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How to Break a Bad Habit and Replace It With a Good One

Bad habits interrupt your life and prevent you from accomplishing your goals. They jeopardize your health — both mentally and physically. And they waste your time and energy.

So why do we still do them? And most importantly, is there anything you can do about it?

I've previously written about the science of how habits start (<https://jamesclear.com/three-steps-habit-change>), so now let's focus on the practice of making changes in the real world. How can you delete your bad behaviors and stick to good ones instead?

I certainly don't have all of the answers, but keep reading and I'll share what I've learned about how to break a bad habit.

What causes bad habits?

Most of your bad habits are caused by two things...

Stress and boredom.

Most of the time, bad habits are simply a way of dealing with stress and boredom. Everything from biting your nails to overspending on a shopping spree to drinking every weekend to wasting time on the internet can be a simple response to stress and boredom.

But it doesn't have to be that way. You can teach yourself new and healthy ways to deal with stress and boredom, which you can then substitute in place of your bad habits.

Of course, sometimes the stress or boredom that is on the surface is actually caused by deeper issues. These issues can be tough to think about, but if you're serious about making changes then you have to be honest with yourself.

Are there certain beliefs or reasons that are behind the bad habits? Is there something deeper — a fear, an event, or a limiting belief — that is causing you to hold on to something that is bad for you?

Recognizing the causes of your bad habits is crucial to overcoming them.

You don't eliminate a bad habit, you replace it.

All of the habits that you have right now — good or bad — are in your life for a reason. In some way, these behaviors provide a benefit to you, even if they are bad for you in other ways.

Sometimes the benefit is biological like it is with smoking or drugs. Sometimes it's emotional like it is when you stay in a relationship that is bad for you. And in many cases, your bad habit is a simple way to cope with stress. For example, biting your nails, pulling your hair, tapping your foot, or clenching your jaw.

These “benefits” or reasons extend to smaller bad habits as well.

For example, opening your email inbox as soon as you turn on your computer might make you feel connected. At the same time looking at all of those emails destroys your productivity, divides your attention, and overwhelms you with stress. But, it prevents you from feeling like you're “missing out” ... and so you do it again.

Because bad habits provide some type of benefit in your life, it's very difficult to simply eliminate them. (This is why simplistic advice like “just stop doing it” rarely works.)

Instead, you need to replace a bad habit with a new habit that provides a similar benefit.

For example, if you smoke when you get stressed, then it's a bad plan to “just stop smoking” when that happens. Instead, you should come up with a different way to deal with stress and insert that new behavior instead of having a cigarette.

In other words, bad habits address certain needs in your life. And for that reason, it's better to replace your bad habits with a healthier behavior that addresses that same need. If you expect yourself to simply cut out bad habits without replacing

them, then you'll have certain needs that will be unmet and it's going to be hard to stick to a routine of “just don't do it” for very long.

How to break a bad habit

Here are some additional ideas for breaking your bad habits and thinking about the process in a new way.

Choose a substitute for your bad habit. You need to have a plan ahead of time for how you will respond when you face the stress or boredom that prompts your bad habit. What are you going to do when you get the urge to smoke? (Example: breathing exercises instead.) What are you going to do when Facebook is calling to you to procrastinate? (Example: write one sentence for work.) Whatever it is and whatever you're dealing with, you need to have a plan for what you will do instead of your bad habit.

Cut out as many triggers as possible. If you smoke when you drink, then don't go to the bar. If you eat cookies when they are in the house, then throw them all away. If the first thing you do when you sit on the couch is pick up the TV remote, then hide the remote in a closet in a different room. Make it easier on yourself to break bad habits by avoiding the things that cause them.

Right now, your environment makes your bad habit easier and good habits harder. Change your environment (<https://jamesclear.com/design-default>) and you can change the outcome.

Join forces with somebody. How often do you try to diet in private? Or maybe you “quit smoking” ... but you kept it to yourself? (That way no one will see you fail, right?)

Instead, pair up with someone and quit together. The two of you can hold each other accountable and celebrate your victories together. Knowing that someone else expects you to be better is a powerful motivator.

Surround yourself with people who live the way you want to live. You don't need to ditch your old friends, but don't underestimate the power of finding some new ones.

Visualize yourself succeeding. See yourself throwing away the cigarettes or buying healthy food or waking up early. Whatever the bad habit is that you are looking to break, visualize yourself crushing it, smiling, and enjoying your success. See yourself building a new identity (<https://jamesclear.com/identity-based-habits>).

You don't need to be someone else, you just need to return to the old you. So often we think that to break bad habits, we need to become an entirely new person. The truth is that you already have it in you to be someone without your bad habits. In fact, it's very unlikely that you had these bad habits all of your life. You don't need to quit smoking, you just need to return to being a non-smoker. You don't need to transform into a healthy person, you just need to return to being healthy. Even if it was years ago, you have already lived without this bad habit, which means you can most definitely do it again.

Use the word “but” to overcome negative self-talk. One thing about battling bad habits is that it's easy to judge yourself for not acting better. Every time you slip up or make a mistake, it's easy to tell yourself how much you suck.

Whenever that happens, finish the sentence with “but”...

- *“I’m fat and out of shape, **but** I could be in shape a few months from now.”*
- *“I’m stupid and nobody respects me, **but** I’m working to develop a valuable skill.”*
- *“I’m a failure, **but** everybody fails sometimes.”*

Plan for failure. We all slip up every now and then.

As my main man Steve Kamb

(<http://www.nerdfitness.com/blog/2012/08/16/get-over-it/>) says, *“When you screw up, skip a workout, eat bad foods, or sleep in, it doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you human. Welcome to the club.”*

So rather than beating yourself up over a mistake, plan for it. We all get off track, what separates top performers from everyone else is that they get back on track very quickly. For a handful of strategies that can help you bounce back when you make a mistake, read this article (<https://jamesclear.com/get-back-on-track>).

Where to go from here

If you're looking for the first step to breaking bad habits, I'd suggest starting with awareness.

It's easy to get caught up in how you *feel* about your bad habits. You can make yourself feel guilty or spend your time dreaming about how you wish things were ... but these thoughts take you away from what's actually happening.

Instead, it's awareness that will show you how to actually make change.

- When does your bad habit actually happen?
- How many times do you do it each day?
- Where are you?
- Who are you with?
- What triggers the behavior and causes it to start?

Simply tracking these issues will make you more aware of the behavior and give you dozens of ideas for stopping it.

Here's a simple way to start: just track how many times per day your bad habit happens. Put a piece of paper in your pocket and a pen. Each time your bad habit happens, mark it down on your paper. At the end of the day, count up all of the tally marks and see what your total is.

In the beginning your goal isn't to judge yourself or feel guilty about doing something unhealthy or unproductive. The only goal is to be aware of when it happens and how often it happens. Wrap your head around the problem by being aware of it. Then, you can start to implement the ideas in this article and break your bad habit.

Breaking bad habits takes time and effort, but mostly it takes perseverance. Most people who end up breaking bad habits try and fail multiple times before they make it work. You might not have success right away, but that doesn't mean you

can't have it at all.

P.S. If you want more practical ideas for how to build new habits (and break bad habits), check out my book *Atomic Habits* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/atomic-habits>), which will show you how small changes in habits can lead to remarkable results.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hat tip to Leo Babauta (<http://zenhabits.net/crush/>) for originally talking about stress and boredom driving bad habits.
 2. Hat tip to Scott Young (<http://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/>) for sharing the great idea about using the word “but” to overcome negative self-talk.
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Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

Whenever you buy one of [my books](https://jamesclear.com/books) (<https://jamesclear.com/books>), join the [Habits Academy](https://habitsacademy.com) (<https://habitsacademy.com>), or otherwise contribute to my work, 5 percent of the profits are donated to the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF).

With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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