How to Quit a Bad Habit

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I can start this article saying that if you want to know how to quit a bad habit, you have to know what a habit is. After this, you can find a way to work on quitting a habit that you found bad. A habit is a choice we made a long time ago, and that has taken root in our minds. A habit is a usual way of behaving: something that a person often does in a regular and repeated way.

With the right tools, we can learn to make better choices.

For the past several years, I decided to carry on a philosophy of personal growth that has little or nothing to do with current courses made of lights and sequins, guru exalted and mundane concepts repeated ad nauseam.

I chose a different way of talking about personal growth.

I am firmly convinced that real change does not happen if you walk through a bed of hot coals, accompanied by some of music motivating. Real changes should be earned, but primarily they should be built, day by day, in the silence of the morning, in the path of our choices, in the depths of our mind and our heart.

I am convinced that the road to Self Improvement is made of good habits.

Habits are in fact the starting point, the foundations and the first blocks on which to build our personal revolution.

Try to imagine, for just a moment, how they would be your days if you could stop smoking, start eating healthily, stop wasting time with the extra check of phones and social media, shopping, stop procrastinating and stop with other more distractions.

Not only. Imagine how these same days would be if you could get up early in the morning, work out consistently, work productively.

How different would be your life? How satisfying would you appear to yourself? What goals do you achieve?
Let’s come to the key point: How To Quit a Bad Habit?

Let’s now focus on the strategy we can apply:

Every individual is unique, as well as all the habits that characterize the behavior. Different cravings drive each person’s habits.

It can be generalized a pattern to help us understand how a habit works and what are the levers on which to act to create it, change it or delete it.

Some habits yield readily to analysis and influence. Others are more complex and obstinate and require continued study. Moreover, for others, change is a process that never fully concludes.

The general pattern, framework that I am going to show you may tell that change might not be fast, and it is not always easy. However, with time and effort, almost any habit can be reshaped.

THE FRAMEWORK YOU NEED TO FOLLOW IF YOU WANT TO PRACTICE HOW TO QUIT A BAD HABIT

• Identify the routine
• Experiment with rewards
• Isolate the cue
• Have a plan

In the late 90’s, researchers at MIT discovered a neurological mechanism behind our habits, a simple neurological loop at the core of every habit, a loop that consists of three parts: A cue, a routine and a reward.

The cue is a signal, a hint or an indication of how to behave in particular circumstances or environmental condition that pushes our brain to activate the “automatic pilot” making us make a habit without realising it.

Classic examples of the cue can be an emotional condition, a time of the day, a physical location, a.

The routine is what we do automatically when the cue occurs. A routine can be physical, that we perform certain actions, mental, or have particular thoughts, or emotional, or feel certain emotions. A classic example of routine is a cigarette after a coffee or after lunch, for those who have experienced or are going through a bad habit like smoking.

Another routine can be to check social network when we woke up instead of doing meditation or physical activities.

The reward is what reinforces the habit in our brain; It is the biochemical reaction that speaks to our minds that a routine should remember why we did try some form of pleasure (or avoided because it made us feel pain). It is
what we achieve acting a routine.

A cigarette after a coffee may make you more relaxed and feel "better". You check social network in the early morning because you want that someone has written to you. You always look for something when you are trying to reach the reward.

I discovered this framework within the pages of the bestseller “The Power of Habits”, of the New York Times reporter Charles Duhigg. If you have problems with your habits, Duhigg’s book is a must-have.

In addition to offering very impressive insights, it provides an efficient path to 4 steps to remove, alter or enhance any habit.

I am now going to show you this 4-step framework:

1. Identify the routine

The first essential step to achieving any change is the awareness. Become aware of bad habits is the gateway to our path of personal growth. Start by asking what does it mean to change habits, then which habits are limiting your potential or ruining your life.

The routine is the most obvious aspect: it is the behaviour you want to change. It is the habit you wish to quit.

Identifying the routine is easy. It is harder to understand what is the cue that triggers our routine, and, even more, difficult to define the reward that we are looking for.

After you have identified the routine, you should ask yourself: What’s the cue for this routine? So what’s the reward?

2. Experiment with rewards

The objective of this second phase is to identify the needs that we are meeting with our routines. Rewards are powerful because they satisfy cravings.

The main question you should ask yourself is: Why am I practicing this routine? What’s the purpose?

Imagine to find yourself going to act and behave in a routine you have identified as bad. Resist this urge and try to make some small changes: instead of doing that thing, read an article from the Archives of mind-globe.com, or meditate for 20 minutes, or even better get out to go running and to do physical activity!

However, it does not matter what action you are going to do instead of the routine: the important thing is to experience different rewards, until you recognize what compensation satisfies the need that you met with the routine, exactly like the first reward.

Experiencing different rewards means to reach the satisfaction we filled with the routine.

By experimenting with different rewards, you can isolate what you are craving, which is essential in redesigning the habit.

You get the idea. What you choose to do instead of the routine is not important, the point is to test different hypotheses to determine which craving is driving your routine.
Understanding exactly what need we are trying to fill is not easy, then you should keep track of your experiments.

Try not to do the routine, and test four or five different rewards. You can use, to test, an old trick to look for patterns: after each new activity, write three words, the first you spring to mind, or just a brief description of what you feel, what you think. There may be three words that describe your mood or random thoughts.

After being written, wait ten minutes and ask yourself a simple question: do you still feel the need to make your routines?

The first time you answer “no”, you will have found your reward replacement and the three words will help you understand the need you are meeting.

You have then to find, after some experiences, what rewards satisfies your need even if you are not doing the routine.

The reason it is important to write down three things, even if they are meaningless words, is twofold: it forces a moment of awareness of what you are thinking or feeling, a moment of attention, and it helps in later recalling what you were thinking at that moment.

Then, at this point, we just have to find the cue that triggers our habit!

3. Isolate the cue

It is not always so easy to identify the signal; it often happens that the signal is playing to hide itself.

Experiments have shown that almost all habitual cues fit into one of five categories:

1. Location (A particular place can trigger us to smoke a cigarette or eat junk food)
2. Time (At 3:30 pm you just want to drink hundred cups of coffee)
3. Emotional State (When you start crying or feel bad, then you need to eat a 500ml ice cream pack)
4. Other People (When you meet some people you will begin to drink to feel at ease)
5. Immediately preceding action (A routine as a consequence of another routine)

If you want to identify your signal, in the next few days, each time you put in place a habit you wish to change, try to answer these five simple questions:
1. Where are you? (sitting at my desk)
2. What time is it? (3:36 pm)
3. What’s your emotional state? (bored)
4. Who else is around? (no one)
5. What action preceded the urge? (making a photocopy)

The next day:
1. Where are you? (walking back from the copier)
2. What time is it? (3:18 pm)
3. What’s your emotional state? (happy)
4. Who else is around? (Jim from Sports)
5. What action preceded the urge? (Writing an article)

Also, do the same for the third day, and so on.

By answering these questions for one week, or even more or less as far as you find your clue, you will be able to identify the cue that triggers your routine. You have to find if it is the time of the day, or the presence of a particular person, or whatever present in the five list of categories presented before.

4. Set a plan of action

Once you’ve figured out your habit loop, you’ve identified the reward driving your behaviour, the cue triggering it, and the routine itself, you can begin to shift the response. You are then going to replace your bad habit with another routine which is not bad.
Once the cue has been identified, you can shift the behaviour. In the example, the cookies have been replaced with the walk to a friend’s desk to talk 10 minutes with him.

Once you too will have identified the three essential elements of your habit, you’ll have all the tools to change it, delete it or improve it. Obviously, changing some habits can be more difficult. Regardless, this framework is a place to start. Sometimes change takes a long time. Sometimes it requires repeated experiments and failures. However, once you understand how a habit operates, once you diagnose the cue, the routine and the reward, you gain power over it.

The images have been taken from the examples of mentioned book.

This flowchart, from “The Power of Habit” author Charles Duhigg, guides you through the three steps of breaking the habit loop.
It is shown in the infographic below:
Then, in the end, I can strongly suggest to try this method if you do not know how to quit a bad habit and to let me know in the comments how it is going and what are your questions/doubts about it. If it may help you, print the flowchart and use it to change your habit!

Other resources for you:

- How To Be Great In Life
- Best Suggestions For Personal Development To Improve Yourself
- Why Should I Switch Off My TV?
- Practical Experience For Starting Meditation (For Beginners)