
F O C U S

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How to Tackle Your Cravings with Mindfulness

We function throughout the day thanks to habits that are nearly automatic: wake up, brush teeth, make coffee. Transforming behaviors into habits save our brains from having to exert extra effort to make decisions, and this can work to our benefit: Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps broke world records by fine-tuning his habits, for example. But what about those other habits—like smoking cigarettes, stress-eating, or constantly checking our social media—that may be holding us back? In his book, *The Craving Mind*, psychiatrist and Yale School of Medicine psychology professor Judson Brewer makes a case that mindfulness and meditation can help you identify and counter everyday cravings that lead to recalcitrant bad habits, and even addictions. Brewer, also director of research at the Center for Mindfulness in the University of Massachusetts Medical School, guides us through various addictions (cigarettes, technology, distraction, and even love) and explains how we can hack our brains to break them. Habits can be described as automatic behavioral loops, involving tiggers, behaviors, and rewards. For example, one may feel stressed (trigger), eat junk food or smoke a cigarette (behavior), and feel better (reward). When you attain (and, later, anticipate) the reward, your brain releases dopamine in a neural process that lays down a memory of that behavior and helps you “learn” to execute that behavior next time to attain the reward. This process is called reward-based learning. In every day life, Brewer explains that reward-based learning can reinforce a diverse array of inconvenient habits. Doctors may learn to respond to patients’ suffering in a self-protective way bey emotionally distancing themselves (which erodes patient care). We can get in the habit of

ruminating, constantly checking our phone notifications, and distracting ourselves, to the point that these behaviors become addictive. With tobacco use and unhealthy eating habits as leading causes of preventable death worldwide, and the rise in accidents due to texting while driving, habits can be dangerous. Addiction is defined as “continued use, despite adverse or negative consequences” (which, in the context of this book, doesn’t include more serious substance use disorders). How is it that even when someone is fully cognizant of how harmful their habits are, they continue to act on them? Brewer explains that reward-based learning is the very powerful mechanism that forms and reinforces habits. When we have an uncontrolled relationship with our habits, we can experience inadvertent cravings for reward and become blind to how the habits are hurting us over time. Though the study of addictive behavior emerged in Western psychology in the 19th century, it has in fact been observed for thousands of years. Brewer and his colleagues have mapped reward-based learning onto the Buddhist concept of “dependent origination, which describes the nature of craving and how it leads to continued suffering. Since Buddhist tradition teaches mindfulness to help people understand craving and suffering, Brewer suggests that mindfulness may also help free us from our modern bad habits. Brewer touts that mindfulness skills of curiosity and attentiveness as key to tackling bad habits. Being more mindful can help you clearly see the outcomes of your behaviors and assess whether the behaviors are helpful or harming you. Being aware of the outcomes can help you recognize your blind spots and realize how they are perpetuating the same harmful habits. Once you are no longer caught up

(Mindfulness continued)

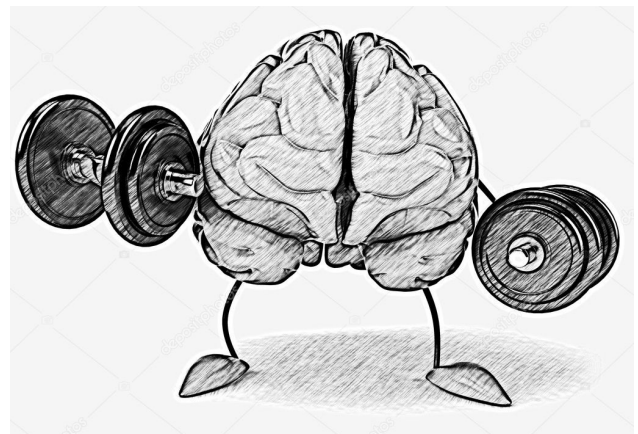
in your cravings, you may begin to direct your behavior toward more helpful rewards. In a randomized clinical trial, Brewer showed that a mindfulness-based program helped smokers quit at twice the rate of the gold standard “Freedom From Smoking” program from the American Lung Association. In the mindfulness program, smokers were taught formal and informal practices, including breath awareness, loving-kindness, and attention to habit triggers and actions. Smokers reported being more aware of why they smoked, what behaviors they might substitute for smoking, and how disgusting cigarette smoke actually smelled and tasted. The study also found that among all informal practices, the one associated with the greatest reductions in smoking was RAIN, in which people are encouraged to:

- **Recognize/relax** into what is arising
- **Accept/allow** it or be there
- **Investigate** bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts
- **Note** what is happening from moment to moment

Practicing RAIN helped smokers to approach their smoking as observers, distancing them from their habit in a way that allowed them to become disenchanted and eventually quit—a strategy that may help in conjunction with medication-based treatment plans. Brewer also advised against brute-forcing habit change. Instead, when faced with a craving for the old reward, be curious about how you feel and why you feel that way. Being too concerned about overcoming the habit and too emotionally invested in progress and relapses could hinder true attentiveness, he explains. Being in the moment and watching things unfold are more impactful than trying to coerce oneself into quitting. When you do this, Brewer says, one of the things you might start to recognize is the difference between excitement and joy as rewards. Joy is open and arises from being curious and attentive, while excitement—like how you feel after excessive online shopping—is more restless and leaves an urge for more. Uncovering the subtler pleasure of joy versus

excitement through mindfulness can help you choose the path to joy more often (and, with it, good habits). In many of his neuro-imaging studies, Brewer hones in on one region of the brain: the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC), which typically activates during self-referential brain activity such as craving. His work shows that mental states such as meditation, concentration, joy, and wonder are associated with decreased PCC activity, lending compelling evidence that mindfulness may help unshackle the mind from out-of-control habits. Given that many health concerns are fueled by habits and addictions—and certain racial, socioeconomic, and other demographic groups disproportionately face these health concerns—it’s critical to find better solutions that help people change their behavior. Although Brewer’s book gives us a compelling argument that mindfulness is a helpful practice that may be palatable to a wide range of people, some barriers still exist for certain groups. Nonetheless, his work has led to the creation of two mindfulness smartphone applications, **Cravings to Quit**, and **Eat Right Now**, that help people take control and overcome their smoking and eating habits and may make mindfulness practices more widely accessible. And, for those of us who may not have serious addictions but simply can’t put away our cell phones, his book gives us yet another reason to practice mindfulness.

Source: Deborah Yip, research assistant at the Greater Good Science Center, and health policy research analyst at the University of California, San Francisco, greatergood.berkeley.edu, May 18, 2017,



Kiddo Knows Best

Sometimes it's cute when kids act self-centered. Yet parenting styles can make the difference between a confident child and a narcissistic nightmare, psychologists at the University of Amsterdam and Utrecht University in the Netherlands concluded from the first longitudinal study on the origins of intense feelings of superiority in children. Two prominent but nearly opposing schools of thought address how narcissism develops. The first attributes extreme self-love to a lack of affection from parents; the other implicates moms and dads who place their children on a pedestal by lavishing them with praise. Over the course of 18 months, 565 kids aged seven through 11 took multiple surveys designed to measure self-esteem, narcissism and their parents' warmth, answering questions about how much they identify with statements such as "kids like me deserve something extra." The parents filled out reciprocal surveys about their approach to child rearing. In a March 2015 issue of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, the Dutch researchers report that children of excessively praising parents were more likely to score high on narcissistic qualities but not on self-esteem. They also found that lack of parental warmth showed no such link to narcissism. The correlation shows that positive feedback should be tied to good behavior in a child rather than piled on indiscriminately, says psychologist Like Hyde of the University of Michigan, who did not participate in the work. A 2008 meta-analysis of 85 studies showed that narcissism is on the rise in young adults in the West, which could stem in part from a cultural emphasis on praise, with the goal of boosting high self-esteem, notes Eddie Brummelman, lead author of the *PNAS* paper. "It might be well intended," he adds, "but it actually backfires." Such results support the praise-centric school of thought on narcissistic origins, although other scientists in the field point out that controversy still remains over the definition of narcissism itself. Brummelman and his colleagues considered narcissistic personality traits (such as the desire for admiration), not narcissistic personality disorder (characterized by an impairment of daily functioning), in their study because clinicians are discouraged from diagnosing the disorder in youth—no one knows at what age the full-blown psychiatric condition sets in.

**Source: Andrea Alfano, June 2015,
ScientificAmerican.com**

Yoga for Anxiety and Depression

Since the 1970s, meditation and other stress-reduction techniques have been studied as possible treatments for depression and anxiety. One such practice, yoga, has received less attention in medical literature though it has become increasingly popular in recent decades. One national survey estimated, for example, that about 7.5% of U.S. adults had tried yoga at least once, and that nearly 4% practiced yoga in the previous year. Yoga classes can vary from gentle and accommodating to strenuous and challenging; the choice of style tends to be based on physical ability and personal preference. Hatha yoga, the most common type of yoga practiced in the United States, combines three elements: physical poses, called *asanas*; controlled breathing practiced in conjunction with asanas; and a short period of deep relaxation or meditation. Available reviews of a wide range of yoga practices suggest they can reduce the impact of exaggerated stress responses and may be helpful for both anxiety and depression. In this respect, yoga functions like other self-soothing techniques, such as meditation, relaxation, exercise, or even socializing with friends. By reducing perceived stress and anxiety, yoga appears to modulate stress response systems. This, in turn, decreases physiological arousal—for example, reducing the heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and easing respiration, there is also evidence that yoga practices help increase heart rate variability, an indicator of the body's ability to respond to stress more flexibly. A small but intriguing study done at the University of Utah provided some insight into the effect of yoga on the stress response by looking at participants' responses to pain. The researchers noted that people who have poorly regulated response to stress are also more sensitive to pain. Their subjects were 12 experienced yoga practitioners, 14 people with fibromyalgia (a condition many researchers consider a stress-related illness that is characterized by hypersensitivity to pain), and 16 healthy volunteers. When the three groups were subjected to more or less painful thumbnail pressure, the participants with fibromyalgia—as expected—perceived pain at lower pressure levels compared with the other subjects. Functional MRIs showed they also had the greatest activity in areas of the brain associated with the pain response. In contrast, the yoga practitioners had

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(Yoga continued)

the highest pain tolerance and lowest pain-related brain activity during the MRI. The study underscores the value of techniques, such as yoga, that can help a person regulate their stress and, therefore pain responses. Although many forms of yoga practice are safe, some are strenuous and may not be appropriate for everyone. In particular, elderly patients or those with mobility problems may want to check first with a clinician before choosing yoga as a treatment option. But for many patients dealing with depression, anxiety, or stress, yoga may be a very appealing way to better manage symptoms. Indeed, the scientific study of yoga demonstrates that mental and physical health are not just closely allied, but are essentially equivalent. The evidence is growing that yoga practice is a relatively low-risk, high-yield approach to improving overall health.

Source:
Harvard Health
Publishing,
Harvard
Medical School,
Harvard
Mental Health
Letter,
May 2018.



Welcome to Vista!!!

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Feel It

The more you can bring your attention to that which you feel grateful for, the more you will notice to feel grateful for! Researchers at Indiana University using an fMRI scanner, compared brain activity in gratitude letter writers with those who didn't write letters. The letter writers showed greater neural sensitivity in the medial prefrontal cortex, a brain area associated with learning and decision-making—and the effect persisted three months later. “Simply expressing gratitude may have lasting effects on the brain,” they concluded, noting that practicing gratitude can lead to greater sensitivity to the experience of gratitude in the future. And that bodes well for everyone. **Try this:** Start by observing. Notice the *thank yous* you say. Just how habitual a response is it? Is it a hasty aside, an afterthought? How are you feeling when you express thanks in small transactions? Stressed, uptight, a little absent-minded? Do a quick scan of your body—are you already physically moving on to your next interaction? Pick one interaction a day. When your instinct to say “thanks” arises, stop for a moment and take note. Can you name what you feel grateful for, even beyond the gesture that's been extended? *Then* say thank you.

Source: *Mindful*, December 2018.
mindful.org

