

## Things to remember

### ... It takes practice

Habits weren't formed in a day and they won't be changed in a day. Practice may not make you perfect, but it will, in time, give you a new habit.

Writing in *Marriage Encounter*, Earnie Larsen underscores the importance of practice with this story about young swimmers.

"Every day they get up at 6 A.M. to go practice. They work at it. They eat, think, drink swimming," and their skills increase. But if you want them to lose those skills, just keep them from practicing.

Lorraine Forfa writes in *Catholic Digest* of being offered coffee by a frail elderly nursing home resident who had cultivated the habit of kindness.

Despite being slow, shaky and unsteady, the old woman fetched the cups, poured the coffee, returned and set it all down. Then she said, "My mother used to tell me to look each day for something I could do for another to make that person's day a little easier. I've done it every day of my life."

### ... Why it's so hard

Many people say they dislike a bad habit but find it too hard to conquer.

"We want to deal with (the habit) but nothing works for any length of time," says Pennsylvania psychologist Robert Wicks, noting that often the list of such habits "is endless." He observes that the behavior "must have some type of apparent reward" or we'd stop it.

To change, he says, "we have to have a high purpose and high motivation. Also, we need to substitute one reward for another so we don't feel as if we are punishing ourselves."

### ... Make changes gradually

Knowing well the risks of an unhealthy lifestyle, *New York Times* health columnist Jane Brody decided to eat better and to exercise. But she made changes slowly.

"People who try to create revolutions in their lifestyles only inspire counterrevolutions. Take one step at a time—do one good thing for yourself this week, do another good thing for yourself one or two weeks later, and it becomes a habit.

"You replace lousy habits with wonderful habits. And it's a very enjoyable experience."

### ... Don't get discouraged

In trying anything new you also face the prospect of failure. Don't become discouraged if you slip. Beginning bicycle riders don't give up after falling. Eventually they learn to keep their balance.

Expect to falter and plan for the setbacks. A slip is just that, a slip, not a reason to blame yourself or to give up.

One useful technique is to anticipate the problems you might face: you're giving up rich desserts—what will you do if invited to a birthday party? You've quit smoking—how will you deal with a smoking co-worker?

Ask for help. Tell your family you may be irritable today because you're feeling deprived; ask a co-worker to please not smoke around you.

Keep in mind that it will be harder to maintain your resolve when you're feeling defeated, frustrated, angry or tired. At these times try to recall all of the reasons you want to change.

### ... Rely on God

"Although God calls us all toward a more perfect life, we cannot personally achieve the state of perfection," writes Dr. Gerald May in "Addictions and Grace." "We can and should do our very best to move in that direction, struggling with every resource we have, but we must also accept the reality of our incompleteness."

"Personal insufficiency" doesn't make you unacceptable to God, he notes. "Far from it. Our incompleteness is the empty side of our longing for God and for love. It is what draws us toward God and one another."

Columnist Bernadette McCarver Snyder suggests making spiritual reading a habit. Turn off just one TV program a day and "use those few minutes to read a scriptural book and then seriously consider how the author's words could help you change," she suggests.

According to the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, four things needed to break bad habits are:

- Self-examination.
- Avoiding possible sources of temptations.
- A strong act of will.
- A right philosophy of life.

That philosophy would be based on love for "The new love that takes possession of us must be bigger than ourselves. . . . No new, competing love is large enough except the love of God Himself, with all that that love makes us long to do."

*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:13)*

"Everyone kept telling me to change.

"I resented them and I agreed with them, and I wanted to change, but simply couldn't, no matter how hard I tried.

"What hurt the most was that, like the others, my best friend kept insisting that I change. So I felt powerless and trapped.

"Then one day he said to me: 'Don't change. Don't change. . . . I love you as you are.'

"I relaxed. I came alive. And suddenly I changed!

"Now I know that I couldn't really change until I found someone who would love me whether I changed or not."

Is this how you love me, God?

**Anthony de Mello, S.J.**  
in *The Song of the Bird*

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# New Day!

# New Year!

# New You?

David Burns never makes New Year's resolutions. But he likes the idea behind them.

"I like New Year's resolutions—they symbolize the fact that it's okay to make fresh starts," says the Philadelphia psychiatrist and author. This concept of "rebirth and a new opportunity to try to correct certain problems" appeals to him.

But he cautions against trying to become a perfect person. "Give yourself permission to be human and to have setbacks," he advises.

Burns himself constantly sets personal goals and refines them. And he forgives himself for falling short of them. "I find every day—not just New Year's—an opportunity to learn from my mistakes and move forward."

No matter what time of year, today is as good a day as any to resolve to change what needs changing in your life:

- Stop sniping at loved ones.
- Exercise regularly.
- Improve study habits.
- Be more pleasant at work.
- Make daily prayer and reading a habit.
- Control angry outbursts.

## Habits and compulsions

Habits are ways of behaving that become ingrained by repetition. You do something so often that it becomes automatic.

It's easier to break habits than it is to throw off compulsions or addictions.

With motivation and concentration a person can, for instance, learn to taste food first before automatically salting it, notes Dr. Sheila Blume, an authority on behavior.

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To break that habit you "force yourself to think first" and then retrain yourself, the New York doctor says. But "when something becomes compulsive it is not simply automatic because it's done so often. It's automatic because it is obeying unconscious motives. And that isn't easy to break."

Another expert, G. Alan Marlatt of the University of Washington, notes that there is a loss of freedom with addictions. Of the cigarettes which once promised friendship and relaxation to a smoker he writes:

"... they steal your strength, your time, your money, often your friends, and eventually they may demand your life. Although it sometimes seems as though you have them under your control, you realize more and more that you have fallen under their control."

People trying to cope with compulsions should think about getting professional advice and joining a recovery program. But if it's simply a habit you're trying to change, you can do it by using proven techniques.

## You and your habits

Habits help define you as a person. Some aren't important, but many are for they often reflect your inner values and beliefs.

How you think, feel and act have important consequences in your relationship with God, yourself and others.

Habits can be a source of embarrassment to you, annoyance to others, or even harmful. If you habitually gossip, fail to pay attention to loved ones, interrupt at business meetings, or "fly off the handle" relationships suffer. You suffer.

Because habits are so much a part of your character, knowing ways to eliminate bad ones and develop new ones is invaluable.

Changing isn't easy. It takes desire and effort. But it's worth it. In creating a better world, all of us need what you have to offer. Offer your best self.

*With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God. (Mk. 10:27)*

## Ready, set, go

"Eat your breakfast," a father hollered at his 12-year-old son. His bored son shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Motivate me."

Motivation is vital to change.

People are moved to change for a variety of reasons. When it comes to self-improvement, says Josephite Sister Alice O'Shaughnessy, a Long Island physician, "the reason ultimately that you change is because you come to care enough about yourself to make it worthwhile."

Inner values play a role in change. Says Dr. Lawrence Green of Texas, "if people make behavioral changes without changing their internal values, beliefs and attitudes, the new behaviors are less likely to stick."

Strong motivation, then, makes change easier. "Before you do anything, you must have at least some desire to do it," writes columnist Doug Hooper."

Preparation is necessary too. As creatures of habit, we prefer the status quo. So if there's a habit you'd like to change, get to know yourself a little better and understand the reasons for it.

When you're ready, go for it.

## Habits of the heart

Writing in *These Times*, Anya Bateman of Maryland tells how she brought change to her life after reading that a good habit could often be formed in three weeks. She started with diet and dental hygiene and was surprised that the system seemed to work.

She realized she had been concentrating on physical habits, and asked herself, "What about habits of the heart and mind?"

She and her husband Val had not been getting along. Recognizing that part of the problem was her constant criticism, she decided that each day she would look for something to praise.

For a few days she felt phony, however—"like a robot programmed to say nice things without really meaning them." But she found that as the days went by it became easier to find positive things to say about her husband. She realized he was a patient father, an honest man and said so.

Val started to seem like a different person—and he began to see her as different also. They talked about it and Mrs. Bateman told of her resolve. "I guess that's why I've been feeling so much better about myself," Val said.

The experience has improved their marriage. And its given Mrs. Bateman confidence that she can improve anything if she persists.

*Behold, I make all things new. (Rev. 21:5)*

## Eight steps to change

**Know yourself**—Once you've decided to change a habit examine its role in your life. How did it start? What triggers the behavior? Are there "hidden gains?" Keep a diary for two weeks to help pinpoint these details.

For an overeater, for instance, delicious aromas may trigger the behavior; or it might be tension, anger, loneliness, fatigue or "friendly enemies" like the cook who makes you feel guilty for not eating his or her meal.

**Make a plan**—Set a quit date, or a start date: New Year's, your birthday or some other time that suits you.

**Alter your environment**—This might mean emptying the kitchen of fattening foods, throwing out ash trays, avoiding companions who encourage uncharitable gossip and so on.

**Find healthy replacements**—This is basic. For instance, start exercising at the time you once ate dessert. Volunteer to help others with a problem similar to yours. One man decided to say a prayer each time he felt like being sarcastic.

**Think of yourself differently**—See yourself as the person who now controls his temper, or makes time for spiritual reading. San Francisco medical sociologist Patrick Berniacki says people who successfully change "can combat cravings because giving in to them would ruin their new identities."

**Ask for support**—Enlist the help of family, friends and co-workers. Tell them you want to know when they notice you engaging in the habit you're changing. New Yorker Karen Slater found it easier to break a childhood habit of nail biting with support. She was helped by the "compliments of a husband who likes his back scratched."

**Pray**—As William Diehm, a California clinical psychologist, notes, "Prayer has been one of mankind's chief methods of healing for 5,000 years."

**Plan a relapse strategy**—You might have heard someone say that giving up this or that is easy, "I've done it hundreds of times!" With this in mind, it's worthwhile to learn ways of coping with a slip to keep it from becoming a major relapse. It's normal to fall back into an old pattern. That doesn't mean you're a failure. Learn what happened and why for the next time.