

Breaking Habits

Much of the behaviour we carry out (or don't carry out) to make us fat, is learned. We learn to have a piece of cake with a cup of tea for example. We learn (almost unconsciously) to get up and get something to eat when there's an ad on TV. We learn to stay in bed when it's a bit cold outside, rather than get up and go for a walk.

Psychologists call this 'conditioning'. It's what happens when a certain stimulus (eg. a cup of tea), becomes a signal for a response (eg. a piece of cake). Initially there may have been a hunger for a piece of cake, but as time goes by and this is paired regularly with the cuppa, the tea itself becomes a signal to eat. It's like Pavlov's dog that learned to salivate to a bell after the bell had been repeatedly rung every time it was given a piece of meat.

Conditioning is often the cause of habits that become almost unconscious. You call in for a hamburger on the way home from work - whether you're hungry or not - simply because you've learned to do it every day.

So if habits like this can be learned, they can presumably be unlearned. Here's some ways you can do it:

Monitor Your Behaviour: By closely watching and recording what you do each day, you'll start to see some patterns. Then you can see what's causing the problem and set out to change this. Write down when you eat, how you feel at the time and what else you're doing. If you find that eating follows watching TV for example, you can try some of the actions mentioned below. In some cases just becoming aware of what you're doing is enough to lead to a change in behaviour.

Change the Stimulus: Once you've found the stimulus or 'signal' for your bad habits you can set out to change it. If getting up during the ad breaks on TV leads you to go to the fridge, change channels, or don't watch TV! If drinking beer leads to eating peanuts, try drinking something else - or not drinking.

Change the Response: Again, once a 'signal' becomes known, long term behaviour can be changed by consciously changing the response to that signal. Instead of going to the fridge during the ad break, walk around the room or read a book. Instead of having peanuts with the beer, keep these out of arm's reach or have some low fat pretzels or fruit with a glass of wine. Remember, it only requires small changes to make a big difference to your weight over time.

Habits are often good. They enable us to do things without have to think about them. But they can also be a liability when they teach us to do the wrong thing. They can be broken.

For more information on habits that affect your health go to www.lifestylemedicine.net.au
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