

'Habit is either the best of servants or the worst of masters'

– Nathaniel Emmons –

- ❶ **Habits are learned:** Disorders of habit can range from nail biting and spasms to eating disorders, problems with alcohol, drug misuse, smoking and gambling. The one thing they all have in common is that they are learned behaviours with short-term rewards and long-term costs. As they are learned, they can be unlearned.
- ❷ **Motivation:** The most important step towards breaking a habit is deciding that you want to change. Motivation to change goes through a cycle of different stages. The stages of this cycle consist of: thinking about changing, making a decision to change, acting on that decision, maintaining that action, then either relapsing or exiting from the cycle and then breaking the habit.
- ❸ **Self monitoring:** The next step is to carry out an accurate assessment of the problem by the process of self-monitoring or keeping a diary sheet. When does it happen? How? What are the antecedents? What are the consequences? What thoughts and emotions are associated with the habit? This self-assessment can lead to greater understanding, greater control and a baseline measure of frequency and severity.
- ❹ **Alter antecedents and consequences:** You can work out an intervention plan based on information from the self-monitoring assessment. It might consist of:

Altering antecedents or what occurs before the habit. Assessment often shows that the habit is related to a particular situation or emotional state, for example hours of boredom, feeling anxious or being in a particular situation.

Altering consequences. At the moment your habit is being maintained by certain short-term consequences or 'pay-offs' – these need to be altered. Introduce a system of rewards and incentives to deliberately change the pay-offs.

- ❺ **Set goals to reduce frequency:** Set yourself reduction targets and goals. If you smoke 10 cigarettes a day on average, set a goal of eight cigarettes.
- ❻ **Develop intervention strategies:** Establish a repertoire of coping strategies which can be implemented when you are feeling particularly vulnerable to resorting to the behaviour.

Draw up a list of activities that are incompatible with the habit and distract you from the urge. For example, eating fruit instead of chocolate, or chewing gum instead of smoking, going for a bike ride instead of bingeing etc.

- ❼ **Challenge negative thoughts:** Work out a list of positive thoughts that you can say to yourself when feeling vulnerable. For example, 'I don't need a cigarette but I'd like one', 'If I can resist for the next hour the urge will reduce'.
- ❽ **Massed practice:** If the habit is something that is out of voluntary control, like a 'twitch', set aside time for repeated practice; deliberately carry out the habit for a limited period of, say, 10 minutes; this has the effect of increasing your feeling of control.
- ❾ **Accept setbacks:** Don't be discouraged if you relapse. Relapses are a natural part of progress. Learn from them.