



# Working Out Loud Circle Guide

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## Week 10: Make it a habit

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### What to expect this week

You've spent nine weeks thinking of your goal in terms of people and contributions. Yet you're still working on making it a habit and mindset. It's natural, for example, to struggle with finding the time or with remembering to follow up. This week, you'll explore things that will reinforce your new habit so it takes less effort and feels increasingly natural. It will also help you overcome the inevitable challenges and setbacks.

### Suggested agenda

Thing to do	Approx. time
1. Check-in	10 mins
2. Exercise: The habit checklist	20
3. Exercise: Create your own progress chart	10
4. Exercise: Offering vulnerability	15
5. Checkout for Week 10	5

#### 1. Check-in (10 minutes)

Each person should speak for a few minutes about what they did since the last meeting. Discuss interesting blogs, YouTube Channels, Facebook pages, or other self-published sites you found and why you liked them. Share any contributions you made (or ideas for possible contributions).

#### 2. Exercise: The habit checklist (20 minutes)

Part of the reason change is hard is that it's idiosyncratic - what works for one person won't necessarily work for someone else. Yet there are some common themes related to change that help many people. Here's a list that you can use to guide you as you try to make Working Out Loud a habit. Whenever I get stuck developing some new habit or skill, I look at this list and pick an adjustment to make.

- ❑ *Picture the way you'd like life to be:* Re-reading your "Letter from your future self" helps you tap into your sense of purpose, reminding you why you're doing what you're doing.
- ❑ *Set achievable goals:* It's good to dream big! To make it real, make sure you "chunk your dream" into nearer-term goals you can do something about.
- ❑ *Take small steps:* The progress principle is a powerful thing. Any small step can unlock additional, bigger steps. So when you're stuck, sometimes "touching the treadmill" can get you back on track.
- ❑ *Chart your progress:* By tracking what you're doing (and not doing), you become more mindful of your efforts throughout the day. (You'll create your own chart in the next exercise.)
- ❑ *Reflect on and celebrate success:* We're wired to focus on issues and problems, and that can be a disincentive. So it's important to periodically reflect on the progress you've made and reward yourself in some way, including simply allowing yourself to be proud of what you've accomplished.
- ❑ *Expect setbacks:* All learning and development includes challenges and mistakes. Feeling bad about them triggers resistance. Instead, view each setback as a necessary learning opportunity, and channel your energy into doing better next time.
- ❑ *Structure your environment:* So much of what we do is impulsive and unthinking, that your environment is a major factor in whether making progress is easy or hard. This can include adjustments to your schedule, your workspaces, your technology and anything else that makes it easier to do what you need to do and eliminates negative distractions.
- ❑ *Find a friend:* Whether it's simply talking through what you're trying to do or actually going through the process together (like your Circle), support from someone else can help you get through challenges and inspire you to keep going.

Now think of your goal and how the habit checklist applies to your progress so far. For each item, pick one adjustment that could help you make progress.

*Picture the way you'd like life to be. e.g., a visible reminder of what's in your letter.*

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*Set achievable goals. e.g., Is your current goal achievable and also a step towards what's in your letter?*

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*Take small steps toward your goals. e.g., What's one thing you could do today?*

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*Chart your progress. e.g., Chart the effort or results related to something you're trying to do.*

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*Reflect on and celebrate success. e.g., Actively look for and acknowledge things you're doing well.*

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*Expect setbacks. e.g., Pick something that isn't going well and write down what you can learn from it.*

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*Structure your environment. e.g., Write down one change that would make change easier by eliminating temptation.*

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*Find a friend:*

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### 3. Exercise: Create your own progress chart (10 minutes)

The idea of a progress chart has been around for a long time. Ben Franklin wrote about his in his autobiography. It was a kind of scorecard that he updated each day, listing how well he did on 13 things he wanted to improve on. (Things like "Temperance" and "Sincerity".)

Your chart can be as simple as a monthly calendar, with a space to write down how much time you spend on your goal each day, or the number of people you reach out to offer a contribution. (Over time, you might add other things.) When I created my first chart, I was struggling to make progress on my book. So I simply charted how many hours I spent writing each day. Over time, I added other things I wanted to do more of (exercise meditation, playing with kids) or less of (desserts and alcohol).

The key is to put the chart in a place you will see multiple times per day. That's what makes you more mindful of the behaviors you're trying to change. I put my handwritten chart next to the bathroom mirror, and I update it in the morning and evening. It takes just a few seconds, but it makes it plainly visible where I need to make adjustments. Since my chart is visible to my family too, they often provide support, including some gentle prodding.

You can use this simple table, or create your chart now and decide where you'll put it. If you create one, consider taking a photo and sending it to your Circle as a way to help them make their own.

S	M	T	W	Th	F	S

### 4. Exercise: Offering vulnerability (15 minutes)

Sometimes you *do* need something: advice, an introduction, a reference. Then what? Even when asking for help, your first thoughts should still be about empathy and generosity. *How*

will the recipient receive your request and is there any way to frame it as a contribution? Here's a story from Tim Grahl, who helps authors market their books:

*Two authors recently e-mailed me for the first time. The subject line of the first read, "Let's meet." The e-mail shared the author's struggle marketing his book and a request for a phone call so he could "pick my brain" about what he was doing wrong and how to fix it.*

*The subject line of the second e-mail read, "Interview." The e-mail was a request to interview me for his podcast so that he could share my advice to educate his listeners and promote my business.*

*Which one do you think got a response from me?*

Brain picking isn't an incredibly attractive offer. Before you ask for help, spend time figuring out how the other person can gain something too. It might take some creative thinking on your part, but it will help you stand out and get better results. If you can't come up with a contribution, remember that vulnerability can also be a gift if it's presented in the right way.

Look through your relationship list now, and find someone who could help you. Choose someone who's particularly nonthreatening, and practice framing your request as a contribution, avoiding phrases like "I want," "I need," and "I would like to."

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Before you ask to "pick someone's brain" or offer an exchange of coffee for an hour of their day (less than minimum wage!), take the time to figure out how the other person can gain something too. It might take some creative thinking on your part, but it will help you stand out and get better results.

If you're stuck, send me an email at [john.stepper@workingoutloud.com](mailto:john.stepper@workingoutloud.com) to ask for my latest progress chart. Think of it as a safe way to practice asking for something, and try to use what you've learned from exercises in previous weeks. I'll be glad you contacted me.

## 5. Checkout for Week 10 (5 minutes)

1. Schedule the next meeting.
2. Ask: "What will you do this week?"

Write down what you will do this week, and you will be even more likely to do it. You will increase the chances even further if you write down when and where you will do it.

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## Frequently Asked Questions

*Q: Are some things on the habit checklist more important than others?*

It depends on you, the habit you're trying to develop or change, and the challenges you're facing at any particular moment.

For me, the two things I found most useful over a range of habits and circumstances are charting your progress and structuring your environment. (It's why I included creating a progress chart as an exercise this week.) You can find examples of my habit experiments and how I used elements from the checklist in the articles at the end of this guide.

*Q: Asking for help feels extremely uncomfortable.*

When I was writing a book, I needed help - reviewing content, editing, marketing - and I thought of the eight-foot bride. I shared early drafts of the book and offered people the chance to help make it better. I sought out people with specific expertise to see if they might be interested in the book's message and helping to spread it. I acknowledged their contributions with personal thank-you notes and thanked them publicly too, the literary equivalents of Amanda's deep eye contact and a flower. Sometimes, when people didn't respond, it stung a bit. I wondered if they truly didn't like me or my work.

The more you focus on empathy and generosity, and the more you do so without expectations imposed on another person, the less discomfort you'll feel. Approaching people can naturally touch on some of our deep-rooted fears and insecurities. But instead of avoiding those feelings, try channeling them into positive emotions that can genuinely lead to contributions to others.

All you can do is try to make your request feel more like an invitation than an imposition.

*Q: What if people don't respond or, worse, they reject me?*

Tim Grahl, author of *Your First 1000 Copies*, encourages writers to build relationships with reads and other people who can help them raise awareness about their work. He offered some excellent advice for people seeking help from others:

*When you're in outreach mode, revoke your right to be offended. You're not always going to get the answer you want. People are going to turn you down or just ignore you from time to time. That's a part of the game; that's a part of life. When you don't get a favorable response, take a breath and move forward. Keep looking for ways to help people. Always assume the best of people.*

When you don't get a response, it's easy to be upset and make up some negative story about why you didn't get a response. Instead, assume the best of people—they're simply busy or have some other legitimate reason—and focus on what else you can do to be helpful. That mindset ensures your requests don't feel like burdens, and makes it much more likely people will respond favorably in the future.

## **If you need to do less...**

Reflect on times you've successfully developed a new habit or changed your behavior in some way. Why were you successful then? As you think about it, use the habits checklist as a guide. What could you learn from that experience that could help you now?

If you do only one thing this week, make a progress chart and keep it where you can see it throughout the day. If you track even one thing related to your goal (the number of people you reach out to, for example), that will help make you more mindful of your goal and steps you're taking towards it.

In *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin referred to her progress chart as a "Resolutions Chart. In her search for better habits and a happier life, Gretchen felt that, more than anything, her chart made her happier.

*"The single most effective step for me had been to keep my Resolutions Chart...By providing an opportunity for constant review and accountability, the Resolutions Chart kept me plugging away."*

## **If you want to do more...**

### **Easy: Something you can do in less than 10 minutes**

Look at your habit checklist and make one of the adjustments. It could be as simple as reviewing your "Letter from your future self" ("*Picture the way you'd like life to be*"), or taping your progress chart to your bathroom mirror, or blocking out time in your calendar for doing something related to your goal. Any step you take will reinforce your sense of control and help increase your motivation.

### **More challenging: Something you can do in less than 15 minutes**

Amanda Palmer, a singer and songwriter, spoke about vulnerability as a gift in her TED talk "The Art of Asking" and she later wrote a book with the same title, based in part on her years as a performance artist on the street asking for contributions. Here's a quote from her book:

*"Asking for help with shame says: You have the power over me. Asking with condescension says: I have the power over you. But asking for help with gratitude says: We have the power to help each other."*

Watch her TED talk. (There's a link at the end of this guide.) When Amanda Palmer worked as a living statue, she could have simply said, "I would like you to give me a dollar." Instead she found a way to ask for that dollar so that it felt like an invitation and a connection. Years later, when she asked for money on Kickstarter to launch a new album, twenty-five thousand individuals donated a total of more than \$1.2 million.

As you watch the talk, reflect on how you ask for help? Is it with shame or is it with gratitude? Does it feel like an imposition or an invitation?

## To read, listen to, or watch

### *On habit change*

- *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg
- My first progress chart: “How’s the book coming along?” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/hows-the-book-coming-along](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/hows-the-book-coming-along)
- My first habit checklist: “The prospect of premature death didn’t make me change so I tried this instead” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/the-prospect-of-premature-death-didnt-make-me-change-so-i-tried-this-instead](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-prospect-of-premature-death-didnt-make-me-change-so-i-tried-this-instead)
- “Changing habits: a personal experiment” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/changing-habits-a-personal-experiment](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/changing-habits-a-personal-experiment)
- “A year without meat” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/a-year-without-meat](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/a-year-without-meat)
- “Two years after ‘A year without meat’” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/two-years-after-a-year-without-meat](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/two-years-after-a-year-without-meat)
- “How this one simple chart made me happier in 6 weeks” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/how-this-one-simple-chart-made-me-happier-in-6-weeks](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/how-this-one-simple-chart-made-me-happier-in-6-weeks)
- “What happened to my brain after 30 days without alcohol” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/what-happened-to-my-brain-after-30-days-without-alcohol](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/what-happened-to-my-brain-after-30-days-without-alcohol)
- “Learning the piano at 51 years old” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/learning-the-piano-at-51-years-old](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/learning-the-piano-at-51-years-old)
- “Planting my piano tree” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/planting-my-piano-tree](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/planting-my-piano-tree)
- “The piano chronicles: my first recording” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/the-piano-chronicles-my-first-recording](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-piano-chronicles-my-first-recording)
- “A different kind of challenge” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/a-different-kind-of-challenge](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/a-different-kind-of-challenge)

### *On asking for help*

- Video - “The art of asking” by Amanda Palmer - Link: [www.ted.com/talks/amanda\\_palmer\\_the\\_art\\_of\\_asking](http://www.ted.com/talks/amanda_palmer_the_art_of_asking)
- “How to ask for help” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/how-to-ask-for-help](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/how-to-ask-for-help)
- “Asking for help” - Link: [workingoutloud.com/blog/asking-for-help](http://workingoutloud.com/blog/asking-for-help)