

There are some things you just *do*. Reach for the *cookies* at three o'clock. Bite your *nails* down to the quick. Wait until *the last minute* to make a hair appointment (when they're all booked up, again). You *hate* these habits, hate feeling *trapped* by them. But no matter how frustrated you get, you can't seem to *stop*. *Why?* The answer lies in your approach to *breaking* them. These automated actions exert considerable *control* over our behaviors and routines, so it can take more than good intentions to *set yourself free*. In order to bust out of your routine afternoon-snacking, nail-nibbling, procrastinating rut, you need to understand what makes these quirks stick. *Discover new ways* to cease the same old, same old. Our expert-designed, *fail-safe* strategies will show you...

## HOW TO BREAK A HABIT

*The fact is, habits aren't bad* in and of themselves. They're just an autopilot feature of the human brain that helps conserve mental energy. Just imagine if you had to meet the complex new challenges of your daily life, from creative problem-solving to navigating touchy conversations, *and* perpetually reinvent all those rote patterns you have, like tidying up the kitchen when you talk on the phone or putting on your seat belt when you get in the car. As Lenora Yuen, Ph.D., author of *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It*, puts it, "We'd be paralyzed if we had to think of everything we needed to do." ¶ The problem, as most of us know, is that some habits harm more than help. When self-sabotaging rituals take over ("winging it" when you should have prepared, watching TV too late into the night), they crowd out opportunities to make better, healthier choices. So if we want to improve our lives, we can't do it without paying attention to our habitual behavior. And this is where it gets hard: In order to put newer, better habits in place, we need to drop the ones that get in our way. ¶ The good news? Change is possible—if you take the right steps. With the help of a unique and diverse group of experts, we've identified the most effective ways to break bad habits and begin anew. Get ready to let go of the damaging hang-ups that hold you back.

### • Set your sights

Unless you can identify why you want to stop—or adopt—a certain behavior, you'll have a hard time meeting your goal. If you want to break a three o'clock mocha latte habit, focus on the greater goal of losing weight. If you want to stop using bad language, think about how you want to be a great role model for your kids. "Unless you care about the outcome," says Yuen, "trying to force a change in habit is going to be like swimming against the tide." ¶ This tactic worked for Amy Smith of Scottsdale, Arizona, who realized she was spending far too much time (and money) shopping online. So she honed in on why she wanted to curb her habit: It didn't fit in with her vision of her best life. Rather than sit in front of a screen pointing and clicking, she envisioned herself playing with her daughter more and reading great novels in her downtime. When she identified the larger goal of enjoying the people she loved and finding inspiration in books, she found it easier to quit her browse-and-buy habit. So align your habits and behaviors with an inspiring or worthwhile ambition. Make all your efforts count toward something that pays off in the long run as well as the short-term. Then you can start living in the context of a larger picture of your life—not a bad goal at all.

## ● *Be patient*

First the bad news: There's no shortcut for dropping a bad habit, just as there's no quick fix for making newer, better ones stick. "There's a reason we do what we do," says Brian Wansink, Ph.D., author of *Mindless Eating*. "If you try to make dramatic changes suddenly, they'll boomerang on you." Because habits are so deeply rooted in our psyche and our lives, says Yuen, trying to change them on a dime nets frustrating results. Instead, take it step-by-step. One metaphor that adequately portrays how habit works is this: Picture yourself taking a sled down an untouched, snowy hillside. When you climb back to the top, you have a choice: Go down the same path or start a new one. If you go down the same track, the ride is faster and easier, and after a while it's tough to get out of. That, says Yuen, is a lot like habit. To change the direction and shape of that path, you have to be patient enough to forge a new one, and use it enough times that doing so becomes faster, requiring less thought and effort. For example, you may groan when, midway through the supermarket parking lot, you realize you left your reusable bags in the car. But sooner or later, you'll grab them without thinking much about it at all.

## ● *Wake up*

One thing's for sure: You can't address habits you aren't aware of. Pay attention to not only how you do things, but also what triggers that behavior in the first place. For instance, do you dive into a pint of ice cream after every fight with your spouse? Gossip at work when you know you shouldn't? Whatever you do, don't beat yourself up over the habits you have. "Take the stance of observer, not judge," says Yuen, and ask yourself what need that behavior provides. Sweets may bring comfort when you're frustrated; gossiping may help you feel accepted. Your idiosyncrasies can reveal how your mind and body work when stressed or worried—and that knowledge will come in handy when you try to make changes that stick.

## ● *Walk the talk*

It's easy to think that the more you know, the more likely you are to take action. But until you actually adjust your habits (say, washing your clothes in energy-saving cold water), more data (like knowing even more about the problems of climate change) won't do you any good. † Case in point: Research has shown, again and again, that when we use a larger plate, we eat more food—and that switching to a smaller plate will affect how much we eat, and ultimately, our weight. "People tell me, 'Oh, that's good to know,'" says Wansink. "And I say, 'No, it's not good to know. It's good to *do*.' Information can only help us make changes if we apply it to our lives." † By way of example, Yuen tells of a colleague, a brilliant, educated man who had a habit of being late for everything—and he knew it. "He'd sit in his office until the last possible second. If he had an 11 o'clock class, he'd still be at his computer at 10:45, 10:50," she says. "This took a toll on the quality of his life. He lived in a constant state of stress, always late and irritable." But knowing that he was always late wasn't enough to change his bad habit. He had to do it—and he did. Taking action not only dramatically changed his life, it lowered his blood pressure, too. † Try it in your life. Rather than amassing reasons that you want to stop doing a certain thing, take one step to change the pattern. If you want to stop snacking on sugary foods, it's not enough to read the health studies. Vow to stop buying (and eating) the sweet stuff. Likewise, if you've always stayed up for Letterman but suffer from inadequate sleep, you can read up on the benefits of a solid eight hours of shut-eye. Or you can turn off the television altogether and call it a night.

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## ● Snap out of it

Part of the reason we do what we do, again and again, is because of what we get out of it—whether it's chewing a pen to help you think or picking your cuticles to defuse tension. “Habits become that way because they provide value to a person,” says Wansink. Another element of habit-changing, then, lies in either negatively reinforcing a current bad habit or positively reinforcing a new good one. Laugh if you will, but Wansink says you can negatively reinforce a bad habit by keeping a rubber band around your wrist; every time you do the thing you want to stop doing (swearing, drinking another Diet Coke), snap it. “It’s a quick way to pair nonreinforcing behavior with the behavior you want to stop,” he says. † If this sounds a bit punitive for you, then try a little trick that Teresa Tyler of Waltham, Massachusetts, uses to avoid tempting treats in the office: Every time she passes a plate of cookies or brownies, she imagines they’re formed out of kitty litter or that they are rotten inside. “Just that moment of disgust is enough to ward me off,” she says. The mind games work; she’s lost six pounds passing by one plate after another. ‡ Also, try positively reinforcing the good habits you take on. Treat yourself when you’ve taken strides toward better habits—a long bath after a workout or a massage after a week straight of morning power walks. When you use positive and negative reinforcement to break a bad habit, you realize that you’ve been holding the cards all along.

## ● Be accountable

Another critical element to kicking your old habits to the curb? Own up. This doesn’t mean you have to hold a press conference about how you’re going to stop checking your e-mail 200 times a day. But you might want to appoint a taskmaster to keep you honest. Martin Lindstrom, author of *Buyology: Truth and Lies About What We Buy*, says that it’s the little, piddling bad habits that often destroy relationships (cap off toothpaste, socks on the floor). When you invite someone to call you on your gum-snapping or nose-picking, you’re more likely to stop doing it. But other kinds of accountability work as well, such as putting up Post-it notes, keeping a journal, or blogging and tweeting toward your goal. None of us likes to lose face, so making some kind of pronouncement may be just the push you need to drop old habits—especially ones that may be affecting the people in your life.

## ● Fight fire with fire

We’re wired to make and keep habits, and you can use that to your advantage. How? Swap in a new ritual for one you’re trying to break. If you want to stop giving in to the siren call of lunchtime takeout, for example, get in the habit of bringing delicious, homemade meals to work. (Delicious is key: A boring or otherwise unappealing alternative will lose out to kung pao chicken every time.) † Take Abbie Banner of Columbus, Ohio, who habitually dropped her keys in a different place every day for years—which inevitably led to a maddening and time-consuming scramble every time she went to leave the house. She finally had enough. “I was wasting time and making myself crazy,” she says. So she put a wooden bowl by the door and trained herself to put her keys there again and again. Sure, sometimes she carried the keys all the way to the kitchen, and then, annoyed, had to go back and put them in the bowl. In time, though, the new habit of putting her keys in the same place became as mindless as misplacing them had once been. And automatic behavior means one less thing to think about.

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