

Breaking Bad Habits

Do you have a bad habit that needs breaking?

Would you like to understand the triggers behind your bad habits and gain control?

Habits Defined

A habit is any acquired behaviour which is repeated over time. Habits are automatic. Habits can be helpful or unhelpful in nature. A habit is performed without conscious awareness.

Every habit you have — good or bad — follows the same 3-step pattern.

- Reminder (the trigger that initiates the behavior)
- Routine (the behavior itself; the action you take)
- Reward (the benefit you gain from doing the behavior)

Positive Habits versus Negative Habits

A positive habit such as great time management, can produce desirable and constructive outcomes. As a result, we are more likely to repeat the same behaviour because it is positively reinforced. We are rewarded for doing it!

A negative habit on the other hand, can serve as a hindrance. It prevents us from getting on with our day and may have a negative impact on us and the people around us.

The trick to effectively breaking a bad habit is to keep your conscious brain engaged with the problem as long as you can.

Here are some examples of negative habits:

- Disorganisation
- Seeking attention
- Negative Thinking
- Procrastination
- Making rash decisions
- Lifestyle choices, such as alcohol use
- Engaging in self-sabotage
- Being a perfectionist

- Making poor health choices, such as eating habits
- Nail-biting, fidgeting, restlessness
- Being late for work or meetings
- Gossiping

Are Bad Habits Hard to Break?

The simple answer is YES. The main reason behind this occurrence is that our “cognitive scripts” which consist of our unconscious, automatic thoughts and core beliefs, are activated every time we engage in any behaviour. Thoughts precede behaviours.

Breaking a bad habit is not easy. Unless you truly understand the root of the problem, you won't be able to devise a strategy to get rid of it. Take a cold hard look at your bad habit. Following are some questions you should seriously consider answering:

- When did you acquire the habit?
- Why is it that you have the habit? / How did you acquire the habit?
- What is the need that it fulfills?
- How bad do you want to get rid of the habit?
- How would you benefit from getting rid of the habit?

Automatic thoughts are based on previous experiences. Any situation we've encountered many times before will produce ingrained behaviours. We don't consciously think about what we're doing and therefore our actions have become habitual.

Bad habits are hard to break simply because we might find them to be enjoyable. Consequently, we are likely to repeat them. There is a pay-off.

From a neuropsychological perspective, when we engage in pleasurable activities, our brains will release a neurotransmitter called dopamine, a chemical that activates the brain's reward centre. This in turn, will encourage us to do those things again, and the activity becomes a habit.



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1300 our eap
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Breaking Bad Habits

How do I break a bad habit?

1. Admit that you have a problem

Acknowledging that you have a negative habit that needs breaking, is essential and takes great courage. Consider the impact of your behaviour and what life would look like without this problem. This can be achieved by doing a decisional matrix for your bad habit. In the decisional matrix you are exploring the costs and benefits of the bad habit followed by the costs and benefits of giving it up.

example:

Bad habits

Costs

- _____
- _____
- _____

Benefits

- _____
- _____
- _____

Giving it up

Costs

- _____
- _____
- _____

Benefits

- _____
- _____
- _____

2. Identify your Triggers

- People: identify people that influence you in maintaining your bad habit
- Places: identify the places in which you practice your bad habit
- Times: Identify the times in which you practice your bad habit

Once you have identified your triggers in those three domains, it is important that you manipulate them. This will involve you actively manipulating your triggers by habit substitution.

This may involve:

- Changing your environment
- Not associating with people that reinforce your bad habit
- Doing something different during the times that you are triggered, eg. exercise, deep breathing, meditation

3. Develop an Action Plan

Once the triggers have been identified, you have already paved the road toward breaking your habit for good. Set a time frame in which you want to achieve your desired outcome, eg. 30 days. Commit to this time-frame.

4. Write a List of Substitute Behaviours

Examples include:

- If you overeat, find delicious healthy menus and eat at designated times
- If you procrastinate, prioritise by doing the hard tasks first.
- If you gossip, replace all gossip with praise talk
- If you associate with negative people who impact your mood, develop a new social group of positive people
- If you have a smoking craving, take yourself for a jog

5. Seek Support

This can be both informal and formal support. Whilst you are creating changes for yourself, it is important that you surround yourself with people who support your efforts in breaking your bad habit. This will serve as a motivating factor and will contribute to your overall success in achieving your desired outcome.

6. Never Give Up

Persevere with your efforts and reward yourself for every milestone you make. Celebrate your achievements. Remember that lapses are common; don't give up trying to give up.

References

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A Word of Caution

Substance abuse, gambling, eating disorders, self-destructive behaviours and self-harming are **not** habits.

These are defined as addictions and mental health concerns that require help from a health professional.

- Seek support from an EAP Consultant
- Consult your Doctor
- Explore helpful resources and link in to professional services

