when you have it, 30 days when you have it again, that's life in a vacuum. Right. So what I say to people is **start with one habit at a time**, and like the Kaizen approach, you were talking about that on your podcast interview with the doctor about breast cancer.

And do you need just the Kaizen approach, the little changes, right? So what you can often do with somebody is get a sense of, until they're better slept. None of this, is going to fly right. Then not going to be able to resist the coffee with three spoonfuls of sugar. They're not gonna resist the doughnut at work.

They're going to not have the energy to exercise unless they, right. So that kind of ties into the Keystone habit approach a little bit. But you know, if you can access with your client through conversation, which the allopathic healthcare model, doesn't really, that's not the conversation doesn't really facilitate and see, like this person is in such a state of sleep deprivation.

But it doesn't matter what I talk to them about? None of this is going to work. Right. You can get a sense from somebody. Wow. Like when they move, they feel so much better. So let's just start by getting them to walk a mile every day. Right. So there's the two approaches, the telescope or the microscope.

That's how I do it with my clients. And it's a really personalized approach.

MERYL: I like that. I think what happens is Yeah, it's almost like they'll start, they'll start. And then, like you say, well, you're the sum of the five people you hang out with.

And sometimes, and I think especially now let's call it post COVID. When you talk about that the **sense of community really feels so diminished** and, and gone and disconnected for me. I think we are more divisive than ever for so many reasons, and we're not even going to go there, but we're disconnected.

And I talk about this often **we're disconnected from our environment**. We're disconnected from our community and we're really disconnected from ourselves. And so how do you, when you say, all right, well, you need this sense of, or it helps to have a sense of community. What do people do? Because I find so many people feel like they don't have that and that's driving anxiety and it's driving depression.

So what are some things that people can do? Let's say until we can find them some support in the community that they can for themselves.

How to support yourself in change if you don't have community

TAMSIN: So I think one of the biggest things, and we know this from a lot of research is that **being in nature is incredibly balancing**, right? So vitamin N right. You sometimes see it referred to, and it's shown to be so huge in terms of creativity, in terms of health and wellbeing, in terms of psychological.

Well, like there's so many. Benefits and being in nature. So one of the things that I was part of during COVID was we did a million steps in three months challenge in our community, and we created a Facebook group and people in our community in Ohio, where I live committed to tracking their steps. So that we could walk a million steps, which works out to be about 11,000 steps a day for 90 days.

And we challenged each other. We were like, oh, we're meeting at this park on Sunday doing something along those lines. And **it fired up a lot of people in our community who did not have a regular exercise practice. And who missed the community.** So that's one of the advantages on the positive you know, side effects of, of social media, which can seem toxic.

In many ways, we can create these online communities, which facilitate in-person connection too.

MERYL: Wow. That's, that's amazing and amazing what you did, but I think that's a great idea. We should probably think about doing that more of these community-based you know, and it's funny during COVID we did have a Facebook group.

We also had. You know, sort of dealing with the whole isolation thing and we had some good feedback, so maybe we need to go back to that, but I feel like more people if they have put in those concerted efforts to be part of the community or, or find outreach things, or even just you know, and get yes, getting out in nature, I did a quick like rebel rant last week where I usually am at the gym and I happened to be outside. And I, and I said, you know what? Get outside disconnect. Because again, for me, very much like that it is being out in nature, spawns my creative energy does something that whole grounding right.

Feeling at the end. And I think we need to, like, there's so many pearls in this information. Right. And in this knowledge yet we are, **I feel like people are expecting some big aha**, like, oh, I have to do something really difficult and complex to fix this problem. Yes. If you take a step back it's so.

Nourishment is not just about food

TAMSIN: Yeah, totally, totally. And I mean, it sort of ties into that piece that you were saying as well. I think about the **nourishment, which people have, you know around changing their diet**, because one of the things that I did my clients is I talk a lot about ayurveda and eating with the seasons, eating a particular time zone so that you have The digestive fire to break down the food and all of that kind of stuff.

And one of the things people often say when I'm like. You know, try need a smaller life at dinner rather than a big heavy meal that your system's struggling to digest at night. That kind of stuff. It's, I'd say **let's rethink the concept of nourishment because so often people think of nourishment as being just what you put in your mouth.**

And I say, what you breathe? **Breathe is nourished. Hugging somebody that's nourishment listening to a song that excites you or a podcast that's nourishment.** You can have mental nourishment, intellectual, emotional nourishment, having a ball, rubbing almond oil on your skin

that's is nourishment. **So don't think of nourishment as this thing of depriving yourself of your donut** or whatever it is.

You are committed to not letting go because it will feel restrictive and horrible, right? Like what I can, I **redefine nourishment and it can be so simple inhaling a deep breath**, or for me being here because I don't live by the sea. I've got in the water every day and the salty water on my skin and the waves hitting my body is incredibly nourishing to me and feels just so restorative.

MERYL: And, and not everybody can see you, but you're totally radiating. So there's definitely a glow. Not that I see you every day, but you definitely glowing. So that's doing something for you, but yeah, I, I want people to really hear that because I feel like we don't, and, and I guess that kind of goes into.

That whole self care. **We talk a lot about self care here**. I know that's something that you talk about because you didn't have it. Talk a little bit about that in terms of sort of how you got here. Because I think people always like to know with our guests, like, okay, you're talking about this, but what's a little bit of how did you get here?

Because I. A lot of times people think, oh, well she has it so good or she's so successful. And yes, we are. We were just talking about what kind of bad-ass women we are, but that was born, right. That was born out of the need to be that, or, or the evolution, it, it evolved. And I think hearing your story and I talk about my straight.

I think it gives people. And, and women, especially because I think we're notorious at not taking care of ourselves, but I think it gives people really this sense of hope and, and this positive out like, oh, okay. Yeah, she was all she hit bottom. Wow. And look at where she is now I can do that.

Tamsin's story

TAMSIN: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, no, thank you. And I think you're right. I think there is, there was a line somebody said I've never met anybody interesting and powerful who hasn't experienced. Something really, you know? Right. Because it does, it does create that. So I think the biggest things that I've gone through that created my journey really was that **my middle child was diagnosed with cancer when he was two**.

You know, it was one of the most shocking and traumatic events to go through. But what was **my personal experience of that was that I started to get sick** in the kind of classic nondescript, insomnia, food allergies, hives, weight, loss, weight, gain just nothing very specific, but all this sort of general.

Symptoms and every allopathic doctor I went to and all of the tests I had for sleep apnea for Helio, Pyra, bacteria all of the things, all of the things I said, and they all basically ended up going, not sure nothing's clear nothing here. Just here's a, here's a prescription for a sleeping pill.

Here's a prescription for an antacid. Here's a prescription. And I just. All you're doing is suppressing symptoms. And that's what led me to ayurveda because the difference between the east and the west is that **in the west, we define healthy as absence of disease and the east healthy is are you seated in your self.**

Which is so, completely different and understanding what it means to be healthy. Cause right now I might be classified as healthy in the Western if I didn't have any symptoms. Right. But if I'm not happy with how I'm spending my life, I'm not happy in my relationship. If I feel like I've got boundaries that are porous and not healthy.

In the east, I would be considered unhealthy. Right? So this led me down the route of ayurveda. I got certified in ayurveda. I got certified as an Ayurvedic health coach. I launched a business as an Ayurvedic health coach. And then I struggled in the Midwest to talk to people about energy and digestive fire.

So I then got certified as an executive coach so that I could bring that kind of extra level of sort of quote unquote seriousness to my coaching practice. As this was all happening. My cousin, who was like my brother, we grew up together. He was three months younger, died of leukemia. And as he was dying of leukemia, he and I had a lot of really sort of **heartbreaking conversations about the choices we've made in life and how has it affected us?**

And one of the things he repeatedly talked about was how **he felt that his cancer had been caused by his inability to express his anger healthily**, and that, that, that had turned in on himself. And so six months after he died, my ex-husband walked out for the fourth time. And I decided then that I was not going to take him back for the sake of the children, which I had the third time round.

And that in honor of my cousin Mark, And choosing myself, I was going to let that marriage end, and move on. So as I went through the divorce, I ended up getting through that and through that period, committed to only one piece of my business, which was to learn how to write as a non-academic.

So I produced a piece of content every week and realized that people. Listen to me differently when it was relevant, a 3000 word article with all the fricking references to why you should meditate and what it does for your mind and body I'd go when my four year old daughter is crying on my lap because she misses her daddy's new girlfriend, I meditate, so I don't want to stick a fork in my eye. Right. And people engaged. Right. And I was like, oh, I'm supposed to put my personality into my writing. Cause I would say you said the sort of academic model. Right

I'm going to talk about that in a second. Yeah.

Right. So I kind of let all that go and **cultivated this new business where I wove the east and west together.**

Because at that point I'd been running an executive coaching business where I'd take out my nose ring. Blow dry my hair and I'd put on a jacket and I'd go into the offices. And then I had my health coaching business and yoga teaching on the side and working with children on the ASD and ADHD, spectrums and so on.

And so I relaunched bringing these together and then everything was going great. Then I got stalked. Then I got hacked and I had to shut down and withdraw and rebuild again. And then during COVID, two of my children had extreme mental health difficulties, and my other child collapsed with cardiac issues.

So my three children all went through massive trauma in the last year, which again, made me sort of shut down and collapse and like again, **rebuilt my life. One habit at a time.** Because you can't do it or this last time round, it was exercise. I have a dog, so I walk every day, but lifting weights and doing yoga and pilates and dancing and all of that is also really important for my psychological and emotional wellbeing.

So I've committed to that. After a month of that, I started meditating again because after almost 20 years of meditating I'd stopped because I didn't like my mind. I didn't like the pain that was inside. So I'd stopped meditating. **I rebuilt exercise, added meditation back added journaling back and I kept building boom, boom, boom, boom.**

And that's how I got back.

MERYL: Wow. Well first of all, thank you for sharing all of that. I'm glad I asked you to share it,

I bow my head to you because that, that is a lot and I think. Really, I am speechless, but I feel like, gosh you've used your own tools to pull you back to where you need to be. And yet once again, yes, you are pulling yourself out of, out of that dark whatever place and have used those tools to rebuild yourself and kudos to you on that.