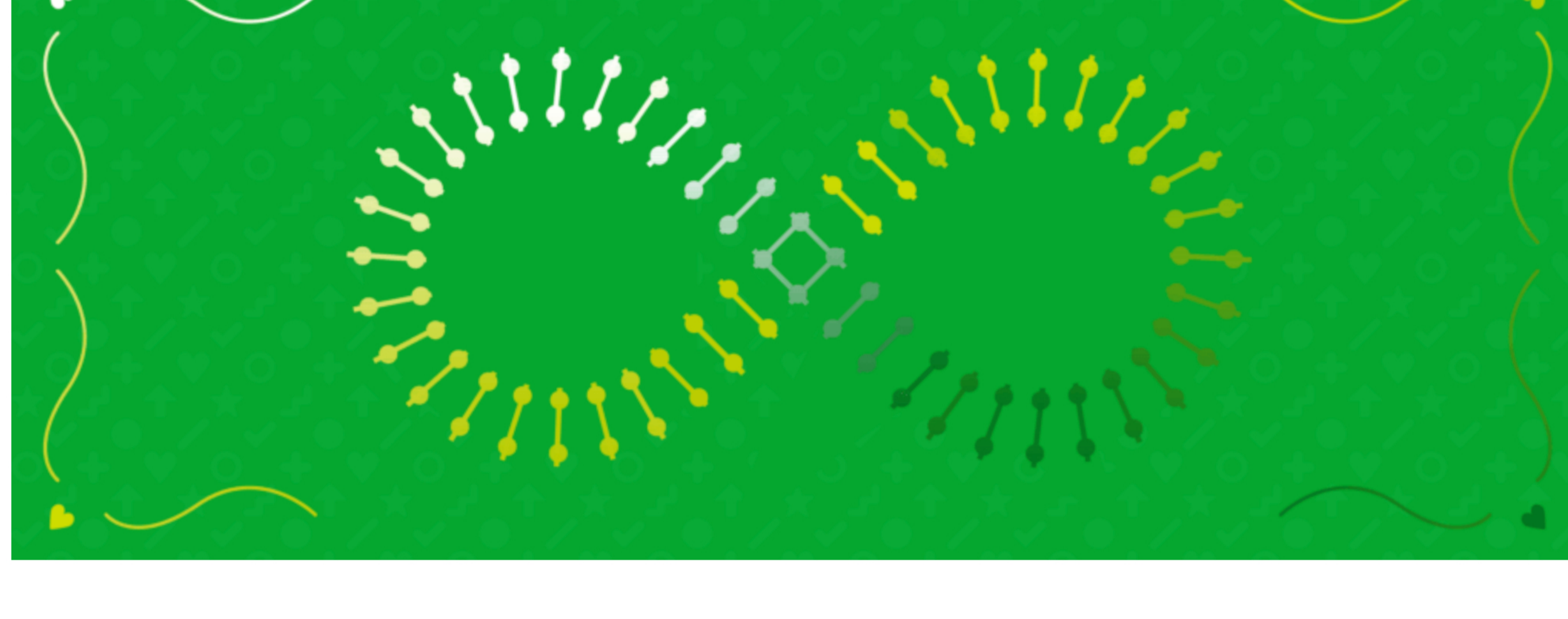


4 Simple Ways to Break Your Bad Habits

ANTHONY BARTLETT • 01/29/2020



A lifetime of accomplishment is about more than just one goal—it's about developing the tools you need to stay focused and achieve any goal. In 2020, Evernote will help you build your own flexible toolkit for success, with a year-long series covering the essential building blocks of productivity.

No two people are alike, so this isn't a pre-programmed series of steps you need to follow in order to be successful. It's a set of tools and tips you can work on at your own pace, in any order. What you accomplish in 2020, then, is building a productivity toolset you can draw upon in the future to keep you moving in the direction of your dreams.

Today, let's look at the role bad habits play in holding you back, and how you can break free.

“Just do it.”

It's one of the most famous advertising slogans of all time, and it's made Nike world-famous. The message is simple: If you want to make a change—if you want to be healthier, happier, more successful—just...do it.

So why doesn't it work?

Millions of people say they want to improve some part of their lives, but research shows only eight percent will actually achieve their goal. Clearly, wanting to improve isn't enough. Before you can make a lasting change, you need to understand how bad habits develop, how persistent they are, and how to deal with the inevitable obstacles along the way.

How habits form

We're all creatures of habit—but it's not our fault. We've evolved that way.

Your brain has an ingenious method for reducing workload and conserving energy, by recognizing patterns in your environment and remembering how you've responded to them in the past. Psychologist Wendy Wood says, “When you repeat an action over and over again in a given context and then get a reward when you do that, you are learning very slowly and incrementally to associate that context with that behavior.”

James Clear, in his book “Atomic Habits,” calls this the ‘habit loop.’ It consists of:

1. **Cue** – the trigger telling your subconscious mind to go into automatic mode.
2. **Craving** – the desire or motivation behind your habits. As James says, “What you crave is not the habit itself but the change in state it delivers.”
3. **Response** – your habitual, learned reaction to the cue.
4. **Reward** – the satisfying rush of dopamine you feel when you give in to the craving.

This response mechanism is so efficient that, as Wendy Wood says, “We spend a shocking 43 percent of our day doing things without thinking about them.”

How to overcome bad habits

Let's get this out of the way first: You can't break a habit; you can only replace it.

Habits are hardwired into your brain, making them remarkably persistent. Once your mind has associated a response with a particular cue (reinforced by a predictable reward), it's almost impossible to change. Willpower may succeed in overcoming it in the short term, but the habit loop is only suppressed, not broken.

The good news is that healthy habits are just as resilient as bad ones. You can hack your mind, then, by replacing your bad habits with new, better habits. In time, they too become automatic and begin to overwrite the older routines that no longer serve you.

Here are four ways you can kick those bad habits for good:

1. Identify your cues

Do you reach for a donut every day at 3 p.m.? Pick up your phone every time it buzzes? Turn on the television as soon as you get home from work? These are a few of the subconscious routines that may be sabotaging you.

To begin, stop and think about the triggers in your life. When do you feel the most stressed? Unhappy? Frustrated? How do you cope with those negative feelings? Are there any cue/routine patterns you can identify that are holding you back? Recognizing these stressors in your life can help you spot unproductive responses you may want to change, such as unhealthy food choices or negative self-talk.

- Create a list in Evernote of the cues you've identified, and review it every morning as soon as you wake up. (Setting a reminder can help you with this.)
- Download Evernote's Daily Recharge template and use it to record your emotions and reactions. Review it regularly and you'll soon see where you can make positive changes in your life.
- Use journaling as a powerful tool for keeping track of your feelings. Your journal becomes a safe place to work through any negative thoughts and emotions, without worrying about what anyone else might think.

2. Increase the friction

There's a reason why supermarkets put shelves of candy beside the checkout, and why McDonald's cashiers ask “Would you like fries with that?” It's all about making it easy for you to indulge.

To fight back, make it more difficult for you to engage in bad habits. If you constantly reach for candy, store it at the back of your fridge or pantry. Then, when you open the door, your eyes will be drawn to healthy options instead. If you're addicted to your smartphone, put it in a drawer when you're not using it. For bonus points, turn the power off before you do.

It's all about adding friction. Wendy Wood found that simply asking moviegoers to eat with their non-dominant hand made them consume less popcorn. Introducing one small step between the cue and the routine began to break the connection, even if only for a short time.

- Create a note and brainstorm ways you can add friction to your bad habits. Try one for a few days and see how it feels. When you're ready to try some more (or if the first one isn't right for you), go back to your note and try another.
- Reduce the junk food temptation by creating a shopping list in Evernote, and only buy what's on the list. It's okay to add the occasional treat—it'll make it easier for you to stay on track—just be careful not to overdo it!

3. Substitute good habits

As long as you continue to experience the same cues, your brain will react with the same old routines that have been holding you back. So, once you've identified the habits you want to eliminate, and made it more difficult to engage in them, it's time to find alternative habits to replace them.

If your routine is to eat a donut every afternoon, try placing a bowl of fresh fruit on the counter instead. Or, if you really need that sugar rush, walk down the street to a nearby coffee shop instead of the office kitchen. For bonus points, take the stairs instead of the elevator. You're not cutting out the habit completely, but you're making small changes that can add up to big wins over time.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) pioneered this concept of habit replacement over 70 years ago. Its 12-step program recognizes that the stresses of life don't disappear when a person quits drinking. Instead, it encourages them to replace the habit of drinking with sharing their feelings in regular meetings.

- Create a table and add a row for each of the responses you want to change. Beside each one, list the ‘good’ habits you've decided to replace them with. For example, next to “Eat a donut at 3 p.m.” you could write “Eat an apple” or “Do 10 jumping jacks.”
- Build a support group of friends and family and share a public link to your note with them. This helps keep you accountable, and gives them a chance to encourage your efforts.

4. Track your progress

When you're in the middle of trying to replace bad habits, it can be hard to see how far you've come. As a result, it's easy to become demoralized and slip back into old patterns. Instead, recognize that behavior change is a difficult, and sometimes painful, process; it's normal to have the occasional setback.

The secret is to anticipate and plan for tough times. For example, if your goal is to eat healthier, think about how you'll deal with the temptation of a meal with friends—before you get to the restaurant. If your new habit is to run every day, what will you do when it rains? Keep a contingency plan in Evernote for dealing with setbacks like these to reduce your chances of falling back into old patterns.

Tracking your progress is a powerful motivational tool. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld famously uses a calendar to maintain his writing habit, marking each day he writes new material.

- Get Evernote's Habit Tracker template to see how well you're doing with your new habits—but don't be too hard on yourself if you miss a day! Simply forgive yourself for being human and jump back in as soon as you can.
- Download Evernote on all your devices so you can update your Habit Tracker no matter where you are. If you go for a walk, record how long you were gone to see how you're improving over time. If you're working on eating better, keep track of your food choices when you're not at home.

As anyone who has ever made a resolution can attest, eliminating bad habits is one of the hardest things to do. But, armed with insight into the workings of your brain and a few tools to help you stay on track, you can make real, lasting change, and start to build the future you've always imagined.



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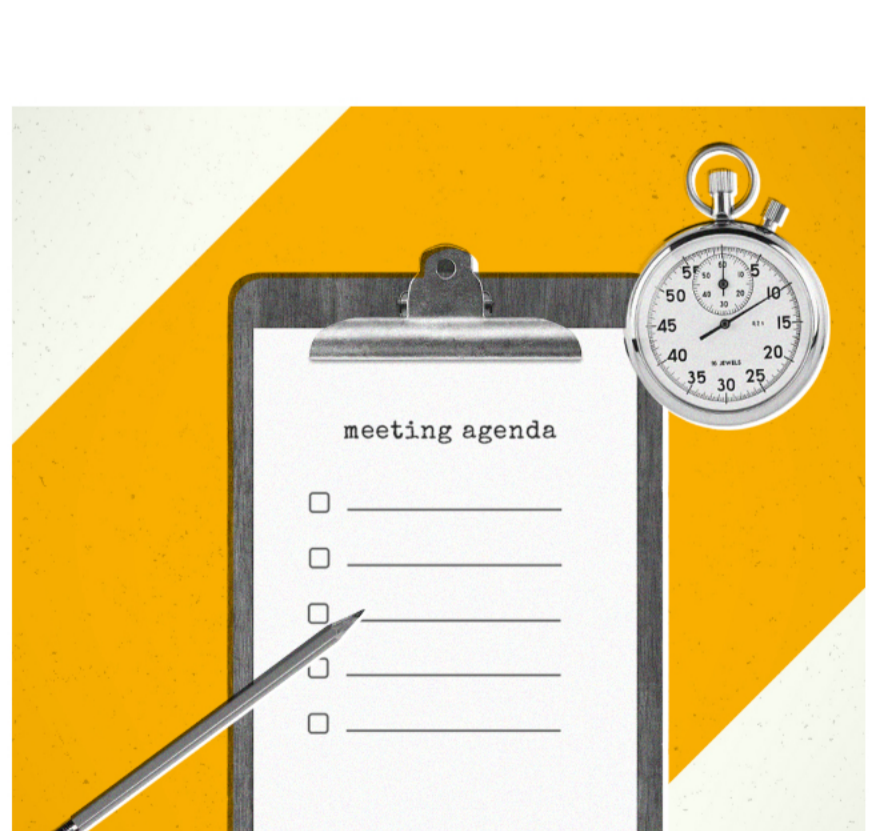
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