"Do anything, but let it produce joy."
- *Henry Miller*

This is great advice. Life is too short to not find joy and happiness in every single day. Happiness truly is a choice, though it can certainly be enhanced further by doing what you love. But we often do things that aren't the healthiest choices and they turn into habits that we often just can't break. People smoke and want to stop. Others make food selections that aren't the best, but they aren't quite sure how to choose more wisely. It's getting to the time of the year where people want to "clean house" so to speak….out with the old and in with the new. So this month, as the days are getting shorter, I thought it would be a good time to learn how to kick some bad habits that might be sticking around. Read below for some ideas. If you need additional help or suggestions, please contact me.

Yours in health,

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How to Kick a Bad Habit

Kicking a bad habit may be simple, but that doesn't mean it's easy. Any change we want to make calls for focus and effort. We all, at one time or another, have tried to change or break a habit, but weren't as successful as we wanted to be. Those are probably the times when you wondered whether it was really worth trying again. My father use to tell me, "Trying is losing, doing is winning." He believed that if you really wanted to change, you could just do it. Unfortunately, most of us aren't as strong or as disciplined as my father was. But I have some suggestions that will hopefully help put you on the path to successfully breaking a habit you no longer want.

How do habits even get formed in the first place? They're basically patterns of behavior we learn that get ingrained into our heads because we repeat them. Then we get some kind of reward for the behavior. Sometimes these habits are so deep into our consciousness, they become unconscious and we do them without much, if any, thought. For example, when we brush our teeth or start our cars, I'm sure none of us give it any thought. Just imagine how exhausted we'd be if we needed to think about each step involved with those simple tasks. But there are other habits in our lives that are much more complicated. Procrastination is one that comes to mind. Constantly being on your cell phone is another. You might feel bad later for wasting time on the phone or not turning in a project on time, but you must have received some type of reward, even it were only for an instant, or you wouldn't have done it. Make sense?

What happens when we try to make a change? We feel uncomfortable. Try this simple test: Cross your arms under your chest and look at where you put each hand. Notice if your right forearm was on top, with your right hand under your left upper arm. Now switch. Cross your arms again, but this time, put your left forearm on top, with your left hand under your right upper arm. It feels unnatural right? When I did that exercise, I immediately wanted to switch my arm position to the one that felt more comfortable and natural. That's what happens when we try to change a habit: it's not comfortable. So what do you do? I guess the real answer is that it depends on whether you can learn to tolerate the discomfort. It takes a lot of mental energy to get through it. Just like we get tired when we do too much physical exercise, our brains can get tired from too much mental exercise. How do we make it stronger and give it more stamina? Repetition. The more you practice, the less effort it will take. Here are some helpful hints:

- <u>You Must Want to Kick the Habit</u>. If you don't really want it, you'll never change it.
- <u>Try to Minimize Stress</u>. A few minutes of stress can decrease your ability to have self-control. In this day and age, we can't totally eliminate stress, but we can make sure we get enough sleep. We can get negative people out of our lives. We can meditate or get a massage.
- <u>Focus on One Habit at a Time</u>. Each one will take up some mental energy. Set a goal. Rome wasn't built in a day and you won't eliminate all your bad habits in one either.
- <u>Retrain your Brain</u>. Since habits are learned, starting a new one and doing it frequently will help the new habit overtake the old one. I have a friend who smokes. He lights up a cigarette as soon as he wakes up in the morning. He could put his cigarettes in another room and put a glass of water next to him instead. Then when he wakes up, he can take a sip of water rather than lighting up a cigarette. Over time, his brain will get used to (and perhaps crave) the water. New habit. Brain retrained.
- <u>Be Prepared to be Uncomfortable</u>. Just like in the experiment above, when you change something to which you've become accustomed, it will feel strange. Think of it as a challenge and know that if you keep doing it, the discomfort will subside over time.
- <u>Distract Yourself</u>. Call a friend. Go for a walk. Focus on something, anything, that will take your mind off your habit for a little while. This is especially helpful if you're fighting the urge to eat some junk food.
- <u>Focus on Baby Steps</u>. If you've been eating a half-gallon of ice cream every night and you start out by only eating a quart, that's a baby step. Be proud of yourself for that step.

How long is it going to take to break your habit? There's not a one-size-fits-all answer. Everyone is unique and we all have different levels of willpower. My dad called it "won't power". It's commonly thought that it takes 21 days to form a new habit or break an old one. But it might be less (or more) for you. Don't compare yourself to others. Remember, as you're walking this new path, don't be too hard on yourself. You're going to slip up every once in a while and that's ok. Please don't use that as an excuse to throw your hands in the air and give up. Good luck. Keep me posted on your progress.

Have a wonderful month.