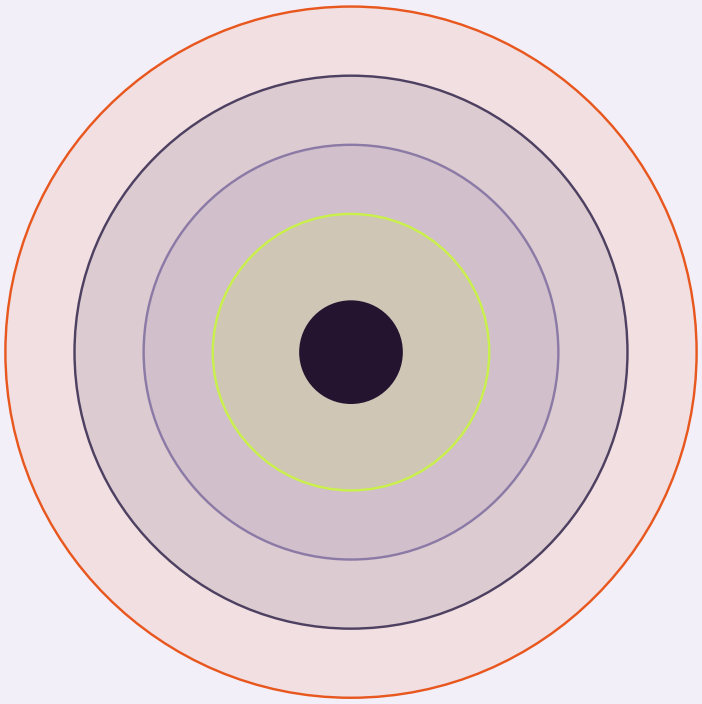


The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Fron-

tiers of Brain Science

A reading of the book by Norman Doidge (2007)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Norman Doidge is a Canadian-born psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who has worked at Columbia University and the University of Toronto. The book argues that the adult brain is not fixed hardware: it keeps rewiring itself around what we do, practise and pay attention to. Its central idea is neuroplasticity, and two rules run through it: neurons that fire together wire together, and a brain map that goes unused is taken over by its busier neighbours. Doidge tells the story through scientists such as Paul Bach-y-Rita, Michael Merzenich, Edward Taub and V. S. Ramachandran. He sets their work beside the people they helped, from a woman who lost her sense of balance to stroke survivors who relearned movement and a woman born with only half a brain. He also covers plasticity's dark side, from chronic pain to habits that are hard to undo.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The adult brain is not fixed: it keeps rewiring itself around what you do.

For most of the twentieth century, the standard view was that the brain's wiring was set in childhood and could only decline after that. Doidge gathers the researchers who showed otherwise. Practice, experience and even thought change the brain's maps, at any age.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Neurons that fire together wire together, so whatever you pair, you bind.

The book leans on Donald Hebb's rule: when two neurons fire at the same time, the link between them grows stronger. That is why a skill practised at the same cue turns automatic. It is also why a feeling and a thought that keep arriving together become hard to pull apart.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Use it or lose it: an idle brain map does not sit empty, it gets taken over.

In Michael Merzenich's experiments with monkeys, the map area for a lost finger was taken over by the neighbouring fingers. Doidge calls this competitive plasticity. The same contest plays out in daily life: a skill you stop practising gives ground to whatever you practise instead.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Attention is the switch: practice on autopilot changes far less.

Merzenich found that lasting changes to a brain map depended on close attention to the task. Going through the motions while distracted did much less. Fewer reps done with full focus beat many done half-awake.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The strong side can be what keeps the weak side weak.

Edward Taub called it learned non-use: after a stroke, people stop trying with the affected arm because the good arm is easier. His constraint-induced therapy restrains the good arm and asks for intensive practice with the weak one. The general lesson is that an easy workaround can stop a skill from coming back.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The brain can take in a lost sense through a different door.

Paul Bach-y-Rita held that we see with the brain, not the eyes, and built devices that fed one sense through another. The book opens with a woman whose balance organs were damaged by a drug. A device that sent balance signals through her tongue helped her stand and walk steadily again.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Pain is made by the brain, and the brain's maps can be retrained.

V. S. Ramachandran studied phantom limbs, where people feel and hurt in an arm that is gone. With his mirror box, a patient sees the intact hand reflected where the missing one should be, and some found their phantom pain eased. Doidge uses it to show that pain is a map the brain draws, not only a signal from the body.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Imagined practice is still practice.

Alvaro Pascual-Leone had one group practise a piano exercise and another only imagine playing it. Both showed similar changes in the brain's motor maps. Mental rehearsal will not replace real reps, but it counts on days you cannot play.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Plasticity cuts both ways: the power that builds skills also locks in bad habits.

Doidge calls it the plastic paradox. The same change that makes us flexible can also leave us stuck, because a well-worn circuit is the easiest path to take again. Getting out usually means building a competing path, not only resisting the old one.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Name one skill and its rival
- [ ] Set a daily block at the edge of your ability
- [ ] Clear the block for full attention
- [ ] Take away one crutch
- [ ] Tie the practice to a fixed cue

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Log every session
- ◯ Raise the difficulty when it feels easy
- ◯ Rehearse in your head on off days

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Name one skill and its rival

Write down one skill you want to build and the habit that eats the time it needs.

They compete for the same hours, and for the same space in your head.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Set a daily block at the edge of your ability

Pick a time and a length between 10 and 30 minutes.

Choose a level hard enough that you make some mistakes, but not so hard that you give up.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Clear the block for full attention

Put your phone in another room and close every tab you don't need before you start.

Attention is what makes practice stick.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Take away one crutch

Find one shortcut that lets you avoid the weak skill, such as subtitles in your own language or a calculator for simple sums.

Remove it for one week.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Tie the practice to a fixed cue

Do the block in the same place, at the same time, after the same daily event, such as your first coffee.

Pairing the two is how it becomes automatic.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Log every session

Tick each day you do the block, on paper or in the planner on this page.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Raise the difficulty when it feels easy

When a session goes by without a mistake, make the next one a little harder: faster, longer or with less help.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Rehearse in your head on off days

On a day you can't practise, spend five quiet minutes picturing a session step by step.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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December 2026

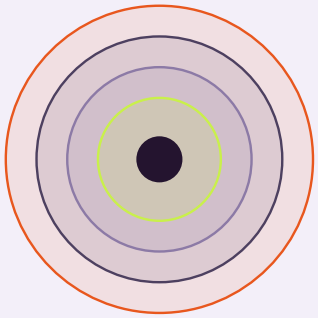
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Your brain keeps becoming what you do with it, so choose what you practise.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER NORMAN DOIDGE