

Keeping your health and wellbeing in the know

MyHealthTALK

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WHY IT'S HARD TO BREAK BAD HABITS AND WHY YOU SHOULD KEEP TRYING

If you know something is bad for your health, why can't you just stop it? Seventy percent of smokers say they want to quit. Drug and alcohol abusers struggle with addictions that ravage their bodies and tear apart lives. Two-thirds of Americans with excess weight could lose it by eating right and exercising more. So, why don't we do it?

The National Institute of Health (NIH) and National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) are searching for answers.

"Habits play an important role in our health," says Dr. Nora Volkow, head of NIDA. "Understanding the biology of how we develop routines that may be harmful to us, how to break those routines and embrace new ones, could help us change our lifestyles and adopt healthier behaviors." Volkow has been studying the brains of drug addicts, smokers and overeaters for three decades.

Habits arise through repetition as a normal part of life. They can be helpful, such as when we drive to work on autopilot —with the ability to focus on issues that are more important. Habitual behaviors are also beneficial when they are healthy, such as keeping up with a daily workout or a nutritious diet.

Unhealthy habits are a different story. They are hardest to break because they trigger the brain's pleasure center and release the 'feel good' chemical called dopamine. Dopamine motivates us, stimulating bad

habits such as overeating, smoking, drug or alcohol abuse, gambling and even compulsive use of computers and social media. Volkow's research finds that simply showing an addict an image of drugs or alcohol gives them a burst of dopamine. When a pleasurable behavior is repeated and dopamine is released, it strengthens the habit even more. When not engaged in the unhealthy behavior, dopamine creates the craving to reengage. In other words, the brain's reward center keeps us craving the things we are trying so hard to resist.

The good news is that humans are not simply creatures of habit. Our brainpower and self-control can set us free to do what's best for our health. However, our willpower is like a muscle; after resisting temptation, self-control can be temporarily drained, making it harder to stand firm the next time around.

The most widely applied and tested model of behavioral change is the transtheoretical model (TTM). This model presumes that at any given time, a person is in one of five stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action or maintenance. Hurrying through stages or skipping them makes a person prone to setbacks because each stage is preparation for the next.

Evidence for TTM comes from studies of alcohol, smoking cessation and drug abuse, although it's also been applied to health behaviors such as exercise and dieting. You don't need to be an expert to try this approach. If you are motivated to change, TTM can help you assess your situation and formulate strategies.

Be good to yourself when you are breaking a bad habit. Don't let yourself be derailed by a setback; they are common, perhaps even inevitable. When you are changing bad habits, tackle one at a time. Keep in mind that change is a process, not an event. Think of a potential relapse as an integral part of the change process. Every time you have a setback, you learn more about yourself. Learn from your relapse, adjust if need be, and continue on a pathway toward good health.

(See Stages of Behavioral Change on reverse side. Look for Tips to Break Bad Habits in next month's newsletter.)



STAGES of Behavior Modification

1 PRECONTEMPLATION is the stage when you have no conscious intention of making a change. This stage involves a lack of awareness or information (“Everyone in my family is obese; it must be genetic”), or feelings of failure or demoralization (“I’ve tried to diet so many times; it’s hopeless”). Moving past precontemplation requires you to sense that a bad habit is at odds with important personal goals like being healthy enough to exercise, travel or enjoy your grandchildren.

2 CONTEMPLATION is the stage in which you consider making a change. At this stage, you know that a behavior is a problem and consider doing something about it. However, you still aren’t committed to taking action. If you are stuck in this stage, make a list of the pros and cons of making the change, then examine your potential obstacles and think about how to overcome them.

3 PREPARATION is a stage in which you know you need to change, believe you can, and make plans to change. Perhaps you’ve joined a fitness club, sworn off cigarettes, or started counting calories. It’s important to create a realistic action plan with achievable goals. Be aware of situations that provoke your unhealthy habit, and plan alternatives. For example, if work stress triggers an end-of-the-day cigarette, plan to take a walk instead.

4 ACTION is the stage when you have changed a bad habit and experience challenges without the old behavior. This is a good time to practice alternatives identified during the preparation stage. If stress tempts you to overeat, use healthy coping strategies such as exercise, deep breathing or yoga. Let family and friends know you are making a change and solicit their support. Use positive “self-talk” to bolster your resolve.

5 MAINTENANCE is the stage you’re in when you have changed an unhealthy behavior for at least six months. During this stage, you’ll become more confident about being able to maintain the change. Work to avoid temptation, and reward yourself when you are successful at avoiding a relapse. Fully integrate the new, healthier behavior into your life, and accept that it may require additional changes. If certain situations or triggers are associated with the old habit, avoid them. Congratulate and reward yourself for staying on the path to a healthier you!

*You can help create
a culture of good health*

MILLENNIALS ARE AMERICA’S MOST STRESSED GENERATION

Young Americans ages 18-33 are more stressed than the rest of us, according to the latest annual Stress in America survey. The survey shows young adults, on a scale of 1 to 10, have a 5.4 stress level compared to the national average of 4.9.

Jobs and money are blamed for increasing stress for the so-called millennial generation. Many young adults are starting families and repaying student loans, which piles on even more stress. Moreover, 49 percent of young adults surveyed said they aren’t managing their stress well, and only 17 percent said their doctor helps them manage it. A mere 23 percent believe their doctors are helping them make healthy lifestyle and behavioral changes.

“When people receive professional help to manage stress and make healthy behavior changes, they do better at achieving their health goals,” said Norman Anderson, CEO of the American Psychological Association. “We need to improve how we view and treat stress and unhealthy behaviors that are contributing to the high incidence of disease in the United States.”

The report found that many people are aware that managing stress is important for good health. Stress is on the rise for one-third of Americans. The Stress in America study of 2,000 Americans was conducted by Harris Interactive for the American Psychological Association.

