

Breaking A Bad Habit

Most of us have "bad" habits we 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 give you the power to end these negative patterns of behavior.

Defining the Habit

Habits are conditioned repetitive actions we do without thinking. They can be good, such as brushing your teeth twice a day or turning off the lights when leaving a room, and they can be bad, like reaching for a cigarette with every cup of coffee you drink or snacking while watching television. Habits are automatic responses that become regular activities in our lives because they initially brought us some form of pleasure or satisfaction. Once ingrained, bad habits can become a source of pain that we feel we may never be able to stop.

Breaking a bad habit is possible but it will take work and dedication. First, look at your average day and ask yourself the following questions:

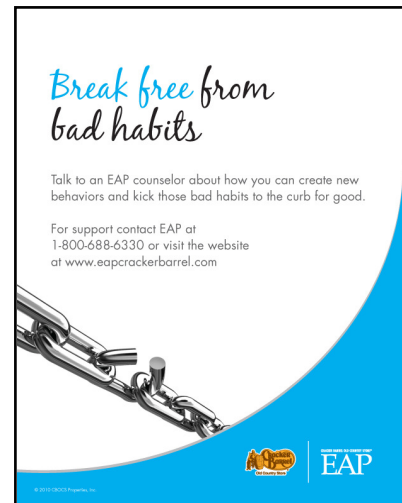
- What are your daily habits, both good and bad?
- Which habits have become a burden or pose a health problem?
- What habits do you really want to change?

Now it is time to diagnose your habit.

- Make a list and pick one bad habit on which to focus your energy. Once you break the first habit, you can focus on another.
- Think about the habit you are trying to break and how it manifests itself in your life. Write down when the habit occurs and what events lead up to it happening. Once you determine what is reinforcing the habit, you can decide how to address its reasons for existing.
- Ask yourself some questions: 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 your habit, think of your habit as an unconscious choice that has become ingrained over time. All humans have bad habits; once you take a conscious look at yours, you can make the choice to change it.

Six Methods to Help Break a Bad Habit

- 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 like the school library. 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 should chew sugarless gum.

- Avoid temptation. Avoid cues that trigger the bad habit. If you want to cut down on snacking, remove everything around you that has to do with snacking, such as candy, chips and ice cream. Also, avoid the situations that lead to the habit; stay away from other people having snacks and avoid watching television. Try taking a walk, calling a friend or doing something that keeps your mind elsewhere. Again, be careful not to substitute the old bad habit with a new bad habit.
- Create a new response. Forming a new, better habit in response to the old stimulus is a productive method for eliminating bad habits. Maybe you are constantly telling your kids to take off their muddy shoes before entering the house, but they continually forget to do so until you scold them. The scolding has become the cue for them to take off their shoes. Instead of scolding your kids tell them to put their shoes back on, go outside, come in the house again and then take off their shoes. Soon, the act of coming in the door, not the scolding, will be their cue to remove their muddy shoes.
- Try the *negative practice* method. This method involves having a person do something until it gets very uncomfortable or boring. Perhaps you whistle while you are working and it annoys your fellow workers. To break the habit you might try whistling continually while on your way to work. Your lips will get tired and you will be sick of whistling when you arrive at work. This method relies on the fact that when most people overindulge in something they grow tired of it. For example, eating steak every day normally kills a person's appetite for steak.
- Try the *feedback and visualization* method. Look closely at your habit and track how often you indulge it, making yourself more aware of the scope and impact of the habit in your life. Making a rational decision to change will be a natural next step. Do this by visualizing yourself free of your bad habit. Picture yourself practicing new habits (for example, see yourself as slimmer or as a non-smoker), and think of yourself as having been successful at breaking the bad habit.
- Exercise. Exercising is a great way to break bad habits because it makes you feel better about yourself. The better you feel about yourself the more confident you will be that you can end your bad habits. It does not have to be a strenuous exercise; even a brisk walk can make you feel better. You will have more energy and a new perspective on life just from getting up and moving around.

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 wouldn't be bad habits if

they were easy to quit, so any frustration and discouragement you feel when trying to stop them is natural. If you occasionally give into temptation and go back to your old habit, you have only lost a battle and not the war. Remember that tomorrow is another day, when you can start kicking the habit again.

There are no overnight cures for bad habits. The process takes time, but the reward at the end of your struggles is more than worth it. When you get discouraged, try to imagine the freedom you will feel when you are no longer tied to a behavior that makes you feel bad. Positive thoughts give you the courage to keep trying. And every day you avoid giving in to your old habit is a step toward changing it.