

The Little Book of Big Change

Social psychologist Amy Johnson offers a fresh take on controlling bad habits. Rather than encourage people with negative habits and addictions to view themselves as sick and telling them to fight against their habits with willpower, Johnson teaches them simply to be mindful of their urges and forget willpower altogether. Writing in a candid, accessible voice, Johnson combines spiritual psychology, personal anecdotes and neuroscience research to offer an alternative framework for anyone who wants to overcome a bad habit.

Her ideas and techniques can help those who are battling addictions or bad habits to look at their urges with fresh eyes. She encourages them to tune in to their inner wisdom and change their perspective on their habits. While never giving medical advice, Johnson's supportive manual is for anyone looking for alternative suggestions about how to live a healthy, happy life – free of negative habits.

In this summary, you will learn

- How to identify negative thoughts and urges,
- Why habits are so hard to break, and
- How to overcome habits and addictions without relying on willpower.

Take-Aways

- Bad habits, including addictions, indicate your true mental wellness – rather than a diseased mind; you're performing the habit in a misguided attempt to feel better.
- Your survival-focused "lower brain" governs negative habits.
- Willpower is the wrong tool for breaking habits.
- Embracing your spiritual side frees you from the pull of temporary negative thoughts.
- Overcome a habit by gaining insight into it, changing how you view it and, thereby, stripping your urges of their power over you.
- Your urges are mechanical signals you can learn to ignore.
- View them as an early detection system that lets you know when you are succumbing to negative thoughts.
- Taking a "pause" when you have an urge to act on a habit will help you overcome it.
- Experiencing "setbacks" and giving into urges is natural and doesn't prevent recovery.
- True happiness comes from being mindful of the present and living a meaningful life.

Summary

Bad Habits Indicate Mental Wellness

Contrary to popular belief, bad habits and addictive behaviors are not symptoms of illnesses. People engage in bad habits when they seek to alleviate pain and return to their natural state of mental well-being. Thus, addictions and habits actually indicate how mentally healthy you are. Most people are fundamentally healthy and calm on a deep, spiritual level, but their negative thoughts cause them to believe otherwise.

You suffer when you give in to urges and addictions, but you are still making the best choices you know how to make for yourself. Gaining insight into these urges will help you make healthier choices in a way that feels effortless and natural. People often give their negative urges too much power. They regard their habits as a reflection of who they are as human beings. But, habits are not a part of your identity. They are responses to misguided thoughts that pass through your mind. Your habit “may dominate your thoughts, emotions and behaviors, but your habit says nothing at all about your basic nature – that part of you that is always there and always true, underneath your surface thoughts, emotions and behaviors.”

“Viewing addictions and disorders as thought-created habits is not only fair and accurate...but it is also incredibly hopeful.”

When you realize your habits are temporary actions, not an innate part of you, you become less likely to give in to negative urges. Rather than react impulsively to negative thoughts that push you to engage in harmful habitual behavior, you can acknowledge the urge as a passing thought. Becoming aware of the temporal nature of thought will weaken your urge to succumb to a habit.

“Your habit is rooted in an attempt to feel better, but that doesn’t mean you have to radically change your life for your habit to go away.”

Your “Lower Brain”

Your lower brain forms the thoughts that tell you to act out a bad habit. This primal part of your brain connects to your impulse for survival. Some refer to it as the “reptilian” brain or “inner lizard.” When the lower brain pushes you to engage in a habit, the push feels powerful because your brain mistakenly associates your habit with the things you need to have to survive, like water or food. But lower-brain signals to indulge in a bad habit can make you uncomfortable. Physical tension in your body often accompanies the negative thoughts that such signals generate.

The link between a habit that isn’t tied to survival and this primal association is a neurological misunderstanding. Detaching meaning from your lower brain’s urges is important. Much like an alarm clock that you’ve accidentally set to wake you up at the wrong time, an urge is a mechanical mistake occurring when your lower brain sends you the wrong signal.

“Your habit is a useful indicator that you are in a low state of mind, using your amazing power of thought to your detriment rather than to your benefit.”

Just as you wouldn't get out of bed if your alarm clock didn't ring, you don't have to act on the signals from your lower brain. If you stop letting these signals dictate your behavior, the urges they spark will grow fainter over time.

“That extremely uncomfortable drive to act on your habit is neurologically strengthened each time you obey the urge.”

Willpower

Willpower isn't an effective tool for overcoming bad habits. Relying on willpower alone to end a habit can reinforce it instead. For instance, if you want a doughnut and start to debate with yourself about whether to eat one, you're giving your thoughts about doughnuts more power. When you attempt to use willpower to overcome an urge, you end up thinking about that urge even more and creating a stronger neural pathway to that habit.

Scientists observe that when they tell people to suppress thoughts about specific things, they became even more likely to think about those things. Psychologist Daniel Wegner wrote in 1989 in *White Bears and Other Unwanted Thoughts: Suppression, Obsession, and the Psychology of Mental Control* that when researchers told subjects not to think about white bears, the subjects couldn't stop themselves from thinking about white bears. Scientists have a name for the difficulty people have in consciously willing something out of their minds; it's called the “Ironic Monitoring Process.”

“The more you begin to follow your own inner nudges and common sense, the further away from your chaotic, thought-based, surface-only habit you'll find yourself.”

Thoughts are passing signals that never activate themselves. You can choose whether to act on an urge. You're the only one who can make that choice. The willpower method takes motivation, energy and strength, but sometimes people can't muster sufficient willpower to deny their urges.

“You weren't born with your habit, and it is not an essential part of who you are.”

Breaking a Habit

Each time you engage in a habit, the urges associated with it grow stronger. You effectively teach your brain to reinforce your habits every time you give in to them. First, you experience thoughts that push you to act on a habit. Then, obeying those thoughts prompts your brain to wire together the thought and the habit. This strengthens your urges on a neurological level.

Instead, view your urges as an early detection system that lets you know when you are succumbing to negative thoughts. You can break a habit by being mindful of your urges and letting them pass. This is “self-directed neuroplasticity.” If you don't act on your urges, they grow weaker in time.

“You can experience more joy folding laundry or filing papers than going on your dream vacation if you are fully in life and not just thinking about life.”

You react differently to thoughts from your lower brain. Often, when your lower brain triggers impulses to carry out a bad habit, you don't feel calm or mentally healthy. Your lower brain is repetitive and triggers the same negative thoughts again and again. For instance, you may find yourself thinking "just one more drink" multiple times. In *Steering by Starlight*, author Martha Beck identifies repetitive thoughts from the lower brain as "neurological junk." Recognizing these negative thoughts as junk weakens their power over you.

"At some point, you see through your habit. You begin to realize that it is only thought-created experience occurring within you. You can witness it without diving into it."

"Universal Mind"

Spirituality and neuroscience aren't diametrically opposed. Use both to your advantage. To conquer an addiction or habit, tune in to your innate spiritual self. This will help you to view your urges as fleeting and to understand that you are already healthy at your core.

Familiarize yourself with spiritual psychology's "Three Principles." These three tenets will help you gain the power you need to change your behavior for good:

1. "Universal Mind" is the creative and intelligent energy from which all life originates.
2. "Thought" is the vehicle humans use to gain knowledge about the world around them.
3. "Consciousness" is the ability to experience life directly as it happens.

Thought and consciousness enable people to have positive experiences. If you wander too far away from Universal Mind – which forms the core of who you are – you can get caught up in negative experiences. Experiencing thought and consciousness are part of what makes you human, but don't neglect your spiritual side. Practicing mindfulness helps you to connect to your spiritual core and weakens your attachment to the thoughts telling you to obey your urges.

"You are not a fixed entity with a fixed habit – you are fresh in each moment, with infinite possibilities available to you."

In 2002, researcher Jeffrey Schwartz reported that patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) benefited greatly from practicing mindfulness. When patients viewed their obsessive thoughts as temporary and as separate from their identity, they detached themselves from these thoughts and could dismiss them more easily.

"That formless intelligence that powers all of life is you, at your core. It is the health and wellness that is you, underneath your human thoughts, emotions, behaviors and habits."

Insight, Not Information

Insight and information are two different things: You can grasp information intellectually, but that's not the same as having a deep insight. Gaining insight into your habits, as opposed to learning about them, will help you conquer them. While a person acquires information actively, gaining insight is a passive, natural experience.

You can't force insight, but you can be open to it. An insightful moment causes you to see your habit from a different perspective on a deep level and enables you to overcome it naturally. The wisdom required to break your habit is already inside you.

“Habits are a function of the mind, so when your mind quiets down, your habit is transformed.”

Calming your mind can help you open it to new insights. Tapping into your inner wisdom is easier when chaotic thoughts and anxieties aren't assaulting your thoughts.

Doing Nothing: The “Power in the Pause”

When you experience an urge to give in to a habit, the best thing you can do is simply pause. You can choose between two types of pauses:

1. Actively interrupt yourself with intention, and observe your impulse.
2. Briefly stop – naturally and automatically. This often happens once you experience deeper insight into your urges.

“Behavior change is the consequence, not the solution. Behavior changes as a result of seeing things differently.”

Either kind of pausing will help you stop blindly obeying your urges. The more you pause before acting on an urge, the more likely you will be to notice a “choice point” opening before you. This is a moment where you realize you are in control of the decision about whether to obey your impulse. You have always had a choice about obeying a habitual urge, but you may not have realized that you had options. Pausing gives you time to notice that you are, in fact, in control.

Along with free will, humans have “free won't” – the ability not to act on thoughts, which scientists Simone Kühn and Marcel Brass refer to as “veto power.” The more you embrace your veto power, the weaker your urges become. Once weakened, your urges and negative thoughts will create less tension and discomfort. Indulging in your habit will become less momentarily rewarding because you'll no longer need to find a release from that tension.

“Your habit is of the mind, not of the soul or spirit.”

When you no longer experience the strong urges and thoughts associated with your habit and subsequent tension-release, you have successfully engaged in self-directed neuroplasticity; your mind has reordered itself or reached a “new normal.”

“Setbacks Are Meaningless”

Experiencing setbacks is not uncommon or even meaningful. People can get quite emotionally distraught when they go through a reversal and might even dismiss the progress they've made.

Although occasionally giving in to an old habit is perfectly normal, many people mistakenly take that break as a sign that their habit is somehow untreatable and that recovery is impossible. Remember, you can experience a setback and bounce right back to a healthy, habit-free lifestyle.

Eyes of a Child

Breaking habits over the long term requires changing your perspective on them and no longer viewing your thoughts and feelings as something the outside world causes. Your state of mind originates within you. Thus, true change must happen on a deep inner level.

Try seeing the world through the eyes of a child. Children live in the moment and don't dwell obsessively on their thoughts as adults do. Children "don't think about their thinking." Kids can usually bounce back from being upset and find ways to make a situation enjoyable, perhaps creating games on the spot. They "simply feel what they feel and move on."

To embrace the present, rid yourself of negative thoughts from your past. When you keep rehashing old thoughts associated with your habit, you're not living in the present; you're needlessly causing yourself pain. Rather than clinging to painful memories, clear your mind and open yourself to the new possibilities the future brings.

You may break a habit but still feel unhappy. When it comes to well-being, a rigid mind-set about health and wellness won't help. Listen to your inner wisdom and not to third parties who claim to know what's best for you. True happiness doesn't come from getting healthier, living habit-free, going on your dream vacation or achieving your life goals. It comes from being mindful of the present moment and living a meaningful life.

About the Author

Life coach and social psychologist **Amy Johnson** also wrote *Being Human: Essays on Thoughtmares, Bouncing Back*, and *Your True Nature*. She has been featured on Oprah.com.