

How to Change the World Online Manual for the Centre for Sustainability Leadership

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How do I Build and Break Habits?

Why is it Important to Build Good Habits and Break Bad ones?

Good habits make your life run smoothly and improve your self respect. Bad habits make your life unpleasant and diminish your self-respect. It's that simple! But, if it's so simple, why isn't it easy to leave our bad habits behind to graze on the sweet pastures of the good habit habitat? Well therein lies the paradox, you know it's bad for you, but you just can't stop.

The good news is you can! Take an honest self assessment, transform negative thought patterns to positive ones and nurture your good habits. This will bring about the changes you want.

Remember...in order to lead others towards a sustainable future it is essential to start by taking a long hard look at **yourself**. Ask yourself a few questions...Is your life currently sustainable? Do you make good decisions? Are you in charge of your life or are bad habits leading you astray?

Basic Answer

To change your behaviour you need to **modify the way you think about the problem** and the easiest way to do that is to consciously switch your negative thoughts for positive ones. "You can have more fun in life, enjoy better relationships and rid yourself of a great deal of unnecessary stress if you take the trouble to change your thinking to positive"¹

A concerted effort to reject negativity and look for the 'silver lining' in each and every situation – no matter how dire – will cause a cosmic shift in your perspective. You'll not only feel better about yourself but you'll begin to see your habit, and indeed your whole life, differently. Quitting your habit will become a positive act of giving yourself something rather than a negative act of denial. Say, for example, you're trying to quit smoking. By thinking more positively you'll be able to see every cigarette you **don't**

¹ Vera Peiffer, *Banish Bad Habits Forever Increase your Confidence and Achieve your Goals* (London: Piatkus Books Ltd, 2005), 44.

smoke as a gift to yourself: a gift of less stress, more money and a longer, healthier life.

They say a journey of a thousand miles starts with a simple step so the best advice when trying to fix a problem habit is to “forget the future, forget next week, forget even tomorrow. The here and now is the only thing that counts,”² and the here and now is where and when you start to ditch your bad habits. Yes right now.

Advanced Answer

What is a habit?

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines a habit as “a behaviour pattern acquired by frequent repetition or physiologic exposure that shows itself in regularity or increased facility of performance” and “an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary.”³ Pieffer (2005) defines habit as “a routine which links a particular situation with a fixed response.”⁴

Perhaps it is shocking to think that involuntary, unconscious habits form the structure within which we live, but this knowledge is also the key to change.

How do habits affect our lives?

Habits become our autopilot response to almost everything that happens. Regardless of whether these habits have positive or negative consequences, they define how we react to the challenges and situations in everyday life. Problems only arise when a particular habit starts to adversely affect our happiness.

Most people can already claim plenty of good habits which make their lives healthier, better and easier. If you clean your teeth before bed, wear a seat belt and practice honesty, kindness, and compassion, it’s a pretty safe bet you’ll be healthier, safer and happier than someone who doesn’t. By living consciously you can build good habits that work in your favour.

It is important to realise that no matter what the self-help books promise: **big changes don’t come easily and don’t come overnight**. Patience is the skill to

² Peiffer, 10.

³ <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/habit>>

⁴ Peiffer, 6.

cultivate here. Habits are usually so deeply engrained that there is no quick fix, but if you're serious about change you'll begin an enlightening journey of personal discovery and live a happier, less stressful life.

Always remember this fundamental principle about the nature of man: “**Between stimulus and response, man has the freedom to choose.**”⁵

First things first: an honest self-assessment

Have a think about these questions...

- How do you structure your life?
- What bad habits raise their ugly heads when you're stressed?
- How do you feel and what do you do when you're upset, relaxed, angry, happy, depressed?
- How much time do you spend thinking negatively about yourself and others?
- What kind of life would you ideally like to live?

Taking an honest, objective and unemotional assessment of the concrete reality of your current situation is essential. Writing this down often helps. This 'reality check' will enable you to recognise, break down and monitor your negative reactions in a different and more positive way.

Think along the lines of keeping your friends (good habits) close, and your enemies (bad habits) closer. You need to know how, when, where and why your bad habits trip you up so you can be prepared when you're at your most vulnerable.

What are the advantages of good habits?

- Greater self respect
- Greater respect from others
- Increased confidence
- Greater freedom from fear

⁵ Steven R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People Restoring the Character Ethic* (The Business Library, Information Australia, 1989), 70.

- Better relationships with your partner, family, friends, work colleagues and possibly even your bank manager
- Better career prospects
- Fewer worries
- No guilty conscience anymore
- More money available to spend on those things that are really important⁶

What are the disadvantages of bad habits?

We all know what our bad habits are but **why** are they so bad for us? “Bad habits prevent you from reaching your potential. They're self-inflicted punishments that drain you of motivation, time, and money.”⁷ Bad habits are at best a nuisance and at worse can block your friendships, relationships and career. There's always a sliding scale of how bad a bad habit really is but we've all heard stories of people who've lost not only family, friends, possessions and career, but in some cases their life due to a bad habit – be it gambling, infidelity, drinking or smoking.

Why are bad habits so hard to dislodge?

Habits are so difficult to shake because endless repetition has embossed them in our behaviour. Have you ever found that as soon as you 'firmly' kick your bad habit you wind up so stressed you repeat the problem behaviour because it gives you immediate comfort? **This type of behaviour is driven purely by emotion.** “While your conscious mind tries to implement a new rule, the emotional part of you goes on strike. It's all too much – too much like hard work.”⁸

It's time to wake up to ourselves with Peiffer's *Seven A-ha! Moments*:

1. Just because something is obvious doesn't mean you are going to act on it
2. Just because you have all the right reasons to change doesn't mean you will go ahead with the change

⁶ Peiffer, 7.

⁷ Michael Masterton. “Habit Busting Secrets”. *Habit Busting Secrets* (16 September 2009). <<http://www.breakhabits.net/habits/>>.

⁸ Peiffer p9

3. Unless you convince the emotional part of your mind about a new plan, nothing will change
4. Sometimes short-term plans are more effective than long-term ones
5. Simple works best
6. Even a minor change is better than no change at all
7. The best way of taking care of the future is to take care of today⁹

Cultivating good habits helps you stop bad habits

Focussing on your good habits will make you feel physically better and reward you with increased mental stability, positive feelings and self respect.¹⁰

So what are some excellent habits?

- **Drinking 1-2 litres of water a day** – when you're dehydrated your body and mind can't function properly. This makes you sluggish and makes it harder to shift negative behaviours.
- **Regular exercise** – exercise releases serotonin, the mood enhancer, and helps the lymph move around your body. Lymph filters the blood and keeps it clean.
- **Get enough sleep** – sleep is the body's recharge button and is essential for creating stress-free waking hours. Aim for six and a half to eight hours per night.¹¹
- **Meditation or visualisation exercises** – taking 10 minutes a day to empty the thought torrent in your mind will improve your concentration and self control.

⁹ Peiffer, 8-11.

¹⁰ Peiffer, 34.

¹¹ Laura Blue, "How Much Sleep Do You Really Need? *Time* 6 June 2006 (16 September 2009) <<http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1812420,00.html>>

Try this: Find a place you feel safe. Either close your eyes or focus on one spot. Concentrate on your breathing. Imagine your thoughts and worries easing out of your head in beautiful bubbles that drift gently away on the breeze. Then pop! The bubbles burst and your worries evaporate leaving you relaxed and calm

- **Be kind to everyone and stop being critical of others** – “Ugly thoughts make ugly faces. What we believe to be true and think about consistently is mirrored back to us in our experience”¹² Being genuine and open, and acting positively towards others will help you make new friends, deepen your existing friendships and create unforeseen opportunities.
- **Mind expansion** – your brain is a muscle which needs exercise too! Think about what you’re interested in and learn something new: Spanish, gardening, fishing or crochet – anything fun, exciting or even outrageous that will increase your confidence and nudge the negative behaviour out of your life.

The re-programmable brain – latest developments in Neuroplasticity

For hundreds of years the consensus among scientists was that the brain was ‘hardwired’ like a computer¹³ and incapable of fundamental change. But the latest developments in the science of neuroplasticity are proving this theory wrong – which is really good news if you want to shift a bad habit.

Neuroplasticity can be defined as the “brain’s ability to reorganise itself by forming new connections throughout life.”¹⁴

Norman Doidge, in his groundbreaking book *The Brain that Changes Itself*, stands at the cutting edge of this science and demonstrates how the brain is able to change its structure with the different activities it performs. If we think about this for a moment it

¹² Charlie Greer. HVAC Profit Boosters, Inc. Newsletter, “What are you thinking? Part Deux, (16 September 2009). <http://www.hvacprofitboosters.com/Tips/Tip_Archive/tip_archive7.html>

¹³ Norman Doidge. “The Brain that Changes Itself Excerpt” *The Brain That Changes Itself Official Website* 2008, (16 September 2009) <<http://www.normandoidge.com/normandoidge/EXCERPT.html>>

¹⁴ Alvaro Fernandez. “Neuroplasticity 101 and Brain Health Glossary”. *The Brain Fitness Authority* 10 September 2007, (16 September 2009) <<http://www.sharpbrains.com/blog/2007/09/10/neuroplasticity-101-and-brain-health-glossary/>>

makes complete sense: if you want to be a concert pianist you have to play the piano! Neuroplasticity is showing us that our brains can be rewired and our habits can be relearned.

Some thoughts on thoughts:

It's hard to find consensus on how many thoughts people have per day but estimates range from 12,000 to 50,000 and if you're not in control of them, they're controlling you! How many of yours are negative? Living consciously means developing the ability to review the contents of your thoughts. "Watch your thoughts – they are blueprints for actions. Positive thinking is the only way to produce positive results."¹⁵

Summary: how do you break bad habits?

- Take an honest, unemotional, objective self-assessment
- Think in the positive
- Cultivate your good habits
- Live consciously
- Have a clear focused intention
- Reward and celebrate your small victories

Conclusion

"To stop our feelings from governing our lives, we need to take back control by consciously feeding new information into our subconscious mind. This information needs to be strong and confident, so only positive thoughts will do. By converting negative thoughts into positive ones, you are multiplying your chances of success a hundredfold."¹⁶

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¹⁵ Charlie Greer. HVAC Profit Boosters, Inc. Newsletter, "What are you thinking? Part Deux, (16 September 2009). <http://www.hvacprofitboosters.com/Tips/Tip_Archive/tip_archive7.html>

¹⁶ Peiffer, 45.

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