How to Break Bad Habits and Create Good Ones

Interview with Maneesh Sethi
Hosted by John Durant
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Hey this is John Durant and welcome back to PaleoCon.

Today’s talk is going to be a lot fun. I am here with Maneesh Sethi, an author, biohacker and entrepreneur who is working on a really cool device called Pavlok. It’s a bracelet. We’re going to tell you what it does that nothing else is doing right now.

Our topic today is: hack your habits, tips to breaking bad habits and creating good ones. We all know what a challenge that it is when people try to change their lifestyles. You fall back into your old habits. So we’re going to figure out how to successfully change some of those.

Two quick reminders: remember to register if you haven’t already at paleocon.com. You’ll get notifications for all the talks plus a bunch of cool bonuses and if you can’t hear all the sessions there will be an all access package that you can purchase.

Maneesh Sethi, a serial entrepreneur, has published four books including an international best seller on computer programming. He has worked on the release of multiple New York Times best sellers including the Four Hour Chef, started multiple companies and most recently a company called Pavlok.

Maneesh welcome.

Hi. Hey John.

How are you?

Pretty good man. It’s good to hear from you and I always enjoy our conversations. So I’m excited to talk.

Yeah. We had a couple of missed schedules before this one and so now it’s good to get through it.

Definitely. I’m excited to tell everybody. Hey and just in general. For the people who are listening in the audience, I don't think that I’m particularly fascinating or anything, but it is a really good idea if you take those few minutes and just shut off your Facebook and
turn off Skype and just try to focus, if you can, because there’s no real point in living life if you’re going to do two things at the same time. You’re going to end up getting worse results from each part.

So if you want to focus, focus; if you don’t want to, come back another time.

John: Seriously. I face that problem all the time. So give people a little bit a background on Pavlok and what you’re working on and then let’s dive into understanding habit formation and how to create a new one.

Maneesh: Yeah absolutely. So I will tell you a little bit about Pavlok. Well first of all it’s not very public, what we’re doing, but I trust people in the paleo community and I trust you John so hey guys don’t tell my competitors everything that I’m telling you. I would keep the really cool stuff obviously. I’ll tell you different parts.

So I’m building a pretty interesting product that’s based on my own challenges with behavior change and with doing the things that I want to do. So I’ve been pretty ADHD ever since I was ever existing and when I started this blog called “Hack The System” while I was traveling, I found myself traveling and managing to make a living while being abroad and doing cool stuff, but never really doing what I wanted to do.

I really wanted to set out and achieve specific productivity based goals and I would never make them happen. So, one day back in 2012, I hired a girl on Craigslist and had her sit down next to me and every time I used Facebook she would slap me in the face. That’s her entire job. I paid $8 an hour.

I noticed something because I tracked my productivity through that time using some productivity tools and I found that my productivity sky rocketed. It went from about 30% to 98%, meaning that I’d never switched apps. I never got off of track. I just stayed in the writing app or stayed in Microsoft Word until the product was done.

I posted this article online and for some reason it went crazy viral. It was in a hundred different countries, 116 news sources.
John: For some reason it went viral. I have a very good idea why it went viral which is: it’s awesome.

Maneesh: It’s because the girl in the video was cute, John.

John: It’s because you’re cute too.

Maneesh: Thanks John, of course.

John: How hard did she slap you?

Maneesh: She slapped me pretty hard. I mean not as hard as some slaps. I’ve been slapped a lot for some reason. My most viral stuff was always about that thing and bringing the mood towards that in Pavlok, you’re going to see that even more.

It went really viral and I found that there were a lot of interesting facts, like the thing with the slap, that made it go viral. It was like “This guy’s getting slapped in the face. That’s hilarious.” But what was really the change, what really affected my behavior was not the slap. It was the having somebody sit down next to me. It was the accountability. And so I was hanging out at my friend’s house in San Francisco when I was like “You know what would be really funny, if we made a dog shock collar that electrocuted me every time I used Facebook.”

And my friend looks at me and he says “Let’s go to Radioshack.” So we go to Radioshack and we hack together. We basically take apart an old dog shock collar. In less than four hours we have this really crappy prototype put together.

John: Great moment in the history of science. The apple falling on Newto and “Let’s use a dog shock collar.”

Maneesh: Yeah it looks like discovering penicillin but probably better for humanity.

So basically we made this thing of me getting shocked and it was a really hilarious video I cut together. It’s nothing crazy. It’s just me getting shocked over and over again every time I use Facebook.
and then I was thinking about it, because I was about to post it on my blog and I remembered my last post going viral. I was pretty sure this video would go viral and I said “You know there’s actually something really interesting in this.”

It’s not just a shock collar for a gag. It’s not just a novelty but there’s actually a lot of power in having some kind of accountability for things that today we have trouble doing, stopping us from being distracted and so I decided to try and turn it into a company.

So I filed for a patent on this idea and then I started working with a few prototyping companies and some engineers trying to get it made legitimately and I had a bunch of failures and basically I gave up on the project until June of this year when some incubator, an incubator called Bolt, bolt.io, and they’re a hardware based incubator in Boston.

I’d written a pitch to them and sent the video of me getting shocked and they called me up and they told me that out of a thousand people they were interviewing 100 and then out of the 100 I was one of the 20 finalists and then out of the 20 finalists I was one of the 7 winners.

So I ended up getting a spot in the Bolt incubator and that’s where I am now. And so the company that I’m building, Pavlok, is based on this idea of how can we add accountability to things that we know we should do but just don’t do.

For example you don’t miss work every day because you know you’ll get fired, but you might miss going to the gym because nobody gives a shit. I think that Pavlok is designed to add accountability to things that you don’t want to do.

John: Pavlok comes from Pavlov. Give a quick background on this thing.

Maneesh: I know what you’re getting me to say John. All right.

John: What am I trying to get you say?

Maneesh: The exact details of what exactly it does.
Yeah I’ll tell you how it works. It’s actually really interesting. I think it’s really interesting.

The way that I’ve discovered how to change to work is that it takes consistency and there’s nothing else. It’s really purely about consistency. If you do an action for 30 days or 60 days, if you do it everyday, you do it at the same time with the same trigger everyday it becomes so ingrained inside your self that it’s harder to not to do it, than it is to do it. And we’ll be talking about this a little bit later on the call.

There’s different tricks to get your self to do things and Pavlok uses a mixture of negative and positive reinforcement, a mixture of pleasure and punishment to get you to do something. So for the first five days or so you sometimes just have to do something.

The first five days of creating a habit are so hard because you’re just not used to it. The first five days of flossing. You start flossing one day and the next day you’re like “Ah screw it.” But if you can get your self to push through that hump, you win.

So what Pavlok does, the way it works is that it lets you set a goal and it lets you set your level of accountability. So you say “I want to go to the gym everyday at noon.” That’s an example and the bracelet says “What do you commit?” And you write down what you commit. You hit okay.

Now the next morning if you’re not there on time, if you’re not at the gym by noon, and it knows by GPS, then the bracelet will start vibrating. It will make really loud noises. So everybody around you is getting pissed off. It will post to your Facebook wall. You can’t take it off or you’ll get in trouble. You’ll pay a penalty and if you continue to cheat, if you continue to not make it to the gym you’ll have to pay a commitment penalty and depending on what you agreed to, the penalty is either you pay out money to your friends or to a charity or you post a message to your Facebook wall “I didn’t make it to the gym on time. Shock me.” Your friends get to shock you from across the internet with 2000 volts of electric current.
John: Oh I love it so much.

Maneesh: Yeah man. It was really fun until I started to have to get shocked all day everyday. So if anybody wants to intern as my shock recipient please...do let me know.

John: Well keep me updated as you actually have a product for people to buy and sell because I’d love to demo this product and it’s such a widespread challenge that so many people face, particularly around New Years where people are making all these resolutions and are never able to stick with it.

You look at most big box gyms and there’s this huge influx of people for the first two weeks of January, but then everybody knows that it’s going to empty out again during the last two weeks of January.

Maneesh: Definitely. And just before I move on if you guys are interested in this thing, do check out pavlok.com. And if you put in your email address you’ll get updates. So check that out. It’ll be fun.

Yeah exactly. Right now is a great time for you talking about habit change because New Year’s resolutions are a perfect example of the successes and failures of habit change. The thing about habits are that they’re just not represented... They’re just not done the right way.

Everybody starts forming New Year’s resolutions because it’s New Year’s so that the gyms and other companies can make a lot of money in the same way that the FDA pyramid was created by lobbyists so that food processing companies can make more money. New Year’s resolutions are not based on science. They’re based on profit.

So if you want to approach a habit in a different way, if you want to approach it the right way, you shouldn’t be focusing on New Year’s resolutions. The best way to start is today.

Now, with that said, I do understand the mental benefit of “A new year, A new you.” And there’s nothing wrong with that. So let’s work within the framework of that New Year’s resolution.
John do you want me to talk about how I would form a new habit if I wanted to for the new year?

John: Yeah take us through the different key parts of a habit and forming a new one and a better way to start.

Maneesh: Sure. I’m going to start off with a story of one of my favorite bloggers who runs a site called Zen Habits. His name is Leo Babauta. He did a habit change on the first of the year as a New Year’s resolutions in a very effective way.

So Leo, he was overweight. He’s a government worker in Guam. I think he had 8 or 9 children. He was overweight. He was a smoker. He never went to the gym ever and he had been trying for so long to quit and he kept having New Year’s resolutions like “This year I’m going to go to the gym everyday and this year I’m going to finally quit.”

And he would just do nothing and end up eating some Doritos if they have Doritos in Guam. I’m sure they have Doritos in Guam.

John: I’m sure they do.

Maneesh: So instead one year he said “I’m going to try to make a small change this year. Instead of trying to go to the gym everyday and all that stuff what I’m going to do is every time I feel like I want some junk food, every time I reach for a junk food, instead of reaching for it I’m going to do 10 push ups. If I still want the junk food no problem but just for the first month I’m just going to go ahead and do 10 push ups if I have that craving.”

He did this for 30 days and he noticed that he suddenly started to eat better after 30 days and he said “This is interesting. This small little change of 10 push ups wasn’t about the push ups. It wasn’t about the quantity of the push ups. It was adding some kind of breakage. Some kind of little pattern that interrupts the trigger, which was the emotional desire for food, and the action, which was the grabbing and eating of the food.”
So you add that little break, that little pattern-interrupt and suddenly he stopped eating junk food as much. So then he said “What else can I do? Now that I’ve already got this good habit going on, I’ve got this good series of not eating so poorly. How about I start going to the gym two times a week?”

So he started adding that in for four weeks and that started to click. So now he’s suddenly eating better and he’s going to the gym. He’s like “You know what? I don’t need to smoke anymore. Just for 30 days I’m not going to smoke. No big deal. It’s just a 30 day challenge.”

Suddenly he stopped smoking and he kept adding on all of these habits one by one and he did it in such slow and non difficult manner, a non willpower using manner. Instead of saying “I’m going to change for the rest of my life” he started saying “I’m going to change for the next few days” and was able to string and link these habits together in such a cool form that one year later he’d lost I think 60 lbs or something.

He quit smoking. He didn’t eat junk food. He went to the gym. He had started a blog. He started writing every day. His blog had 50,000 subscribers and it was just ridiculous. So from there his company Zen Habits, his website Zen Habits is based on helping people make small changes to improve their habits.

So looking at that story you can see that there’s a big difference between how regular Americans approach it and how he approached it. Regulars Americans go ahead and say “I’m going to do all of this for ever. I’m going to go to the gym five times a week.” Then they go twice and then they never come back because they get tired.

John: And they’ve already broken their difficult achievement or goal.

Maneesh: Exactly. They’ve already broken their difficult achievement and goal and that’s a really typical problem with binge eaters and people who don’t have the personality of doing what they say they’ll do.
Once they go over their calorie count for the day they just consider it a lost day and they’ll just eat everything and even I do this all the time.

That’s not how it works. If you miss a day it’s no big deal. Just go tomorrow. But if you can create that tiny habit, then the fear of creating some overarching goal of who you want to become, any small failure causing you to fall off the wagon isn’t going to hurt you.

John: So let’s get down to the tactical level. How would you go about creating a new habit and I think that’s really relevant to the listeners of this podcast.

Maneesh: In general the first thing you should do is grab a copy or at least Google some articles on the Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg. That book’s fascinating and what Charles did is he broke down habits into a really pure science and a habit is formed from three parts.

There’s a trigger, an action and then a response reward. So a reward you can call it. Let’s think of, for example, when you wake up: you are triggered to be awake and then there’s a trigger in your mouth, of that dry feeling in your mouth. The action that you’ve been trained to do since you were a kid is to go and brush your teeth. Then the reward is the feeling of your mouth not being so gross.

I always use this brushing your teeth as an example but at least 15% to 20% of the time I’ll be like “So you brushed your teeth every morning right?” Somebody says “No. I don’t brush my teeth every morning.” Whew. Right well I have no example. Maybe anything you do?

John: Right. Maybe we shouldn’t be kissing right now?

Maneesh: Maybe we should not be kissing.

John: That is an example of a habit you probably have ingrained.
Maneesh: Another one I always give an example of is when you are driving a car and you are turning your wheel to the left and you naturally hit the left turn signal that’s not something that your brain is designed to do.

That’s something that you made it do and if you go there into your car and you try to make a left turn without a left turn signal, unless you’re from LA because those guys suck at driving, but if you try to make a left turn without using your left turn signal you’ll just notice it’s hard. You can put your hand behind your back it’s just hard. It feels weird.

So what happens is that your brain is so ingrained. It’s reached it’s maximum level of automatism based on neural pathways and it becomes harder to not to do the action than it is to do the action. It takes more willpower to not to do it, than to do it.

So again we have a habit. We have a trigger, we have an action and we have a reward.

John: And the classic Pavlov example is you have some dogs, they ring a bell as the trigger, the response is the dogs start to salivate and the reward is the food and they then train this over many many times. Is that accurate?

Maneesh: Well Pavlov is famous for classical conditioning which is association between different habits. So you would associate the ringing of the bell with the showing of the meat but that’s a different thing and we can definitely talk about classical conditioning. I think that’s something that no one talks about at all in the world because people are afraid to consider themselves as dogs and I have some really cool insights on that stuff.

John: I think dogs are awesome.

Maneesh: Me too. So what we’re looking at here is it’s not about conditioning. It’s about habitual change. And that’s a more of a brain function. An operant conditioning is like where you have a reward, you get a prize like gamefication stuff. That’s a little more relevant to what I’m saying right now but, in general, a habit of any variety is formed by a trigger, an action and a reward.
It’s almost impossible to create a habit. You just cannot create a habit out of nothing. What you can do is you can replace parts of an already existing habit. But when you start to think that if you get down and you look at every action that you do all day everything that you do is based on some form of habit. Something you’re doing is coming from a habit.

John: So if you have these neural pathways that are already established in your brain what you’re saying is it’s easy to tweak those in one direction or another rather than try to immediately erase them which just ain’t going to happen.

Maneesh: Yeah. Some scientists say that there is no way to add or remove a habit. It can only be changes. I’m not sure if I completely agree with that but I understand where they’re coming from. So what that means is we take the example of Leo Babauta and we say I get that feeling instead of eating I will do 10 push ups.

This is a really common work place thing where they’ll eat a cookie or they’ll get some food during the day and just start snacking. The thing is it’s not about the snack. It’s about the getting up and taking a walk.

So Charles Duhigg in his book, he tried testing different options to see which would give him the same response, the same feeling, the same reward and he found that it was just getting up, taking a walk and saying, “Hi” to his co workers was the identical to going to the kitchen and getting a cookie. It was a break that he wanted.

Okay so getting back into this. If you’re trying to create a habit let’s take an example. What habit do you want to form John?

John: I’d like to form a habit of going to cross fit three times a week.

Maneesh: What days?

John: Let’s call it Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Maneesh: And at what time?
John: Tuesday and Thursday it’s usually in the evenings for me so say 7:30 and Saturdays would be mornings at 12:30 or early afternoon.

Maneesh: Are you able to do that? Have you done it some times but you’re just not good at making a habit every time?

John: What happens is I’m nearby. I’m physically close. I’ll do it successfully or even I’ll work out often, four days a week and then where I fall apart is I’ll often be doing this for a little while and then I’ll miss it for an entire week and then it feels like I have a psychological block where it’s that much harder to get back into the gym. So that’s what I struggle with sometimes is I lose that consistency.

Maneesh: And what is the consistency worth to you? Is it a really big deal in your life? Is it something you’d be willing to sacrifice for to get this habit?

John: Absolutely.

Maneesh: Okay. So there are some quick ways that I would answer/solve your problem. I’m going to say those in a few minutes. I think what I’ll start with is just saying how would I form the habit of going to cross fit for the first time for people who don’t do gyms whatsoever.

Okay so what they would do is... what you said first was really relevant and these are things that people never think about. They say “I’m going to start going to the gym.” They don’t say “I’m going to get in shape.” They don’t say “I’m going to go to crossfit three times a week on Tuesday and Thursday and Saturday and Tuesday and Thursday I’m going to go in the evenings at 5 pm and on Thursday I’m going to go at 12:30.”

That specificity is incredibly powerful because the number one easiest trigger is time. The clock is always there. So if you have a trigger of a clock that’s a really good one and cross fit is great because there’s classes. So that’s really easy to use.
John: I found it’s so much easier when I schedule a class for myself a day or longer in advance and put it on my calendar and then it’s like my calendar forces me to go to do it.

Maneesh: Isn’t it funny when you have a private trainer you’re there. You’re not going to miss it because there’s somebody waiting for you for accountability but even crossfit even though they have classes they don’t have that purity of accountability where you’re going to get in trouble or something. “Where the f were you?”

So what you said there and crossfit allows you to do really well is scheduling things in advance and committing to it in advance - there’s a lot of value in that.

So here is how I would do it if I wanted to form a habit. First of all you want to create a tiny habit. The habit is not about success. It’s about getting there. It’s not about going to the gym and running 15 miles. It’s about walking in the gym or even more importantly walking outside of your house.

So the first thing I do to create new habits is I set the tiniest iteration of what the lowest possible version of success is. If it’s flossing, it’s floss one tooth. If it’s exercise it’s like going to the gym it’s go outside in my gym clothes.

Now you’d say “Listen dude. You do not have to go to the gym. You do not have to floss your entire mouth. In fact you are not allowed to floss more than one tooth. You have to walk to the gym but you’re not allowed to go on a machine.”

At this point what’s happening is your brain is saying “Okay. Well why would I even do that? How can I get myself to even go outside in these shoes?” I set bets. I set a serious pain, a fear of loss to make that happen.

So what I would do in a case of somebody trying to go to cross fit for a while would be to start off by saying for the first week you are going to go to cross fit gym and you’re not going to be allowed to work out. You either watch them or just go home but you have to go on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and you’d have to sit
there for two weeks and you have to be just be in the workout clothes but not work out.

But more importantly if you don’t go, if you cheat, you have to pay a penalty. In this case I usually do a $50 bet with my friend James Swanick. He and I have that that’s going on all the time overlapping and what you’ll do is you’ll be like “I don’t want to go to the gym. I don’t want to go to crossfit.” Even though I told you you’re not allowed to go to workout it’s just like walking there is surprisingly hard even if it’s next door.

So you’ll be like “But I’m not going to pay $50. Fine. I’m definitely going to go or I have to go and besides it’s not that big a deal. It’s just a tiny walk in the gym. I just walk right back home. It’s like a 20 minute turn around.”

And you get there and you’re already in your gym clothes and suddenly you want to work out. The first time is the hardest but now you suddenly want to work out but you’re not allowed to and your brain’s going to be like “Fuck you. I want to work out.”

But if you work out you get charged so you can’t and now you’re at this place where your brain is like “I want more. I want more.” It’s like adding a dream of positive reinforcement, a reach goal that’s going to come if you just keep doing it.

John: Oh I love this.

Maneesh: So the flossing is a great one. You’re allowed to floss one tooth but you cannot floss another tooth and your brain’s saying “What? Dude I have the floss in my mouth already. I need to move.”

So anyway that’s the first step - adding negative reinforcement to a tiny habit to force your self to get consistency. Identifying the trigger, in this case it’s time, identifying the action which is going to crossfit and once you get there you’ll start to feel the desire or reward.

Now we’re talking more about adding this habit so once you get pass these two weeks then you start to add in the actual work
outs but you keep that bet going. So you’ll be like “All right. I’m going to bet $50 if I don’t go to the gym I’m going to pay Maneesh $50 and I will be there.”

So you’ll find your self getting there. You’ll find your self frequently getting there and here’s an interesting fact. Your conscious brain is motivated by positive reinforcement but your subconscious brain is motivated more by negative reinforcement.

So what that means is that you’ll not even realize the power of the loss of $50; $50 doesn’t mean shit but it does mean a lot to your subconscious brain. So that will help motivate you and if it’s not money there are other things that can always motivate you but you’ve got to figure out what works and what motivates you but adding that fear gets you through the first month.

At the end of the day the goal is consistency. So once you get one month in great. You got to your first month. Your goal is going to be 90 days before you can remove any kind of framework around you.

So what you’ll do then is you can pull back a little bit on the scare factor. You don’t want to make your self only motivated by this negative reinforcement because that leads to binging post talk but what I recommend you’ll do and what Pavlok does is it switches to a positive reinforcement mode where it’s like now you get to work out. Now it’s going to post on your Facebook wall that you’re succeeding. It’s going to tell your friends that you succeeded.

So you’ll be feeling great but you’re not allowed to miss two day in a row. If you miss two days in a row then you have to pay a penalty. So you keep that bet but it’s not as strong as it used to be. So if you start to fall off the bandwagon it keeps you back on it.

John: So right now I actually do have a little bit of a negative cost and positive reinforcement where if I book something I can’t cancel in the hour directly preceding the class and that’s usually the time when I would find reason to keep working on something and be like “Oh I’m too busy right now. I can’t go.”
And if I do cancel, I know the people who run the gym and it’s very bad for them to cancel in that hour, or have it on the schedule and take someone’s spot and not show. Then on the positive side I found that going to classes with the same instructor, a particular instructor who I enjoy working with, and I’ve enjoyed a banter or two, that also is a little positive incentive.

So those are my current negative and positive dynamics.

Maneesh: Cool. So that’s like social accountability is a huge one and having that friend be there is not even work out anymore. It’s just you hanging out with a buddy. It’s really easy to throw tires around when you’re hanging out. That’s what we’re designed to do. It’s like it’s play.

So it shouldn’t be a big deal for us to get to the gym. We just created this weird world where we get sucked in to stupid distractions that mean nothing to us.

Anyway what do you feel like your success rate is with your cross fit habit? How often can you go three times a week?

John: I have been successful in that for the last 3 or 4 weeks.

Maneesh: Cool and you’d like to make it a permanent habit?

John: Yes.

Maneesh: What I recommend even though I rarely do it, myself – I need to start doing myself, is to create a long lasting bet that is minor but keeps you on track. What you told me about your biggest failure is that you’ll miss a week and it was a mental block and you won’t go back for a few weeks because you’re just blocked.

John: Right and it happens usually for one of two reasons. Either I travel and then my routines get screwed up a little bit or what’s happened recently is specific to cross fit, I’ll go in, there’ll be a workout with tons of pull ups. I’ll end up tearing up some of calluses on my hands and then it will make it difficult at least for three or four days to get in and do a work out because my hands
are sort of torn up. So I’m sort of sabotaging myself by overdoing sometimes.

Maneesh: So it’s good that you’ve identified that. The first thing I’m going to say John is right after this call’s over just go on Amazon and buy a hand grip. That’s easy problem solved.

John: Right.

Maneesh: That’s easy. You should have that always in your crossfit bag or in your car, whatever you always have with you when you go to crossfit.

So the second thing is, yeah, you told me many reasons. So what I would do is I would say “Okay. Listen. For the next 9 months I will go to cross fit once a week at least. If I don’t go at least once a week and again it’s not about the workout, even. It’s just going. So even if your arm is broken you could still go.

If you don’t go at least once a week you have to pay some kind of enormous penalty. Something you don’t really want to do like $1000 or $2000 or something.

The habit is not the actual work out. The habit is getting there. That’s the hardest part. So if you can get there there’s no excuse for not getting there. If you’re traveling maybe say I have to go to the gym for 30 minutes at whatever hotel I’m at and do whatever workout but there is a solution.

So you set that minimum barrier and you make sure that’s legitimately covered and you make that deal with someone who either knows where you are and can seriously hold you accountable somebody you just don’t to cheat with.

Now a lot of people do cheat so adding that accountability is important and hopefully Pavlok will solve that problem.

So for example I was going to China about a month and a half ago to source my factory for my product and I knew what was going to happen. “Listen Maneesh you’re in great shape. You’ve been
going to gym four days a week. You’re going to get to China and you’re just going to be a fat ass. You’re just going to binge.”

I emailed James on the way to the airport. I’m like “James, for the next 7 days I will go to the gym 6 days a week. I will do a 12 minute workout or 15 minute workout or something.” James said okay and suddenly man I went 6 out of 7 days and it’s funny because I went 6 days in a row and then on the 7th day I just didn’t go because I beat the bet.

It was so clear. I got there and I did it and I only did it because I had to do it, but it worked and I came back not fatter which is the first time that’s ever happened on a trip.

I remember there’s a video actually I put up on my site last week. I made a bet with James, we went to a conference in Portland and it was like “I promise I would go to the gym everyday for 20 minutes,” and one day it was 9:30 or 10 pm and I looked down. I was at a bar and I already had four drinks and I’m like “Fuck. I have to go to the gym.”

So I drunkenly walk my ass over to the gym. I do a really intense work out. James is right there videotaping just laughing his ass off and it worked. It’s so effective that it bothers me how effective it is. So that is the one trick and people don’t think that it’ll work on them. They keep saying this will never work on me.

For some reason it works on them. If it’s not money, if money really doesn’t motivate you then chose something else. Choose something like you have to send a text to your ex girl friend that’s pre-scheduled or something. You have to give away your favorite dress or your favorite shoes. Your laptop is taken away. Your phone is taken away for two days. Imagine that. You didn’t go to the gym. Shit.

That’s actually one of the punishments we’re trying to make happen on the Pavlok is to lock your phone for four hours if you don’t do something. You can’t lock an iPhone but you can lock an Android so we’re figuring out that.
John: I know so many people who would just freak out at the very idea of that. I wouldn’t be able to check Twitter and Instagram for four hours or text messages.

Maneesh: Which again is a very obvious symptom of our weird ass society that has all these distractions. It makes no sense.

John: I have become addicted to Twitter over the last year or so and I really need to break my Twitter addiction. Now my Android is buzzing when I get updates. It’s trained me to keep seeking for it. I will sometimes sit there at 1 am knowing that I need to get up early the next day and I will sit there refreshing my feed just to get that next little hit of discovery of what’s next on my feed and it’s driving me nuts.

Maneesh: Yup. So first of all I woke up at 2:30 AM knowing I had this call at 9 and yet managed to not go back to sleep because I had so many ready posts to read.

So the problem is when I’m talking about these habit things I’m not the answer king. I’m suffering this addiction as well as anybody else and in fact, worse than probably 99% of people, but the fact is that I’m trying to solve the problem and that’s why I’m trying to help the people that are listening.

It’s a solvable issue but nobody’s a god. Everybody’s suffering the same problems. I’ve talked Pavlok to a lot of people. Probably about 30% of people say “Oh I don’t need that. Everything I need to do, I just do.”

And I’m like “You’re weird.” I don’t even know how that’s possible. That is crazy and I’ve seen people... some of my employees just do things and I’m like “cool.”

But anyway what you were saying is interesting about this Twitter addiction. First of all Twitter is a great example and email is an even better example of training habits, because they’ve trained us. Twitter trained us and Facebook trained us to do things. They used positive and negative reinforcement in the same way that we do it. The trigger is that vibration or that ding or that red little notification icon and the action is the clicking of it and the
response is you get some kind of new information that makes your brain light up even though it’s not necessary information. It’s very positive and communication is good. It’s also really destructive. So the trick is how do you isolate the two things. Now one experiment I’ve been running for the last two weeks which has been phenomenally successful is not doing email anymore.

So I’m trying my hardest to outsource my email to somebody else and you think about it like email is that one thing that people cringe when I say “I don’t do it” because there’s no way they could give that up. There’s no way I could do that and I say “Why?” And they say “Because I have to do that.” And I say “Why?” And they say “Why?” and there’s no better answer.

So what I try to do is figure out a way to create some kind of... email is my Twitter, email I was in it 8 hours a day and so what I started to do is I’ve hired an assistant and I told my assistant to do these things.

First of all I have a list of directories that are readers from my website. For those people I’ve written up some templates for a few of the types and the rest of them just write a draft email, tag it as drafts and leave it in that folder.

I let him do that in my words and then or the other emails that were not Hack the System emails, things that are like you emailing and such I said “Okay. Well do your best. If you think it’s unnecessary tag it as to archive. If you think it’s necessary that you can handle write I tried to handle it and if you don’t what to do add it to a spread sheet subject line: link to the article and then question to me. Manees I think that you can do A or B? Which would you prefer?”

I just got a link from my assistant right now. That’s funny. That’s a link to my spread sheet and it says... I’ll click it right now to just look at it. My spread sheet says it’s called Maneesh handle this and it says a list of emails that are in my inbox and the ones that you didn’t know what to do.

So I’m going to look at this and it says subject line scaling three printing. Terrain Gozalia says “I’m looking forward to hearing from
you. Perhaps we can set up a chat type to chat and I can help you explain my business to you further.”

Second email says “Heat working and Matt Cohen says,” my room mate says “is anybody at the apartment? I’ll be back 4:30 but we have a heating guy coming in.” So what happens now is at 10 am on my walk from my home to my office I call Caleb and I talk and Caleb just says the things in the spread sheet to me and I say “I would handle it this way. Try that. Oh write a draft to that.”

He’ll just draft up the emails and then I will just go into my email and really quickly hit send send send done. So I only have to check my email once at 10 AM and once at 5 PM and with Twitter I’m actually doing exactly something. I’ve just built a team to handle my copy writing and build a system for handling my blog as well as my social media and what we’re doing now is a very specific system.

Why did you get addicted to Twitter John? Is it with the posting or with the reading?

John:  
Both. Usually it’s with reading and following different lengths and different stuff and then going back and then occasionally I will get addicted to tweets and I’ll sort of go on rants and just tweet for a while.

Maneesh:  
For me I kind of got addicted to Facebook because I have to do that. I have to use social media. You’ve got to tweet out a little bit. You’ve got Facebook out a little bit because it’s necessary for your brand but then once you tweet once or twice you’re on the website and so many are using it.

First things first: delete the app on your phone. It’s got to go. It’s just got to go and at least the notifications has to be off. There’s no excuse for having your notifications on.

What I’m doing with my Twitter thing is now my copywriter and I are setting a system where I just tag Delicious at a bookmark for anything that I find on my website or anything I find online that I would like to tweet, at some point, and I just have a big ass list of them and then on Fridays when we have our hack system meeting
he schedules out 5 tweets a day for the next week and it’s just done. I don’t have to look at it.

So having somebody else work with you especially if your personality type is that extroverted type you’re really going to want to have somebody else help you with these things because otherwise you’re just going to get sucked in and use it for your social energy grabbing capabilities.

Do you know what I mean?

I think that people don’t really recognize this that a lot of us are really... I mean I’m really really extroverted, but it looks to other people that I’m really addicted to the computer. I’m on it 8 to 10 hours a day but I just found that I was using the computer just to chat, email, Skype, Facebook - it’s all about communication. It’s all about people. It’s all about being with other people and so the truth is that I was substituting actual human conversation with fake human conversation. Not a bad thing but it’s not a good thing either.

So having another person who just keeps you in check in particular a judging personality, somebody who does something will be really effective for you getting that social interaction. You still get that social interaction, but now it’s with a person who’s more effective than you are.

John: That’s awesome. I need to put some of that into practice.

Maneesh: But a lot of it, John, with your problem is like incessant watching tweeting and reading it and stuff, a lot of it is about stakes. You’ve got to add that little barrier. You’ve got to set rules and you’ve got to figure out a way to make those rules actually be followed and the bet switch works so well. At least you should test it out and be like... Do you know the app self control?

John: No. I don’t.

Maneesh: Do you know the app freedom?
Okay so these two apps that are really really cool. One is called Freedom and I think it’s from macfreedom.com and it just turns off your internet for up to four hours. It just turns it off. That’s it. You can’t get back on.

John: Actually yeah I do know Freedom.

Maneesh: Then the other one is called Self Control and it lets you choose what sites you want to block and you just can’t turn it back on. So one easy bet to make is I will turn on Self Control by 9 am for a period of four hours or I will pay $50.

Do you know what I mean? And if you just make that bet for a week you’ll find that suddenly all you really have to do is press the button and then you don’t lose money but you won’t get sucked into that chain of tweets anymore. So that’s a really effective way to add that little pattern interrupt into your life where you would normally...

You know if you block a site in your computer you still go to the site. It’s weird. As soon as I open up Google Chrome I hit ctrl TM enter which opens my mail even though I’m not supposed to go to my mail until 5 pm. It’s just so ingrained.

John: Yeah. There are certain websites that are regulars in my list and I’ll manually cycle through them even if I just read that same blog five minutes ago just to see if there’s something miraculously new there within the last five minutes and I know of course there’s not, because some people only post one time a day and I still cycle back to the same website.

Maneesh: Like what I was saying about dogs. We are animals. We make fun of pigeons for pressing the same key after you show a light when the food comes out, even when the food goes away, because they just keep doing it but they’re just used to it. They don’t think their brains are trained to press that button. We’re exactly the same and we just don’t look at our selves the same way.

So when we see these notifications we hit the refresh button for some kind of momentary rush of endorphins. It’s just horrible. It’s just a crazy problem that we’re existing in right now.
John: Let me ask you another question. Sometimes peer influences are very important. The people you spend time with - spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends, things like that - and if someone’s trying to quit smoking it can be incredibly difficult if their spouse still smokes and things like that. How do you think about peer influences with making or breaking habits?

Maneesh: There’s no dispute. You are the average of the five people closest to you and you will succeed if people around you are succeeding and you will fail if people around you are failing and the trick is you either need to associate with better people or figure out a way to add some kind of system to your current life that the people who don’t support you can’t stop you.

So my example for this is every time I do some weird diet thing which is all the time like intermittent fasting for example. You try to explain to your mother that you can’t eat after 8 PM and it just doesn’t make any sense. “No. Just have a cookie. Just have a little bit. It doesn’t matter.” And you’re like “No.” “No. Shut up. Just have some.”

And then I started adding these bets in and I said “Oh I can’t because if I do I’d have to pay James $50.” And they’re like “What?” And I’m like “Yeah. I made this bet. I’m locked in.” “Well that’s weird. Okay. I understand.” It adds that excuse and I’ve noticed that to be really effective for things like this.

My dream vision of the Pavlok bracelet is just some fat guy who’s been trying to get healthy in the mid west and every time he eats a salad his friends make fun of him and then wants him “Dude why are you trying to eat a salad.”

Seriously? He says “You know I bought this product or I got this as a gift and now every time I don’t eat a salad I get shocked.” They’re going to be like “Really? All right well eat your salad.” It adds that excuse

John: The social justification.
Maneesh: Exactly. Social justification. It gives you an excuse to do what you’re doing. I love bets for that. I love it so much. So that’s one thing you can do to solve the problem in your current context but a better solution is also to fix your context.

I’ve learned four languages, the majority because I started dating somebody who only spoke one language. I asked a guy who spoke perfect Russian once “How long did it take for you to learn?” He said “Two wives.”

John: I was in South America and I haven’t used my Spanish in about 10 or 15 years and basically was still skating by on speaking English to people and then I met a young lady who didn’t speak very good English and so it forced me for the next four days to. My Spanish improved so dramatically in a four day period it wasn’t even funny.

Maneesh: Yeah man like I did a bet where I was not allowed to speak a single non Italian word for six days including to my own family and I learned more in those six days than I learned in the previous three months.

It just works.

I’m a big supporter of extreme context shifting for habit change or for results gaining. So I lost 28 lbs in 28 days and I did it by moving to the wilderness and I did a 28-day survival course where I had no backpack, no sleeping bag, no tent. It’s just me and a few friends. It was a course and that was it. Living in a cave I was on solo for five days and I brought a note book with me and a moleskin and I wrote more words in that moleskin in 5 days than I’ve written in two years.

So it was just a function of severe context shifting which I think is a very powerful skill to have.

John: Well I think about it as changing habitat. In a zoo if you want the animals to be healthier you don’t expect them to have willpower and to make shifts in their behavior on their own, just by wanting it. You forcibly change their habitats so that they have to respond to their surroundings in a different way.
Maneesh: Totally true.

Hey I wanted to talk a little bit before we end up the call just a little bit about classic conditioning that you mentioned because I think that this is something that Paleo people will appreciate and nobody else. People think it’s kind of crazy.

So there are really some interesting things about classical conditioning. Classical conditioning, for anybody who doesn’t know what it is, it’s where you take two unrelated stimuli and you put them at the same time such that they get related to each other. So the classical example is with Pavlov’s dogs.

Pavlov had dogs. You show them a steak and they would salivate. That was natural. He would show them a steak and ring the bell and they would salivate, show them a steak and ring the bell and they would salivate. Show them the steak and they would ring the bell and they’d salivate and then after a week or so you removed the steak and you would just ring the bell and they would still salivate. So it was replacing a trigger. How do you change a trigger to get the same action?

I’ve been doing this with some other habits which I think is really cool. Nicotine is a very interesting drug because as a pure chemical, nicotine is really not that bad for you. If you go to gwern.net/Nicotine you’re going to see a whole lot of research done on nicotine that’s really interesting. What I found was was that nicotine has a very odd interaction in that it doesn’t create an addiction to nicotine, itself.

What it does is it creates an addiction to anything that you’re doing at the same time. So when you’re smoking a cigarette you get addicted to the action and moving your cigarette up and down. You get addicted to tobacco, obviously. You get addicted to the smoke leaving your mouth. However, if you take a nicotine patch or a nicotine lozenge, you can get addicted to other things and so I’ve tested this out. It’s pretty cool.

Slap on a nicotine patch at 10 am, walk to the gym, take off the nicotine patch as soon as you get to the gym. If you do this for 30
days you create a chemical addiction in your brain to the action of getting up and walking to the gym at 10 am.

You can do the same thing with writing a thousand words a day at 11 am. I will put on a nicotine patch, write and as soon as the words are done pull of the patch done and suddenly if it’s 10:01 am and I’m not standing and walking to the gym my arms feel weird. My head’s going kind of crazy. I’m wanting that high but it’s a positive high. It’s not a cigarette high. I find it really cool.

John: Yeah that’s really fascinating. I’m sure it does strike people as a little bit extreme, but there had been occasionally times when I have picked up a minor cigarette habit at times, when I’m writing or need a 15 minute break. Or in college, some social drinking, social smoking and things like that, and you get that “Oh I enjoy the act of smoking,”and it’s the nicotine addicting you to whatever you’re doing at the time.

Maneesh: And that brings up a great point which is one of the easiest things to do for people trying to fix something in their life: substitutions. So if it’s the act of smoking they’re like then go smoke an e-cigarette. It’s way better for you.

One thing that I do is I always I’m a big late night binger. I always eat a lot and I typically binge on sweet foods and I’ll binge on ice cream and when I say I binge I mean I buy a pint of ice cream and I eat a pint of ice cream. It’s not going to last until tomorrow.

I told this to my trainer and he’s like “Dude. I know the answer.” I said “What?” And he said frozen berries. I said what do you mean and he said “Go buy frozen berries. When you eat frozen berries you’re going to get the same sweetness. You’re going to get the same texture. It’s the same thing as ice cream but the difference is: if you binge you binge a whole bag of frozen berries, which I do every fucking night, John, It’s only 200 calories instead of a 1000 and it’s berries. It’s Paleo.

Substitutions are really effective ways of solving these problems. Every action is the same but instead of getting whole milk you’re getting 1% milk. There’s a really famous study where a whole city
lost a ton of weight because the entire pitch to the whole city was
switch from whole milk to 1%. That was the entire thing.

It wasn’t stop drinking so much milk, stop eating calories. It was
just make that small change.

John: Well a lot of Paleo people would disagree with 1% being healthier
than whole but we’ll put that thought...

Maneesh: Sure put that aside but at the end of the day it’s a bunch of fat
Americans who are eating a standard American diet and the most
important thing was that the measurement here was weight and
the input was calories and whole milk has more calories than 1%
milk and then they track the whole city’s weight over a period of
time.

So it may or may not be healthier. That’s a different question. But
it did do what they were trying to do which is make the city lose
weight. So that’s pretty cool.

John: What I love about what you’ve been saying is this theme of tiny
habits. You make small habits upfront but ultimately because
you’re successful lead to huge changes.

Maneesh: It’s amazing to see how creating systems, creating routines and
creating small habits multiply in a way that’s so exponential, you
don’t even notice it. You don’t feel like you’re doing anything
because habits don’t feel like work. They just happen.

So it’s like email thing that I’m talking about, having somebody do
my email, I don’t feel like I’m doing anything. I spend a week just
trying to figure out what to do, because I have so much free time
that I didn’t have in the past.

My response rate was way improved, but it felt to me, internally,
like I was failing and that’s a funny feeling and a funny situation
but the trick is to create habits and to build systems that support
you rather than make you angry or make you frustrated.
If there’s something you don’t like doing, if there’s something you just have any internal resistance to, figure out a way to batch it or give it away. I highly recommend giving it away.

John: People would benefit a lot more if they spent a day or two around New Years figuring out how to get these systems into place and what bets they’re going to make even if they only spend an hour thinking about it.

Maneesh: It’s not about the thinking and that’s the part we get tricked off of. It’s the act and the simplest act is calling your friend and saying “Dude if I don’t go to the gym for the first 10 days of the new year I will pay you $100 a day.”

That simple phone call is the system. That’s the system that’s going to keep you locked in. It’s going to support you the whole way. You’ve added accountability. You’ve added a punishment. You’ve added subconscious fear of negative reinforcement. You’ve created a whole system in a single phone call.

Honestly my website’s hackthesystem.com. It’s all about systems. I truly believe that the secret to success is creating systems. I know this from working with Tim Ferris. When you’re with him, he seems like a normal guy. He’s not working that hard. But he’s created systems that support him in such a way that everything gets done. He’s just not the one always doing it. Somebody’s delegating. Somebody’s doing the task, but somehow it gets done and I find that to be really powerful.

John: Love it. Love every bit of it. Give people a quick overview of where they can find you and at hackthesystem.com and at pavlok.com.

Maneesh: Yeah. So my last four years and until today the website that I blog at, the one that you should definitely check out is hackthesystem.com and that site’s about unconventional solutions to the world’s most difficult problems with the theme of productivity hacks, body exercise hacks and making my online hacks, fame hacks like I became a famous DJ in Berlin in 90 days and there’s a trick to it, breaking into the right circles so networking and fame hacks and travel hacks - so how you fly first class for free.
That’s the stuff on my website hackthesystem.com is about and if you go there and sign up, put your email address in and you’re going to get a little cool guide that will teach you how to get your first free business class plane ticket anywhere in the world and then if you go to pavlok.com you’re going to see it’s a landing page and it’s still in a pretty early stage.

Pavlok is going to be shipping in late 2014 so we’ll be launching a kick starter sometime in April, May, probably April and if you want to stay tuned for that and get a chance to be electrocuted or shocked then check out pavlok.com. Give me your email address and I’ll send you updates no more than one a month.

John: Maneesh this was great, really loved it. A lot of fresh information here than people haven’t heard before so thank you very much.

Maneesh: Cool. I hope it was helpful.

John: All right thanks everyone we’ll see you tomorrow.

Maneesh: Thank you guys. Ciao.
To learn more about Maneesh Sethi visit his website at http://www.hackthesystem.com