

Unlock your path to success



Struggling to break stubborn habits? Experts say the simple secret is cutting yourself some slack

Lose weight, eat healthier, spend less. If you're anything like us, you set New Year's resolutions like these, then feel crushed when willpower falters in the face of a fantastic Amazon Prime deal or a restaurant outing a few weeks later.

But the surprising key to banishing unwanted habits is to abandon willpower altogether, asserts psychologist Amy Johnson, Ph.D., author of *The Little Book of Big Change*. "Willpower is an exhaustible resource that requires effort," she explains. "When you're in the middle of an urge or craving, you're already very taxed, so it's the worst time to try to add more weight on your shoulders."

According to Johnson, "Every habit starts as a well-meaning attempt to feel better in the moment." So filling an online shopping cart with shoes isn't a personal failure; it's your brain trying to help you cope with the stress of a demanding day, using a method it knows has worked before. "When you clench down with blame and shame—*Oh no, I'm doing it again, I need discipline*—it creates more angst."

Fortunately, the key to freeing yourself from this trap is simple: "When you're kinder and more open, the negative thoughts and feelings driving the habit naturally settle down and disappear," says Johnson. "It's amazing how quickly the mind self-corrects and habits fall away." How to respond in this kinder way the next time temptation strikes? Read on for the expert tips that work better than willpower!

WINNING STRATEGY

Take the wheel

You've vowed to step outside your comfort zone and accept more responsibilities at work, but anxious thoughts pop up—*I can't do this!*—and you fall back on old habits like turning down high-profile projects. "Your habits aren't weaknesses but helpful warning signs showing you're caught up in some uncomfortable thoughts and feelings in the moment," says Johnson. "Instead of taking the storm in your mind too seriously, take a deep breath and know that it will come and go on its own."

In the meantime, Johnson suggests thinking of intrusive thoughts as the bossy commands of a backseat driver. "She can scream at you to run the light or pull over," says Johnson. "But *you're* behind the wheel, so you have all the power." Why it works: "You realize the urges that come up are not 'you' but habitual brain firing, and eventually they lose their voice." In one study, people ate 70 percent less candy after imagining they were bus drivers and their tempting thoughts were annoying passengers.

WINNING STRATEGY

"Surf" the urge

After you pledged to cut back on sugar, the office candy jar and your husband's chocolate stash rocket to the top of your mind, weakening your resolve. "The 'lower' brain, where habits form, is just a computer that plays out the programs it's been given," explains Johnson. "Its whole job is to keep you alive, so when you get this positive kick from sweets, it says, *Let's keep giving her these urges*. But you are healthy and habit-free by nature, so what's learned can be unlearned."

The fix? "I recommend 'urge surfing,' or mindfully noticing urges, stepping back and creating space between them and your actions," says Angela Klein, Ph.D., author of *Mindful Eating from the Dialectical Perspective*. To do: Next time you're tempted to indulge, visualize riding the craving as if it were a wave: It gathers power, crests, then dissipates. This image reminds you that the impulse will pass. Proof it works: In a University of Washington study, smokers who used this trick showed a 37 percent decrease in cigarette use.

WINNING STRATEGY

Think "big picture"

Following the budget you set to boost retirement savings has been tough with all the post-holiday sales, and you're dismayed when the credit card bill arrives. "One thing that can make patterns hard to change is intermittent reinforcement, or unpredictable rewards," says Klein. "You don't always get a payoff, but you keep coming back because maybe this time you will."

Resisting the lure of intermittent reinforcement is easier when you use what Klein calls "reasonable mind." "It's a part of the brain that's calculated, nonemotional and focused on the long term," she explains. To switch it on, she advises keeping reminders of your goal visible. So you might tack a photo near your computer of the Florida coast where you'd like to retire so you recall why you're socking away funds. With the sunny scene on your wall, suddenly quarterly targets are more urgent and motivating. "Even if there are setbacks, reasonable mind stays focused on the goal and how you can keep moving forward."

WINNING STRATEGY

Find peace through discomfort

You'd like to end your habit of taking on too much and feeling chronically overcommitted, but between the awkwardness of telling people "no" and your own high expectations, it's easier said than done. "Either way, you're going to have stress: If you're always saying 'yes,' then you have too much to do, and if you try to create a new behavior and say 'no,' it's

uncomfortable," says Klein. "The question is, which discomfort is leading you toward what you ultimately want and value? Choose that discomfort."

While resisting your habitual response can feel uncomfortable in the beginning, Klein says there's a simple way to put yourself at ease when saying 'no': "Put your shoulders back and take a deep breath or do a half smile, which

looks like the Mona Lisa's," she suggests. "This activates your parasympathetic nervous system, or the brain's safety system, which slows your heart rate and relaxes your body. If you do this while saying something like, 'Thank you for the opportunity, but I'm going to have to say no,' you'll be more comfortable and confident because you're in your safety zone."