

Changing bad habits for good

By Mandy Kendall

We are all creatures of habit. It helps us to do myriad things everyday without having to actually think about it too much. Can you imagine if you still had to think about the act of driving to the same extent as you did when you first got behind the wheel of a car? It would be pretty exhausting.

Our brains set up patterns so that the things we do frequently become much more automatic, almost like a reflex.

However, while some habits are very useful, we can also form habits, or patterns, that don't serve us so well.



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More and more studies are showing the impact our thoughts and behaviors have on everything we do. Judith S. Beck discusses one particular MIT study that showed that lots of behaviors or patterns are triggered by a cue that automatically leads to an action that ends up with a reward. This habitual loop can happen over and over again without us having to think about it much at all.

For example, food cravings or compulsive eating can often be strongly entwined with a cue (for example stress or boredom), which is then followed by a routine (eating food) and ends up with a reward (relief and distraction from the stress or boredom). This may eventually lead to a habit or pattern that

is hard to break.

We can unconsciously train ourselves to the point that whenever a particular cue (stress or boredom) is experienced the brain will go into autopilot. So even if a person were trying to lose weight, they might not realize what they were doing until they had finished eating.

This concept can be applied to pretty much any unwanted habit. Once we recognize what the cue is we can normally follow the process through to the reward and see what the pattern is. However sometimes the reward is not necessarily very good for us.

So, how do we break these habits or patterns if we are not aware of doing them at the time?

Here are some *Qwik-e* tips to help break those unwanted bad habits:

Break the pattern – Once we've recognized a pattern and discovered the cue that starts it, the pattern can then become a much more conscious process. Look at where habits have caused you to do things you'd rather not do, and see where the pattern can be broken.

Avoid the cues – Minimize the chances of being confronted with a cue or trigger that affects you. For example find a positive release for, avoid, or minimize stress where possible. Keep yourself occupied to stave off boredom. Avoid the actual situations where your cues might exist (places and particular people will often be very strong cues).

Change the routine – Sometime cues can't be avoided so try to come up with some alternative routines to follow when you experience a cue. Taking deep breaths or going for a short walk can often distract you from a stressful situation long enough to break the bad habit or pattern that usually follows.

Reward yourself positively – Congratulate yourself when you successfully avoid an unwanted pattern or habit. Positive feedback from friends and family will also help re-enforce the effort you are making. Beck discusses how rewards help establish and maintain habits – so we can use this to our advantage to form the habits that we want to form.

Help from friends and family – Sometimes a habit is so ingrained that it helps to ask someone to gently remind us when we are doing something we are not even aware of until it's too late. Also some support and company, when you are changing your routine, to help avoid specific cues to bad behavior, is often very helpful.

Until next time.

Mandy Kendall operates Health Connective in South Lake Tahoe. If you have any questions, feel free to drop me an email at healthconnective@gmail.com, visit us on Facebook, or keep an eye out on Lake Tahoe News for regular Qwik-e tips on how to make healthy changes one Quick and Easy step at a time.