

Ways to Break Bad Habits*

1. Extinction

Discover what is reinforcing a response and remove, avoid, or delay the reinforcement.

Example: Tiffany has a habit of taking longer and longer breaks to watch TV when she needs to be studying. Obviously, watching TV is reinforcing her break taking. To improve her study habits, Tiffany should delay reinforcement by studying at the library or some other location a good distance from her TV (Ferster et al., 1962).

2. Alternate Responses

Try to get the same reinforcement with new responses.

Example: Alice often tells jokes at the expense of others. Her friends sometimes feel hurt by her sharp-edged humor. Alice has become aware of her friends' feelings and she wants to change. The reinforcement that Alice seeks by telling jokes is social: she wants attention and approval. She could just as easily get the same reinforcement by giving other people praise or compliments.

3. Cues and Antecedents

Avoid or narrow down stimuli that elicit the bad habit.

Example: Raul wants to cut down on smoking. He has taken many smoking cues out of his surroundings by removing ashtrays, matches, and extra cigarettes from his house, car, and office. Raul should try narrowing stimuli even further. He could begin by smoking only inside buildings, never outside or in his car. He could then limit his smoking to home. Then to only one room at home. Then to one chair at home. If he succeeds in getting this far, he may want to limit his smoking to only one uninteresting place, such as a bathroom, basement, or garage (Goldiamond, 1971).

4. Response Chains

Break response chains that precede an undesired behavior.

This is another strategy for controlling antecedents. The key idea is to scramble the chain of events that leads up to the undesired response (Watson & Tharp, 1989).

Example: Almost every night, Steve comes home from work, turns on the TV, and drinks two or three colas while he eats a whole bag of cookies and chips. He then takes a shower and changes. By dinner time he has lost his appetite. Steve realizes that he is substituting junk food for dinner. Steve might solve the problem simply by showering immediately when he gets home or by not turning on the TV until after dinner.

5. Incompatible Responses

Make an incompatible response in the presence of stimuli that usually precede the bad habit.

Example: June bites her nails so much they are painful and unsightly. June should make a list of incompatible responses she can engage in when she has the urge to bite her nails. These might include putting her hands in her pockets, taking notes in class, sketching pictures, crossing her arms, chewing gum, or combing her hair (Perkins & Perkins, 1976).

6. Negative Practice

Use negative practice to associate a bad habit with discomfort.

Example: Roberto has a habit of saying "you know" or "uh" too often when speaking. In negative practice, a response is repeated until it becomes boring, painful, or produces fatigue. This increases awareness of the habit and tends to discourage its recurrence. Roberto should set aside 15 minutes a day and repeat the words "you know" and "uh" over and over while thinking, "I hate the way this sounds when someone else says it." He should repeat the errors until he would really very much like to stop making them.

*from Coon, Dennis. *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*. St. Paul: West Publishing, 1992. Reprinted with permission.