# Why Changing Bad Habits is So Hard

We've all said it at least one time before- new year, new me. We go into the new year determined to fix all our bad habits.

And many of us go strong for the first month or so. But, after the first week, that sudden burst of motivation wears off quickly, making those habit changes feel harder and harder as the year progresses.

Why are changing these bad habits so hard? We've got your answers.

## How We Form Habits

Habits are automatic behaviors we perform with little to no conscious thought. The formation of habits involves a neurological process where repeated actions create strong neural connections, making the behavior more automatic over time.

### The Neuroscience of Habit Formation

When we engage in a specific behavior consistently, the brain forms neural structures associated with it. These pathways become more deeply interconnected with repetition, leading to the development of habits. Over time, these [habits become deeply rooted in the brain's structure](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4826769/#:~:text=Studies%20on%20rodents%20and%20primates,central%20nucleus%20of%20the%20amygdala%20(), making them challenging to change.

Neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, play a crucial role in reinforcing these habits. Dopamine is a happy chemical released during pleasurable experiences. It was formed within the brain to create a reward system that encourages the repetition of certain behaviors. As a result, breaking a bad habit often means disrupting this established reward system, which can be a significant hurdle keeping you from breaking those bad habits.

### The Psychology of Habit Change

Habits run so much deeper than surface level. There are often psychological reasons behind the behaviors, rituals, and routines we develop in our daily lives.

For instance, changing bad habits can be difficult, thanks to the comfort and familiarity we feel within our routines and rituals. Habits provide a sense of stability and predictability, creating a comfort zone that the brain naturally gravitates toward. Stepping outside this comfort zone to adopt new, healthier behaviors can trigger discomfort, which can quickly lead to your brain's resistance.

Change can be difficult for even the most motivated individuals due to a fear of failure or concerns about the effort it will take to make a real difference. The prospect of facing challenges or discomfort during the process of breaking a habit can deter individuals from initiating change. Understanding and addressing these psychological barriers is crucial in overcoming resistance as you work to combat bad habits and make a healthy, productive change.

### External Influences on Habits

External influences, like social and environmental factors, also contribute to the difficulty of changing habits. Social norms and peer pressure can reinforce certain behaviors, such as substance use or procrastination, making it challenging for individuals to deviate from the established habits they are fighting to rid themselves of. Your environment can act as a behavioral cue, triggering a loop that can seem impossible to break.

### Habit Triggers and Cue-Response Associations

Habits are often triggered by cues or situations, like the environmental cues mentioned in the last section. When one's mind begins to associate a behavior with a trigger, it becomes difficult to avoid the habit.

Breaking these habits requires identifying and changing the cues that lead to unwanted behavior. Understanding the associations between cues and habitual responses is crucial for implementing effective changes.

## You Can Still Change Those Habits

While changing bad habits may be inherently challenging, it is never impossible. There are many effective strategies and approaches one can utilize to navigate the complexities of habit change. Below, we will provide you with a few of these tips and methods.

### Set Clear and Attainable Goals

Establishing clear and attainable goals is a key step in habit change and likely the first one you should be making. Goals provide a sense of direction and purpose, serving as a roadmap for your journey ahead. Breaking your larger goals down into smaller, attainable steps makes the process less overwhelming and increases the likelihood of success.

Think about the satisfaction you receive as you tick off every piece of your to-do list for the day. This satisfaction of accomplishing a small goal can have a great impact on your discipline and motivation.

Many people find that physically writing or typing out their small, attainable goals to be checked off can be incredibly helpful for changing bad habits and chasing aspirations.

### Replace Bad Habits with Positive Alternatives

Rather than focusing solely on eliminating a bad habit, consider replacing it with a positive alternative. This approach takes advantage of the brain's familiarity with routine while redirecting toxic behaviors with healthier options. A few examples of this include:

* Swapping unhealthy snacks with healthier ones
* Switching sedentary behaviors with movement
* Trading hours of scrolling your phone with reading or practicing your favorite hobby

### Utilize Behavioral Rewards

Our brains love rewards, which is why incorporating a system of positive reinforcement can be incredibly useful for changing those bad habits. Rewarding yourself for achieving milestones or sticking to your habits triggers the release of dopamine, reinforcing the positive changes and creating a sense of accomplishment. A few ways you can reward yourself include:

* Make a sticker chart to visually track your accomplishments (yes, they work for adults, too!)
* Give yourself a free day after reaching a milestone.
* Place a dollar in a jar to use to treat yourself every time you accomplish a milestone or stick to your habits.

### Build a Strong Support System

One's social circle plays a significant role in habit change. Our [social ties](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3171805/) have been shown time and time again to influence our behavioral decisions. Share your goals with friends, family, or a support group. This creates accountability and will allow you to build a network of encouragement for the moments you find yourself struggling to stick to these goals and habits.

### Practice Mindfulness and Self-Awareness

Mindfulness and self-awareness play pivotal roles in habit change. Being mindful of your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors allows for a deeper understanding of the triggers and reasons behind toxic habits. This awareness will enable you to make more intentional behavioral choices and develop strategies to utilize when you experience a trigger that tends to lead to the habits you are trying to break.

### Have Compassion for Yourself

Changing bad habits is difficult and can take some time. Your progress may not be completely linear, either. Grant yourself compassion in moments when you make a mistake. Not only will it allow you to move past the mistake more efficiently, but it will help you stay motivated as you combat those bad habits. Don't give up because you made one little mistake. Simply acknowledge it and continue your path forward.

### Seek Professional Guidance

Our behaviors typically have a deeper meaning (and deeper consequences) than we see on the surface. If your bad habits are becoming increasingly difficult to break or causing your mental or physical health harm, seeking the help of a professional may be just what you need.

## We Are Here for You

Sometimes, our bad habits are the result of our struggling mental health. We have to address the deeper issue before we are able to break the bad habit. If you are ready to seek help for breaking your bad habits, we are here for you. [Contact](https://www.michiganpsychologicalcare.com/contact.php) us today, and our compassionate therapists will work to help you finally change those habits that are holding you back.

**Resources**

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