

Using Data to Hack My Habits and Whip Up My Willpower



Show-and-Tell Session
Quantified Self Conference
May 2013

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The Experiment

Starting Point (2007)

- Age: 57
- Diet: typical American
- Weight: 190 lb / 86 kg
- Activity: sedentary
- Workouts: zero

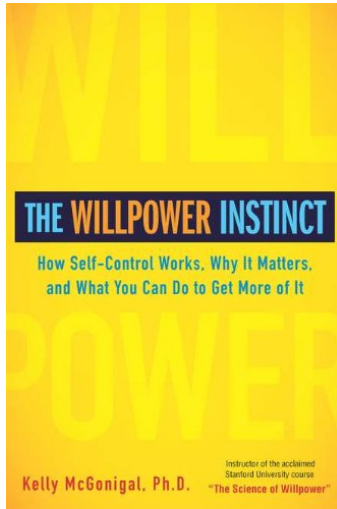


My 4-Step Approach

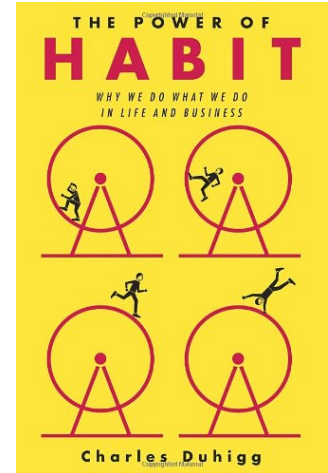
1. Learn
2. Model
3. Track
4. Hack

Learn

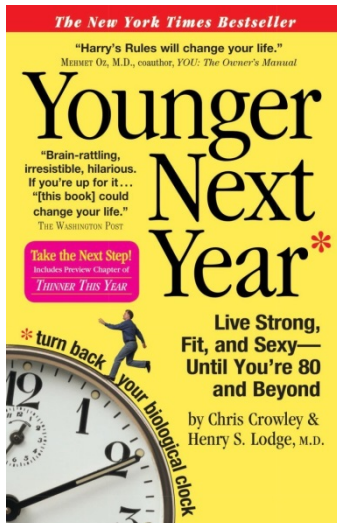
The Willpower Instinct Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.



The Power of Habit Charles Duhigg



Younger Next Year Chris Crowley & Henry S. Lodge, M.D.

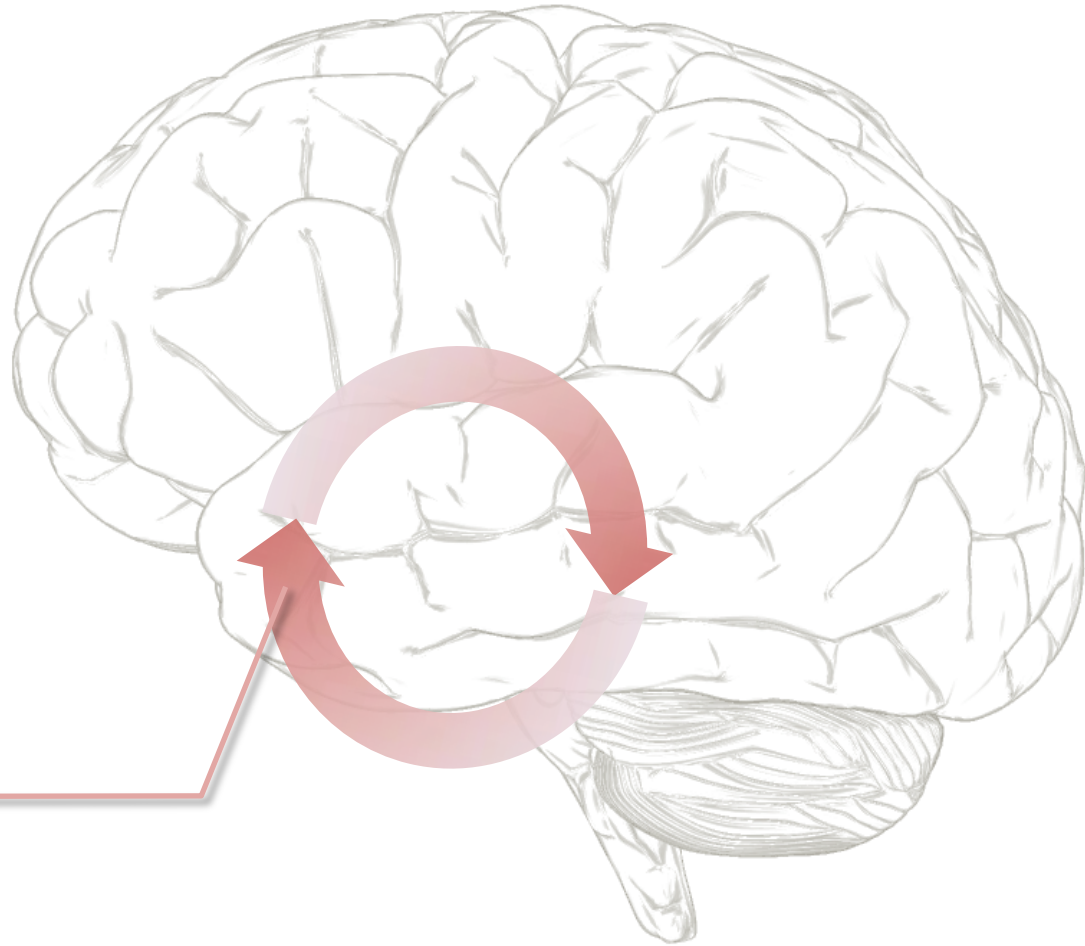


Model: My Brain

(Oversimplified, But It Works for Me)

PRIMITIVE Loop

- Found in all animals
- Short-term rewards
- Unconscious habits
- “I want that NOW”



Model: My Brain

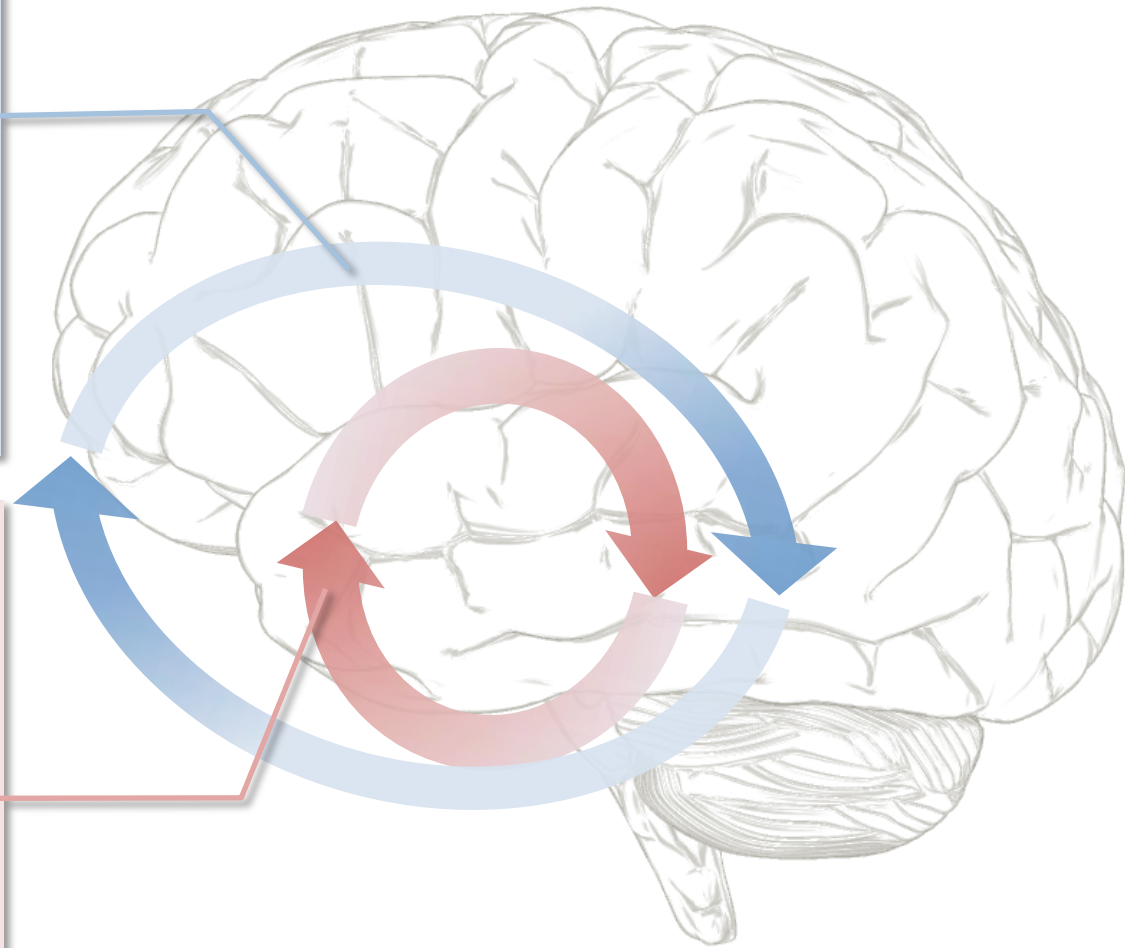
(Oversimplified, But It Works for Me)

ADVANCED Loop

- Sophisticated, humans only
 - Long-term goals
 - Conscious, willpower
 - “Pause and plan”

PRIMITIVE Loop

- Found in all animals
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- “I want that NOW”



Model: Self-Tracking

ADVANCED Loop

- Sophisticated, humans only
 - Long-term goals
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PRIMITIVE Loop

- Primitive, all animals
 - “I want it NOW”
 - Short-term rewards
- Automatic, unconscious

Self-Tracking:
Increasing my
awareness of
unconscious habits
and their effects

Model: Self-Hacking

ADVANCED Loop

- Sophisticated, humans only
 - Long-term goals
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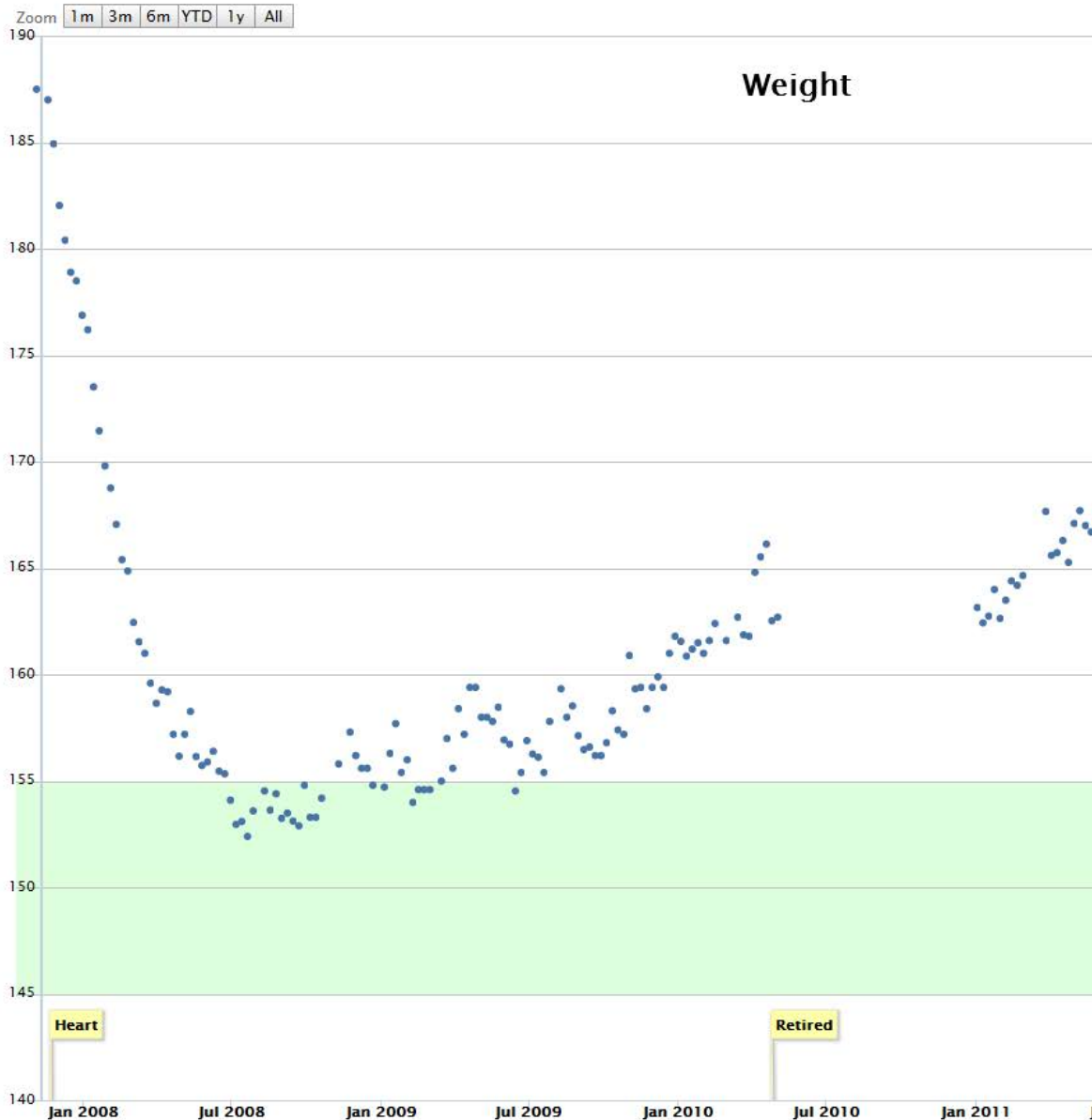
PRIMITIVE Loop

- Primitive, all animals
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 - Short-term rewards
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Self-Tracking:
Increasing my awareness of unconscious habits and their effects

Self-Hacking:
Using **knowledge** and **willpower** to create / hack into those habits

Habit 1: Nutrition / Weight

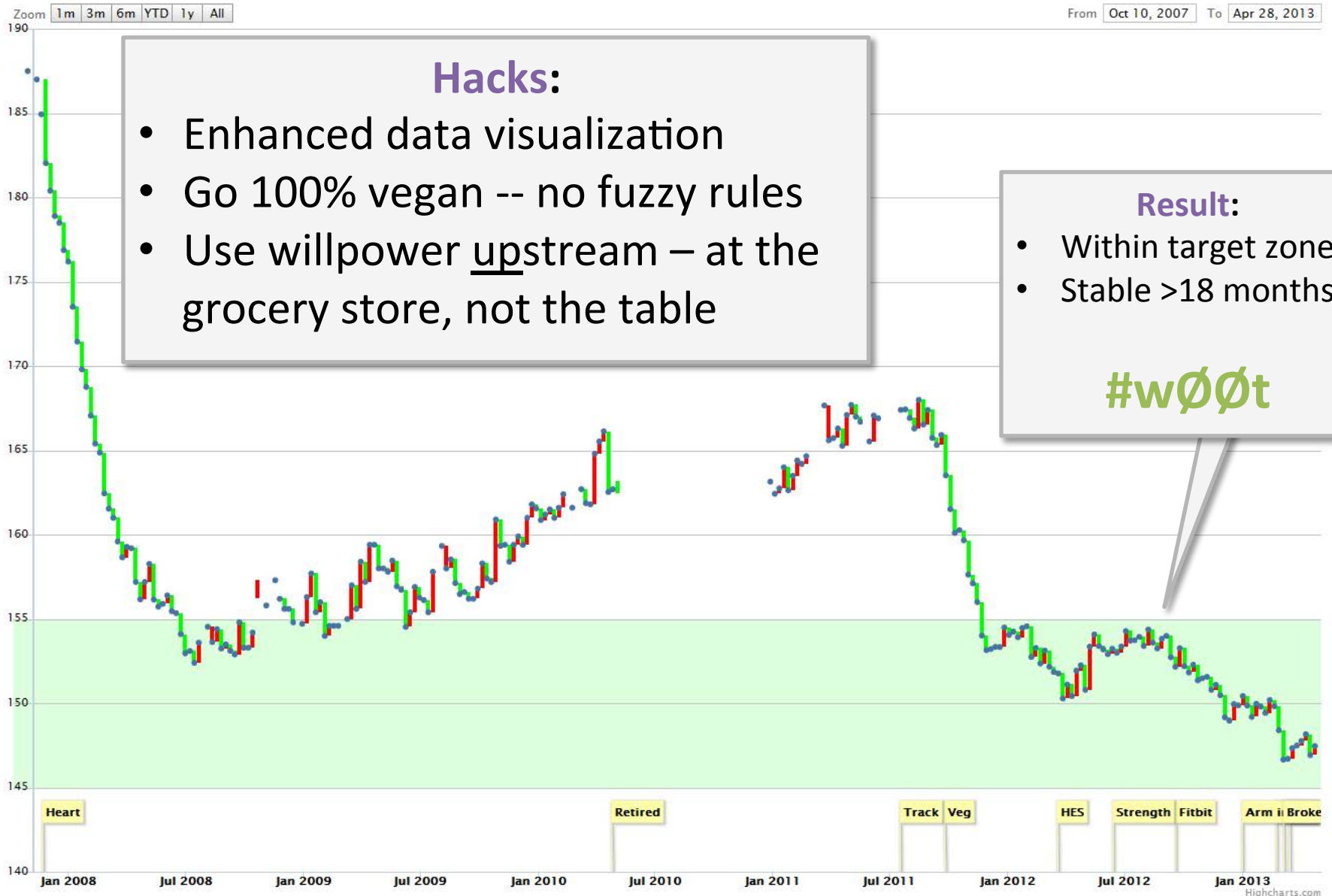


Low-fat diet + Basic Tracking

- Initial success
- Gradual backslide
- Tracking drop-off

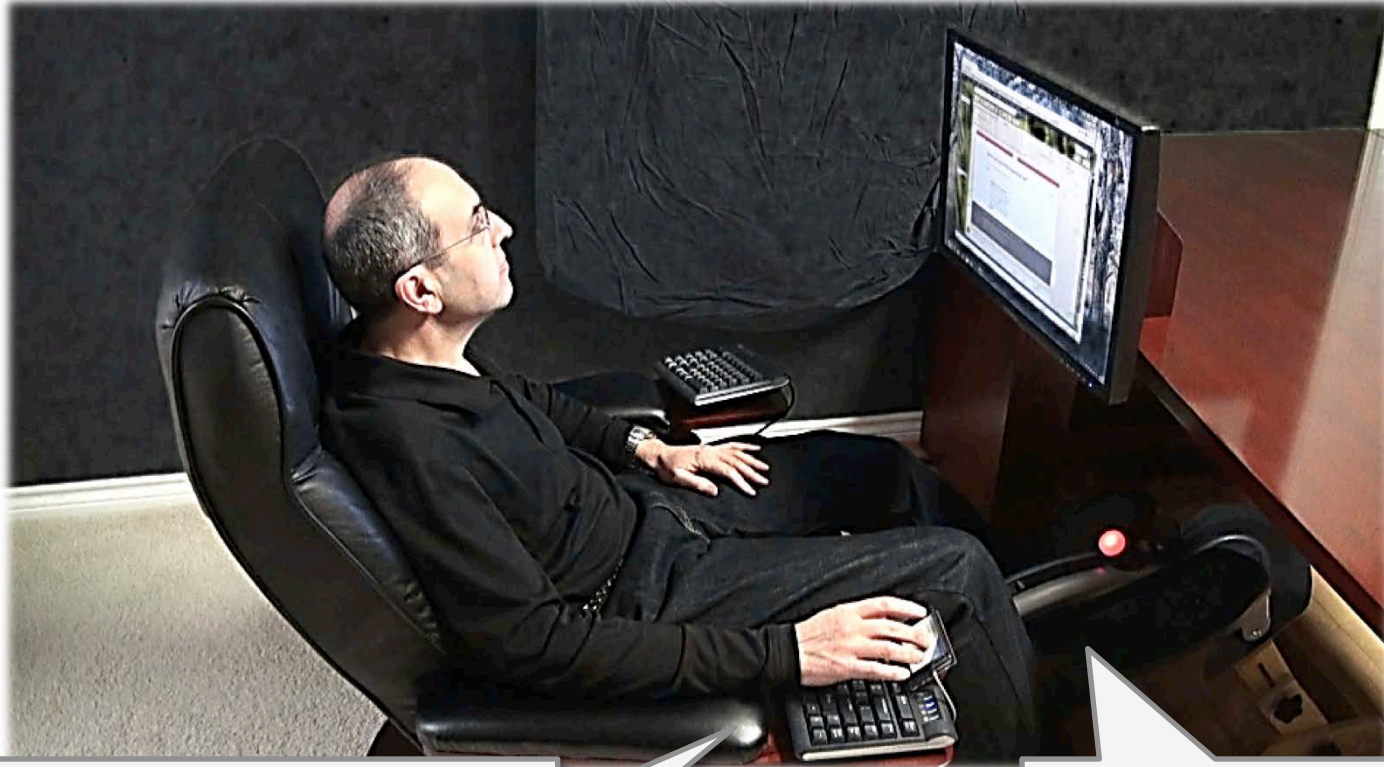
#FAIL

Habit 1: Nutrition / Weight



Habit 2: Activity

A Hack to Make 'Seat Time' More Active

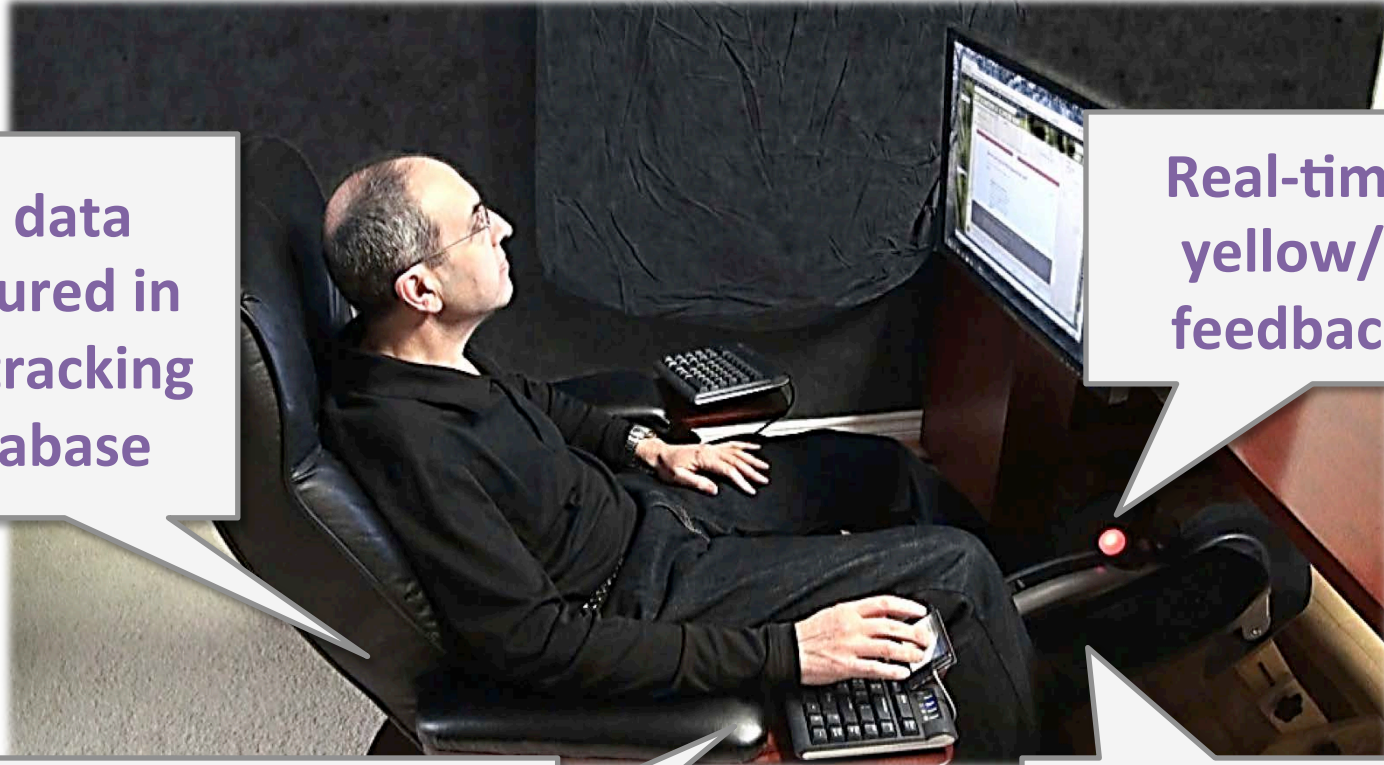


Hacked seat
Split keyboard in arms
Knees free to move

Attached
mini-elliptical
exerciser

Habit 2: Activity

A Hack to Make 'Seat Time' More Active



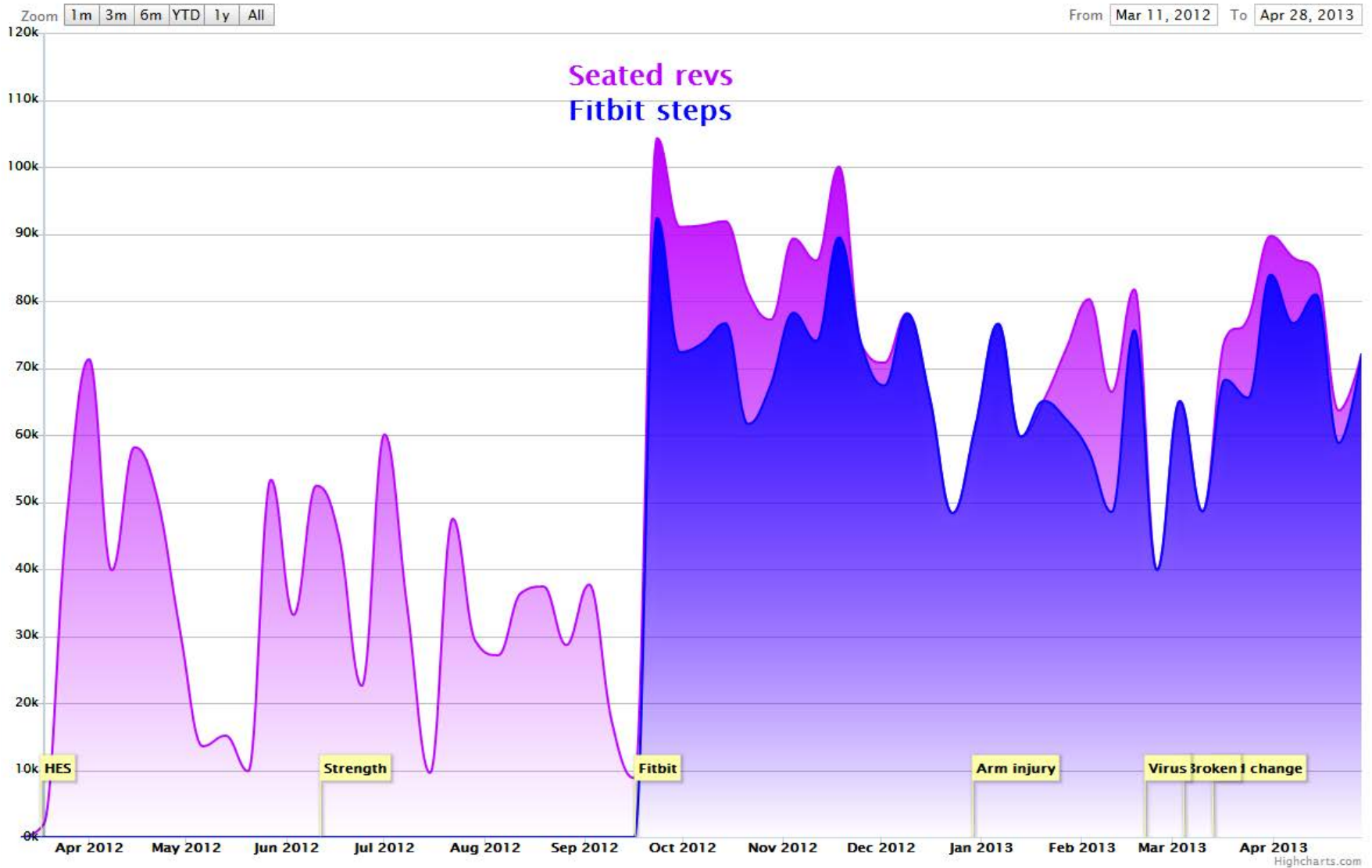
All data
captured in
self-tracking
database

Real-time red/
yellow/green
feedback light

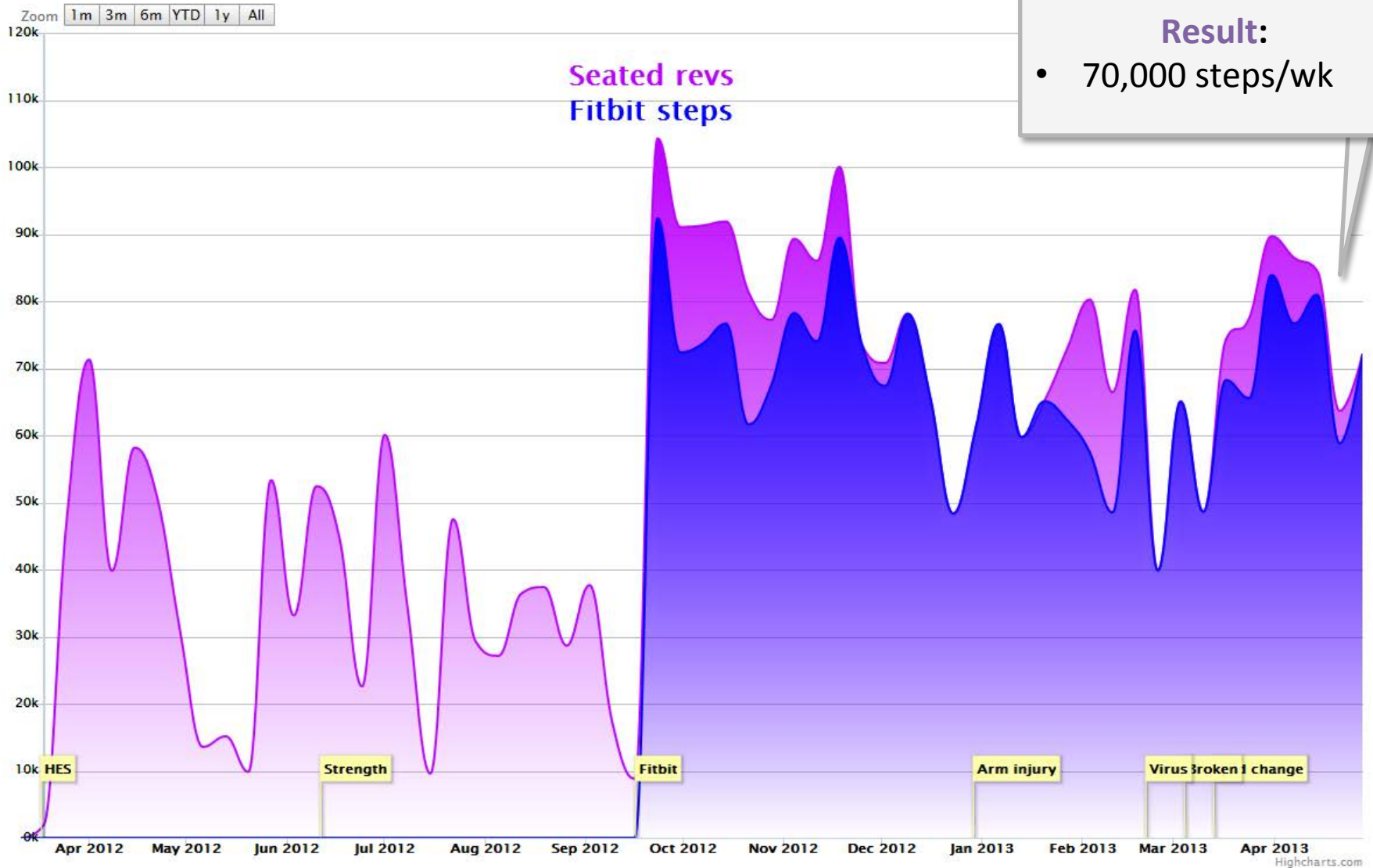
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Habit 2: Activity



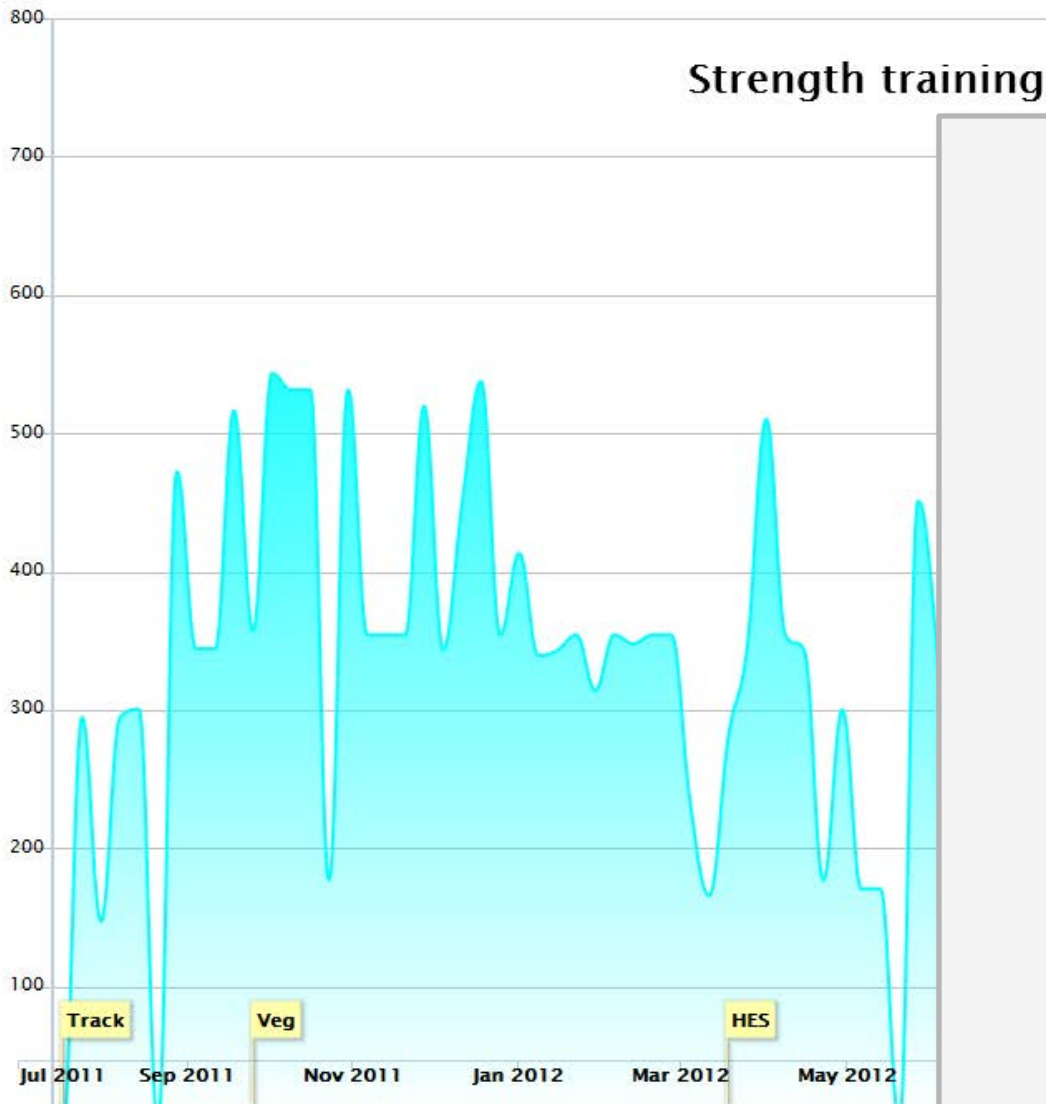
Habit 2: Activity



Habit 3: Strength Training

Zoom 1m 3m 6m YTD 1y All

From Jul 1, 2011 To Apr 28, 2013



**Perform strength training
after aerobic exercise +
Basic Tracking**

- Initial success
- Backslide after 3 months
- Compliance poor: most weeks, I skipped 1 or 2 of the 3 desired sessions

#FAIL

Habit 3: Strength Training

Hacks:

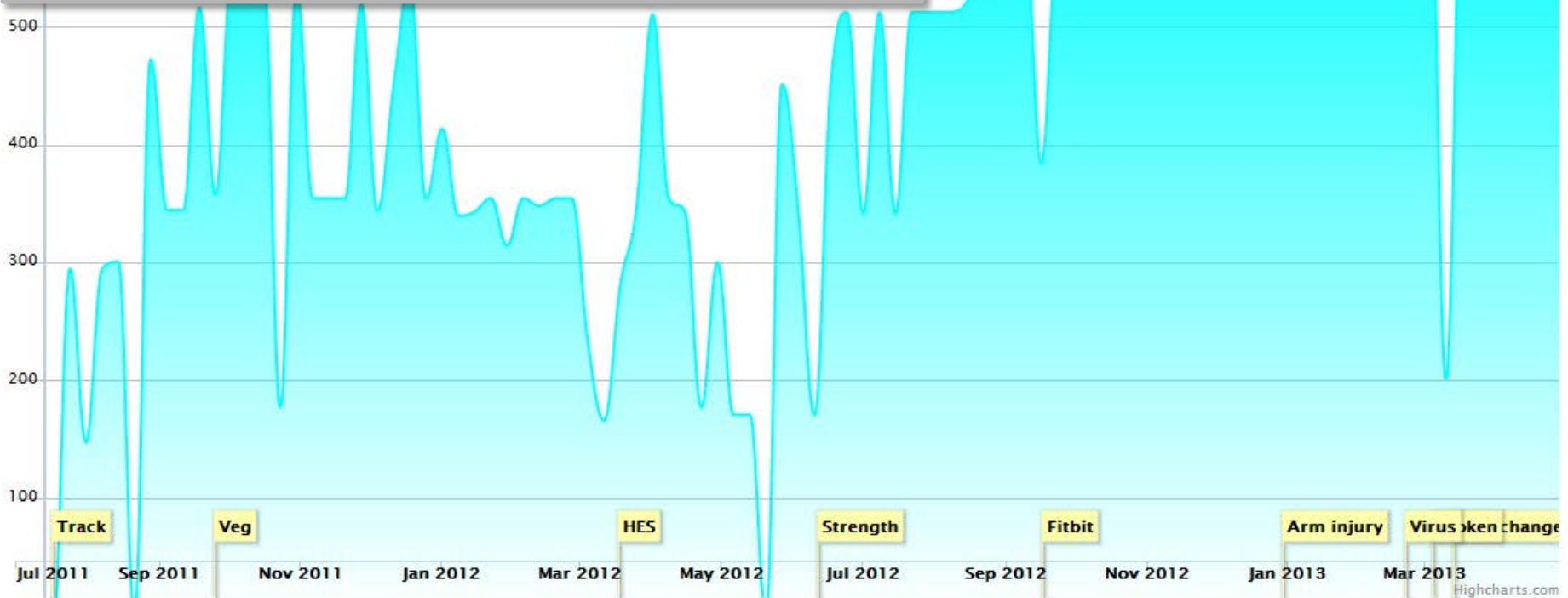
- Same 3 days every week
- Early AM (highest willpower)
- Eat 1 orange before workout (rising glucose increases willpower)
- Eat breakfast after session (reward)

Result:

- Increased strength
- 96% compliance

#wøøt

To Apr 28, 2013



Experimental Results

	Starting point (2007)	Present day (2013)
Nutrition / Weight	Unhealthy American diet; 190 lb / 86 kg	100% plant- based diet; 147 lb / 67 kg
Activity	Sedentary	5 miles / 8 km daily average
Strength	Zero workouts	3 workouts/wk 96% compliance

What Did I Learn?

Life-long habits **can** be **changed**!



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Life-long habits can be changed!

Learn some **science**,
but beware of its **limitations**.



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Even life-long habits can be changed!

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but beware of its limitations.

Make a **mental model** of
willpower and **habit mechanisms**.



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Learn some science,
but beware of its limitations.

Make a mental model of
willpower and habit mechanisms.

Expect first attempts to fail.

Keep iterating through **track-hack cycles**.



Thanks for listening!

Questions and Discussion

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