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How to Break Bad Habits and Change Behaviors

Old habits can be hard to break and new habits hard to make, but with these six basic steps you can develop new, healthy behaviors that stick.

1. **Identify Cues.**

Something has to trigger a habit, and a cue can be anything. Maybe stress makes you crave chocolate, or the sound of your alarm triggers you to hit the snooze button. Identifying cues helps you understand what puts your habits into motion.

2. **Disrupt.**

Once you know the cues, you can throw bad habits off track. If the alarm cues you to bash the snooze button every morning, put the alarm clock on the other side of the room. Trekking across the cold floor will likely disrupt the snooze habit.

3. **Replace.**

Research shows that replacing a bad behavior with a good one is more effective than stopping the bad behavior alone. The new behavior “interferes” with the old habit and prevents your brain from going into autopilot. Deciding to eat fruit every time your mind thinks “cookie” substitutes a positive behavior for the negative habit.

4. **Keep It Simple.**

It’s usually hard to change a habit because the behavior has become easy and automatic. The opposite is true, too: new behaviors can be hard because your brain’s basal ganglia, (the “autopilot” part), hasn’t taken over this behavior yet. Simplifying new behaviors helps you integrate them into your autopilot routines.

5. **Think Long-Term.**

Habits often form because they satisfy short-term impulses, the way chewing on your nails might immediately calm your nerves. But short-term desires often have long-term consequences, like nasty, splintered, chewed up fingers. Focusing long term while trying to change some habits will help you remember why you’re investing the effort.

6. **Persist.**

Research has shown that what you’ve done before is a strong indicator of what you’ll do next. This means established habits are hard to break. But the good news is, if you keep at it, your new behaviors will turn into habits, too. Persistence works — at first it might be painful to get up at 5am for that jog, but soon it will be second nature.