

KICKING BAD HABITS

By Kathleen Megan

Want to quit late-night snacking? Stop smoking? Control your temper? Exercise more? Stop procrastinating? Get places on time?

There are legions of experts who can help you — from therapists to hypnotists, from life coaches to motivational gurus — each with their own spin on how to jettison bad habits and create healthful new ones.

However, while the particulars may vary from expert to expert - whether it takes a trance or inner-strength or visualization or writing your goals on paper or watching inspirational movies — a few central tenets do not.

First, don't just focus on the behavior you want to change. Instead, start by changing your thinking. Figure out why you developed the dubious habit to begin with.

Take overeating, for instance. **Susan Gayle** (formerly Susan Neri-Friedwald), a **behavior-modification expert and motivational coach in New York City**, says people may eat too much because they associate eating with the loving presence of others around them. Or perhaps they eat because they have low self-esteem, and rather than facing inner demons, they want to believe people don't like them because they are fat.

Maybe the bad habits — whether overeating, drinking too much, smoking, not exercising, procrastinating, shopping too much or gambling — take root when we try to distract ourselves from uncomfortable emotions such as anxiety, fear or anger.

People need to find ways to "manage their stressors," said Debbie Mandel, the author of "Changing Habits: The Caregivers' Total Workout for Those Sandwiched Between Children, Aging Parents and Work." Once you've figured out where the troubling habits come from — a task that may require talking to friends or to professionals — you can begin to figure out positive ways to handle those problems, rather than relying on bad habits.

For instance, says **Gayle** (formerly Neri-Friedwald), if you're hooked on doughnuts, cookies and other junk food to keep you going through the work day, instead renew your energy by taking a walk or calling a friend on the phone or going to the rest room and doing jumping jacks. **Gayle** (formerly Neri-Friedwald) said she's gotten a boost by going out to her car, listening to her radio and singing along for a bit.

Mandel also recommends exercise as a way of controlling the stress that causes us to revert to bad habits. "I recommend putting on sneakers and walking out the door," said Mandel. Another suggestion: do squats over your chair or pushups against a wall.

Betsy Collins, marriage and family therapist in Milwaukee, says people need to simply get better at finding positive ways to soothe themselves. "Think of yourself as a scared pet or a little kid or someone else that needs soothing," she said.

She suggests: listening to music, calling a friend, saying nice things to yourself.

The experts also recommend starting small and then letting success build when you try to break a bad habit.

Kerul Kassel, a personal and business coach from Orlando, Fla., says if, for instance, you want to get better organized at home, make the goal very specific and attainable. "Think specifically about how you want to be organized. I want my kitchen to be organized. I don't want anything on the counters for more than a few hours. Make measurable, specific goals."

As you try abandon a bad habit or start a new healthy one, Karen Steinberg, a psychologist at the University of Connecticut Health Center, warns not to fall into the trap of negative thinking if you aren't successful right away. "People get into routines of being unkind to themselves or saying they are stupid or an idiot, that they can never do anything right," said Steinberg.

In this frame of mind, a person who tries to quit smoking and doesn't succeed right way, may consider themselves a failure and not bother to try again. The truth is, said Steinberg, often it takes several tries to stop a habit like smoking. "The more times people try to stop smoking, the better chances they have of eventually stopping it altogether." said Steinberg.

Steinberg said she believes society contributes to the development of bad habits because people get the message: "you never have to have emotional pain."

"We have lots of things to help people avoid, to distract them from their pain," said Steinberg. "That's the enemy — the worst thing in the world is to have people get into behaviors that are destructive to themselves or others, because they feel they can't handle sadness or anger. If people were more adept at experiencing their emotions, they might do less acting out because of them."

Some Techniques

- **Bad habit:** Hooked on junk food.
- **Ask yourself:** Why am I eating too much? Is it stress? Am I lonely, disappointed.
- **Make a change:** Start small — allow yourself junk food two days a week; take a walk when cravings hit. Try losing weight with a friend or group. Exercise to reduce stress and weight.
- **Bad habit:** Smoking
- **Ask yourself:** Why are you smoking? Is it anxiety? Fear? Because you're bored?
- **Make a change:** If you decide to quit smoking, set a stop date. Seek support from friends, programs. See a doctor for help with the physical addiction to nicotine; avoid situations and friends that trigger the urge; take up exercise, hobbies; expect lapses.
- **Bad habit:** Disorganized
- **Ask yourself:** Why don't I want to throw things out? Do cluttered spaces make me comfortable? Why is that? How does it make my home life or work life difficult?
- **Make a change:** Try spending 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes every night to bring some order; hire an organizer if you're way behind; and if it's in the library, why keep it at home?
- **Bad habit:** Chronic tardiness
- **Ask yourself:** Why am I late? Anger or resentment? Am I simply absent-minded? Disorganized? **Make a change:** Set an earlier deadline for yourself.
- **Bad habit:** Road Rage
- **Ask yourself:** Are you tired? Not eating well? Stressed out? Are you angry about other topics? Do you imagine that the person who is cutting you off has it in for you?
- **Make a change:** Leave earlier - reduces the stress; develop compassion for others on the road; don't take anything personally.