



Employee Assistance Program

Hard Habits to Break

With just one month left in this year, many of us have already turned our attention to the annual ritual of making New Year's resolutions. According to researchers at the University of Scranton, 45% of Americans usually make resolutions, but only 8 percent are successful in achieving them. Typically, people resolve to begin a healthy habit like exercising regularly or to break an unhealthy one like overeating or smoking. While both can be challenging, it's the latter that generally proves more difficult. How do you stop doing something that you've always done?

First, it helps to think positively about making a change. Researchers at the Mayo Clinic have identified negative thought patterns that sometimes make it difficult for us to make positive changes and stick with them. They include filtering, which is focusing only on negative aspects of people or situations, and overgeneralizing, which is basing a general conclusion on a single incident or piece of evidence. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a resource you can use to help identify and modify negative thought patterns.

It's also helpful to understand how habits work. Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit: Why We do What We do in Life and Business*, has developed a framework to help people change their habits. He believes that "while change might not be fast and it isn't always easy, with time and effort, almost any habit can be reshaped." Duhigg identified three main parts of habits that need to be identified in order to change them: the cue, the reward, and the routine.

Cue: When you feel the urge for your habit, ask yourself:

- What time is it?
- Where are you?
- Who else is around?
- What did you just do?
- What emotion are you feeling?

The Reward: What craving do you think your habit is satisfying?

- Test your hypothesis.
- Substitute another reward. For example, take a walk instead of eating a cookie.
- Is the craving gone? If yes, that's what you're really craving.
- Keep experimenting until you find something new that satisfies the urge.

The Routine: Now that you have identified the cue and reward, insert a new routine.

- Studies show that the easiest way to implement a new habit is to write a plan:
When (cue), I will (routine) because it provides me with (reward).
- Post this plan where you will see it. Try it for a week.

Here's a scenario to illustrate these components of habits: *Every day at 3 p.m. when I feel tired, I either eat a snack or drink coffee to feel energized. It doesn't satisfy my "craving" for energy. The next afternoon I go outside for a few minutes. I feel much better.*

MY PLAN: When I feel tired in the afternoon, I will take a short break outside because it provides me with more energy to finish the work day.

Of course breaking unhealthy habits and beginning new healthy ones takes time and is a different experience for each person. Resolve to examine one routine or habit that you would like to change for the better. Your Employee Assistance Program can serve as a useful tool in developing and monitoring your change plan.



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