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8 Steps to Breaking Bad Eating Habits

By Dr. Larina Kase

Many clients tell me that their eating patterns have become habits over the years—bad habits. As we all know, habits are very difficult to break. This is because habits are formed by a complex combination of emotional, behavioral, biological, and interpersonal variables. This article will give you an overview of the fundamental simple steps that you need to know to change your eating habits.

It is not enough just to read these ideas and know them. You need to DO them. If you're familiar with our work, you know that our message is: Knowing is only 1/10th of the battle—it is doing that takes 90% of the effort. I'll include some action steps to take in this article to give you an idea of how to get started. If you have difficulty translating your knowledge into behavior changes, then you may want to consider coaching or a support group to help you.

It all begins with your state of mind, so take a minute to get ready to beat your bad habits for good. Ready to learn how to break your bad habits? Okay, let's launch into the eight steps now...

Step #1: Identify the Problematic Behaviors

This is a fundamental step in changing anything that you want to change. Unfortunately, it is something that people often neglect as they jump to trying to make changes. Before knowing what you need to change, you need to be fully aware of the problem.

This is a major issue for weight loss because even though people think they are aware of their eating patterns, most are not. Research studies show that 30% of normal weight people significantly under-report what they eat each day and 60% of over-weight people under-report what they eat. This means that none of us really know how much we're really eating!

We all have this problem. I recognized a situation like this last week. Under a tight deadline, I popped a bunch of Hershey kisses (7 to be exact) at my desk. If someone asked me, I would have said that I ate about 3, but I had the wrappers to count up the 7 that I ate! Whoa- 7 chocolates without realizing it?! And think about the way things like this can add up over time!

The best way to identify behaviors is to keep a daily record. Do this for 2 weeks and then begin making some serious changes. Use the following headings for your journal:

- Time
- Situation/ Activity
- Feeling/ Mood
- What I ate (be exact)
- Where I ate it
- Nutritional value in what I ate
- How I felt afterwards

Step #2: Regulate your environment

In psychology, this is called "stimulus control". The idea is to make it more difficult to carry out the habit. This is a very simple and straightforward thing to do that you can start today. Here are some steps to take to gain control over your environment.

1. Eliminate junk foods from your house. If it is not there, it is much easier not to eat it, right?
2. Only have controlled portions of food around (so- no quarts of ice cream!). You can do this by buying food and then dividing it up, freezing some in Tupperware, and placing some in plastic baggies.
3. Many people overeat while standing because they are eating on the go and not keeping good track of how much they are eating. As a rule, therefore, it is better to sit, but if you find that you eat too much while sitting (because you're so comfortable that you can keep sitting and eating), try to break the cycle by standing for about a week.
4. Change the feel of the environment. Try turning up or down the lights, turning off the TV, and turning on some music. You have to pick these strategically. For instance, if you are a quick eater (not a good thing for losing weight!) try to play some slow music and turn down the lights.
5. Always have some great healthy snacks on hand. For example, have some individually wrapped string cheese, small bags of nuts, those little bags of mini carrots, or fruit. Make these healthy snacks very accessible by putting them where you can see them, keeping some at work and at home, and having a special snack drawer.

Step #3: Changing Emotional Eating

Everyone eats in response to their emotions from time to time. The most common emotions that fuel eating are:

- Boredom
- Frustration
- Anxiety or nervousness
- Feeling tired or fatigued
- Sadness or depression
- Loneliness
- Confusion or indecision
- Stress

Come up with a list of alternative activities to do which will help you manage any negative emotions that fuel overeating or unhealthy eating. The best activities are ones that are actually **opposite** to how you are feeling.

It may feel very unnatural or counterintuitive, but it helps you to figure out what to do differently. For instance, if I feel sad and want to lie on the couch with a pint of Ben & Jerry's, I know that what I really need to do is the opposite of this: Get out, get active, and eat something that makes me feel nourish my body.

Sometimes people eat as an avoidance strategy. If there is something else that needs to be done which brings up anxiety or fear or irritation, we may want to avoid it and if we are sitting down in front of a pizza, we can avoid it for at least 20 minutes! Stop eating for avoidance, instead do what you were avoiding and *then* eat.

Step #4: Turn Excuses into Strategies

We all have many, many excuses for not exercising and not eating what we know we need to be eating or eating what we know we need not to be eating. This is natural human behavior- when we do not feel like doing something, we try to convince ourselves why that is the best decision. Just because it is natural, it is not necessarily helpful, so let's look at changing it into something more helpful.

First, identify what excuses come up for you the most often. For example, for me, I found that several times per week I tell myself "I don't have time to...go grocery shopping, go to the gym, to prepare a healthy dinner..." The common theme for me is time.

Now, our excuses are often very much based in reality. In truth, I don't have much extra time in my life. However, when we take a closer look at the excuses and alternative responses we can see that there are great solutions.

Let's take my first one: I don't have time to go grocery shopping. So what do I do instead? I go out to eat several times per week. Let's say I go to a popular deli near my work to get lunch 4 days per week. I have to walk over there (5 minutes), wait in line (5 minutes) order and then wait while they prepare 5 meals ahead of mine and then mine (10 minutes) and walk back (5 minutes). This is 25 minutes per day or over 1.5 hours a week just for lunch.

How long does it take me to go to the grocery store and buy some healthy organic frozen meals and other food? About an hour and a half. So, the time is the same and the nutritional value is much better when I prepare my own (and as an added bonus, I save money).

Here's a coaching exercise to try:

1. Over five days, record every excuse that comes up for not eating healthy or not exercising.
2. Now for each excuse, brainstorm alternative strategies that accomplish your goals rather than emotional eating which takes you farther away from your goals
3. Each day, work on a new alternative strategy. If you have not made progress with one and the excuse is still around, really focus on changing that one before you move on.

Step #5: Partially Gratify Urges

In the research on what works to change habits, there is something called "habit reversal". This means changing the habit by not really gratifying it. I say "not really" because you gratify it partially—through a more healthy behavior.

Many of you have probably heard of the popular strategy to smoking cessation of chewing gum or snacking on low-fat foods. This is a habit reversal strategy. You partially gratify the urge to put something in your mouth by placing something more beneficial than a cigarette (people need to be careful that they aren't using something like M & Ms constantly as their main habit reversal strategy).

The same idea works for breaking bad eating habits. If your habit is to sit and snack for a long period of time, find something that is slow to eat and healthy, such as grapes, mini carrot sticks, non-fat or low-fat popcorn, or blueberries one by one.

You can also use this strategy for fulfilling cravings with healthier options. For instance, if you crave something salty, go for some lightly salted vegetables or pretzels instead of potato chips. If you crave chocolate, have a few chocolate covered raisins or soybeans. This will break the association of craving salty leading to chips and craving chocolate leading to a pint of Ben & Jerry's.

Here's another coaching exercise for you:

1. List out the specific habits you want to break
2. Now, brainstorm alternative strategies to employ, such as air popping popcorn and using non-fat butter sprinkles when you crave something salty and want to snack for several minutes.
3. Keep this list of strategies with you at all times so you will have many habit reversal options in front of you.

Step #6: Make it a family or friend affair

Getting support for changing your eating habits can be VERY helpful. There are several reasons for this. First, social learning theory tells us that we learn by what others are doing. If you get a close friend, or your husband, or your mother (or anyone you spend time with) to eat healthily whenever you are together, it will help you to pick those healthy foods as well.

Second, having support for your changes makes a big difference. Whenever someone gives you encouragement or praise for your healthy choices, it serves as positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is the #1 factor which increase the (healthy eating) behavior. It means that your good behaviors get rewarded by a compliment, a great feeling, or any other reward.

Third, it will reduce temptations and have you not feel deprived. When you don't have unhealthy or tempting foods around or others don't order them when you go out, it will be easier for you not to eat them. People will want to help you out when you ask them and they will be improving their own health.

Fourth, if you are a parent, you can help your kids to eat more healthy which will in turn help you. Many people find it easier to help their kids to change something than to help yourself. The great thing is that you can do both at once.

Step #7: Identify Self Sabotage

Does your self-sabotage center around food and weight? Here are some of the signs:

1. Frequent self-defeating thinking, such as, "I can't do this, I'll never lose weight."
2. Procrastination: "I will begin my exercise program- tomorrow."
3. Time management problems: "If I was not so busy, I would definitely go grocery shopping for some healthy food."
4. Reduced motivation: "My goals are so unobtainable and big- it would take forever to get there."
5. Negative Predictions about the Future: "If I begin a healthy lifestyle, I will never be able to enjoy my favorite foods again."

One of the most critical steps in overcoming self sabotage is to recognize it. Begin investigating to see if you have any of these thoughts or behaviors. If so, write them down. The act of self-monitoring (or writing these things down) often results in decreases in the self-sabotaging behaviors.

Don't procrastinate or make excuses, begin identifying these things today!

Step # 8: Overcome Self Sabotage

In the last step, we taught you how to identify self- sabotage. The tell-tale sign is self-defeating thinking, with thoughts such as: "I can't do this, I'll never lose weight" or "If I begin a healthy lifestyle, I will never be able to enjoy my favorite foods again."

Thoughts like these are very likely to lead to weight- loss self-sabotage because they set up a fear of failure and sap your motivation. The key to overcoming thoughts like these is to ask yourself: **"What is the validity of that thought?"**

Rather than trying to respond with a "positive thought" (which you are unlikely to believe), tell yourself that you need to test out just how true your fear really is. If you think you will never be able to enjoy your favorite food again, keep some of your favorite food (in small portions of course) in your diet and see whether you can actually continue to enjoy your favorite food AND lose weight.

Self-sabotage thinking is in black and white or all or none. The exercise I just described to you helps you to think in a way which includes all of the **grey areas** which is a key in overcoming self-sabotage.

Dr. Larina Kase is the president of STRENGTH Weight Loss & Wellness™. She helps clients to learn the psychology of weight loss success and then turn knowledge into action. Her company's unique and effective approach has been featured in media like The New York Times, Shape Magazine, The Jane Pauley Show, and Fitness Magazine. [Click here](#) to sign up for our free newsletter and get a free 8-week e-course.

