

Strategies for Overcoming Bad Habits

Even the most virtuous of us has a bad habit or two that they would like to break.

Much of our behaviour takes the shape of repetitive actions such as making and drinking coffee in the morning. We refer to these repeated behaviours as habits.

A habit, according to The Concise Dictionary Of Psychology, is a learned response to a given situation which occurs in such a regular fashion that it appears to be virtually automatic.

Habits and bad habits

When is a habit a bad habit? When a habit provides positive outcomes in the present but detrimental outcomes in the long run, one can speak of a 'bad habit'.

Bad habits in Australia. In a 2014 survey of more than 1000 Australians:

- Respondents listed their worst personal habits as procrastinating, eating junk food, swearing, spending too much time online, drinking too much alcohol and smoking.
- Most annoying bad habits viewed in others were texting while driving, lying, drug taking, swearing and gossiping.
- Most respondents said they started their habit out of boredom, followed by peer pressure and the availability of the habit.
- Sixty per cent of participants said they knew someone seriously affected by a bad habit, and almost half were worried about their own welfare.

Consequences of bad habits

Research shows our bad habits often have unwanted impact on ourselves and others. A few examples:

- Feelings of guilt and shame
- Bad habits costs Australians on average almost \$4000 per person per year (for example due to buying cigarettes)
- Chronic diseases which cause 90 per cent of all death and disability in Australia (like heart disease, cancer, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) can be traced back to the health risks caused by our bad habits such as smoking, physical inactivity, poor nutrition and harmful use of alcohol.
- Drivers engaged in text messaging on a mobile phone are 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash or near crash event compared with non-distracted drivers.
- A longitudinal study found procrastinators are sicker, more stressed and does not perform as well as non-procrastinators.

Can bad habits be broken?

The short answer is "yes, bad habits can generally be broken". It is however important to distinguish between bad habits (behaviour we still can control) and addictions or compulsions (where control is no longer achievable without assistance).

There are a number of steps that can successfully assist you in breaking bad habits for the long term.

1. Plan

Know the consequences. List the current and future impacts and consequences of your bad habits for both yourself and others.



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Know the benefits. List the current and future benefits of breaking the bad habit, for both yourself and others.

Get motivated. Motivation is essential for behaviour change. A few simple strategies you can use to strengthen your motivation includes thinking positively, finding daily inspiration, rewarding yourself and joining a support group,

Compile a plan. Plan changes in easy steps over time.

- Define your goals. Write them down. Say how you plan to achieve them and by when.
- Keep it simple. Breaking bad habits should be one or two rules, not 20. Keep changes simple so they will be easier to adhere to.
- Replace what you lose. Your bad habits fulfill needs. Write down the benefits you currently get from your bad habit and make sure the new good habit addresses them.
- Target most important habits. Focus on the bad habits that are most important to break.
- Anticipate and mitigate. Identify and plan for situations that might undermine the changes you are trying to make.

Commit. Make a commitment to follow your plan and achieve your goals.

2. Do

Do it now. Put your plan into action. The best way to change habits in your life is to practice.

Get role models. Join groups and find mentors who have already adapted the habits you want to establish

3. Check

Chart your progress. Check how you're going against your plan.

Do vigilant monitoring. Research shows bad habits are controlled most effectively through spontaneous use of vigilant monitoring (thinking "don't do it," watching carefully for slipups).

4. Action

Take corrective action. If you find you are not sticking to your plan, take corrective action:

- Review your plan. Get yourself back on track. If initial goals were unrealistic, adapt them.
- Get out of hazard zones. Get yourself out of situations that can trigger your old habit.
- Dispute unhelpful thoughts. Ask yourself for undisputed evidence. Look for alternative explanations. Put things into perspective. Learn from unhelpful thoughts to achieve your goal.
- Distract yourself. Re-focus your attention on something else than the bad habit.

If you feel that a habit is taking more away from your life than adding to it, or are concerned about someone else, **Converge International** Consultants can provide you with support and strategies to assist you on your journey. Call **1300 687 327** to arrange an appointment.

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