



Employee NEWSLETTER

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10 Steps to Breaking a Bad Habit

You have to finish an important project in two hours, so you reflexively head to the snack machine for a high calorie treat. You're stuck in traffic with an important meeting coming up, and you start biting your nails to the bone. You know you should get to bed and get some sleep, but you can't seem to pull yourself away from the television. If any of this sounds familiar, you may be among the many Americans mired in a stress-producing bad habit.

A habit is a recurrent, often unconscious pattern of behavior. All people have habits, says Jim McGee, Ph.D., a psychologist who is an expert on habitual behavior.

"If we didn't have the natural tendency toward habit, our behavior would be chaotic and random," he says.

But even though habits are natural, bad habits can be self-destructive, experts say. Good habits such as exercising or talking with a friend can relieve stress in your life.

Bad habits can create everything from bad relationships to health problems. So why do we have bad habits?

They're unhealthy coping mechanisms that have an immediate payoff, says Dr. McGee.

"Biting nails has the short-term effect of reducing nervousness and anxiety, but the long-term effect is that it makes your nails look unappealing."

If a habit begins to interfere with your enjoyment of life, it's an indication that something must be changed. He also warns that using substances like nicotine or alcohol may result in a health-threatening addiction. In that case, professional help may be warranted.

If you're just dealing with an annoying habit, however, your impetus to change may be simple frustration: One day you wake up and are sick and tired of doing things the way you've been doing them. At that point, you're ready to move forward.

If you're tired of your chewed-on nails or the headaches that come from too much coffee, you may be ready to adopt a step-by-step action plan that includes the following:

Step 1: Define the habit.

Before you can change, you must identify the reason for the habit. Bad habits, from lateness to laziness, often serve a hidden purpose we don't recognize, such as avoiding hurt or disappointment or establishing control, experts say.

Step 2: Make a full commitment.

That's the advice of Neal L. Benowitz, M.D., a national expert on the effects of nicotine at the University of California at San Francisco. "One of the main predictors of success in changing any behavior is motivation," Dr. Benowitz says. "And it must come from within yourself."

Step 3: Set short- and long-term goals.

Do you want to finally lose that 25 pounds? Dr. McGee says you need to decide exactly what your ultimate goal is,

Continued on the next page.

Continued from the previous page.

and then break it down into small increments you can actually accomplish. "You're not going to lose 25 pounds the first week," he says, "maybe only 8 ounces."

Step 4: Define and eliminate your triggers.

Do business calls make you reach for a cigarette? Experts say that when quitting a bad habit, you need to set up situations in which the habit would be prohibited. Examples: Make calls from a smokeless environment; clear your pantry of junk food.

Step 5: Get support.

"Change is more fun and more likely to be successful if you have a partner," says Dr. McGee. Support can come in the form of an established group, like Weight Watchers, or from an understanding friend or mate. Telling someone about your commitment, says Dr. McGee, helps to make it stick.

Step 6: Replace a bad habit with a good one.

A good habit, like exercising or using relaxation techniques, can help you manage stress in a healthy way. If you want to cut back on a nighttime television habit, for instance, you might find it helpful to check out a gym instead, even if all you do is hang out the first few times.

Step 7: Use reinforcements.

Some people may need to create artificial roadblocks to keep themselves on target. The national group Action on Smoking and Health advises you to wrap your pack of cigarettes in cellophane and then put five rubber bands around it. The pack may be so tough to get into that you'll forgo some cigarettes rather than wrestle with the rubber bands and plastic.

Step 8: Give yourself rewards.

A weekend away? You'll certainly deserve one if you keep to your goals. But don't overdo it: Rewarding yourself with six chocolate bars for losing weight is counterproductive. Instead, reward yourself with new clothes.

Step 9: Accept plateaus.

According to Dr. McGee, behavior change follows a predictable curve, rising quickly at first, reaching a plateau, and then rising more slowly with still more plateaus. "You're going to get discouraged and want to quit because you're not making much progress," says Dr. McGee. "If you know to expect this, you'll be more prepared to stay with your goal."

Step 10: Be kind to yourself.

Having a bad habit doesn't make you a bad person. The more you tell yourself you are bad, the more likely you'll indulge your bad habit to relieve your stress.