



FREE AT LAST
How To Free Yourself
From Bad Habits,
Forever!

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Introduction

Alice: *Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?*
The Cheshire Cat: *That depends a good deal on where you want to go.*

Can People Really Change?

David Lucero knows where he wants to go: He wants to go to El Paso, Texas.

David is about sixty years old, I think. For the last three months, he has been living on a sidewalk across the street from a Greyhound bus station.

I don't know how long David has been homeless. He is one of America's walking wounded—mentally ill, unable to take care of himself, unable to cope with the business of life. He is always happy to talk, although you have to repeat yourself a few times before he can understand you: David is losing his hearing.

One day I tried to take him to a shelter for the homeless. All he had to do was get in the pickup truck. He had to make a decision: Get in or stay on the street. The right decision could have started the cycle of healing and change, but it was more than David was capable of doing that morning. He decided to stay on the street, waiting for his imaginary ride to El Paso.

When I meet people like David, I tell myself that Lewis Carroll didn't make anything up when he wrote *Alice in Wonderland*. I have met many people who are flesh and blood Cheshire Cats, Mad Hatters, and Queens of Hearts.

I come into contact every day with people whose lives and families have been torn apart by bad habits: people addicted to cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal drugs; over-spenders, overeaters, and chronic worriers; negative thinkers, procrastinators, and people who won't forgive themselves for something that happened long ago.

I have seen firsthand how bad habits keep ordinary people from living happier and healthier lives. Everywhere you look, people want to know why they are unhappy. And they want to know what they can do about it.

The talk shows offer a constant menu of miracle cures for every type of bad habit imaginable—everything from quick weight-loss programs to 20-minute lessons in positive thinking that promise to cure depression. We are constantly bombarded by programs that promise effortless and immediate results: *Lose weight fast, while eating as much as you want! Guaranteed to work!* Sure.

We are overwhelmed with solutions today. And the more solutions there are, the harder it is to find one that works. Many people have failed so many times that they've almost given up the battle. Others gave up a long time ago.

Establishing new priorities

Is it possible to free yourself from bad habits? Can people really change in any meaningful and long-lasting way? Can I change myself? The answer to each of these questions is “yes.” But you can’t change in 24 hours, as some programs and self-help books promise.

My research, as well as my experience and common sense, tell me that *anyone can change*, but at the same time, I know that people need a compelling reason to change.

What does it mean to change? To change means to establish new priorities—to choose a behavior that’s different from the one we’re using now. David Lucero is stuck on the street, waiting for a solution that doesn’t exist. When a real solution is right in front of his nose, he can’t see it.

I don’t know when his hearing started to deteriorate. And even though he can see, I have a feeling that he has been blind for many years. I don’t know the story of his life, but I suspect it is a story of bad habits and bad decisions.

I’m sure it’s a story filled with bad people and bad situations, too. But at some point we have to discard the factors, the people, and the situations that shaped us. Focusing on the past won’t help us solve today. At some point we have to take responsibility for our own lives.

I suspect that bad habits and bad choices are what brought David to this point—day after day and year after year—until he hit rock bottom. That’s always the way it is.

Learning how to free yourself from bad habits starts with the realization that we cause our own feelings. I am the major cause of my own problems. The moment I grasp that simple fact, I’m ready to step into the process of self-change that will lead to freedom from the habits that keep me from living a more satisfying life. And when I’m free from my bad habits, the people around me will be free from the person I used to be.

All people can bring about superficial changes in themselves. But freeing yourself from a self-destructive habit like smoking or overeating requires a deep, long-lasting change. A bad habit is like an iceberg. You can’t beat the habit if you approach it as if it were only as large as what you can see on the surface.

Franz Kafka said, “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.” Any book or program that aims to help people break bad habits must reveal the whole iceberg that lies below the surface.

You can’t eliminate the whole thing in one day, but if you take a step-by-step approach, you can eliminate the bad habit sooner than you thought possible. It is going to take effort on your part.

You can't eat whatever you want and loose weight, no matter how many times you hear it on the talk shows. But you can loose weight, and you can learn to enjoy healthy foods more than the unhealthy foods you're eating now.

David has constructed a verbal cage for himself. His definition of the problem seems to give him no choice; he avoids having to take responsibility for himself. To receive the benefits that come with daily meals, hot showers, clean clothes, a bed, medical attention, companionship, and as much help as a social worker can give him—bus fare to El Paso, if that is indeed where he should go—he must break out of the cage.

But David is convinced that he cannot go to the shelter, for doing so would mean that he might miss his ride to El Paso. That is how people get trapped in verbal cages of their own making.

I talk about some extreme cases in this report, because I see them every day. But I also think that these extreme cases make it easier to see the real issues and challenges faced by people who are not in such obviously life-threatening situations.

David isn't conscious of the elaborate mechanisms he has constructed to hide the truth from himself, but he is hiding it all the same. To free ourselves from bad habits, we must stop hiding the truth from ourselves.

Overeaters, smokers, and chronic procrastinators have more in common with people like David than meets the eye. We all go to great lengths to hide the truth from ourselves about the destructive nature of our bad habits; too often, lives and families are destroyed before we become aware of the verbal cages that keep us trapped in self-destructive behavior.

Does professional therapy work? Can it help people break bad habits before the habit destroys their lives? The dropout rate is astonishing: *45% of clients who seek a professional therapist drop out of therapy after two or three sessions.*

Do programs help? Millions of smokers have quit forever *without following a treatment program*. On the other hand, many people who try a smoking-cessation program are not able to quit, no matter how many different programs they try.

Some research suggests that for *every person who quits smoking by following a treatment program, there are almost twenty persons who quit on their own.*

What conclusion should we draw from all of this? It's pretty clear, I think. You have a better chance of freeing yourself from a bad habit by becoming your own coach, by taking responsibility for your own program.

The goal of this report is to give you the information and strategy that will empower you to free yourself from bad habits. Millions of people have succeeded in breaking a bad habit, and so can you.

The six stages in the process of self-change

Change is not an event, but a process. Change happens through a series of stages, and most successful self-changers fail at least once before they succeed. Willpower alone won't do it.

You need to understand the cycle of change, or you risk substituting one bad habit for another, as so often happens when ex-smokers satisfy their craving for "something" by overeating. Success depends on having the right information and knowing how to use it.

Researchers have identified six clear stages in the process of successful self-change:

1. *Denial*
2. *Awareness*
3. *Preparation*
4. *Action*
5. *Maintenance*
6. *Termination*

For most people, the process of breaking a bad habit is not a straight path that takes them from one stage to the next. Successful self-changers usually follow a path that's more like a spiral: They move forward, go back to a previous stage, and move on to the next level of commitment one or more times before breaking the habit for good.

Quitting a habit cold turkey usually doesn't work. If a person isn't ready to move ahead, pushing her into the action stage will cause her to feel like a failure the first time she slips up. She may end up more addicted to her habit than she was before she tried to quit. If she feels guilty and blames herself for failing to break the habit, she will find it even harder to make a commitment to quit the next time.

We have all seen cases close to home. Many of us have experienced the frustration of trying to break a bad habit. As Mark Twain said, "Quitting smoking is easy. Personally, I've quit many times." If that sounds familiar, this report is for you.

Whatever your bad habit is, you may have tried to break it many times, too. This time will be different, because you'll understand that breaking your habit is a process, not an event. You will have the knowledge and the confidence to succeed this time.

Can you really change? Can you really free yourself from bad habits? Millions of people around the world are living proof that you can. This guide will show you how. But like Alice, to reach your goal you need to know where you want to go. For many people, that is the hardest part. Like David, they're stuck.

Freeing yourself from a bad habit starts by removing the blinders.

Stage 1

“It isn’t that they can’t see the solution. It is that they can’t see the problem.”
— G.K. Chesterton

Removing the Blinders

At the age of 72, Jim is a chronic complainer. I learned a long time ago that I don’t need to buy a newspaper or watch television to know what’s wrong with the world; there are plenty of people like Jim who will tell me what’s wrong. Complaining, gossiping, criticizing, and negative thinking are some of the deadliest habits.

Little by little, negativity eats away at a person’s health and eliminates the possibility for happiness. If someone close to you is a complainer, a criticizer, or a negative thinker, your own well-being is at risk.

Complaining about things beyond our direct control is one of the most destructive habits. Yes, I know, it’s also one of the most common things that people do. We complain about the weather; we talk about whoever is the focus of the latest celebrity scandal; we blame the government—any government—for everything that’s wrong.

Complaining about things we can’t control is a very effective way to avoid facing up to things that we can do something about. By spending his life complaining about things that he is powerless to change, Jim avoids having to confront his own negative thinking and bitterness.

Jim wants everyone else to change. He blames everyone else for his problems: his parents, a former business partner, the government, the local economy. In his present state, he can’t begin to understand that his unhappiness has nothing to do with any of these things, and everything to do with his habit of blaming others for what’s wrong in his life.

Jim doesn’t have a habit that causes a clear health risk. He doesn’t smoke, drink, use drugs, or overeat. But his health is failing, and he is worried about the need for major surgery. Although negative thinking hasn’t been conclusively linked to cancer or heart disease, researchers are beginning to find evidence that resentment, bitterness, and hatred literally kill people.

Jim feels no reason to change his own attitude or behavior. He is a classic example of a person who is unable to recognize the true cause of his unhappiness. Jim is in denial.

Denial is the first stage in the cycle of self-change. The vast majority of people whose health, happiness, or relationships are being threatened by a self-destructive habit spend months, if not years, in a stage where they deny the seriousness of the problem.

People in this stage share the following characteristics:

- They refuse to admit that they have a serious problem.
- They resist change and usually become aggressive if confronted about the need to change.
- They have a general sense of hopelessness, no matter how busy their lives seem to be on the surface.

Many people who have self-destructive habits also suffer from feelings of distress. Research suggests that up to 50% of drug users have some form of depression. Misery loves company: We tend to form relationships with people who have our bad habit.

By spending time in a bar, people can convince themselves that it's the normal way to unwind after a stressful day, since there are so many other people in the bar doing the same thing. Research shows that clinically obese people are less likely to lose weight when they live with other clinically obese people.

Self-destructive behavior

Many people are so stubborn in their unconscious need to defend their bad habits that they refuse help even when their lives depend on it.

In *Changing For Good*, James Prochaska mentions a startling experiment done by a zoologist named Calhoun. Instead of using domesticated white mice and rats in his research, Calhoun studied wild mice to gain an insight into how they strive to maintain control over their own behavior.

In one experiment, Calhoun gave the mice an electric switch that allowed them to select dim light, bright light, or no light in their cages. When allowed to make their own choice, the mice avoided bright lights and darkness; time after time, they turned on the dim light. But when the dim light was turned on by the experimenter, the mice ran to the switch and turned it off. Then they turned on the bright light or left the cage dark.

In another experiment, the mice were given control of a switch that activated a treadmill, which was their only source of exercise. Caged mice need to run about eight hours a day to stay healthy. Without any prompting, the mice turned on the treadmill and ran at different times of the day.

Whenever the experimenter turned on the treadmill, the mice immediately turned it off, even though the first part of the experiment clearly showed that the mice wanted and needed to exercise.

Prochaska calls this “foolish freedom.” Laboratory mice are too domesticated to exhibit this kind of behavior. Prochaska points out that the wild mice “demanded control over their behavior, even if it meant sacrificing their own health.”

Helping relationships

People in denial have lost control of the problem, which means that they have lost control of their lives. They rarely progress to the next stage without the benefit of a helping relationship.

Professional counselors, therapists, and helpers have learned that confrontation doesn't help a person move from stage 1 to stage 2. Nagging doesn't help. Letting him have his way—or “going along with him” to avoid confrontation—merely strengthens his denial of the problem by reinforcing in his own mind that whatever he's doing is right.

People usually need an unexpected response before they can remove the blinders. This is a fact that hasn't changed in the last 3,000 years, as the following story illustrates.

King David was one of the heroes of ancient Israel. He was the leader of his nation, a great warrior, an accomplished musician, and one of the greatest poets of antiquity. When he was a young shepherd tending his father's flock, he killed a bear and a lion with his hands. When he was barely a teenager, he killed Goliath on the battlefield.

One evening, the king got out of bed and went up to the roof of his house. He saw a beautiful woman washing herself not far away. Immediately he sent his men to find out who she was. Her name was Bathsheba. She was the wife of a soldier named Uriah, who was one of Israel's bravest and most loyal soldiers.

Uriah was away from home, serving his nation in a war against one of Israel's many enemies. David sent for Bathsheba and slept with her. She became pregnant.

The king wanted Uriah out of the way. The Israeli army was besieging an enemy city at the time. David sent a letter to the commander of his army, Joab, in which he laid out instructions for getting rid of Uriah. He told Joab to send Uriah to the front of the battle, then retreat with the rest of his soldiers, leaving Uriah alone.

Joab carried out the king's orders and Uriah was killed in battle. David made Bathsheba his wife, and she gave him a son.

There are a lot of things going on here that are worse than smoking, overspending, negative thinking, and overeating—treachery and murder, to name just two. And it started with David's voyeurism, a nasty thing in itself. How do you tell a king that he's developing some dangerous habits?

If you think it's hard to get somebody in your own family to remove the blinders, imagine what the prophet Nathan was up against. Nathan knew what was going on. As a prophet, it was his job to help the king open his eyes.

Nathan didn't confront David directly. Instead, he told the king a story about two men who lived in the same city. One man was rich, the other poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds. The only thing the poor man had was one lamb. The poor man loved the lamb as if it were his daughter.

One evening the rich man needed a lamb for a dinner party. Instead of sacrificing a lamb from one of his own flocks, he took the poor man's lamb. When King David heard this, he was furious—he thought Nathan was telling him a true story about two men in his kingdom.

“The man who did this thing shall surely die,” said the king.

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man.”

David listened to Nathan's story, and it opened his eyes. Why can't we listen better? Why can't we see the faults in ourselves that others see so clearly in us? It is so easy to know when others are in denial, and virtually impossible to admit that we are in this stage.

In the language of modern therapy, the prophet Nathan was in a helping relationship with King David. He confronted David, but not through an act of direct verbal aggression. He created uncertainty in David by responding in a way that David least expected. That is what allowed David to open his eyes.

Uncertainty is what causes us to look for new options. Nathan knew that it's impossible to change another person, but you can motivate him to want to change himself. Your role as a helper is to support another person during the process of self-change, not to attack him or reject him.

We can't all be as wise as Nathan. But there is always a way to help someone open his eyes without entering into an aggressive confrontation, which often causes irreparable damage to everyone involved.

If someone close to you is in denial, you are already equipped to be a better helper by having read this. Don't go along with him, don't cave in to him, and by all means, don't confront him openly.

The best thing you can do is give him this report. When he reads the story of Nathan and King David, he may be ready to say, “I am the man.”

If you've become aware of the need to free yourself from a bad habit, you're already in stage 2.

Stage 2

“We are not helpless dolls...we do not behave as we behave by accident.”
— Ernst G. Beier

Awareness—When You Know You Have a Problem

People in this stage know they have a problem and want to understand their problem, but they don't know what to do or they feel powerless to change. People in stage 2 are still far from making a commitment to change.

Many people get stuck in this stage. They spend years telling themselves that they are going to change “one day.”

Fear of failure keeps many people stuck in this stage. They hide from the truth by telling themselves that they're waiting for the “perfect” weight-loss program, the perfect smoking-cessation program, or the perfect time to stop drinking.

“I'll change when the time is right,” is one of the phrases you hear most often from people in this stage of the self-change cycle. There will never be a “right time,” of course, but they haven't been able to break out of their verbal cage.

Some people in this stage are never able to make a serious commitment to change, even though their life depends on it. We are all familiar with the day-to-day experiences and struggles of ordinary people who are stuck in this stage.

My father-in-law recently died after a long struggle with emphysema. Even though he slept with an oxygen tank next to his bed, he never quit smoking. He cut down, but he never quit, even though he knew it was killing him.

A number of years ago, I read about a woman in New Jersey who had a tracheotomy before she died of cancer. After her tracheotomy, she was no longer able to breathe through her mouth, so she placed lighted cigarettes into the hole in her throat and inhaled the smoke that way.

Danger signs

People in stage 2 are still focusing on the problem. They want to talk about themselves and their families; they can be quite open when talking about their problem. What holds people back in this stage is often a fear of change.

Even *good change* threatens our security. When we're accustomed to something, the thought of losing it can cause us to panic and freeze where we are, no matter how much we stand to gain by changing.

Olga is a widow with three children in their teens and early twenties. She met a man named Chuck and fell head over heels in love. Chuck is divorced and recently moved to Olga's city from another part of the country. He is a construction worker in his late forties who seems to have no trouble finding jobs in spite of a drinking problem.

A few months after I met them, Olga and Chuck left town. When Olga's children realized that their mother was going out with an alcoholic drifter, they naturally became alarmed and pleaded with their mother to break off the relationship.

When Olga refused to stop seeing Chuck, her children told relatives that they feared their mother was in a dangerous relationship. When the whole family confronted Olga, she did what any experienced counselor could have easily predicted: She left town with her car, her clothes, and her new boyfriend.

I was taking my walk around the neighborhood one evening when Olga stopped her car and asked if she could talk to me. What followed was a sad but common story of a woman in love with the wrong man.

When Olga and Chuck got back in town, Olga used her contacts to get Chuck a good job. Chuck moved into an apartment that Olga owns. The apartment is adjacent to the house where Olga lives with her children. Olga told me that Chuck pays rent, and he is nice to the children.

But Chuck has become verbally abusive to Olga. He hasn't abused her physically, but the verbal abuse has become intolerable. Olga is a Hispanic American. She was born in the United States. When Chuck is drinking, he shouts at Olga and tells her to go back to Mexico. Every time Chuck insults her, Olga asks him why he doesn't go back to wherever he is from.

Olga is a classic example of a person in stage 2. She has become aware of the problem. Olga's "bad habit" is her low self-esteem, which is the only thing that keeps her from ending such an abusive relationship. Just as every bad habit can be broken, low self-esteem can be changed into a healthy self-image. But it takes time.

Olga realizes that her children's safety may be at risk. Chuck has never done anything violent so far, but Olga is beginning to understand that she's playing with fire. As bad as the relationship is, Olga doesn't want to lose Chuck. "I love him," she says, "Can't he see how much he's hurting me?"

Olga recognizes that her life may be in danger. Chuck has said that he would like to take her to another part of the country. Olga senses that moving to an area of the country where she doesn't have any support relationships would make her even more vulnerable than she is now. "He might take me there and then decide to kill me," she said.

Chuck hasn't threatened Olga or the children, and Olga doesn't want to ask Chuck to leave. She still can't take action, which is a common problem for people in stage 2. Instead of telling Chuck to leave, she asks him why he doesn't leave on his own. That's as far as she can go at this point.

Getting unstuck

Olga is afraid to lose the life she has become used to, no matter how unsatisfying or risky it is. She worries about her problem day and night, but so far that is all she has done. One of the biggest dangers in this stage is to substitute worrying about a problem for working on it. That describes Olga. If you're in a position to help someone who's in stage 2 of the cycle, always keep the following points in mind:

- People in this stage need support, listening, and feedback.
- Don't give advice unless you're asked for it.
- People in this stage usually need to be jolted into action, but that doesn't mean you're the one who should apply the pressure.

Trying to push a person to take action before she is ready to change can be a big mistake. Pressure at this point will only make the person more resistant to change. People who are stuck in stage 2 really do know better, but they have forgotten what they know. Too often, a personal tragedy must happen before a person in this stage is able to move forward.

Olga knows what she must do. Yet she still can't do it, even though her family's welfare depends on her ability to act. This is typical of people in stage 2 of the cycle. Olga didn't come to me for advice. She already knows all the reasons to end the relationship that she needs to know, and she is beginning to understand that as long as she does nothing, the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better.

Olga is like a chain smoker who isn't ready to quit. Many smokers are fully aware of the damage they're doing to their health. John repeatedly says that he wants to quit, but can't. The truth is that John doesn't want to quit smoking.

John knows the health risks that smokers face. But he doesn't want to give up all the little satisfactions that smoking gives him: the pleasant anticipation he experiences after a meal when he is about to light a cigarette; the satisfaction of feeling the cigarette between his fingers; the nicotine rush that goes straight to his brain every time he takes a puff; the security of knowing he has an extra carton of his favorite brand stashed away in the closet.

The only part of smoking that John wants to give up is the part that threatens to give him lung cancer; he wishes he could somehow eliminate that part, and hang onto all the other little perks that hooked him in the first place. People like John don't want to quit, no matter how much they say they do.

John isn't lying when he says he wants to quit. He sincerely thinks he wants to quit. His problem is that he hasn't come to grips with the real reason he smokes. As soon as he is able to do so, he will be in a position to move forward. When he is able to admit that he likes lots of little things about his habit, he will be in a position to substitute healthy new habits for the old destructive ones.

As long as he hides from the truth—from the real reasons why he smokes—he can conveniently shift responsibility from himself to a “force” that's stronger than he is. When a smoker says, “I really want to quit, but I just can't,” what he really means is that he doesn't want to be held accountable for his bad choices.

For many people, there is a certain comfort in believing that they can't avoid the destructive path they're following, even though they know where it leads in the end. They are locked into a self-defeating mindset that says, “I know I'm doomed, but what can I do about it?” The answer is that they can do a great deal about it, but not until they are able to see through the mind games they play.

Why do we play these games, even when we know our habits are destroying us? I think the answer goes something like this: As soon as we break out of the cage we've been hiding in, we will have to admit that we had the power to do it all along.

That can be a scary thing. A person who frees himself from a habit that has dominated his life for years or decades can be terrified of the prospect of having to admit that he wasted a large part of his life by failing to take responsibility for his own behavior.

If you're in a helping relationship with a person like that, or if you are courageous enough to admit that you are that person, take heart and remember this: Better to have wasted part of your life than to have wasted all of it. It's never too late to turn your life around. As soon as you do, you'll discover that none of it was wasted after all—it just took a little longer to reach your goal.

A woman you know may be drinking herself to death, but subconsciously she tells herself that it would be far worse to be free of her habit. If she were free, she would have to spend the rest of her life wondering what she might have made of her life if she had realized sooner that she was free to make better choices.

This is the danger of focusing on the past. When all you can see is what lies behind, you aren't able to understand that new opportunities present themselves as soon as you make the decision to walk in a different direction.

A person's capacity to shift her thoughts from the past to the present is the key to moving from stage 2 to stage 3. You can't make the decision to change as long as you're still focused on the past.

As soon as you decide to change, you're at the end of stage 2. The next step in the cycle of freeing yourself from a bad habit is the preparation stage.

Stage 3

“Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you.”
— Proverbs 4:25

Planning Your Personal D-Day

We live in a world that is accustomed to 30-second commercials that offer instant solutions. But we shouldn't be surprised when the easy solutions don't work: There are no magic bullets, no simple solutions on the path to deep and lasting change.

In this stage, you work on making change your No. 1 priority. You can't move into stage 4 until freeing yourself from the habit becomes your highest priority. Your life will go in the direction of your most dominant thoughts. When you focus on the past, your thoughts hold you back by causing you to relive events over and over.

Blaming ourselves for things that went wrong in the past is the most self-destructive habit of all. It's easy for our families and friends to see when a habit like drinking, overeating, or overspending is destroying our lives. But it isn't always so easy, not even for the people closest to us, to know when guilt and self-blame are destroying our possibility for happiness.

The solution is to accept responsibility for yourself, to realize that you can decide to take charge of your life. There is a scene in Disney's animated film, *The Lion King*, which illustrates this in a humorous and powerful way. Simba has been hiding the truth from himself ever since he ran away from Pride Rock. He has constructed all sorts of verbal cages for himself: *Hakuna Matata*, he says, *No worries*.

But he isn't happy, and he worries all the time. He blames himself for his father's death. Simba is destined to be king of the Pride Lands, but guilt and self-blame keep him from taking action. Rafiki, the wise, old monkey and high priest of Simba's future kingdom, tracks Simba down and tries to bring him to his senses. To bring home the message, Rafiki hits Simba on the head with his staff.

“Why did you do that?” asks Simba, rubbing the sore spot on the top of his head.

“It doesn't matter,” answers Rafiki, “It's in the past.”

Simba needed to be jolted into action, and Rafiki's staff proved to be an effective tool. Of course, if you're in a helping relationship with a person who is trapped in a cage of guilt and self-blame, you must never hit him on the head with your staff. That technique works wonders in cartoons, but it will destroy a helping relationship in real life.

So how do you jolt a person into action if he's stuck in the same bad habits that threatened to ruin Simba's life?

Here's an idea: Make popcorn, get comfortable, and invite him to watch *The Lion King* with you. If the person is in stage 1 or stage 2, the movie will hit him on the head for sure. It may even jolt him into action and accelerate the cycle of self-change.

As soon as you've decided to change, it's time to schedule your Decision Day. Set a date and announce your intention to take action: "I will stop smoking on the first of the month." Put your commitment in writing.

One of the keys to successful self-change is to develop your own plan. The critical element in any program is the confidence of the person who is using it. If you believe the program will work, you have a better chance of making it work. The best way to do that is to create your own plan.

Preparing for a total lifestyle change

The key to success in this stage is reevaluating your life. The greatest motivator is a vision of what your life will be like when you break your bad habit.

Being prepared for change means that you set goals for yourself. The best way to do this is to write a personal mission statement. Make a list of the benefits of changing. How does each of these benefits help you achieve your goals in life?

The key to freeing yourself from bad habits is to change your lifestyle. A total lifestyle change isn't something that happens overnight. It happens one day at a time, as soon as you begin to focus on the solution instead of the problem. The process of total lifestyle change starts when you begin to think more about the present than the past.

Don't be surprised if you're not completely sure that you're ready to break your habit at this stage. It's not about quitting cold turkey; no one is asking you to do it today. Forcing yourself to quit before you're mentally and emotionally prepared to change usually backfires. Quitting cold turkey usually doesn't work at this stage. In this stage, you're getting ready to quit.

The best way to free yourself from any bad habit is to replace your old behavior with a more active lifestyle. Your commitment to an exercise program is one of the keys to breaking a bad habit.

I started smoking when I was 22 years old. I had never taken a single puff on a cigarette before then. When my smoking turned into a two-pack-a-day habit, I started to worry about my health.

Like many smokers, I spent five years smoking and another five years trying to quit. I switched to a pipe for a while in the hope that the trouble it takes to prepare a pipe and

clean it would curb my smoking, but it didn't slow me down enough to make a difference. Eventually I went back to smoking cigarettes.

I realized that I was going to need a plan. I had noticed that many ex-smokers substituted snacking on junk food for their former cigarette habit. Their rapid weight gain made me wonder if the remedy wasn't worse than the disease. I didn't want to fall into the same trap, so I planned to use sugarless gum to satisfy my craving to put something in my mouth.

I was teaching at the time, and back then I was still using a chalkboard in the classroom. When I was trying to quit smoking, I would sometimes catch myself holding a stick of chalk between my fingers as if it were a cigarette. I almost put a stick of chalk in my mouth once. I'm sure it looked funny to the students, but I didn't worry about it. They knew I was trying to quit, and their encouragement and support played an important role in my success.

My plan to free myself from nicotine included an exercise program. I theorized that if I punished my body enough, it would cry out for me to take better care of it. Some of my students had a basketball team in a local league. I was 33 at the time, so they were 10 to 15 years younger than I was. I told them that I wanted to start playing again, and they invited me to a practice game.

I had been a decent basketball player in my teens, but I hadn't played competitive sports for a long time. I played about 10 minutes the first time, and when it was over, I told myself that I didn't need to punish my body *that much*. But the kids wouldn't let me quit.

I didn't stick to the date I set for breaking my habit. It took about a month of lapses after my target date had come and gone before I quit for good. During that month, I would steal a smoke from time to time—never more than one cigarette in a day. I didn't know it then, but I was still in stage 2 when I set my target date. I was aware of the damage that smoking was doing to my body and to my relationships, but I hadn't made a serious commitment to change.

My lapses taught me that breaking the habit was going to cost more than I thought. I started my real preparation *one day after my target date*, the first time I lapsed. The month-long period of lapses after my target date became my stage 3—the preparation period that allowed me to be successful. That's not the best way to do it, but it worked.

The most important part of my preparation was my commitment to a more active lifestyle. My new teammates wouldn't let me quit. I played on their team for two years. I paid for new uniforms and warm-up suits before one important statewide tournament.

I didn't realize it then, but I understand now that the new uniforms were a motivator and a reward—my motivation to stay committed to a healthier lifestyle, and my teammates' reward for supporting me.

Dr. Kenneth Cooper, the father of the aerobics movement, has said that maximum health benefits are obtained by participating in any activity that increases your heart rate for at least 30 minutes, three times a week.

Thirty minutes of aerobic exercise is enough to release endorphins into the brain. Endorphins are chemical substances produced by the body that are many times more powerful than morphine. Endorphins are responsible for the sensation of peace, well-being, and exhilaration commonly experienced by people who exercise regularly.

If you make a commitment to exercise for just *90 minutes a week*, it will make you happier and it will help you replace your self-destructive habits with healthy new habits. It doesn't have to be competitive basketball. Brisk walking, swimming, or an exercise class will do the trick. Every lasting change costs something in terms of time, energy, and money. But if you stick with it, the payoff is a thousand to one.

You can't exercise away all the temptations to go back to your old habit, of course. You need a plan that works 24/7. The best alternative for self-destructive habits is *active diversion*. Keeping busy—keeping your mind off the temptation to drink, smoke, or overeat—is the strategy that all successful self-changers use. Exercise is the healthiest substitute for bad habits, but it's not the only substitute that works.

You are the only person who can know what will work for you. Whatever keeps you busy and takes your mind off your craving for a drink, a piece of cake, or a shopping spree will work for you. It has to be something you enjoy. Playing your favorite game, reading a book, listening to music, cleaning the house, or working on a home improvement project are all healthy alternatives.

Beware of procrastination

The biggest danger in this stage is procrastination. Try these strategies at the first sign that you're trying to put off your commitment:

- Weigh the benefits of acting versus the effects of procrastinating.
- Set achievable goals. Trying to pay off your credit card next month will only set you up for failure. Paying off the credit card in six months or one year gives you a much greater expectation of success.
- Get started. Do something. Sign up for an exercise class or go for a ride on your bike. Activity is the best antidote for procrastination.
- Don't beat yourself up if you're not perfect all the time. It's not about perfection—it's about making progress one step at a time.

Knowing yourself is the key to successful planning. What are the real reasons for your habit? What are the real causes of your procrastination? Your greatest enemy at this stage is fear of failure. That's normal. Don't let it bother you. Just set a date and stick to it.

Be sure to set a date that's in the near future—two weeks from today, not two months from today. If you give yourself too much time, you'll be more likely to procrastinate.

Stage 4

“Change has to do with recognizing the value of options and with experiencing the fact that we are fully responsible for what we choose to do.”

— Ernst G. Beier

Attacking the Problem

In this stage you finally do it. But you need to remember that action isn't the first or the last step in a change.

This is not the only stage where important changes happen. To get this far, you had to change your awareness, your emotions, and your self-image as you moved from each of the earlier stages to the next.

The goal in this stage is to change your way of thinking. You do this by:

- Learning how to relax when temptations are strong.
- Starting an exercise program.
- Learning effective “countering” techniques—thoughts and actions that keep you from falling into your old patterns.

How to defeat daily temptations

Countering is one of the most effective techniques in the cycle of self-change. It's easier to promote the new behavior than to get rid of the old one. Trying too hard to break a habit is usually a recipe for failure. As long as you're focused on trying to break the old habit, you're like a soldier who is fighting with one hand tied behind his back.

Focusing on your new behavior is like freeing the hand tied behind your back. Suddenly you have more power to bring about the change you desire. People who break bad habits frequently experience frustration in the early stages, when they're trying as hard as they can to eliminate the old behavior.

In a very real sense, success comes when you *stop trying*. By focusing on your new lifestyle, you stop trying to break the old habit; almost without being aware of what's happening, you move to the next stage as the new behavior replaces the old one. When your preparation is good, you should be able to move through the action stage very quickly. If you have laid the proper foundation, your transition from stage 4 to stage 5 will be a smooth one.

You need a strategy to handle the daily temptations that arise in this stage. One of the secrets to success is to stay active.

Our bodies are designed for activity. Ancient hunters lived on a diet of red meats that were high in bad cholesterol and triglycerides, the two most important factors in high blood pressure and

heart disease. Yet anthropologists have discovered that members of ancient hunting tribes did not suffer from these diseases, due to the fact that they led such active lifestyles.

The urges we feel when we light a cigarette, pour ourselves a drink, go for an extra piece of cake, or drive to the mall are often physical promptings of an entirely different nature. We think our body is telling us to kick back and relax with a box of doughnuts when in reality our body is trying to tell us to *move*.

By now you should be convinced of the crucial role of exercise in your total lifestyle change. But you can't exercise or go for a walk all the time. So how do you fight temptation when you can't exercise?

The answer is RSD: relaxation, stretching, and deep breathing.

Relaxation: Smokers who say that they smoke in order to relax are fooling themselves. Research shows conclusively that nicotine and other chemicals in tobacco *stimulate* brain cells. Smoking provides the opposite of relaxation—nicotine is a stimulant. When you feel the urge to go back to your old habit, do something that's truly relaxing. Think about a beautiful day at the beach. Imagine you're floating in the water with the sun on your face. You can do this in just a few seconds. It works every time.

Stretching: This is a great technique to use at the office. I'm not talking about a 20-minute routine (although you should stretch for at least 10 to 15 minutes every day). Anytime you feel temptation strike, fight it by stretching for a few seconds. If you have just one minute, that will defeat the temptation.

Deep breathing: This is done just like you do it at the doctor's office. Breathe in and breathe out. This technique works every time. Try it right now. You'll see what I mean.

By keeping you in tune with the natural rhythm of your body, these three countering techniques remind you that you don't really want the chocolates after all.

Reward yourself

It's important to reward yourself during this stage. Make contracts that reward you for fulfilling your part of the agreement. Write down the terms. As every lawyer knows, a contract is more binding when it's on paper.

Your contract might say something like:

- "For every pound I lose, I will put \$___ (You choose the dollar amount) into a savings account" (shopping account, weekend getaway account, etc.)
- "I will deposit \$___ into my shopping account for every 30 minutes I exercise."

- “I will make a donation to charity in the amount of \$___ for every pound I lose.”

Use your imagination. Whatever you’re trying to free yourself from, rewarding yourself is a powerful motivator.

If you decide to make a donation to charity, your reward will be immense. Losing unwanted weight as you donate money to a charity that feeds hungry children will give you all the motivation you need to reach your goal. You can make a tax-deductible donation to *Feed the Children*, a nonprofit organization based in Oklahoma City.

Ron Artest is one of the most gifted players in professional basketball. Artest is also one of the NBA’s bad boys. He has a history of violence, both on and off the basketball court. He has been fined by the NBA and suspended from play for fighting with opponents on the court and, on one occasion, with fans in the seats.

Ron’s bad temper has been his worst enemy throughout his NBA career. His first team, the Indiana Pacers, has given up on him. He will be playing with the Sacramento Kings in the 2007-2008 season.

In May of 2007, Artest was sentenced to twenty days in jail; 100 hours of community service; parenting and anger-management classes; and three years of probation. His crime? Domestic violence and wife abuse, two very bad habits.

In July of 2007, Ron participated in a Feed the Children mission that delivered grain to famine-stricken regions in Africa. He says that the mission trip gave him a new perspective on life. He called it a life-changing experience. He plans to return to Kenya often.

I hope it’s true. I’m eager to see how Ron conducts himself in the upcoming NBA season—on and off the court.

Stage 5

“There is no way to change one isolated item of behavior if the item is significant and the change is to be a lasting one. We have to change the pattern of which it is a part.”

— Ernst G. Beier

Winning the Battle

In this stage, the key is to replace your bad habit with a new lifestyle. Professional therapists call this stage *maintenance*.

Countering, the technique we studied in stage 4, is the first step in this process. Promoting new habits is crucial to your success. If you only remove the old habit, you’re condemned to a lifetime of fighting off the urge to go back.

People who get stuck in this stage would gladly go back to their old lifestyle if science were suddenly to offer new proof that their habit was harmless. If safe cigarettes were invented that somehow satisfied a smoker’s nicotine craving without causing cancer, emphysema, and heart disease, ex-smokers who never move past this stage would buy them by the truckload.

In this stage you must struggle to prevent a relapse. As I mentioned in the last chapter, I wasn’t ready to quit smoking when I reached my target date. I thought I could just quit cold turkey and break the habit by using sheer willpower. I was wrong. My mistake didn’t cause me to give up, as often happens when people discover that willpower alone isn’t enough.

I understand now that I did two things right that were keys to my success: First, I went through a real preparation stage that lasted about one month. Second, I didn’t blame myself or let myself feel guilty because I lapsed.

Research has shown that these two things are keys to breaking any bad habit. I didn’t know at the time that these techniques were scientifically sound. I simply used them as part of my trial-and-error effort to quit, and common sense told me that they were the right way to attack my problem.

I had many lapses during that month. It wasn’t a relapse: I was still in the preparation stage, still strengthening my commitment to quit. There were many *lapses*, however. Almost every day, I ended up buying a pack of cigarettes, smoking one, and throwing the rest of the pack away out of disgust.

Lapses as well as relapses teach you that real change costs more than you thought in terms of time, effort, and cash. My lapses taught me that I needed to make a more serious commitment to preparing for my lifestyle change. One of the most important things I did during this period was to buy new uniforms for my basketball team.

Putting your money where your mouth is always helps to keep you focused on the goal of lifestyle change. By doing this, I was starting to think more about getting in basketball shape and less about trying to quit smoking.

I came to understand another important thing after my lapses. Every time I lapsed, I felt disgusted. But I didn't feel guilty or beat myself up for not being strong enough to stick to my word. There is a huge difference.

I felt disgusted because I was letting the bad habit control me. Every day when I threw away the almost-full pack of cigarettes, I proved to myself that I could control the habit. Instead of feeling guilty, I felt free and powerful every time I *chose* to throw away the nineteen cigarettes remaining in the pack I just bought. If I could choose to do that, I could choose not to buy the pack in the first place.

Do some bad habits require a lifetime of maintenance? Even the experts are divided on this. Alcoholics Anonymous teaches its members that this stage lasts for as long as they are alive. I believe that it is possible to free yourself from bad habits forever. I believe it because I did it, and millions of other people have done it, too.

One thing is sure: Programs that promise easy change or quick fixes fail because they ignore stage 5. Dieters who regain more weight than they lost by following the latest fad are victims of programs that ignore the need for a total lifestyle change. In the end, of course, they are victims of their own wishful thinking. They learn the hard way that lasting change cannot be made without serious effort on their part.

People in stage 5 haven't *changed* their lifestyle yet. They are still *working on changing it*. For some people, the struggle can indeed go on for a lifetime; others move through this stage quickly and free themselves from the problem forever.

What causes people to relapse?

Researchers have identified three main causes of relapses:

1. **Overconfidence:** The ex-alcoholic who says, "I can handle one drink," is clearly in stage 5. As everyone in AA knows, overconfidence is the No. 1 cause of relapses among its members.
2. **Daily temptation:** A man who is fighting an addiction to pornography cannot walk into a movie theater that's showing an X-rated film and ask God for the strength not to look at the screen. People in stage 4 still feel tempted. Success depends on removing daily temptations from your life. You can't eliminate every temptation, of course. That's why you need to master the countering techniques covered in stage 4.
3. **Guilt and self-blame:** Telling yourself that you aren't strong enough to break the habit sets you up for a relapse. It's part of the verbal cage that people construct to avoid responsibility for their choices.

Deep change must be associated with a new way of life. Research shows that a diet is successful when it is combined with eating healthier foods and exercising. Most of us don't need to see research findings to believe this: We see the proof every day in our own lives and in the lives of people who are close to us.

The first danger sign for a dieter usually isn't overeating, but *weakening her commitment to a new lifestyle*. She stops going to her exercise class. When she sits in front of the TV instead of exercising, she's only one step away from serving herself a big bowl of ice cream.

Most gyms and fitness centers have mirrored walls. When she goes to the gym again, she will be reminded of the need to keep working on a healthier lifestyle. But if she stops going to the gym altogether, the lapse can become a total relapse.

Social pressures are still dangerous in stage 4. As far as possible, ex-smokers must stay away from environments where people smoke, and dieters must stay away from environments where people overeat. That's why holidays are the most difficult times to start a diet. Setting a target date that coincides with the Christmas season is foolish. It makes more sense to start your diet after the New Year.

New Year's resolutions don't fail because they're made on the New Year; they fail because people jump into them without having progressed through the previous stages. As I learned from my experience, you can't move through the action stage successfully if you haven't already moved out of the preparation stage.

Most people make New Year's resolutions after waking up with a hangover—or with five extra pounds in their midsection—on the morning of January 1. They haven't done the necessary preparation to have a chance to be successful. It's no wonder that so many people go back to their old behavior before the month of January is over.

When you relapse, learn from it and move on. This is part of the spiral that most people go through before they exit the cycle forever. You don't have to start over when you slip up. A lot of people fall out of the cycle completely by beating themselves up with feelings of guilt after a lapse.

My experience taught me two important lessons: (1) A lapse isn't always a relapse; and (2) Guilt and self-blame don't help. If I had allowed myself to feel guilty when I lapsed, I probably would have dovetailed into a total relapse, and it might have taken me another five years before I was ready to make a serious commitment to quit.

It took years to establish your bad habit. If you think you can eliminate it in a few days or weeks, you're probably setting yourself up for failure.

Stage 6

“Anyone who learns that he can choose his own feelings and words and actions is a free person and a powerful person.”

— Ernst G. Beier

Free at Last!

When you move from stage 5 to stage 6, you’ve broken the habit forever. In this stage the bad habit is no longer a threat. *It will never return.*

Professional therapists call this stage *termination*. Some therapists believe that termination is impossible. Alcoholics Anonymous teaches its members that they can never be free of the threat of a relapse. In other words, the best they can hope for is a lifetime of successful maintenance, which means that they can expect to spend the rest of their lives fighting the urge to have a drink.

There is a better way: I know that termination is possible, because I was as addicted to nicotine as alcoholics are to alcohol, and I freed myself from cigarettes forever.

Our potential for change

I don’t want to make it sound easy, because it isn’t. But it is possible to break bad habits forever.

We tend to get the results that we expect to get. A recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported some interesting findings on the attitudes and expectations of cancer patients.

The researchers studied the relationship between prayer and improvement in the condition of cancer patients. The study concluded that the prayers of other people didn’t seem to have any bearing on the condition of the patients in the study.

But the attitude of the patients themselves had a very strong bearing on their chances for surviving cancer. The researchers found that, all other things being equal, a patient’s chances for surviving cancer depend in large part on his belief that he is going to get well.

This is not the first study to reach this conclusion, and it won’t be the last. Such studies only confirm what many doctors have known for a long time: Our thoughts and expectations can help make us well, or they can make us sick. Scientists are beginning to gather a lot of research data that suggests that people can literally worry themselves to death.

The point is this: If you think you will have to spend the rest of your life fighting the urge to go back to your old habit, you probably will. Not because you can’t be free of the problem, but because the way you view the problem forces you to stay focused on your old behavior.

By refocusing on the benefits of your new lifestyle, you replace negative thoughts with positive ones. I agree with the basic premise of AA: Eliminating the old problem requires a long, hard

struggle. The point is that you don't have to *eliminate* it. It's much easier to replace it with something better.

Freedom from bad habits comes when you replace the old behavior with a new lifestyle. I have always wondered why AA doesn't focus less on controlling its members' urge to drink and more on helping them build a new lifestyle that emphasizes the importance of exercise.

AA is right about one thing: Overconfidence is a danger in stage 5. Telling yourself that you can handle one drink, or one cigarette, or one piece of chocolate cake is one of the major causes of relapses. So how do you know when the war is over?

The difference between stage 5 and stage 6 is a difference between *still changing* and *already changed*. People in stage 5 are struggling to make and maintain changes in their life. The struggle can go on for years, or forever. People in stage 6 have successfully *changed their lifestyle*.

How do you know when you're really free of a bad habit, forever? Look for these three signs. When you find all three in the new you, you can be sure that you've broken the old habit forever:

1. **You have a new self-image.** Successful self-changers talk about "owning the change." When they reach stage 6, they feel that they've "made the change theirs." In other words, they now see themselves as the new person that is living the new lifestyle. One day I stopped thinking of myself as an "ex-smoker." It may seem like a superficial difference, but it isn't. Once I started thinking of myself as a *nonsmoker* instead of an *ex-smoker*, I knew that there had been a deep and lasting change in my self-image. At that moment I knew the problem would never return.
2. **You no longer feel tempted in any situation.** You no longer have to make an effort. If half the people in a meeting are smoking, you have a legitimate complaint—and a real problem if one of the smokers is the owner of the company—but you aren't the least bit tempted to join them. That's a sure sign that you're free at last.
3. **You have real confidence in your power of choice.** You know that you live better without the old behavior. You enjoy your healthier lifestyle. Nothing could make you go back to your old habit. Social pressure is no longer a threat. You no longer have to drink with the boys to feel like a man, and you no longer have to go on a spending spree to feel that your life is complete.

David Lucero is still stuck on the street across from the Greyhound bus station. I hope he'll be ready to get in the pickup truck soon. For now, he is still waiting for an imaginary ride to a place and time that only exist in his imagination. He still can't make a choice based on what he needs to do today.

If you have come to the realization that you're stuck in a self-defeating lifestyle, you have already taken the first step in the cycle of self-change. You have started to become aware of the need to change in some area of your life.

Whatever it is, remember that you can free yourself of it. It will take time, but you have already taken the hardest step by consciously recognizing the problem. Now start working on your plan. Use this report as a step-by-step guide. Don't try to skip any of the stages—it won't work if you do.

Believe that you can create a happier, healthier lifestyle. As you move through the stages of self-change, always remember what psychologist Ernst G. Beier discovered about the process of freeing yourself from bad habits: *“Anyone who learns that he can choose his own feelings and words and actions is a free person and a powerful person.”*

When you win the battle in your mind, it's only a matter of time before you win the war against bad habits.

Resources

- If you need to talk to a professional, contact the American Association of Christian Counselors. AACC has a national network of professional people-helpers. To find a certified counselor in your area, visit <http://www.aacc.net/resources/find-a-counselor>.

Or call AACC at their toll-free number: 1-800-526-8673.

- Helping others change their lives is one of the best ways to change yourself. To make a donation to Feed the Children, visit <http://www.feedthechildren.org>.

There are literally hundreds of books on the topic of “how to break bad habits.” These two stand head and shoulders above the rest:

- *Changing for Good: The Revolutionary Program That Explains the Six Stages of Change and Teaches You How to Free Yourself from Bad Habits*, by James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente.
- *People-Reading: How We Control Others, How They Control Us*, by Ernst G. Beier and Evans G. Valens. This book was an axe for the frozen sea within me. I started reading it one day in the hope that it would equip me to be a better helper of others, and I was not disappointed. But I was in for a surprise: By the time I finished the book, I had been forced to take a fresh look at a few areas in my own behavior. As I read this book, I was forced to say, like King David when he heard Nathan's story, “I am the man.”