

# How to Break the Habits that Get You Stuck

Bad habits are often what get us stuck. Ideally, we see what's happening (I can't afford my speeding tickets), and we adjust (drive slower). But sometimes we recognize the bad habit and choose not to do anything about it, willing to live in "stuckness" (think procrastination). Then there's the bad habit we don't even know we have. These are some of the hardest stuck moments to solve. We know something isn't working for us, but can't pinpoint our role in it. It's these hidden bad habits that also hold the most potential. If we can shine some light on them, understand them, and own them, then we can replace them with good habits. And that means we get stuck less often or for not as long.

## What Is A Habit Anyway?

There are three defining characteristics of a habit, according to Jeremy Dean, author of *Making Habits, Breaking Habits*:

1. **Habits are performed with minimal awareness.** When you brush your teeth every morning, you don't exert much effort thinking about what tooth to brush and how to go about it. You just do it, so your mind is free to wander to other things, like what you're going to wear.
2. **When something becomes a habit, it loses its emotional charge.** If we play our favorite song over and over, it eventually becomes less exciting than the first time we heard it. That's the soul-crushing effect of repetition. On the upside, it makes something painful, such as waking up early for work every day, seem less miserable after a while.
3. **Habits are based on context.** Very specific triggers, such as time, place, emotional or physical state, and situation produce automatic reactions, or habits. When we're out of context in a new place, it throws off our usual routines and we become more conscious and observant. We might drive without realizing that we stopped for the traffic lights on our way to work, but if we're taking a road trip somewhere new, we're more conscious of every turn.

## Finding Our Hidden Bad Habits

When we think about bad habits, the first ones that spring to mind are actions like nail-biting, smoking, or eating too much cake. But we have other not-so-good habits that we may not realize we're doing, like how we respond to certain types of people or situations. It could go something like this: You're eight weeks into a new romantic relationship and happy, happy, happy about it. But in the following weeks, your mate hasn't been able to call or come over as often. As your time together dwindles, you begin finding fault after fault with him, and now you feel stuck in a relationship you want out of. From the outside looking in, we conclude that lack of attention led to the intense criticism. We might even see a pattern of this in your life, whether it's personal relationships, jobs, or activities. But for you, on the inside, it's harder to connect the context of being ignored with your response (or habit) of fault-finding.

So how do we make that connection? It takes active self-observation.

- ✓ Think about how you spot trouble patterns in others, like the example above. You step back and consider a wider scope of time and behavior than the situation at hand. And then you identify similar instances. Every time this happens, she does that. Turning that

kind of eye on yourself takes courage and honesty. But if you get stuck in the same way often, this is a great first step toward undoing that hidden habit. Try this: Make a list of all your past stuck moments and then come up with possible triggers for each of them.

- ✓ Think about how you felt, what others said and did, what you thought, how you reacted, what you said, how you got unstuck (if you did). You may start to see patterns, but most likely, you'll have to keep adding to the list with new stuck moments before the insights emerge. It also may help to get input to your list from someone who knows you or the situations well. If you use the Unstuck app regularly, much of this work is already done. You can go back to your past stuck moments and review your feelings, thoughts, and actions. You may even want to diagnose stuck moments you had before you got the app so you have a full record. In either case, find the behavior pattern of "when this happens, I do this."

As a thought starter, below is a list of the 11 ways we believe people get stuck. With each, we've included a list of possible habits that may emerge in these situations. If any strike a chord, your job is to find the trigger that causes the habit. *[Assignment: You STUCK, looks like which character(s)? Circle and prioritize any that apply]*

1. **Tunnel Visionary:** Stuck by only seeing the limitations → **Possible bad habits:** Bad-mouthing or complaining, ignoring things, shutting out new ideas.
2. **Deflated Doer:** Stuck with lack of motivation → **Possible bad habits:** Not showing up or being on time, mentally checking out, letting others take over.
3. **Drifter:** Stuck without a goal or purpose → **Possible bad habits:** Filling your time with busywork, feeling jealous of other people, going along for the heck of it.
4. **Waffler:** *Stuck with fear of making a mistake* → **Possible bad habits:** Thinking out loud and annoying your friends, starting the same thing over again and again.
5. **Reluctant Adapter:** *Stuck with fear of uncertainty* → **Possible bad habits:** Fighting with others, walking away from the situation.
6. **Idle Achiever:** *Stuck by a lack of follow-through* → **Possible bad habits:** Letting yourself get distracted, talking about it, but not doing anything about it.
7. **Fuzzy Forecaster:** *Stuck by lack of clarity* → **Possible bad habits:** Getting annoyed when others don't know what you mean, frequently changing your mind, jumping in before an idea is fully formed.
8. **Perplexed Planner:** *Stuck by new obstacles* → **Possible bad habits:** Taking a stubborn stance, working overtime, complaining, quitting.
9. **Ad Libber:** *Stuck with lack of preparation* → **Possible bad habits:** Over-promising and under-delivering, winging it, getting distracted.
10. **Lone Leader:** *Stuck by taking on too much* → **Possible bad habits:** Not communicating, avoiding the issue, working way too many hours.
11. **Avoider:** *Stuck by mixing up priorities* → **Possible bad habits:** Getting really busy with other stuff, blaming others, getting distracted.

## Swapping In Good Habits for Bad

Once we identify the hidden habit that gets us stuck, we can work on kicking it. Because habits are an automatic response to a specific trigger, it's nearly impossible to just stop. It's much more effective to replace a bad habit with a better one.

For example, if, under deadline pressure, we get stuck as a Tunnel Visionary and spend all our time finding reasons why we can't meet the target date, our goal would be to swap that negative behavior with something that helps us think more positively. It could be taking a walk, listening to a certain piece of music, talking to a colleague. You know what will work best for you. The most important thing is that the solution should directly respond to what's triggering your habit, so eventually it will become automatic: I feel deadline pressure, so I will...

To help your habit swap succeed, consider following these three pointers for before, during, and after:

- **Before: Catch yourself ahead of time.** Take advantage of days when you're feeling more resolved about changing your habit to put preventive measures in place, recommends Dean. If you know you always procrastinate with Facebook or Twitter, schedule an app to block them during certain times. If you overspend, deposit your money in an account you can't access until the weekend comes.
- **During: Don't go it alone.** When you're the only one who knows about your new habit, it's far easier to give up. Find someone, or something like a digital tool, that can keep you accountable as well as offer encouragement and feedback. At times like this, there's no shame in fishing for a few compliments if that will help keep you on track. *[Coach Roz Harris: Having and using an effective, lasting support system is the key to successful achieving your permanent lifestyle changes]*
- **After: Make minor adjustments.** If your plan works the first time out, kudos! You've got habit-swapping superpowers. Most of us will slip up once or more, so we'll have to figure out why it didn't work. Maybe we need more people to motivate us. It could be the good habit isn't the right replacement for the bad one. Like everything in life, it's a process of trial-and-error, so you have to allow yourself to make mistakes, understand them, and adjust the plan.

Expectations will play a big part in your success. On his website, Psyblog, Dean points out that turning an action from intentional to automatic takes time. *A recent study averaged that time at 66 days for relatively simple habits such as drinking a glass of water every day.* For hidden habits that aren't necessarily triggered daily, it's wise to assume that your habit swap is going to take longer than two months.