

Breaking Bad Habits

by Michael J. Scales, D.C.

The Bad News

We do everything by habit. Whether we realize it or not, we have set behavioral patterns that are repeated day in and day out, most often on an unconscious level. Up to 90% of our normal behavior is based on habits. How we exercise, eat, sleep, and generally proceed through a typical day, are all behaviors that became habits at a very early age. Once ingrained in our daily routine, they become incredibly difficult to alter, and this is where the problem lies. Our inability to improve these behaviors causes us to suffer the consequence of their cumulative effects over the course of our lives. Many of us smoke, eat poorly, exercise sporadically, don't floss, have unprotected sex, **yet we have the knowledge that these activities are counter productive.** Why then do we continue behaviors that we KNOW are harmful and unhealthy? Why don't we go that little extra mile now to reap the benefits in the future? Is it just laziness? Is it just that we are overworked and exhausted, or is there more?

Most of the bad choices we make in our lives involves an immediate reward. Our addictions to sugar, caffeine, and tobacco for instance provide short-term enjoyable "rushes", but have cumulative negative effects. We often choose to live "in the now", even though we're likely to end up paying the price later. This "live for the moment" philosophy becomes even more powerful when the punishment is not a sure thing. For example, the negative effects of eating poorly, not exercising, and smoking take considerable time to accumulate, so this lack of immediate feedback reinforces our bad habits. We also try to fool ourselves by saying: "I only smoke a ½ pack a day," or "I need my bacon for protein."



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Nevertheless, our day-to-day bad choices have alarming results. For example, 1/3 of Americans are overweight costing \$100 billion each year in treatment related illnesses. **Our desire to take the path of least resistance is so strong that we continue our sometimes-destructive behavior even though we know, as in the case of smoking and overeating, it literally may kill us.** Seven of the top ten causes of death in America today is directly related to diet and lifestyle, specifically: **heart disease, cancer, lung disease, pneumonia, influenza, diabetes, kidney failure, and liver disease.**

The Good News

The great news is that you can reprogram yourself anytime you choose to do so. The key to breaking a bad habit and adopting a good one is to do so SLOWLY. Sudden changes may create withdrawal symptoms that will drive you right back to your vices. Because behaviors are mostly learned, they can also be unlearned. New strategies can

take us off autopilot and introduce ideas that we normally wouldn't consider.

So how long does it take to change a habit? The consensus is about three to four weeks for making small adjustments in your behavior. If you've been doing something repeatedly for 30 years, however, you may not be able to let go in a few short weeks.

Don't get discouraged by any small set backs as they are almost inevitable. As long as you know what your goal is and you maintain your perseverance, you will succeed.

Our Immediate Environment

It is important to assess your immediate environment including home, work, and the people you associate with. We often don't realize how much we are influenced by these factors. Repeated exposure to certain situations or people can promote the development of all sorts of unproductive habits. For example, smokers often have parents or friends who are also smokers. Being surrounded by people who smoke can eventually lead to adopting this behavior.

Unhealthy home or work environments may be a major source of stress that can lead to a loss of interest in responsibilities, procrastination, dissatisfaction, and eventual depression. Low-grade depression is widespread in the population with many people not realizing they have it. When people are depressed they have a tendency towards unhealthy behaviors.

In addition, social pressure and peer pressure can be as strong for adults as it is for children. Quite often in a social situation, we "follow the crowd" in order not to stand out. Having strong self-esteem and doing what you believe in helps to lessen this outside influence.

HOW TO CHANGE BAD HABITS

1. Have a **no exception policy**.
2. **Write** everything down on paper.
3. Create a three-part **action plan**.

Lets look at these more closely.

1. First, you **MUST** be **committed** to change. Taking a half-hearted approach to improving habits simply will not work. For instance, if your goal is to exercise 3 times per week, you must make a **NO EXCEPTION POLICY** to accomplish that goal. That means no excuses **WHATSOEVER!** You must elevate your goals to the top of your priority list.

2. List the habits that need improvement, and then define in **detail** what your new successful habit will be. Include the long-term benefits of your new behavior to provide incentive to maintain the change. The more vivid you describe the benefits, the more likely you will take action. A **written** game plan is essential for success. Goals written down on paper can be referenced and checked off daily. You will also need to ask people you trust and respect and who know you well. Ask them what they observe to be your bad habits. Be open to good, honest advice from others.

3. Create a **three-part action plan**. These are immediate action steps to put your new habit into focus. For instance, if your goal is to eat healthier during the week on you lunch break, the three steps could be:

1. Make a large dinner on Sunday night to allow for leftovers for Monday and Tuesday lunches.
2. Locate a restaurant near work that serves healthy food.
3. Find a relaxed setting to slowly eat and enjoy your food.

Study the habits of successful people. Read biographies, listen to motivational tapes, or talk to people who are inspiring. It is wise to have a role model who is

successful in a way you would like to be. Learn from them, and distance yourself from those who will influence you negatively

Lets look at specific examples to apply these strategies to, particularly diet and exercise.

CHANGING BAD FOOD HABITS

The first step is to **identify and list** the poor eating habits that are specific to you. Some possibilities are: unhealthy food choices (fast food), too much processed food, too much meat and not enough fruits and vegetables, eating on the run, eating late at night, consuming too many calories, and skipping meals to name a few. Next, **describe** what you want to achieve. It may be to lose 20 lbs to improve your self-esteem, or eat several small meals over the course of the day to maintain blood sugar and energy level, or to eat 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every single day to prevent disease. A subsequent three-part action plan should follow to guide you to the end result you desire.

Sugar

Avoiding sugar is a good idea if you suffer from fatigue, the very reason a lot of people overeat it. Sugar spikes our blood glucose and then causes it to bottom out creating the "roller coaster" ride of energy and fatigue. The best strategy is to replace sweets with healthier foods and water when you have a snack. Once you are full, you will not crave sweets. Try to set a goal of less than 5 teaspoons (22 g) of sugar per day.

Caffeine

Coffee is also consumed to increase energy, specifically as a stimulant in the morning. Caffeine works by increasing dopamine and serotonin in the brain, which are mood-elevating chemicals. The constant stimulant effect of caffeine keeps the body running in overdrive and eventually the adrenal glands fatigue.

Trying to quit creates significant withdrawal symptoms, including headaches, constipation, fatigue, depression, and decreased concentration. The key, much like sugar, is to gradually taper off consumption while increasing

other mood-elevating activities such as exercise!!

Tobacco/Nicotine is a strong drug, and therefore is more difficult to overcome. No single strategy works for everyone. Cold turkey, gradual tapering, patches, acupuncture, hypnotherapy, are just some of the options. You have to find what works best for you, and utilize the help of friends and family.

CHANGING EXERCISE HABITS

Exercise is another elusive habit that many people dabble with but rarely adopt lifelong habits. Making excuses is always simpler than pushing ourselves to perform better. The negative consequences, much like with diet is eventual weight gain, loss of self-esteem, fatigue, and a greater chance of suffering from degenerative diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and osteoporosis. The health benefits of exercise are almost endless including a reduced risk of disease maintaining ideal weight, improved circulation, mood, and lower blood pressure.

The solution is to **avoid excuses**.

The only way to become consistent with exercise is to schedule a time in your day for exercise and **DO IT**, with a **NO EXCEPTION POLICY**. With time, it will become a part of your routine. Do an activity you enjoy **and** have an exercise partner. If the activity is not enjoyable, or you perform it alone, it will soon become phased out of your routine.

My Wish For You

Remember that only **you** can make this happen. Start to treat your body with respect, as it is your only true possession in this world. Caring for yourself is loving yourself, and you can develop the habit of self-love by changing your daily conduct. Remember that **gradual** change over time is necessary to make lasting, lifelong improvements in your health! Start now, and reap the benefits later.

Do not hesitate to call me at (415) 491-0959 with any questions.