

Here's Why It's So Hard to Get Rid of Bad Habits

If you've ever tried to change a behavior and sustain it long term, you know it can be tough.

In fact, sustained behavior change is one of the most difficult things many of us will try in our lives. Whether it's exercise, diet or anything else, there is a lot of research about why changing a behavior is so hard. Here are some of the reasons why and tips to successfully change a behavior in the future.

We begin motivated by negative emotions. It's easy to think negative emotions like fear, shame or guilt are a good catalyst for behavior change. However, research shows it's actually the opposite. Fear and regret do not lead to lasting behavior change. Instead, think of a positive reason for why you want to change, and use that as your starting point instead. For example, if you want to become more physically active instead of worrying about the negative consequences of not exercising, think about how you will feel after you exercise.

We get trapped in all-or-nothing thinking. All-or-nothing thinking happens when we over-generalize a specific event to our overall experience. For example, this kind of thinking happens if someone is working on changing their diet, has a cookie, and then thinks their entire diet is ruined. If we expect to be perfect all the time, we are putting ourselves in a no-win situation. Instead, recognize that slip-ups happen, learn from the situation and move on.

We try to change everything at once. Too much change all at once can be overwhelming. Instead, try breaking down the behavior into small, actionable steps. This is where setting goals comes in. Make sure you are setting small, specific goals that will eventually help you reach your larger goal. Each specific action you take towards your goal brings you one step closer to changing a behavior.

We don't make sure we have the right tools first. When you think about the behavior that you want to change, is there anything you need to support you? For example, if you're thinking about changing your diet but don't have much experience with nutrition, you may need to research healthy eating first. Spending time to make sure you are prepared to make a change helps set you up for success.

We forget that failure is a given, and that it's okay. Instead of seeing failure as a sign you should give up and stick to your old behavior, think about what you can learn. Failing can reveal what needs more time and attention the next time you try to make the change.

Sarah, Sommer, Advocate Health Enews, 9/20/18

Wishing you joy and good health,
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