

# Understanding and Changing Your Habits

## What to 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 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; for example, 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 practice 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 p.m., or decide she will do a final check of her inbox at 7:00 p.m.

What are some ways you can change unhealthy habits? Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Choose a substitute.** Plan ahead of time for how you will respond when you face the stress or boredom that prompts your bad habit.
- 2. Eliminate triggers.** Your environment might make your unhealthy habits “easier” and good habits “harder.” Make it easier to change your habits by avoiding the things that trigger them. For example, if you overeat ice cream when it is in your freezer, stop purchasing ice cream.
- 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.”

## 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 smartphone Notes or a simple piece of paper, and each time your habit happens, mark it down. At the end of the day, count up all the tally marks and fill in the following chart. Estimate the amount of time you spent on the habit, and include any notes (for example, triggers, stressful situations, and so forth). Fill in the chart for one week.

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

Describe the most common triggers.

---

---

---

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?

---

---

---

Think about people you can pair up with to work on this habit. If possible, write down the names of at least two people.

---

---

---

What can you do to ensure your success?

---

---

---

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

## Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

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

What did you learn from this exercise?

---

---

---