



Top Tips for breaking a bad habit

We all have bad habits. Some are fairly innocuous and others, at the opposite extreme, can develop into behavioural addictions.

Many of us try our hardest to break bad habits, but end up failing miserably. There is a particular time of year – [New Year's](#) – when many of us set out to “turn over a new leaf” and to give up on habits that may not serve us. The statistical evidence shows that on average, only around 8% of us manage to stick to our resolutions. We then generally attribute this failure to us being weak-willed in some way, but the real reasons for the difficulty of breaking a bad habit are more complex.

Why are bad habits so hard to break?

Neuroscientists are starting to unlock the secrets of how our brain plays a key role in us staying stuck in old habits. It has a lot to do with [dopamine](#) – a neurotransmitter that helps control the brain's reward and pleasure centre.

Our brain gets very easily distracted and searches for past rewards that it felt when engaging in an activity – even when the rewards are no longer there, or perhaps never were. Dopamine causes our brains to gravitate towards behaviours and activities that were previously pleasing, and once a habit becomes established, we have much less control of our brains than we like to believe.

So, rather than being weak-willed, our brains (or a part of them) are hijacking our behaviour to seek out a dopamine hit.

Top tips

How do we break this cycle? Researchers are now suggesting that instead of focusing on stopping the negative behaviour, we should instead focus on replacing it with a new one that will give our brains some reward.



The first step in this process is to identify what the exact nature of the reward is that we get from the behaviour. For example, if we find that we snack late at night because we are hungry, then changing meal times, changing food types, moving exercise routines, etcetera, can all help to change our cravings. It may be, however, that we snack because we are feeling bored, in which case, going for a walk around the block may be a suitable substitute.

In the 12-step program, participants are invited to HALT before engaging with their addiction. HALT is an acronym that stands for posing the questions: 'Am I Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired?' Often, one of these feelings is responsible for driving the addictive craving.

So instead of self-critiquing when you once again succumb to a bad habit or [addiction](#), concern yourself with the following questions:

- What am I [feeling](#)?
- What triggered me? – time of day, activity (e.g. drinking may correlate to smoking)
- What would better meet my needs in this moment?

By engaging with these questions, you can take control by focusing on putting in place a behaviour or set of [behaviours](#) that makes you happier and provides your brain with dopamine for the right reasons.

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