

Why is losing weight so hard??

It's Saturday night and you and your husband go out to dinner. You see a new item on the menu and it sounds delicious but you also know it's high in calories. Something in you says you don't need it. You shouldn't order it. But something else says "It's OK. You can start your diet Monday." Sound familiar?

What's going on here? Through your life you have developed a habit. HABIT by definition means *an automatic response to improve well-being.*

Our brains do not differentiate between habits that are good for us and habits that are detrimental. For example, the body is stressed because you just got in a confrontation at work. The brain seeks an immediate solution for this uncomfortable state. You go outside and smoke a cigarette. The stress is reduced. Your brain sees this as good. It has no ability to see that if you continue smoking cigarettes when stressed, you may end up with lung cancer. **The brain lives for the moment and seeks immediate reward.** This is what's going on when you know you should order a healthy dinner but the brain says get what you really want. And each time you give in and select the unhealthy option, you strengthen that reward system. This makes it harder to say no next time. Do this for years and voila – you have developed an unhealthy habit.

*Habits are learned and maintained by reward.
Habits can be a behavior, thought or an emotional response.*

How do I know if it is a habit or an addiction?

Addiction is compulsive bad habits. We repeatedly seek reward despite negative consequences. We **crave** the reward. We have a dependence. We become normal when substance on board and withdrawal when absent. Think you may be addicted to a certain food or drink? Try to cut out the food/drink for one day. Most people find that when they intentionally refrain from a certain food it is difficult but they can do it. Put a cigarette smoker into that same scenario. It's unlikely they could go a day without a cigarette. That is nicotine addiction.

Another way to tell you have an addiction is to look at what that behavior is costing you. Ex. Charles was in a habit of going through the drive through at McDonald's every morning on the way to work and ordering a large sweetened iced tea which he would sip on until lunch. This was a habit Charles wanted to stop but was struggling to do so. One morning Charles was running late for work. He didn't have time to go through the drive through for his tea. In this scenario, can Charles do without his tea? Or does Charles not care that he will get a tardy at work because his urge to get the tea is greater than the consequences of getting in trouble by being late to work? See the difference.

Why is self-regulation so hard?

It involves NOT doing something you want to do. You must inhibit a reward your brain wants. This takes practice and perseverance.

It involves doing things you do not particularly want to do. Examples include exercising, keeping a food log and measuring out portions. It's easy to come up with a sabotaging thought that makes it OK not to do these things.

We are terrible at forgoing immediate gratification for long term gain. This is not how our brains are wired. For some, delayed gratification does not even develop until post teenage years. You see this with impulse spending, studying to pass a test, not eating seconds, etc. It's the YOLO life philosophy.



Tips to increase willpower and change habits

You must be intentional and make a conscious effort to change. It involves conscious, repeated efforts to change behavior. Have a realistic outlook that you cannot change a habit overnight. This is why “I’ll start my diet Monday” never works.

You must understand time and not be impulsive. An effective self-regulation system must be capable of understanding the short term immediate rewards have negative long term consequences. Think about the future, not just the moment.

Surround yourself with positive influences. We tend to behave as others around us. Recovered alcoholics do not get out of rehab and start hanging out with their alcoholic friends. Seek accountability partners and support from others who are getting healthy and engaging in habits you are trying to establish.

Reduce stress. When the brain is stressed, it prioritizes a quick fix even more.

When trying to instill a new habit start small. Give yourself easier wins. For example, if you are trying to drink more water start by taking one 12 oz water bottle to work every day and set a goal to finish it by 1 pm. When that becomes easy, increase that goal to 24 ounces by days end.

When trying to break a bad habit, make it less appealing. Trying to stop late night snacking? Don’t buy the chips you are in love with. Buy the chips that you think are OK but not the best.

When trying to break a bad habit, make it difficult to carry out. Trying to stop late night snacking? Store the chips in the cold garage or on a shelf that requires you to get a step stool to get to them.

Reward substitution may help. This is where you associate a specific thing with food. Ex. Danielle and I always go out on Fridays and get wine/apps while sitting at the bar. We have our favorite places but we love to try new restaurants too. So now I associate Danielle with food/drink. Now we change that dialogue and start taking a painting class together. Danielle is no longer a cue for food/drink but a cue for painting.

Focus on long term goals is less successful than short term. Exercise today so you won’t get cardiovascular disease vs exercise today so that you will get stress relief, burn calories and tone your arms.

