

B R E A K I N G

BAD HABITS

We all have habits. Some are good (for example, brushing your teeth before bed), while others can be annoying or even harmful, such as biting your nails or mindlessly eating a pint of ice cream when you feel stressed. Individuals create habits by repeating certain behaviors until they become automatic. Habits free your brain to focus on more important decisions and activities.



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All habits, good and bad, develop essentially the same way. There is a cue, or something that triggers a behavior, the routine (the behavior itself) and the reward, which is the most important part.

When a behavior triggers the brain's reward center, it releases dopamine, a feel-good neurotransmitter. This is why it's easy to develop bad habits. In the short term, the behavior makes you feel good. Over time, however, the bad behavior becomes hardwired into your brain, and then you can't easily stop doing it.

It's important to recognize when bad habits cross the line and become an addiction. Addictions aren't just about drugs and alcohol; people also become addicted to caffeine, gambling, anger, food, the internet, sex, work and nicotine. Addiction is a disease, just like heart disease. If left untreated, an addiction can disrupt your life, work and relationships and cause long-term physical effects. Fortunately, there are effective treatments for addictions.

Breaking bad habits

There is no one single best way to break bad habits; however, it is possible to break even the most deeply entrenched habits if you put your mind to it. Here are a few helpful tips for breaking bad habits.

Become mindful. If your goal is to quit smoking, for example, become aware of what's going on in your mind and body at the moment you smoke or experience the urge to smoke. Studies show that mindfulness can even help people quit smoking — one of the hardest habits to break.

Practice self-control. You can build your self-control through practice. Start with something that's easy for you, and then once you've mastered that behavior, move on to a more challenging behavior.

Become a detective. By analyzing your habits, you can identify your triggers and substitute unwanted rewards with different ones.

Make if-then plans. If you know you tend to engage in bad habits in certain situations, decide ahead of time what you will do instead the next time you face this challenge.

Use an app. Google the bad habit you want to break (or a good habit you want to develop) and you'll probably find there's an app for that! An app can help you identify triggers and schedule the time you need to develop positive habits. Seeing your progress will keep you motivated to stay the course.

DO ONE THING

Ask for help if you, or those who care about you, think your bad habit might actually be an addiction. Addictions can negatively affect your health, work or relationships. A healthcare provider can help you understand the difference and recommend a course of action.



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