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## Breaking Bad Mind Habits

### How do you break bad mind habits?

That is essentially the question that Jim Ryan asked last week on the post "Change Your Mind." Here is his exact question:

I've been thinking a lot about Mind Habits lately and this relates. To break our bad mind habits takes effort. Any suggestions on techniques that people use?

Here are five proven ways to change bad mind habits:

1. **Change your terminology.** To this point, I have used the phrase "breaking bad mind habits" because it is familiar. But from now on, it is important that you change your terminology and your mindset. You are not breaking a habit, you are changing (or replacing) a habit. Habits do not go away. They are replaced. Just like you don't stop eating altogether to lose weight, but rather you replace bad foods with good foods, our mission is to replace bad ones with good ones.
2. **Fake it until you make it.** As I mention in my reply to Jim, changing a habit is an active process. *By definition, habit-changing is forced.* You are taking something that is subconscious and familiar and replacing it with something that is conscious and unfamiliar. It takes *a lot of hard work*. My father used the example of someone who has always used his right hand to turn a doorknob. This person has "practiced" that potentially hundreds of thousands of times. If he tries to switch to his left hand, he must force himself for approximately 28,000 repetitions to use his left hand. The ensuing months will be full of slip-ups and near slip-ups, reminders, and over time the development of a new, ingrained habit. At any point, especially early in the process, if pressure is applied (i.e. a fire in the house), odds are he will use his right hand to open a door. But eventually, using his left hand becomes the new norm and subconscious habit.
3. **Convince Yourself.** I've gotten flak from some for my belief in the power of visualization and self-talk. Some think that they are too "new-agey" and nothing more than pop-psychology. But I know that they work. I have written about visualization here, here, and here. I have written about choosing to be happy here. These things work. There are two ways to convince yourself of something: **to see it and say it.** There are two ways to change bad mind habits: to see the right ones and say the right ones. Just like you must fake it at first and act in a manner that may not be consistent with your feelings, you must visualize and say things that are contrary to what you *feel* at the time. If you are

constantly seeing the cloud in every silver lining, practice seeing yourself being positive and say to yourself, "I am a positive, upbeat, happy person" (Or better yet, write your own script).

**Action item:** Start making positive declarations today. [Download my free Declarations Cheat Sheet.](#) It's a simple list of phrases you might start with. Pick some of them, pick all of them. It's up to you.

1. **Repetition, Repetition, Repetition.** Some of you just rolled your eyes at my last suggestion. You've tried positive visualization and self-talk and it didn't work. And I know why. *You quit too soon.* Most people try positive visualization fifty or one hundred times, which seems like a lot, and then give up. They spend two weeks practicing positive self-talk and nothing changes, so they quit and brush the practice off as the stuff of gypsies and goofy self-help gurus. The problem is you came nowhere close to 28,000 repetitions (or 10,000 hours as Malcolm Gladwell proposes in his book *Outliers*). Changing twenty-plus years of bad habits is not a two week process. You might have to practice these things for years to change the habits, but just like the guy in the door knob example, over time, you will begin to do it more and more subconsciously until one day it becomes your new habit.
2. **Remind Yourself.** This is a simple one but requires some work. One of the best ways to help remember your new habits and keep yourself going when you reach the plateau where you are doing all the right things but seeing no results is to use reminders and cues. If you are trying to change the egotistical habit of immediately shooting down someone else's ideas, for example, you might set calendar reminders on your phone and computer every two hours (that's eight times a day while awake) that say "Listen well and consider each idea carefully before speaking" and include some things you can say in response to the person. You can also post them on meeting reminders and write them out on post-its that you can put on agenda's for your own use. Put reminders on your mirror and front door, on your steering wheel, and office phone. Put them everywhere you reasonable can. And stop throughout the day for ten seconds to visualize listening well and considering each idea carefully. Remind yourself what it looks like to do it correctly as often as possible. In a normal day, this might produce 50-100 repetitions which means you are well on your way to 28,000. The great thing about this is not only are you changing a habit, but you are changing your behavior in real-time as well. *People will notice!*
3. **Form a Support Group.** This is an addition made thanks to the comment below from Jim Ryan. I do this myself but forgot to include it here. This doesn't have to be hard. It does not need to involve twelve steps. Just tell those closest to you what you are working on and ask them to hold you accountable. That's it. Tell three people and ask for their help. Thanks Jim for the reminder!

**One warning:** Only try to change ONE thing at a time and stick with it as long as it takes to change. It might take six months. It might take five or more years. Remember that it likely took you ten times longer to learn, develop, and ingrain the bad habit. But when you are done, you will have changed one bad habit into a good one and there is no way that does not completely change your life.

***What bad mind habits have you changed and what techniques did you use to change them?***