

# 10 Steps to Breaking a Bad Habit

**Y**ou have to finish an important project in two hours, so you head to the snack machine for a high-calorie treat. You are stuck in traffic with an important meeting on tap, and you start biting your nails. You know you should go to bed earlier, but you can not pull away from the television.

If any of this sounds familiar, you may be among the many Americans stuck in a stress-producing bad habit.

*A habit is a recurrent, often unconscious pattern of behavior.* All people have habits. But even though they are natural, bad habits can be self-destructive. 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.

## **Why do we have bad habits?**

They are unhealthy coping mechanisms that have an immediate payoff. For example, biting nails initially reduces nervousness and anxiety, but in the long-term it makes your nails look crummy.

If a habit begins to interfere with your enjoyment of life, it is an indication that something must be changed [i.e., using nicotine or alcohol may result in a health-threatening addiction]. Professional help may be needed.

If you are dealing with an annoying habit, simple frustration may make you change—you are sick and tired of doing things the way you have been doing them. Now, you are ready to move forward.

## **Step-by-Step Action Plan**

**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 do not recognize, such as avoiding hurt or disappointment or establishing control.

**Step 2: Make a full commitment.** One of the main predictors of success in changing any behavior is motivation – and it must come from within yourself.

**Step 3: Set short- and long-term goals.** Do you want to finally lose 25 pounds? Decide exactly what your ultimate goal is, and then break it down into small increments you can actually accomplish.

**Step 4: Define and remove your triggers.** Do business calls make you reach for a cigarette? When quitting a bad habit, you need to set up situations in which the habit would be prohibited [i.e., make calls from a smokeless environment; get rid of junk food].

**Step 5: Get support.** Change is more fun and more likely to be successful if you have a partner. 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 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 will forgo some cigarettes rather than wrestle with the rubber bands and plastic.

**Step 8: Give yourself rewards.** A weekend away? You will certainly deserve one if you keep to your goals. But do not overdo it: Rewarding yourself with six chocolate bars for losing weight is counterproductive. Instead, reward yourself with new clothes.

**Step 9: Accept plateaus.** Behavior change follows a predictable curve, rising quickly at first, reaching a plateau, and then rising more slowly with still more plateaus. You are going to get discouraged and want to quit because you are not making much progress. Knowing what to expect, you will be more prepared to stay with your goal.

**Step 10: Be kind to yourself.** Having a bad habit does not make you a bad person. The more you tell yourself you are bad, the more likely you will indulge your bad habit to relieve your stress.

Source: Wellness Library Health Link & Vitality Communications

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