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How to beat smoking, other bad habits with better self-control

By Liza Lucas, special to CNN

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A new study says mindful meditation may help increase self-control for smokers, but experts also emphasize the importance of integrating techniques such as goal setting and accountability.

Story highlights

Mindful meditation may influence smokers' self-control, even among those who are not intending to quit

(CNN)— Ready to kick your bad habit once and for all?

Even if you're not completely committed yet, there's a technique that may unconsciously help, whether you're intending to quit smoking, binge

Goal setting, planning and public accountability are expert tools for strengthening self-control

Go digital for additional support in tracking progress and keeping goals top of mind

eating, gambling or another addictive behavior -- and even if you don't think you're ready.

A [review of addiction research](#), published in Trends in Cognitive Sciences, suggests mindful meditation strengthens self-control in smokers, even among those smokers who haven't set an intention to quit.

This form of mental training, which originates from Buddhist meditation, focuses on becoming self-aware of one's experience. According to the review, the technique can improve areas in the brain related to self-control, which modulate stress and emotions and may be helpful in coping with addiction symptoms.

In a featured study, Texas Tech University and University of Oregon researchers split up a group of 60 undergraduates (27 smokers and 33 non-smokers) who came into the program only expecting to learn meditation and relaxation techniques. Half received relaxation training and half took [integrative body-mind training](#) (IBMT), a form of mindful meditation.

Following five hours of training over the course of two weeks, the students received brain scans, filled out questionnaires, and their lungs were measured for carbon monoxide from cigarettes. Even though they had no intention to quit, students in the IBMT group showed a 60% decrease in smoking.

"Rather than trying to stop smoking, IBMT focuses on improving the self-control network in the brain and moderating stress-reactivity, that may help treat the inner cause of smoking," says lead author Yi-Yuan Tang, a professor of psychological sciences at Texas Tech.

"Moreover, there was no correlation between intention and smoking changes. If smokers do not have an intrinsic need and craving, why not change smoking behavior?"

[Related: The best place to meditate? At work.](#)

"Thus far, self-control has proven a very difficult thing to train," says Todd Hare, assistant professor of neuroeconomics at the University of Zurich, whose research focuses on the neural mechanisms of decision-making. "If IBMT can be used to reduce cravings in addicts and/or improve self-regulation when experiencing cravings in a manner that does not require increased attention or cognitive effort, that would be a very exciting step forward."

More research is needed, says Hare, who is not affiliated with the study, to further understand how mindful meditation can improve self-regulation. Researchers say it's unclear how long the effects last, and whether individuals dealing with behavioral addictions such as obesity and gambling could also benefit.

"Self-control is important for us to pay attention, regulate emotion and make decisions in school, workplace and life," Tang says, and there are many ways, in addition to mindfulness, to strengthen this ability. "We should be open-minded to explore the best method for us."

[What the 'marshmallow test' can teach you about your kids](#)

But what are those other methods? Here's a toolkit to change your negative behavior or, at the very least, lean on when cravings come calling.

Go set a goal

The motivational system is a set of brain mechanisms that helps achieve goals, according to Art Markman, professor of psychology at the University of Texas and author of "[Smart Change: Five Tools to Create New and Sustainable Habits in Yourself and Others](#)." Your motivational system takes goals and uses one set of brain mechanisms, which Markman calls the "Go system," to drive behavior. The "Stop system" tries to avoid succumbing to temptations or prevent things you don't want to do.

So while meditation can be a great technique to calm the Go function, reprogramming that system through goal setting is integral to success, says Markman.

You can't crochet and eat potato chips at the same time, so find ways to reprogram the Go system by doing alternate activities, he advised. Otherwise, you're constantly riding the brake on the Stop mechanism.

Framing those goals in a positive light helps as well. Instead of saying "I'm going to stop smoking," which is negative framing based on stopping a behavior, Markman suggests, "I'm going to live life as a nonsmoker" instead.

[Where is self-control in the brain?](#)

Make a plan

"Self-control is a muscle that gets strong(er) when you exercise it," says Christine Whelan, who teaches and leads research in the Consumer Science faculty at the School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison. "When we try to stop ourselves from eating overly caloric foods or smoking, we might be successful all day long."

But that muscle also gets tired if it has to work all the time, says Whelan. To beat the inevitable obstacles that pop up, it's crucial to make a plan in advance of when our defenses are down, she says. "That's when we are the least likely to be able to exert self-control." And those times can be when we're hungry, angry, lonely or tired.

Establish the when and where of the activities you're going to do in lieu of the habit, and be specific whether it's gum chewing or taking a walk. Saying "I'm not going to smoke" isn't sufficient, according to Markman. "Make desirable behaviors easy and undesirable behaviors hard." He suggests getting started by ditching that emergency pack of cigarettes or the snack foods around the house.

It's also important to identify a substitution for the "reward" that you expect from the behavior, says Whelan. Instead of a bowl of ice cream for comfort, would a warm bath or a phone call with a friend work? The plan should be specific and made ahead of those moments, to set yourself up for success.

It also will give your brain a break. "When you're faced with a situation requiring a self-control dilemma, you will be ready with an alternative way to handle it," says Hare, "instead of needing to spend additional cognitive effort to come up with an option on the spot."

Go public and get feedback

Reap the benefits of social pressure, which can be a powerful motivator. Tell friends and families your goal and plan so they become part of the accountability process.

"Private commitments to change are weaker than public commitments to change," says Whelan. "Public commitments to change are more 'costly.' You don't want to be ashamed in front of your peers, and you may also have their support cheering you on."

Get a digital helper

Staying focused on your goal is a key aspect for succeeding in self-control, according to Hare, but it can also be tricky, since the benefits or risks sometimes aren't imminent.

So go digital on the days when you're not thinking about your long-term risk for lung cancer or that retirement fund. Websites such as HealthyWage.com, DietBet.com and GymPact offer financial incentives for weight loss.

The goal-setting platform stickK.com lets users create a "commitment contract" on the objective of their choice, be it exercising, eating well or even academic and relationship milestones. Created by Yale University behavioral economists, stickK has had nearly 300,000 contracts and nearly \$21 million in wagers.

The site lets users set the stakes as well as whether losses are sent to family or friends, or to a charity. But stickK urges participants to raise the price of their behavior.

"We're bringing those long-term costs forward so you can feel that pain in real time," says CEO Jordan Goldberg. Plus, there's strength in numbers. Your support network also participates in accountability.

For only \$1 a day, people who want help weaning off cigarettes can check out [Craving To Quit](#), a smoking cessation app which integrates mindfulness as well as daily check-ins and an online community to help users ride the wave of their cravings.

It's "a panic button" that smokers can have at their fingertips, in context of where they usually smoke, explains founder Dr. Judson Brewer, director of research at the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness, as well as an associate professor in medicine and psychiatry.

The mindfulness itself is also intrinsically rewarding. "There's an inherent reward in letting go," Brewer says.

While meditating your cigarette cravings away may turn out to be just what smokers need to beat the habit, there isn't a standard method for strengthening self-control.

Many methods can translate across different behaviors or addictions. "If there was a one-size-fits-all, this would be easy," says Markman.

In fact, those trying to change any behavior should be prepared for setbacks. Instead of quitting, learn from the mistake and ask yourself how you can handle the situation differently next time, Markman suggests.

Self-control involves going two steps forward and one step back sometimes. "You have to recognize that this is a difficult thing to do."

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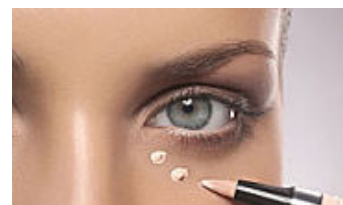
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