

## Breaking Bad (Habits)

*It is possible to muster the strength you need to change your ways.*

**Y**ou're always acting out of habit—choices you barely think about. "Habits are hard-wired connections between the brain's neurons.

Whenever you repeat an action, you strengthen that connection to more likely do it again," says Richard O'Connor, MSW, PhD, a clinical social worker and therapist in Lakeville, Connecticut, and author of *Rewire* (Hudson Street Press).

The brain loves habits because they free it up for more conscious activity. That means changing a habit requires an intentional effort, which starts with adopting the right mindset. For O'Connor, it starts with mindfulness, "viewing yourself calmly, objectively and compassionately."

Next, identify the bad habit you want to ditch along with the cues that set it off—location, emotion, time, who's nearby and what's happening right before the urge to indulge. Susan Bone, 51, of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, decided in 1997 to quit cigarettes. Smoking in the house and car "were triggers for me," she says. So she started by not lighting up at home or while driving to discourage the habit.

Whenever Bone craved cigarettes, she "puffed" on a drinking straw instead. That kind of substitute may work for a while, but to make the change stick, swap the bad habit for a good, enjoyable one.

You're also more apt to repeat a new behavior that doesn't require much thought. So do jumping jacks to keep from biting your nails or snack on carrots instead of cookies.



Frame change in a positive manner. When Bone next decided to eliminate wheat from her diet, she emphasized "not what I was giving up, but what I'd be gaining"—a happier gut, but also a healthier lifestyle.

When you repeat the desired behavior you help shape it into a habit. The number of repetitions depends on the environment in which you engage in the behavior and your thoughts surrounding it. "The more specific the setting for that behavior, only, one that doesn't compete with other habits, and the more determined you are, the fewer repetitions," says Art Markman, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Texas in Austin and author of *Smart Change* (Perigee Trade). Just take a steady approach. Markman calls this "consistent mapping; it's when you repeat the behavior at the same time and place."

That's what Clark Foerster, 56, of Portland, Oregon, did. Wanting to increase his exercise, he walked a mile

from his home to a park and back every morning for a month, "without exception," he says. "After about 24 times, my body wanted to walk. I didn't have to think about it."

Monitor your progress; Bone enjoyed putting stars on her calendar for every day she didn't smoke. And reward yourself to get going in the beginning. If it's your enjoyment from the new behavior, all the better. As Markman puts it, "Losing 15 pounds can be motivating at first, but unless the habit becomes a part of your life, you won't be able to sustain it."

However, it's easy to fall back into your old ways. If that happens, O'Connor says, "Meditate more, focus on a goal just for today, or call a friend for support and to keep you accountable." If you do cave in, "don't let it kill your resolve. If you really have trouble kicking bad habits, though, examine how you might be hurting or handicapping yourself, and consider therapy."

—Claire Sykes