



Breaking Old Habits

Hab-it *n.* involuntary pattern of behavior acquired by frequent repetition.

In this journey of life, we have all developed habits. Good habits, because we perform them without thinking, free us to concentrate our energies on other pursuits. Bad habits encumber and enslave us, preventing us from moving forward in our lives--keeping us from being all that we can be. If you think about it, we make our habits and then they turn around and make us. Changing these ingrained involuntary behaviors takes hard work. There is no magic bullet. Want to make some improvements in your life? Want to move ahead, free of the encumbrance of a bad habit sabotaging your progress toward optimal health and quality of life? We've outlined some steps for you to take.

Make a list of your bad habits. Sounds simplistic, but habits live in the unconscious. They are involuntary behaviors, so we need to become consciously aware of them before we can tackle them. After you have identified your bad habits, determine those that you are currently ready to change. You can't tackle all of them at once so choose one or two to start with. Keep your list handy for future reference.

Rate the seriousness of your bad habit. Let's pick 'a sedentary lifestyle' as our example of a bad habit. Clearly, a sluggish metabolism, a low energy level, a growing waistline, shrinking self-esteem, decreased fitness, shortness of breath, and an increased risk for multiple diseases will result. You may have already experienced some of these consequences, discouraged and frustrated with the negative changes to your health and body. Look forward one year, five years, and ten years. What is the consequence of this bad habit on your health in the long-term? This one is pretty clear: change the bad habit or be destined to declining health and fitness.

Identify the reward for the bad habit. What are you gaining with your sedentary lifestyle? It may be more time to meet obligations of work or family. It may be the opportunity to 'pamper' yourself at the end of the day. You may not like exercise. You may prefer to spend your time on other pursuits, such as watching TV or using the computer.

Identify what you will gain by changing the bad habit. In our example, regular exercise will reap a more energetic healthful lifestyle. Benefits include improved circulation, strengthened heart and bones, increased strength and muscle tissue, increased metabolism, improved mood, improved weight control, better self-esteem, etc. The self-discipline and self-confidence that develops with a regular exercise program spill over into other areas of your life. When you balance the benefits of changing your habit and the seriousness of your habit against the reward of continuing the habit, it is pretty clear that you need to exercise regularly.

Make a choice. Your habit is no longer an involuntary act because now you know that you are making a choice—you're deciding which you value more, the reward for a sedentary lifestyle (the bad habit) or the reward for engaging in regular exercise (the benefit for changing the bad habit). You are no longer blindly reacting to your old impulses. You have the power to choose, and choice is powerful. Once you have made the choice to change the bad habit, get specific. What will you do? What do you need? How will you begin? Visualize, giving yourself a clear picture of where you are going. Set goals so you know exactly what you are going to accomplish and have an action plan for every day.

Change the habit. Bad habits are stopped the same way they are started, with repetition. It takes about three to four weeks to change a habit. That means that you need to make a conscious effort for 3-4 weeks--then it will become automatic. Most experts agree that to have an old habit broken or a new habit established, you must repeat it daily for the 3-4 weeks. So the key appears to be...not skipping a single day! Replace negative self-talk with powerful affirmations. Journal to deal with conflicting emotional messages. Continue to visualize daily. Celebrate victories. Each and every day when you complete your action plan, take a moment to reflect on the positive changes you are making in your life.

What are your five most important goals for tomorrow?

Each night or first thing every morning, list the five most important goals for your day. You may need to grocery shop, write a thank you note, call your mother-in-law, watch your child's soccer game, start outlining a business idea, get to the gym, or read with your children. If we each ask ourselves this question every day and accomplish our goals every day, we will handle those things in our lives that are really important.