

How to Break a Habit

By Darrell Ferguson

Well, it's almost January 1, time for New Year's resolutions.

And it's also pretty close to mid-January, which is the time when most resolutions have gone by the wayside.

Not very many people have much success with resolutions. And that's because they resolve to change, but they don't make any actual plans for change. David Ramsey says, "Resolutions don't work. Goals do." That's a good statement, but I would add, "goals and plans for how to reach those goals. That's how you make progress.

Proverbs 21:5 The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.

Most people put more thought into planning a vacation, or finishing their basement than they put into making changes in their character. If you just make a resolution to change without doing any planning and then applying diligence to carrying out those plans, that's what the proverb means by haste – and haste will lead to failure.

One reason why mere resolutions so often fail has to do with the way God designed our brains. Most of our behavior throughout the day does not come from a series of conscious choices. Rather, the majority of what we do is driven by habit. For every conscious decision you make, there are a hundred other things you do without giving any thought at all to them.

The ability to live this way is a wonderful gift from God. Recall the first time you drove a car. Seat belt, emergency brake, check mirrors, foot on brake pedal, shift into gear... the number of things you had to think about was overwhelming. It seemed almost impossible. But now you can do it all in the dark while carrying on a conversation and turning down the radio. This is because God designed our brains so that when a behavior is repeated enough times it develops a neural pathway like a deep rut in a road that

enables you to do that behavior on autopilot, without conscious thought. Life would be impossible without this ability.

The problem comes when those ruts (habits) are dug in wrong directions. Every time a destructive behavior such as getting drunk, viewing porn, or eating too much is connected with a sensation of pleasure, it strengthens the neural pathway. It digs that rut deeper, and pulls behavior in that direction in your automatic responses.

This is why, in the words of John Ortberg, “Habits eat willpower for lunch.”¹ Resolutions rarely work because once the wheels fall into the deep ruts of habit, steering them back out is next to impossible. The very design of our brains contributes to the stickiness of sin.

The good news is that the neural pathways can be changed. The key is to back up to the point where the rut first begins in the road, and, through repetitive behavior, begin digging new ruts – building new neural pathways that cause your unconscious, habitual reactions to be godly.

Think about a bad habit or addiction in your life. Where does the rut begin? At what point does your autopilot take the first turn in the wrong direction? For an overeater, it might be a response to boredom or stress. For a drinker, perhaps it is the well-worn left turn that happens in responding to emotional pain, or social pressure. For the porn addict, it might begin with certain habits on the computer where one thing leads to another.

In most cases, the ruts in the road are related to how you have trained your brain to respond to various feelings. When we feel anger, emptiness, sexual desire, pain, boredom, fear, or anxiety, we begin moving down well-worn paths in the way our minds respond, that lead into the behaviors that we wish we could quit, but keep falling into.

So what would it look like to make plans for changing some bad habit?

- 1) Set a clear, measurable, attainable goal with regard to a behavior you would like to change.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2014/july/can-neuroscience-help-us-disciple-anyone.html>

- 2) Think long and hard about where the “ruts” in the road begin in steering you toward the behavior you want to change. What feelings tend to cause responses of dropping into those ruts?
- 3) Consider carefully what it would look like to develop a pattern of reacting in a better way to those feelings – a way that would move you in the direction of your goal.
- 4) Write down three or more action steps that would wake up your conscious mind at those crucial moments (so you’re not on auto pilot when those kinds of feelings come up – you’re making conscious decisions) so you can steer in the right direction before you drop into the old ruts.

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