

UNITED WISDOM

One missed occasion does not erase accumulated experience

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *consistency in repetition is required*

Phillippa Lally and colleagues, *How Are Habits Formed* (2010), conclusion, p. 1008. The next part of the authors' sentence adds that the degree of consistency required is not yet known. That qualification matters to the conclusion.

What this article is about

After missing one occasion, it is easy to see an entire practice as a failure. A blank appears in the calendar, and earlier efforts seem to have lost their value. Yet a break in a sequence, the loss of a particular result, and a change in a familiar way of acting are different events. They call for different questions.

Consider Marina, a hypothetical person who has spent several weeks recording birds in her courtyard: the date, species, location, and one noticeable feature of their behaviour. One evening she makes no entry. The next morning she considers deleting the entire list and starting again when she can practise without exceptions. Birdwatching serves only as an example of a voluntary, safe activity. We will not extend it to treatment, mandatory procedures, or actions on which another person's safety depends.

This article considers what one missed occasion may actually mean and how to continue while preserving the facts. Lally's study provides limited grounds for distinguishing a single missed opportunity from a longer absence. It does not establish that every interruption has no consequences. Returning begins with assessing conditions, rather than demanding that we immediately earn the right to use our earlier experience.

I. A blank square and an existing result

Before the missed occasion, Marina had several pages of observations. Afterwards, those pages still exist, provided she has not destroyed them. She can consult their dates, compare the birds' behaviour, and notice that she previously identified a species incorrectly. The entry she did not make yesterday does not automatically change the content of the previous day's entry. This simple distinction can disappear when the entire practice is judged by one feature alone: an unbroken calendar.

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Continuity can matter as well. If observations need to cover every date, yesterday’s gap leaves something unknown. Marina cannot recover it by inventing an entry and calling the sequence complete. She can leave that date without data. Preserving accumulated experience does not require denying the loss of a particular opportunity. An accurate record helps distinguish what is known from what can no longer be established.

Skill is another object of assessment. Marina has already learned to use a field guide and distinguish several species. One evening without an entry does not show whether those skills have disappeared. They can be checked only through the relevant activity. The ease of beginning an evening entry belongs to a third question: how far the familiar context helps her start. The existence of an old list does not prove that starting remains equally easy.

It therefore helps to separate the questions about continuing. Which results remain? What information has actually been lost? What has become harder to do? The answers may differ. If her earlier entries are available but her pen is missing, finding a pen makes more sense than declaring her past observations worthless. This is editorial reasoning about distinguishing facts, rather than an experimental law guaranteeing the preservation of every skill.

Not every retained entry is equally useful. Marina may notice a species identification error and correct it with a clear annotation without destroying the other information. The quality of an external result is checked through its content, rather than the perfection of a sequence. Similarly, a completed object may need further work regardless of whether yesterday was a day without practice. Distinguishing these questions helps direct effort towards a particular inaccuracy. By itself, a missed occasion neither proves the quality of earlier work nor justifies denying it any value.

II. Repetition can produce several kinds of result

Repetition may leave an external product: notes, completed objects, or translated pages. It may involve learning, which needs to be assessed through the quality of performance. Finally, starting certain operations may become more automatic over time. These results are related but not interchangeable. The same calendar sequence does not tell us which result has accumulated or how stable it is.

Wendy Wood and Dennis Rünger’s review discusses habit through associations between a repeated response and its context. A familiar situation may support action without a person having to make a full decision about beginning each time. This helps explain why an evening table and a notebook beside it might matter to Marina. The review does not, however, justify inferring the strength of her habit solely from the number of completed pages.

Marina might have spent considerable time persuading herself to start every evening and still produced informative entries. Alternatively, she might have opened her notebook quickly while

repeatedly writing the same thing without observing. In the first case there is a result without obvious ease of initiation; in the second there is a convenient operation without an adequate product. A single missed occasion does not reveal which situation applied beforehand.

When returning, she can use an available result for its actual purpose. Her old list can help her choose the next observation point, and her field guide can help her check a species. She need not restore a perfect sequence before opening a page she has already written. At the same time, she can allow for the possibility that her familiar procedure needs some preparation again. An existing product and current conditions for beginning may call for different efforts; acknowledging one does not settle the other.

III. What Lally’s study measured

In the study by Phillippa Lally, Cornelia van Jaarsveld, Henry Potts, and Jane Wardle, volunteers chose an everyday eating, drinking, or physical activity behaviour and repeated it in a specified context. Participants reported whether they performed the behaviour and answered questions about automaticity. The authors modelled changes in that measure with repetition. They studied self-reported automaticity in selected activities, rather than every form of experience or moral steadfastness.

There were initially 96 participants. Sufficient data were available for 82; models were fitted for 62, with a good fit for 39. These distinctions matter: the published findings do not mean that every participant showed the same trajectory. The discussion addresses variation in the process, measurement limitations, and possible reasons why a stable description of growth could not be obtained for some participants.

A single number of days is often extracted from the study as though it specified a compulsory period for forming a habit. Yet the estimated time to reach 95 per cent of an individual’s asymptote was a model estimate and varied substantially: from 18 to 254 days among the relevant cases. That range cannot become Marina’s timetable. It does not tell her how long she should keep records or what her minimum daily amount should be.

Our interest here is narrower: how the authors describe isolated missed occasions amid repetition. To use that observation honestly, we need to preserve what was measured, which data were available, and the limitations. The study did not observe our hypothetical participant or test the exercise at the end of this article. It helps clarify distinctions but offers no individual guarantee that her skill has been preserved.

If Marina assesses her practice by the accuracy of species identification, the study’s automaticity measure does not directly answer her question. Easier initiation may coexist with a mistake, while attentive observation may take effort. Ease of performance deserves separate

assessment precisely because it cannot replace a substantive result. Transferring a finding between these objects without additional evidence would be unjustified.

IV. One missed opportunity

In their discussion, Lally and colleagues report that a single missed opportunity to perform the behaviour did not significantly affect the habit formation process in the cases studied. This finding concerns their data and their measure of automaticity. They also note the small number of such missed occasions and the need for further investigation. It cannot be turned into a rule that missing practice is always irrelevant to the outcome.

The finding allows us to question another extreme cautiously: the claim that one evening necessarily destroys the entire process and makes earlier repetitions useless. If a blank calendar square is the sole basis for that sweeping judgement, the evidence is insufficient. We should not replace the judgement with the opposite certainty. We presently know that an entry is missing; we do not know exactly how the ease of the next start has changed.

Marina can make a manageable check. At the next suitable opportunity she can observe the birds and make an entry in her existing notebook. She can then see what worked and what needed preparation. This check need not become a test of flawlessness: an unexpected difficulty would not prove that all her previous experience had disappeared. It would provide information about the current situation and the particular operation.

If beginning feels just as easy after the missed occasion, that will be a fact about one return. If it is harder, she can examine what interferes: lost time, an unavailable field guide, tiredness, or a changed wish to continue. The article does not propose choosing the cause in advance. Useful caution means assessing an observable action without assigning one missed opportunity the power to explain everything that follows.

V. A longer absence raises a separate question

In the same discussion, the authors distinguish a single missed opportunity from another study’s definition of a lapse as a whole week without performance. These are different situations. The comparison does not establish a universal boundary between a harmless and a harmful number of days. It shows why the word lapse, without clarification, can conceal materially different conditions.

Over a week or a month, the schedule, place, tools, and task itself may have changed. Even if a person still wants to begin, they may no longer encounter the familiar situation. Marina’s notebook remains intact, but she now spends her evenings away from home; the birds have moved elsewhere; her old observation point is closed. A lack of an unbroken sequence cannot explain every new difficulty when the conditions of action have changed.

Forgetting or a decline in skill can also occur, depending on the task and the length of the absence. The sources read for this article do not provide sufficient grounds for describing those processes across every skill. We therefore cannot assert that earlier fluency, strength, or accuracy will necessarily remain. Substantial questions about a particular skill require relevant evidence and sometimes professional assessment.

Continuing after a longer absence may involve trying current conditions and a manageable amount again. It can still be a return to the activity even when its form changes. The value of retained experience lies in being able to use what remains useful, rather than in an obligation to repeat everything exactly as before. Marina’s earlier records and her present route to the courtyard may help in different ways. Their usefulness needs checking rather than inference from a general promise about habits.

VI. James’s strictness and the limits of a historical argument

In the chapter on habit in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, William James emphasises consistent action and practical opportunities. His educational writing adopts a strict position towards exceptions at the beginning of a new habit. Readers may recognise a reasonable concern within this position: if we repeatedly postpone action, we can hardly count on the results of regular practice.

Historical strictness must not quietly become a modern empirical law claiming that one exception destroys experience. James’s chapter uses arguments, examples, and borrowed judgements from his period. Its confidence about the nervous system and its severe evaluation are not findings from Lally’s study. We read the book here as an educational position from the late nineteenth century, rather than as guidance on treatment or a precise account of an individual’s brain.

The comparison reveals different questions. James seeks to support a resolve to use opportunities for action. Lally and colleagues study changes in self-reported automaticity and discuss missed occasions in a particular sample. We cannot say that the modern study tested James’s entire philosophy and definitively disproved it. We can say that the contemporary evidence read here does not support an unconditional claim that a single missed opportunity resets everything.

Marina can retain a useful part of the strict argument: the next available observation matters, and she need not keep postponing it until an ideal day. She does not have to accept a global judgement against herself for yesterday’s gap. Respect for a historical source permits examination of its limits. It does not require repeating every norm and image as if educational rhetoric and the measurement of automaticity were the same thing.

VII. Returning can be linked to a noticeable situation

A general decision to continue leaves a practical question: when will it happen? Research on implementation intentions distinguishes a desired goal from a planned response to a particular situation. In the author abstract of Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran’s meta-analysis, specifying conditions and action is described as helping goal attainment across studies. An average finding neither guarantees one person’s success nor establishes the effectiveness of our exercise.

Marina might choose the next ordinary opportunity: after arriving home, provided there is still enough daylight and observing is safe, she will open her existing notebook and make one informative entry. The situation must be available and the response feasible. Requiring herself to observe birds at any moment after supper would be unhelpful if it is then dark or the courtyard is closed.

This plan does not have to compensate for the missed occasion. Two entries today will not create an accurate observation of yesterday evening. If today’s entry requires extra time only to repay an imagined debt to the calendar, that demand may make returning harder. This is editorial reasoning about proportion, rather than evidence that doubling an amount is always harmful. Compensation really is needed in some activities, but its purpose must be specified separately.

After acting, she can record the new result while leaving yesterday’s gap. Her history becomes a sequence of actual actions that includes both a missed occasion and a return. At the next difficulty, she can clarify the plan’s conditions rather than automatically increase a punishment. A plan addresses a manageable beginning; it does not replace endorsement of the goal, resources for performing it, or assessment of what the action is expected to achieve.

VIII. The cause may change the form of continuing

A missed occasion may arise from a single circumstance: there was no time or daylight at the relevant moment. Sometimes it reveals a recurring mismatch between a chosen form and everyday life. If Marina gets home too late to observe every evening, her evening requirement fits the conditions poorly. Greater insistence will not create daylight. She can change the time, place, or available task.

Another question concerns present endorsement of the goal itself. Richard Ryan and Edward Deci’s self-determination theory distinguishes an action a person endorses from one experienced primarily as pressure. An endorsed activity can still be difficult and need not be enjoyable every day. A single missed occasion cannot determine a person’s type of motivation or establish that a goal is no longer wanted.

Marina can examine specific reasons. Does she still want to learn about birds? Does her current method help? How much time is she willing to give it alongside other activities? Two more attentive observations a week may be more suitable. Alternatively, a brief daily activity may matter to her, and moving it to the morning may suffice. The article’s sources do not establish which frequency is best for her; the choice depends on the practice’s purpose and the conditions available.

Repeated missed occasions deserve attention because they supply new information. That does not mean conducting a complete analysis of one’s personality every time. It may be enough to notice a recurring fact and check the corresponding condition. If the activity is no longer endorsed, the option of ending it remains. Continuing makes sense as a chosen action; the existence of earlier records does not oblige Marina to add new ones throughout her life.

IX. Where a private trial is insufficient

Marina’s story concerns voluntary observation, where a missed occasion leaves missing data. Other routines have different consequences. A procedure not performed on time may affect treatment, equipment, an agreement, or another person’s safety. Research on everyday automaticity cannot establish whether such omissions are acceptable or how they should be addressed.

Where a binding instruction, professional recommendation, or agreed standard applies, returning needs assessment within that context. This article does not suggest independently changing doses, treatment schedules, or safety requirements. Necessary information should come from an appropriate competent source. This limit concerns the scope of the evidence, rather than an assumption that every everyday activity is dangerous.

In relationships with others, accumulated experience does not remove the consequences of an absent action either. If Marina promised to send her records to a group by a certain time, participants may have been waiting. Her earlier useful work remains, but it does not replace the missed delivery. An accurate message and a discussion of the future agreement are needed. She cannot decide for others that they must regard the omission as insignificant.

These distinctions preserve proportion. One gap does not justify devaluing a person and their entire past. It may still have particular consequences that need attention. We can acknowledge those while continuing to use retained experience. There is no need to choose between complete self-condemnation and an assertion that nothing happened. Assessment depends on which action is missing and who relies on it.

X. The history continues with its gap intact

Let us return to Marina. She leaves the blank date, keeps her earlier pages, and finds the next available opportunity to observe. Before beginning she checks for daylight, her field guide, and enough time. Afterwards she sees a particular result: she identified one species, while another remains uncertain. This provides more information about current action than a decision to delete the entire list for a new, flawless start.

If she returns successfully, the missed occasion does not vanish from the history. It ceases to be the only basis for assessing the practice. There are now earlier observations, a missing entry, and a new action. She can consider them separately without making calendar continuity a proof of personal worth. The content of her records and the suitability of her chosen routine remain open to further assessment.

If she cannot begin, that difficulty matters too. She can clarify the situation, reduce the task to a feasible form, move its timing, or choose a pause. Such changes prove neither a complete reset nor guaranteed preservation of automaticity. They show that future action depends on present conditions. Earlier experience can help her understand those conditions without being expected to provide the entire answer beforehand.

It is more useful to consider one missed occasion as a limited fact with its own consequences. The sources support caution about its significance, rather than universal optimism. Marina does not have to earn the right to open an earlier entry through a perfect sequence of new days. She can decide why she continues, what remains, what has actually been lost, and which next action is presently available. Her answer may include continuing, changing the form, or ending the activity she chose.

What this means in practice

For one voluntary, safe practice, a small editorial trial may help. It is not a tested research method or a standard for returning after every kind of interruption.

First identify the absent action: for example, no entry was made yesterday. Separately note a particular loss: that date’s observation is now unknown. Then examine the results that are actually available: pages, materials, and skills that can be checked through action. Do not infer either their disappearance or their complete preservation from the calendar alone.

Check the next suitable situation and the means of performing the task. Choose an action with a clear ending that fits your current goal and conditions. One informative entry might suffice; neither the number nor the size is universal. Do not automatically increase the amount to restore a perfect sequence. If there is a real obligation to make up for an omission, identify it separately.

After the attempt, record the observable result and any difficulty. If the same obstacle recurs, reconsider the relevant condition. You can choose a time for a brief review of the routine so that it does not become a daily examination of personal worth. If the practice is no longer needed or is currently unavailable, change and a pause remain possible.

Treatment, safety, and obligations to other people have their own rules and need competent information. This trial does not replace them. Its modest purpose is to help distinguish a missed occasion, an existing result, and current conditions for the next action.

Key quotation

> *some missed opportunities will not derail the process*

Phillippa Lally and colleagues, *How Are Habits Formed* (2010), discussion, p. 1007. The context concerns isolated missed opportunities in a study of self-reported automaticity. The authors' qualification about the small number of such cases rules out a promise that every interruption produces no loss.

Connections between traditions

1. **Consistency and empirical caution.** James values regularly using opportunities for action. Lally and colleagues investigate a specific trajectory of automaticity. A shared interest in repetition does not make a historical educational argument and a contemporary model the same kind of evidence.

2. **Habit and product.** Wood and Rünger's review helps us consider how context initiates a response. Marina's records remain an external product. These objects are related, but the existence of one cannot automatically establish the condition of the other.

3. **Endorsement and difficulty.** Ryan and Deci distinguish autonomous endorsement from pressure. An unpleasant evening or a missed occasion does not by itself identify motivation; voluntary action does not require constant enjoyment.

4. **Goal and initiation plan.** Gollwitzer and Sheeran relate specifying a situation and response to goal attainment. A return plan identifies an available moment without deciding whether the practice itself is wanted.

5. **Steadiness and revision.** Retaining earlier experience allows present conditions to change. This is an editorial comparison of the sources; they do not establish one universal technique for returning to every activity.

Sources

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2. Wood, W.; Rünger, D. *Psychology of Habit*. Annual Review of Psychology 67 (2016), 289–314. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033417. University copy. The preliminary 2015 Review in Advance version was used: introduction, automaticity, and selected material on formation, goal inferences, and changing habits.

3. Ryan, R. M.; Deci, E. L. *Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being*. American Psychologist 55 (2000), 68–78. DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68. Author copy. The abstract, introduction, and selected discussions of autonomy and regulation were used; the whole text was not read.

4. Gollwitzer, P. M.; Sheeran, P. *Implementation Intentions and Goal Achievement: A Meta-analysis of Effects and Processes*. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38 (2006), 69–119. DOI: 10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38002-1. Author abstract and publisher preview. The abstract and available introduction and conclusion material were used; full methods and tables were not read.

5. James, W. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. First published 1899; transcription of the Henry Holt 1925 printing. Chapter VIII on habit. Relevant paragraphs and their surrounding context were used; historical norms were not adopted as contemporary experimental findings.

Tags

habit, missed occasion, repetition, consistency, experience, learning, automaticity, context, returning, pause, continuation, observation, result, calendar, conditions, voluntary action, autonomy, self-determination, goal, intention, planning, self-regulation, practice, proportion, responsibility, limitations, William James, Phillippa Lally, Wendy Wood, United Wisdom

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