

# LINE ON LIFE

11/10/96

## Breaking Bad Habits \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

We all have bad habits. Some we can tolerate, but we may seriously want to get rid of others. How can we do it? The psychological principles of learning can help to break a bad habit.

---

### Breaking bad habits is not easy, but effective methods can insure success.

---

The first thing to do is to make a **detailed record** of when the habit occurs and what events lead up to the habit. This should be done for up to a week or more, depending on the type of habit.

With this record, find out what is reinforcing the habit. Once you discover this, you need to **remove, avoid or delay the reinforcement**. For example, a coed is doing her studying in the evening, but her periods of concentration last for only about 15 minutes. They are usually followed by a trip to the kitchen for a snack.

Not only is she falling behind in her studies, she is gaining weight.

Snacking is rewarding her impulse to avoid reading. If she does her reading where snacks are not readily available – at school or the library – there will be a delay between the impulse to eat and the reward of snacking. At home, she should keep only staples on hand or foods that require preparation, so that a separate trip to the store is required for "goodies."

Another method is to try to get the **same reinforcement with new responses**. For example, a young mother realized that she was yelling at her children more often than she liked. Her yelling was reinforced by the periods of relative quiet that followed.

To avoid this habit, she can make a special effort to praise her children, show approval, and pay attention to them when they are playing quietly and constructively. On the other hand, when they are noisy, she should (as much as possible) ignore her children. Not only does this change the responses that lead to mother's reinforcement, but now the children do not have to be noisy to get attention.

A third technique is to **avoid cues** that elicit the bad habit. For instance, a man is not ready to quit smoking, but he still wants to reduce it. He can take many smoking cues out of his daily routine by removing ashtrays, matches, and extra cigarettes from his car, home and office. He can also avoid situations in which most of his smoking occurs by

staying away from other smokers, taking a walk after meals (leaving his cigarettes at home), and chewing gum when he gets nervous.

He can also **narrow cues**. He can begin by smoking only inside buildings, never outside or in his car. With this accomplished, he could limit his smoking progressively to his home, one room in his home, and finally one chair in his home. It would be better if the room and chair were in an uninteresting place in his home – bathroom, basement or garage.

A fourth technique is to make an **incompatible response** in the presence of stimuli that lead to the bad habit. Suppose a child has gotten into the bad habit of throwing his coat on the floor after coming in the door. After being scolded, only then does he hang it up. The scolding has become the cue to hang up the coat. Rather than scolding, it would help more if he was made to put the coat on again, go outside, come in the door, and then hang up his coat. Soon coming in the door will become the cue for hanging the coat up, not the scolding.

Still another method is **negative practice** – having a person do something until it gets very boring, tiring, or uncomfortable. I used this technique with one of my boys, who had the bad habit of playing with matches. I bought a large box of wooden matches. In my presence, I allowed him to light one match at a time and let it burn as long as he wanted. After the first few dozen matches, he wanted to quit – but I made him light all 1000 matches in the box. Although it took him three hours to light every match, he didn't have his fascination with fire any more.

A detailed record provides **feedback** – one of the most direct of all approaches to changing bad habits. Suppose four college students, renting a house together, are concerned about the high utility bills. They all want to conserve energy. Even with their good intentions, they have not lowered their electric bill. The roommates can keep a daily record of their energy consumption by writing down and posting the use of electricity in a convenient spot. With a psychological study of families giving themselves this type of daily feedback, their energy use was greatly reduced.

Almost any bad habit will be reduced somewhat merely by getting feedback – keeping score. Keep track of the number of times daily that you arrive late to appointments, smoke a cigarette, watch an hour of TV, drink a cup of coffee, bite your fingernails, swear, or what ever other response you are interested in changing. A simple tally on a piece of paper will do, or you can get a small mechanical counter. Many bad habits can be handled effectively without special training. However, if these methods do not work, you can seek the services of a professional to help you break your bad habit.

---

\* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1995, pages 226-227. This book is on reserve at the AWC and Yuma County Libraries.