

Understanding and Changing Your Habits

Objective

To increase awareness of unhealthy habits and replace them with healthier options.

You Should Know

Unhealthy habits prevent you from accomplishing your goals and can even affect your health—both mentally and physically. Many habits are simply a way to cope with stress or boredom. You can learn healthier ways to cope, replacing your unhealthy habits with good habits.

Sometimes stress or boredom is actually caused by deeper problems. Do you have certain beliefs or reasons underlying your unhealthy habits? Is there something like a fear or past event that is causing you to hold on to habits?

All of your habits—good or bad—are in your life for a reason. These behaviors provide benefits to you, even if they are bad for you in other ways. Sometimes the benefit is biological like it is with smoking or using drugs. Sometimes it is emotional – like unhealthy relationship patterns. In some cases, your habits help you cope with anxiety, e.g., biting your nails.

Consider Ellen. She opens her email inbox the moment she wakes up each morning. She checks her email just before falling asleep at night. She thinks this is a great way to stay connected and on top of things, but looking at her email distracts her, affects her productivity, and often overwhelms her. She does not want to “miss out,” but this habit is stressing her out! Ellen believes her habit is good for her, so it might be very difficult to simply stop.

It is important to replace an unhealthy habit with a new habit that provides a similar benefit. For example, if you smoke when you are stressed, it might not be effective to “just stop smoking.” Instead, come up with another way to deal with stress and do the new behavior instead of having a cigarette.

In Ellen’s situation, she can turn off her notifications so she is unaware of when she receives new email. She might shut off her phone at 9:00 pm, or decide she will do a final check of her inbox at 7:00 pm.

So, what are some ways you can change unhealthy habits? Here are some suggestions:

1. Choose a substitute. Have a plan ahead of time for how you will respond when you face the stress or boredom that prompts your bad habit.

2. Eliminate triggers. Make it easier to change your habits by avoiding the things that cause them. For example, if you overeat ice cream when it is in your freezer, then stop purchasing ice cream. Your environment might make your unhealthy habits “easier” and good habits “harder.” Change your environment to change the outcome.

3. Find support. Pair up with someone and work on changing your habits together. You can hold each other accountable and celebrate your victories together.

4. Surround yourself with like-minded people. You do not need to drop your friends and family, but it might be worthwhile to connect with others who are focused on changing similar unhealthy habits.

5. Visualize success. Whatever habit it is you want to change, visualize yourself engaging in a healthier alternative behavior and celebrating your success.

6. Use the word “but” to overcome negative self-talk. When you are changing an unhealthy habit, it might be easy to judge yourself. If you slip up, avoid feeling guilty or mentally beating yourself up. For example, when that happens, finish the sentence with “but:”

“I’m out of shape and tired, but a few months from now I’ll feel energized and fit.”

“I feel like I’m going nowhere in life, but I’m working to develop valuable new skills.”

“I think I’m a failure, but everybody fails sometimes.”

This worksheet will help you understand your unhealthy habits and find ways to replace these habits with healthier alternatives.

What to Do

First, choose one habit you would like to change. You can repeat this exercise if there are additional habits you would like to work on.

Describe the habit.

When does this habit actually happen? _____

How many times do you do it each day? _____

Where are you? _____

Who are you with? _____

What triggers the habit?

What can you do, if anything, to avoid these triggers?

Are there negative effects or consequences when you engage in this habit? Describe, and be as honest as you can.

Next, you will track how many times per day your habit happens. Use your smart phone “notes” or a simple piece of paper, and each time your habit happens, mark it down on the paper or in your phone. At the end of the day, count up all of the tally marks and fill in the following chart. Estimate the amount of time you spent on the habit, and include any notes (e.g., triggers, stressful situations, and so forth). Fill in the chart for one week.

Date	# of times/tally marks	Actual time spent engaging in the habit	Notes

What were the most common triggers? Describe.

Was there anything that surprised you about this exercise? Explain.

What were the negative effects of engaging in the habit? Be specific.

Now, come up with some ways you can either replace the unhealthy habit with a healthy habit, or use alternative coping strategies or ways to distract yourself.

Are you willing to replace your habit with healthier behaviors? Why or why not?

Is there someone you can pair up with to work on this habit together? _____

What can you do to ensure your success?

Changing unhealthy habits takes time, effort, and perseverance. You might try and fail many times before you change your habit. Even if you do not have success right away, if you are persistent you will!

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?
