

HOW TO RID YOURSELF OF BAD HABITS: UNDERSTANDING STAGES OF CHANGE

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

We all have habits---some good; some bad. What qualifies as a habit? It is a routine practice that is done in the same way for the same reason, over and over again. A habit becomes second nature and is intrinsically neither good nor bad. When a habit is negative, it hinders or harms and when a habit is positive, it fosters health, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships.

You may be wondering why we develop habits and whether habits are important or not? Habits help us establish order and allow us to do things automatically, with little thought. This in turn, allows us to focus on other areas of our lives that demand our immediate attention. Originally, our habits are developed because they meet a perceived need. When they no longer meet a need, they continue on automatic and may be reinforced by people around you.

Stages of Change

Typical bad habits include drinking alcohol, smoking, using drugs, gambling, nail biting, lying, procrastinating, cursing, cheating, etc. Like most people, you probably have at least a few bad habits you'd like to change. How do people change their habits? After all, change is not easy. First, if you want to stop a bad habit, decide on one habit you personally *want* to change (not *should* change). Also, make sure you don't choose to change a habit just because it will please someone else. Next, explore your readiness to change. Psychologists, Prochaska and DiClemente have studied and described the process of how people change a negative behavior or habit. They have portrayed the following *five stages* people usually go through in their mind before they actually effect a change. When successful, these stages are progressive, building toward an eventual commitment to change:

The Five Stages:

PRECONTEMPLATION – the person sees no need to change

CONTEMPLATION – the person recognizes the problem

PREPARATION – the person plans for change, but tomorrow (not now)

ACTION – the person admits to having a problem and starts taking positive behavior/action

MAINTENANCE – the person continues the new, positive behavior for more than 6 months

Planning for Change

Once you've reached the Preparation Stage, you can plan to change in the following way:

1. Make a list of what you'll gain or how you'll benefit from accomplishing your goal.
2. Break it into small doable steps and brainstorm multiple ways to achieve those steps.
3. Choose 3-4 action steps that are objective and measurable.
4. Set a timeline with a set date to re-evaluate your progress.
5. Decide on some immediate rewards you'll use for positive steps you accomplish.
6. And finally, don't forget to enlist the support and encouragement of others and remember to remind yourself of previous successes.

“The 5 Stages of How People Change” indicate that “action” or external change only occurs after a person has fully engaged in the preparation stage. By engaging in this process, one becomes a “change manager” rather than a “change victim.

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If you have a goal to break a bad habit, first identify when you do the negative behavior and second, analyze what is triggering this behavior. You'll also want to evaluate the benefits and dangers of changing. Consider the following:

- What pleasure or release of tension does the habit produce?
- What harm is the habit causing?
- What will improve by breaking the habit?

Action: Making a Change

Once you've explored these questions, you'll need to prepare for action. Begin this process by removing any temptations associated with your bad habit. You can also create obstacles to interfere with past things that *maintained* your bad habit. Next, try to reduce your overall stress level since stress is often a trigger for engaging in a bad habit. I also recommend you enlist the support of your friends and family. Find valuable reinforcers and rewards and then commit and act. Throughout the change process, maintain a log of your habit behavior - when, where, what feeling, and any obstacles. Be fair to yourself and remember this: the bad habit was not "built in a day" and neither will it be destroyed or replaced in a day. Research shows that the average smoker attempts to quit approximately seven times before s/he is successful. So no matter how slow, keep trying. "People do not fail; they only give up trying."

Bad Habit or Addiction?

Sometimes, after numerous attempts to change a bad habit, a person may want to consider if s/he is dealing with more than just a bad habit. Sometimes, repeated failure is indicative of a serious addiction. An addiction results in a loss of control and usually involves a compulsive use of a mood or mind altering chemical(s), along with the inability to stop the use in spite of the fact that such use is causing problems in one's life. The person may have a physical and/or psychological dependence on a substance. Some experts also apply this term to compulsive behaviors that produces chemical changes in the brain, such as gambling or compulsive sex. Unlike something that is simply a bad habit, an addiction, such as taking a substance becomes the sole focus of one's life.

If you're not sure whether you're dealing with a bad habit or an addiction, the following signs may suggest that you need professional help with an addiction:

- Multiple tries to break the bad habit have been unsuccessful.
- You give up other things that are important to you in order to indulge your habit.
- You continue the negative behavior even though you know it's damaging you and your relationships.
- You have symptoms of withdrawal or overwhelming feelings of sadness, anxiety or depression when you stop.
- You need more and more of the substance or behavior to obtain the same level of pleasure or satisfaction.

Summary

If you believe you're ready to make a change, remember these tips: 1) Give yourself sufficient time to change. 2) Set realistic expectations and goals 3) Focus on 1-2 change strategies at a time. 4) Think in terms of small steps. 5) Review and reward your progress daily. 6) Seek help when needed

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