**Bad Choices**

*Presents a guide in analyzing the bad choices a person makes and formulas to change for the better. Logic to help break bad habits; How to start a good habit; Results when an old habit has been removed; Explanation on preference for delayed consequences.*

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If cigarettes, gambling, those last 10 pounds, that credit card habit and the one drink too many are standing in between you and your [goals](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/motivation), this new formula may finally make the difference. And the good news is, it's all in your hands.

As the police car pealed out behind Lynn with its lights blinking in her rearview mirror, she remembered with dread that second glass of wine she drank just before leaving the party. Her heart raced as she considered the implications of getting a DWI ticket. She had been preparing to leave the party and knew she had to drive home, so why did she indulge?

Most of the bad choices we make in our lives involve an immediate reward--in Lynn's case, the taste and feel of the extra glass of wine. Like Lynn, we often choose to live now even though we're likely to end up paying the price later. This carpe-diem [philosophy](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/philosophy) becomes even more powerful when the [punishment](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/punishment) is not a sure thing. In Lynn's case, the probability of her being pulled over by the police was not very high. If she had expected them to stop her, she might have reached for a ginger ale.

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Our day-to-day bad choices have alarming results. For example, one-third of Americans are overweight, costing the U.S. [government](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/politics) $100 billion each year in treatment of related illnesses.

We're also steeped in debt:

The [Consumer](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/consumer-behavior) Federation of America calculates that 60 million households carry an average credit card balance of $7,000, for a total national credit card debt topping $455 billion. Our failure to make sacrifices now for rewards later is particularly devastating when it comes to following prescribed medical regimens. Studies have found that only half of us take antidepressants, antihypertensives, asthma medications and tuberculosis [drugs](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/psychopharmacology) as prescribed. Such lack of compliance is the major cause of hospital admissions in people who have previously had heart failure, and it's entirely preventable.

Our desire to take the path of least resistance is so strong that we continue our sometimes destructive behavior even though we know, as in the cases of [smoking](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/smoking) and overeating, it literally may kill us. But we don't need to be slaves to instant gratification. Consider the ways we already suffer in the present for reward in the future: We get tetanus shots to protect against lockjaw and use condoms to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases; we have money taken out of our paychecks for retirement, and [parents](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting) routinely make sacrifices for their children's future. The key to breaking a bad habit and adopting a good one is making changes in our daily life that will minimize the influence of the now and remind us of the later. It sounds difficult, but new tricks make it possible.

A look at the animal kingdom reveals clues as to how this is done. Working in a laboratory with pigeons, Howard Rachlin, Ph.D., of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, found that when birds were given a simple choice between immediate and delayed reward, they chose the immediate reward 95% of the time. This was true even though the delayed reward (food) was twice the size of the immediate one.

Then researchers made the task more complicated, giving birds the chance to choose between 1) the same immediate and delayed options as in the first part of the study, or 2) a no-option condition in which they were only allowed access to the delayed reward. This situation is analogous to the choice between going to a gym where you have the option of relaxing in the sauna or hopping on the stationary bicycle, and going to a gym that has only exercise equipment--giving you no option but to exercise once you get there.

As the researchers increased the amount of time birds had to wait after selecting between the two alternatives, the birds increasingly chose the second option, to have only the delayed reward available. In this way, the researchers effectively altered the birds' [environment](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environmental-psychology) to minimize the value of the immediate choice.

BREAKING A BAD HABIT

We can apply the same logic to help us break our bad habits: We need to 1) minimize or avoid the immediate reward, and 2) make the long-term negative consequence seem more immediate.

My friend John, for example, relies too much on his credit card. When the lunch bill comes, he charges the total tab and pockets his colleagues' cash. You may not know John, but I bet you know that he doesn't rush to the bank and deposit that money.

John needs to avoid the immediate positive effect of using his credit card. The most logical step would be to leave it at home--except that he might need it for travel or emergencies. John's best bet would be to do a little preplanning: He could stop by the bank after work to make sure he had enough money for the next day's lunch. Or he could locate an ATM near the restaurant to make it more convenient--and therefore more likely--for him to withdraw cash.

As a reminder of that big scary negative at the end of the month, John could paste his latest credit card bill near his computer, on the refrigerator or someplace he will see it every day. He might also tape the amount he owes to the face of the credit card. These nearly effortless gestures will make it hard for John to readily ignore his problem and help him bridge the gap between now and later.

STARTING A GOOD HABIT

You might be eager to start eating healthy meals, getting regular exercise or making new friends. Most likely, the going will be tough at first, but the potential long-term benefits are well worth it. Once again, the idea is to minimize the immediate--a negative this time--and bridge the distance to the future, the good stuff.

For the past couple of months, I have been trying to get myself to drink a small glass of soy milk every day Each week I buy a carton of soy milk and after two weeks, I dump it down the drain. I have convinced myself that I need to drink soy milk for the protein and the long-term health benefits. But somehow, the immediate negative of drinking the milk (and even thinking about drinking the milk!) has been seemingly impossible to overcome.

What would help lessen the yuck of soy milk? I tried drinking it in my favorite special cup. That helped a little, but not enough. My new strategy is to mix half a cup of soy milk with regular milk. Every day I drink the soy milk I put an X on my calendar for that day, which makes me feel accomplished and helps me associate drinking the soy milk with a positive consequence. And to make the long-term benefits more immediately apparent, I tore out magazine articles that tout the health benefits of soy and taped them to my refrigerator.

WHEN OLD HABITS DIE HARD

It's never very easy to change, but for some people, it is exceptionally difficult. Twenty-two-year-old Jimmy is a good example. Jimmy's arms are bruised and scarred from his heroin habit. For him, the immense immediate pleasure of heroin far outweighs the long-term consequences of his habit: tuberculosis, lack of money and the inability to hold down a job.

You might not think you have anything in common with Jimmy--or a compulsive gambler or a kleptomaniac. But researchers are beginning to recognize that all of these behavioral patterns involve, to varying extents, maximizing immediate consequences despite huge negative long-term ones.

To find out if some people are more prone to favor the here and now than others, the University of Missouri's Alan Strathman, Ph.D., and his colleagues conducted surveys in Missouri and California. They asked survey participants how much they agreed with statements such as "I consider how things might be in the future and try to influence those things with my day-to-day behavior," and "Convenience is a big factor in the decisions I make or the actions I take." Strathman found that individuals did indeed have varying degrees of what he calls "future orientation"--preference for delayed consequences--and that this orientation remains stable over time. The individual differences were reflected in general health concerns and in environmentally friendly behaviors such as recycling.

The good news is that the [behavioral change](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/habit-formation) strategies can work just as well for people who tend to favor the here and now. They don't require special [genes](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/genetics) or exceptional chemistry. They are very simple and that's their [beauty](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/beauty). Time and again, they have been used successfully to help people overcome problems from [obesity](http://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/obesity) to sulking to failing grades. These simple strategies are effective because behaviors are mostly learned and therefore, can be unlearned. They can take us off autopilot and introduce ideas (namely, long-term consequences) that we normally wouldn't consider. Even if we have focused on the short-term all our lives, these strategies can help us maximize our chances of success.