



Solutions for Life

from **Solutions Counseling & EAP**
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Letting Go of Bad Habits

As we continue through 2016, we are in our 10th month of my “Letting Go” series. This month, let’s talk about letting go of bad habits. According to Texas A&M research, we spend one-third to one-half of our time engaging in “habit behavior.” These are the things we do automatically, without thinking about them: applying brakes when we are driving, buying the same products at the store (even though there are many other options). Thank goodness for these habits. Imagine how cumbersome life would be if we had to think about every decision we make.

Many habits are put into place to help us feel secure, such as nail biting, hair twirling, gum popping (guilty!), automatically playing on your phone if you have two seconds of down time, etc. These are soothing on some level to us, so we go to them when we are feeling stressed, or want a sense of relief. These are the habits that can also get in our way. For example, nail biting is in indication that you are a nervous/fidgety person, and others may make judgements based on looking at your nails (and it’s difficult to hide your fingernails).

If you have a bad habit you’d like to drop, consider these steps:

Create a “Habit Diary.” Since habits are mindless and automatic, the first step in breaking a bad habit is to become more mindful of the behavior. You need to know when, how and where it typically occurs. You may need some help from others to bring it to your attention. Begin to document the “where/when/how” of the habit. You’re looking for patterns and triggers. Sometimes this alone will begin to reduce the behavior.

Disrupt the Habit. In other words, make the behavior more difficult to do. If you are a nail biter, get acrylic nails put on, or begin wearing gloves at those times you typically bite. If you can’t seem to get out of bed in the morning, move the alarm clock to where you must get out of bed to turn it off. If you want to slow down your eating, eat with the other hand or use chopsticks.

Replace the “bad” with the smart! It’s never a good goal to “stop” doing something. (Try to “stop” picturing an elephant in your mind – impossible!) Instead, decide what you want to do instead of the bad habit. Then the goal becomes adding in a new, healthy habit as you eliminate the old unhealthy one.

There are many punishment techniques for stopping a bad habit – popping yourself with a rubber band on your wrist whenever you do the undesired thing, for example. I have never found

punishment alone to be very effective. I am more of a “rewards” person. But the reward needs to be intrinsic (meaning that changing the habit will make you more of the person you want to be – not “I’ll reward myself by buying a new wardrobe if I stop this bad habit!”) I think it’s important to have a really good reason to stop a bad habit and replace it with a good habit. If you want to replace soda with water, you need to believe that this will improve your life in some way. If you want to stop biting your nails and replace that with deep breathing when you are anxious, it is important for you to see and want a tangible benefit, whether it is not having to be embarrassed for others to see your hands, or feeling like you have developed self-control and calmness (and not that your mother will stop griping about you biting your nails – you have to want it for yourself).

Once you know what you want to do instead of your bad habit, and you have figured out the positive reward of your new habit, now you need to make a plan. This is typically best done by using an “If-Then” statement. “If I am craving a sweet, then I will chew a piece of gum.”

Lastly, just like you tracked your bad habit, you need to track your new positive habit. Be aware of it, note it – celebrate it!