

Breaking a Habit

Most people have "bad" habits they would like to change. Yet, wanting to change a habit and actually doing it takes planning and focus.

Learning more about what habits are, what can cause them and how to change them can provide the power to end negative patterns of behavior.

Defining the Habit

Habits are conditioned repetitive actions someone does without thinking. They can be good, such as brushing one's teeth twice a day or turning off the lights when leaving a room. They can also be bad, like reaching for a cigarette whenever enjoying a cup of coffee or snacking while watching television.

Habits are automatic responses that become regular activities in people's lives because the action initially brought some form of pleasure or satisfaction. Once ingrained, bad habits can become a source of pain.

Breaking a bad habit is possible, but it takes work and dedication. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are my daily habits, both good and bad?
- Which habits have become a burden or pose a health problem?
- What habits do I really want to change?

Diagnosing the habit:

- Make a list, and identify all bad habits.
- Pick one bad habit to focus energy on stopping.
- Think about the habit and how it manifests itself in your life.
- Keep notes on when the habit occurs and what events lead up to it happening.
- Once you recognize what is reinforcing the habit, decide how to address its reasons for existing.
- Ask yourself: Why do I cling to this habit? What will I lose if I give it up? Will I feel better if I do something different?
- Use positive thinking instead of feeling bad or weak because of the habit; think of the habit as an unconscious choice that has become ingrained over time.
- Recognize that all humans have bad habits; once recognized, it is possible to make the choice to change a habit.

Six Methods to Breaking a Bad Habit

1. **Remove, delay or avoid the habit's reinforcement:** For example, imagine a student does not like studying, so he interrupts his study sessions with frequent coffee breaks. To delay the time between the impulse and reward (wanting the coffee and drinking the coffee), he can try studying in places

where coffee is not allowed. Breaking the reinforcement of the habit is vital, but be sure not to substitute other bad habits. For example, instead of eating candy or smoking to fill the coffee void, the student could chew sugarless gum.

2. **Avoid temptation:** Avoid cues that trigger the bad habit. If someone wants to cut down on snacking, remove the amount of unhealthy snacks, such as candy, chips, and ice cream. Avoid situations that lead to the habit.
3. **Create a new response:** Forming a new, better habit in response to the old stimulus is a productive method for eliminating bad habits. For example, say a mother is constantly telling the kids to take off their muddy shoes before entering the house, but they continually forget to do so until scolded. The scolding conditions the children to take off their shoes. Instead of scolding the kids, tell them to put their shoes back on, go outside, come in the house again and take off their shoes. Soon, the act of coming in the door, and not the scolding, becomes their cue to remove muddy shoes.
4. **Try the feedback and visualization method:** Look closely at the habit, and track how often it occurs. Become more aware of the scope and impact of the habit. Making a rational decision to change is a natural next step. Do this by visualizing yourself free of your bad habit and being successful at breaking the bad habit.
5. **Use prompts:** Use reminders to help you break the pattern by creating positive triggers and alerts to keep you on track. If you trying to exercise more, you could put your running shoes at the side of your bed so you see them first thing in the morning, or put an alert on your phone to leave for the gym.
6. **Get support:** Having another person or program in place to reinforce good behavior can help keep you on track. Consider getting a running buddy or joining a group that supports other individuals that are trying to break similar bad habits.

Stay Optimistic and Realistic

Change is hard; getting rid of old habits requires persistence and perseverance. Most people have had their bad habits for a long time. They would not be bad habits if they were easy to quit, so any frustration and discouragement a person feels when trying to stop them is natural.

Occasionally giving into temptation and going back to an old habit only means that you have experienced a minor setback or relapse. Remember that tomorrow is another day, start fresh and move toward kicking the habit again.

There are no overnight cures for bad habits. The process takes time, but the reward at the end of the struggle is more than worth it. When discouraged, try to imagine the freedom of no longer being tied to a behavior that makes you feel bad. Positive thoughts provide the courage to keep trying.

Every day a person avoids giving in to an old habit is a step toward changing it.

Resources

- U.S. National Library of Medicine: www.nlm.nih.gov
- Smokefree.gov: www.smokefree.gov
- Debtors Anonymous: www.debtorsanonymous.org
- Gamblers Anonymous: www.gamblersanonymous.org
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA): www.aa.org
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: www.niaaa.nih.gov

Here when you need us.

Call: 844-207-5465

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: LivingME

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