

# Breaking Bad

Nail biting, midnight snacking.... Unlocking the causes of a bad habit is the first step toward forming a good one. **By Alexandra Owens**



**E**ach morning you brush your teeth, turn on the *Today* show, and stop by the Starbucks around the corner without even thinking about it. As humans, it's only natural that we believe we're in control of these and all of our actions at all times. It's what separates us from apes (aside from reality TV and \$200 haircuts). But when Immanuel Kant praised the power of human autonomy, he probably didn't realize that more than 40 percent of the tasks we perform each day—like the ones in our morning routine—aren't conscious decisions, but mere habits. “Habits are a very basic way of learning,” says Wendy Wood, a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California. “They teach us to associate actions with certain contexts, so whenever we're in that situation again, the same result automatically comes to mind.”

This neurological autopilot saves the time and energy needed to make constant decisions, but it can also cause problems when we aren't aware of our behavior and fail to notice the circumstances that act as cues. Inhaling a few cookies one afternoon might be relatively harmless the day you need a sugar boost to meet a deadline, but if you start doing that regularly, your brain begins to expect the snack whether your body needs it or not. Once habits form, sheer willpower often isn't enough to change them. The good news: Scientific studies have revealed ways to recognize the impulses you'd like to change and create new, better routines. "Habits aren't deeply ingrained psychodynamic needs," says Wood. "They're simple associative patterns, so the mechanisms to break them are equally simple." Repetition is key for all of these techniques—and once you establish the behavior you want, it will actually become a habit.

**1** **Take notes.** It's not exactly a secret that our memory is selective. "Even though we make promises to change a habit, when the situation arises we often don't take action because we've forgotten or are tired or distracted," says Jeremy Dean, a psychologist and the author of *Making Habits, Breaking Habits* (Da Capo). If there's a pattern of behavior you'd like to change—say, staying up too late on Facebook—keep a record of everything about that habit. Write down how you're feeling and what time you go on your nightly social-media binge. "The more you understand your habit, the more you can use that information to be vigilant at the appropriate times to make sure the behavior isn't triggered," says Wood. Once you know the triggers, making a change can be as simple as scolding yourself: Say "Don't do it" at the moments when you sense that you're backtracking.

**2** **Get strong.** Developing a new habit often requires plenty of self-control, and your willpower, like a muscle, needs exercise. Megan Oaten and Ken Cheng, psychologists at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, have found through a series of studies that self-control in one area breeds self-control in others. In one example, students who enrolled in a program to improve their study habits found that they cut back on smoking, drinking, and television. Meditation may also be an effective way to strengthen willpower. For an easy five-minute practice, try closing your eyes and focusing on your breath. If you get distracted by a thought, acknowledge it without chastising yourself and refocus. "There is interesting work saying that certain types of meditation can help you pay more attention to your environment and break repeated tasks," Wood says. "Meditation has been shown to boost activity in the executive part of the brain, the area that decides what we're going to do, which improves self-control," says Dean.

**3** **Plan ahead.** Sometimes your willpower is strong—and sometimes you're feeling weak and really want to go to Chipotle. The more decisions you can make when you're focused, calm, and well-rested—in other words, when your self-control is at its peak—the better. "It's putting your executive brain in charge rather than your impulsive brain," says Joe Frascella, director of the Division of Clinical Neuroscience and Behavioral Research at the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Bethesda, Maryland. If you know you're going out for dinner but you want to keep the calories under control, pick a Japanese restaurant rather than Mexican. Or if you always stop at Zara to see what's new on your way to the gym, leave your credit card at home.

**4** **Distract yourself.** Habits seem tenacious, but they actually suffer from a little ADD. They are so reliant on external cues that they can be disrupted by a simple visual reminder. To kick a habit, remove any visual triggers that might cause you to slip, and replace them with eye-catching objects to remind you of your resolution. "I've found that people who are trying to stop biting their nails can paint them a bright color," says Dean. "When their hand comes up, they remember their plan and often decide immediately to stop." A physical roadblock can also help you snap out of it. In experiments at Duke University, Wood and her colleagues had people eat stale popcorn while watching a movie. If they ate with their dominant hand, they kept snacking during the film, even though they later acknowledged that the popcorn was stale. But if they ate with their nondominant hand, it seemed to disrupt the habit, and they paid attention to how the popcorn tasted. "It's the same principle behind swapping your fork for chopsticks: Using an unfamiliar tool is another way to ensure that you only

eat what you really want,” says Wood. If you find you get caught up tweezing your eyebrows or picking at blackheads, try using your nondominant hand to make the action more difficult and less hypnotic before you do any damage.

**5 Link up.** When a company wants you to fall for something new, like the latest song on the radio, it's not uncommon for it to use a technique called “sandwiching,” surrounding the unfamiliar material with what already feels comfortable—for example, playing a new release between two hits. Experts have found the same approach works when adopting a habit. “I think of all our activities during the day as a chain,” says Dean. “So if you want to create a new habit, look for a spot in your routine where you can fit in the new action conveniently and with minimal effort.” For example, if you want to exercise more, plan to hit the gym before your weekly manicure. If you need to floss daily but tend to put it off, do it at night between washing your face and brushing your teeth, instead of during the morning rush. “You want to make a habit part of the context in which you live,” says Wood. “It

takes work initially, but eventually it will happen automatically. That's the beauty of habits.”

## 6

### Make a trade.

Like preventing your dog from destroying your Manolos by giving him a new bone (presumably one that doesn't cost \$900), there's evidence that smart substitution is an effective way to break a habit. Wood suggests choosing something that gives a similar type of response to satisfy the craving—think smokers chewing gum, or squeezing a stress ball instead of picking at your split ends. This solution is especially useful in situations where you can't avoid potent cues, such as social settings. If you're trying to snack less and are invited to a friend's engagement party, make sure you have something in your hand as you mingle, even if it's a glass of sparkling water or a few carrot sticks—something to put in your mouth instead of the fried spring rolls.

**8 Be specific.** While most of us have made a New Year's resolution at some point, only 40 percent succeed in keeping them, according to new research from the University of Scranton. So why is that determination to be on time, to save money, and to always be kind to strangers so often a bust? Those goals are too broad, say the experts. “To create a habit, your mind has to link a situation to a specific action,” says Dean. You need what's called an “implementation intention”—a detailed strategy of how you will form and maintain a new habit. This is easier to follow than a resolution that's too vague or ambitious, because it involves a particular, productive action. So instead of telling yourself, “I'm going to get organized,” try, “I'm going to clean out my handbag every Sunday night before bed.”

## 9

**Consider the big picture.** It seems a little melodramatic, but when you're fighting the urge to turn on Bravo instead of turning in for the night, thinking about what is really

important to you, like your family, friends, freedom, or religious beliefs, has been shown to boost resolve. Researchers at Florida State University asked test subjects to submerge their hand in a bucket of freezing water. The average person lasted 27 seconds, but those who had first written an essay about their higher ideals managed an average of 62 seconds. Strangely, the thought doesn't have to be connected to the habit you're trying to change, says Dean. He speculates this is because when we're tempted by something, we tend to think in the moment, while contemplating high-minded thoughts makes us think abstractly and perhaps more nobly. To give yourself a boost, remember why a particular value or person matters to you, or look at a photo of him or her. ♦

## 7 Accentuate the positive.

There really is power in positive thinking—and writing. In a study led by psychologist Pablo Briñol at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, test subjects were asked to make a list of the good and bad things they had heard about the Mediterranean diet.

Some kept what they had written in their pockets; others threw the lists away.

Those who held on to the page with

positive thoughts were more likely to adopt the diet they had described than those who didn't, suggesting that the influence of our intentions can be magnified by carrying them with us—literally—as a reminder. According to Dean, just the very step of listing pros and cons on paper can increase motivation as well. “You want to visualize all the positives outweighing the negatives to pull you toward your goal,” he says. “It helps to make an actual written list.”