

A Better Way to Break Bad Habits

By Adam R. Parchert

Galatians 6:8, "Because the person who sows to his own flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit"

Breaking bad habits can be daunting, and we often approach it with the wrong mindset. We set arbitrary goals and expect to see somewhat immediate results, and when we fail, we fall into a cycle of guilt, frustration, and self-loathing. So many well-intentioned people find themselves in the dangerous rhythm of life: temptation - sin - guilt - regret - self-loathing. To some, this cycle seems as inevitable as the sun coming up in the morning. It isn't a matter of if they will fall victim to the same old habit, but when. We must change how we approach the journey of overcoming bad habits and recognize failures along the way, not as entry points into the shame cycle: guilt, frustration, and self-loathing, but as learning experiences that will give us the expertise and strategies we need to overcome the bad habit once and for all.

Maybe you've tried prayer, fasting, accountability groups, self-help books, and podcasts... but in the end, you find yourself in the same shame cycle. You find yourself frustrated by the well-meaning yet ineffective counsel of so many in our lives saying, "Just stop doing it." You know all the logical arguments. You are familiar with the wall that seems to keep blocking you because you have been beating your head against it for so long. But, we must recognize that breaking habits takes time, and the journey is not a straight path.

As Galatians 6:8 states, "the person who sows to his own flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit." Habits are like seeds that are sown and tended to over time. They germinate, blossom, and grow into the deepest parts of our being. Seeds sown to our flesh become the bad habits that bring about the sinful, ungodly results of the flesh. Seeds sown to the Spirit become the good habits that bring about the righteousness we are called to as followers of Christ. So, when we set out to confront bad habits, we must first recognize that they took years, maybe a lifetime, to form. They will take time, proper strategy, a resolute mindset, and determination to break.

Studies in psychology support the idea that breaking habits takes time, strategy, resolve, and intention. According to a study published in the European Journal of Social Psychology, forming a new habit takes an average of 66 days.¹ Breaking a bad habit may take even longer because we are trying to undo something that has become deeply ingrained in our behavior over time.

But we must not lose heart. Just as the seed of a bad habit can take root and grow, so can the seed of the Spirit. We can overcome our bad habits by sowing to the Spirit and relying on sound strategies fueled by God's strength. We must approach the journey with a learning and growth mindset, recognizing that setbacks are opportunities to learn and make adjustments.

The Bomb Defuser Approach to Breaking a Habit

Breaking a bad habit can feel like defusing a live bomb. We determine in our hearts to break a bad habit, and then, through force of will, we set out toward this goal. We carefully arrange our lives to avoid temptation and triggers. However, when defusing a live bomb, just one false move, snipping one wrong wire, can trigger a catastrophic explosion. A single mistake, one failure, can leave us feeling utterly defeated. The resulting shame cycle of guilt, frustration, and self-loathing reinforces the belief that we are powerless to overcome our bad habits. This self-defeating approach ultimately undermines our efforts. It is no wonder many people feel helpless when confronting long-term ingrained habits. But there is a different approach...

The Respawn Approach to Breaking a Habit

A better way to approach breaking a bad habit would be to think of it like clearing a mission level in a video game. In video games, when a player loses a life, they respawn. Instead of starting from the beginning, they return to life where they left off, typically at the start of a level or a checkpoint. It's like a second chance to keep playing without restarting the game from scratch. Players can learn from their mistakes and keep trying until they complete the level or game. Apply this approach to breaking your bad habit. You have a challenging level to clear, and you will likely fail many times due to unknown obstacles you may only be aware of once you encounter them. However, you learn from your mistakes each time you fail and adjust your strategy. Then, the next time you approach that obstacle, you increase your likelihood of defeating it. Eventually, you will find that you will become so familiar with the obstacles that you can anticipate and predict their arrival. You will move to overcome the obstacles as if by second nature. Eventually, you clear levels and move on to more complex levels with new hope and encouragement, never having engaged in the shame cycle of guilt, frustration, and self-loathing.

¹ Journal Article: https://centrespringmd.com/docs/How_Habits_are_Formed.pdf

Respawn Video Game Cycle:

Spawn (new life) ➤ Move ahead in the level ➤ Encounter obstacles ➤ Fail ➤ Learn from experience ➤ Respawn (new life) ➤ Move ahead in the level ➤ Encounter obstacle ➤ Overcome the obstacle with new strategy ➤ Move ahead in the level ➤ Encounter obstacle ➤ Etc.

Respawn Cycle for Breaking Bad Habits:

Start (new hope) ➤ Move ahead through life ➤ Encounter obstacles ➤ Fail ➤ Learn from the experience ➤ Start again (new hope because you have a new strategy) ➤ Move ahead through life ➤ Encounter obstacles ➤ Overcome the obstacle with new strategy ➤ Move ahead through life ➤ Encounter obstacle ➤ etc.

How to Learn From Your Mistakes and Adjust Strategy

Learn from your mistakes

- “Setback Analysis” (See separate document ‘Setback Analysis and Instructions’)

So, you fell back into the habit you are trying to break. Now it is time to respawn at the beginning of the level and push on with new intention and strategy. Complete this brief analysis as soon after a setback as possible. This analysis aims to document the incident and learn from it. To become part of building a new strategy for reencountering this obstacle.

Adjust Strategy

Strategy adjustment is a process that requires a level of self-awareness that may be difficult to achieve during the journey. We all tend to have blind spots in our self-analysis that can be a barrier to effectively strategizing when a failure occurs. It is also highly recommended that you connect with a counselor, life coach, mentor, or support group to help you become more aware of aspects of your life you have difficulty seeing.

In Conclusion

Breaking bad habits requires a mindset of learning and growth rather than self-loathing and frustration. Galatians 6:8 emphasizes that habits are like seeds that grow over time, either sowing to the flesh or the Spirit. Studies show that breaking habits takes time, strategy, resolve, and intention. Instead of the Bomb Defuser approach, which often leads to defeat, the Respawn approach treats

breaking habits like a video game level, where failure is not met with guilt, frustration, and self-loathing but with learning and growth. By anticipating and predicting obstacles and adjusting strategies accordingly, we can break bad habits and move forward with hope and encouragement.

May Christ be the heartbeat of the journey...

About the author:

Adam R. Parchert holds a Bachelor of Arts in Biblical Studies from Central Bible College, Springfield, Missouri. He has provided pastoral leadership in various capacities since 1996. From 2012 to 2021, Adam successfully founded and led a suburban Chicago church. In addition, he runs a small business while actively involved in his local church and the Christian non-profit organization, The Crucible Project.