

Dr. Jud

A Simple Way to Break a Bad Habit

A Step-by-Step Guide

How Habits Form (the Short Version)

Hi, and welcome to the DrJud® step-by-step habit change guide. Let's start with a quick introduction to how habits get set up in the first place.

Our brains learn in a simple, three-step process called "reward-based learning" — a process that's easily illustrated with food:

1. We see some food that looks good, and our brain says: Calories! Survival!
2. We eat the food. It tastes yummy.
3. Our body sends a signal to our brains: remember what you are eating and where you found it. We lay down what's called a "context-dependent memory," and we learn to repeat the process next time. See food, eat food, feel good. Repeat. Trigger, behavior, reward. Simple, right?

After a while, our brains — they get extra credit for creativity — say, *"Hey, you can use this 'reward-based learning' process for more than just remembering where food is whenever you're hungry. Any time you feel bad, just eat something good and you'll feel better!"*

We thank our brains for that great idea, and quickly learn that it's true: if we eat chocolate or ice cream when we're mad or sad, we do feel better.

Reward-Based Learning In the Modern World

In the modern world, however, we feel bad for many different reasons.

Yelled at by your boss? In the slow checkout lane at the grocery store? Just broke up with your significant other? Mad at something you saw on the news?

Our bodies are constantly reacting to the world around us — creating sensations and emotions that often we're not consciously aware of, but that still make us uncomfortable.

When that happens, our brain jumps in and tries to "fix" it for us. It looks for anything that has made us feel better in the past, and says *"Do that!"*

Food is the easiest example, but in the modern world, there are plenty of "feel good" experiences right at our fingertips, like checking social media, online shopping, watching cute kitten videos on YouTube... you name it. All of these things distract us from the uncomfortable sensations with a small burst of the "happiness" neurotransmitter dopamine.

We feel better (briefly) and our brain adds another "context-dependent memory" to the pile — making it more likely that we'll fall into the same habit pattern the next time we feel anxious or uncomfortable.

But there is a way out of this brain pattern...

Why Willpower Doesn't Work

Want to quit smoking? Eat healthier? Stop doomscrolling? Stop worrying? The conventional advice is simple: just dig deep and resist. If you fail, your willpower was weak.

But the science doesn't support this. For years, the dominant model was "ego depletion" — the idea that willpower is like a muscle that gets tired. Early studies seemed promising, but a massive 23-lab replication study in 2016 failed to reproduce the effect. By 2021, even optimistically designed replications found only the tiniest effects. Willpower may be more myth than muscle.

What Actually Drives Habit Change?

If it isn't willpower, what can help us change? The answer is **reinforcement learning** — a process grounded in decades of neuroscience.

At its core, reinforcement learning is simple. We learn from experience. If a behavior leads to a reward, we're more likely to repeat it. Dopamine neurons in the midbrain fire when we get an unexpected reward and go quiet when a reward doesn't show up as expected. These signals rewire the brain to favor actions that maximize future rewards.

Rather than fighting urges through force, reinforcement learning suggests a smarter approach: **change the value of the behavior**.

In our clinical trials at Brown University, when participants brought mindful awareness to the actual experience of their habit — the acrid taste of a cigarette, the hollow feeling after stress eating, the tightness of a worry spiral — the brain updated: *this isn't as good as I thought*. Cravings weakened, not through suppression, but through disenchantment.

Curiosity Over Willpower

You don't need more willpower. You need to leverage a superpower you already have: **curiosity**. Becoming curious about a behavior — what triggers it, what you actually get from it, how it makes you feel — lets your brain update the reward values that drive habits. When the reward drops, the behavior fades.

That's the science behind the Three Gears...

First Gear: Map the Loop

You can't change what you can't see. Most of us are stuck inside our habit loops, spinning on autopilot. First Gear is about stepping outside the loop and mapping its parts.

Every habit follows the same three-part structure:

- 1. Trigger:** What set this off? It could be a thought, a sensation in your body, an email, boredom, or a stressful conversation.
- 2. Behavior:** What did you do? Worry, scroll, eat, smoke, procrastinate, pour a drink?
- 3. Reward:** What did you get from it? A brief distraction? A sense of control? A momentary hit of relief?

The simple act of mapping creates what psychologists call "psychological distance" between you and the habit. Instead of being swept along by it, you can see it from the outside.

Try it right now: think of a habit you'd like to change. What's the trigger? What do you do? And what do you actually get from it?

You don't have to change anything yet. Just see the loop clearly. That awareness is the foundation for everything that follows.

Second Gear: Tap Into Disenchantment

Here's why willpower fails: your brain only abandons a behavior when it stops finding it rewarding. You can white-knuckle your way through a craving, but your brain still thinks the habit is a good idea. So it keeps coming back.

Second Gear works differently. Instead of fighting the urge, you ask one question: **"What am I actually getting from this?"**

Don't think about the answer. *Feel* it. The next time you catch yourself in the habit loop, pay careful attention to the experience itself. Does worrying actually solve the problem? Does that third cookie really taste as good as the first? Does checking your phone for the twentieth time make you feel connected or empty?

When you truly feel the gap between what the habit promises and what it delivers, something shifts. Your brain naturally updates its reward value: *this isn't as rewarding as I thought*.

We call this **disenchantment**. It's not willpower. It's wisdom. And it's measurable — in our studies, we used computational models to show that expected reward values actually dropped. This decrease predicted lasting behavior change.

In one of our smoking studies, a participant brought this kind of curious awareness to smoking and concluded: "Smells like stinky cheese and tastes like chemicals... Yuck!" That moment of disenchantment was the beginning of the end of her smoking habit.

Third Gear: The Bigger Better Offer

Your brain can't just "stop" a habit. It needs something better to replace it with. Third Gear is about finding that replacement — what we call the Bigger Better Offer (BBO).

This isn't about substituting one distraction for another. It's about offering your brain a genuinely more rewarding experience. And the most powerful BBO we've found is **curiosity**.

Curiosity feels expansive. It opens you up. Anxiety, craving, and worry feel contracting — they close you down. When you replace "Oh no!" with "Ohhh, that's interesting...", you're giving your brain something that feels better in a real, lasting way.

Here's what that looks like in practice: the next time you notice a craving, an urge to worry, or the pull toward a bad habit, get curious about it. What does it feel like in your body? Where is it? Is it changing? Can you be interested in it without acting on it?

Kindness works here too. Instead of beating yourself up for having the urge, treat yourself with the same compassion you'd offer a friend. Self-judgment contracts the brain and shuts down learning. Kindness keeps it open.

Over time, your brain learns: curiosity and kindness feel better than the old habit. The new pathway gets stronger. The old one fades. Not through force — through a better offer.

Putting It Into Practice: RAIN

The Three Gears give you the framework. RAIN gives you a practical tool to use in the moment. It's an acronym first coined by Michele McDonald, and it maps perfectly onto the gears.

The **"R"** stands for **Recognize**. By practicing mindfulness, we can become aware of the swirl of thoughts, emotions, and sensations in our body. The trigger for your habit might be something external, or something internal, like a feeling. *This is First Gear in action.*

The **"A"** stands for **Acceptance**. Allow the unpleasant feeling to exist within your body without immediately trying to push it away or distract yourself from it. Turn toward it. Welcome it. It's only a sensation or emotion.

The **"I"** stands for **Investigate**. This is the curiosity I talk about in my TED Talk. Put on your inner scientist hat and try to figure out what's actually going on in your body right now. Where is the sensation? How strong is it? Have you felt it before? *This is Second and Third Gear — disenchantment through curiosity.*

The **"N"** stands for **Note**. Describe the sensation in terms you'll remember. Is it restlessness? Tightness? Mouth watering? Learn to recognize these and classify them. Your body is always sending you signals, so knowing your body's "language" will help put you in the driver's seat.

Take Action

The first few times you try the Three Gears and RAIN, it may feel a little uncomfortable. You will probably still do the habit.

That's OK. Good, actually.

But keep it up, and you'll start to recognize the bodily sensations and emotions that precede the habit loop itself. You'll understand the reward — or lack of one — that you feel during and after smoking that cigarette, or having that glass of wine, or checking Instagram for the umpteenth time today.

You'll learn to ride it out. We call that "urge surfing." The urges will always be there, just like waves on the ocean. You can stand in the surf, using willpower to try and resist them, but eventually you'll get knocked down.

But by using the Three Gears and practicing RAIN, you can learn to surf the waves. Not by fighting them — by understanding them.

And break your habit for good in the process.

If you'd like daily guidance through this process, or want step-by-step instruction on behavior change, I've created programs specifically designed to help — whether your challenge is anxiety, addiction, or emotional eating. Turn the page to find the right fit for you.

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Ready to Break Your Habits For Good?

This guide gives you the framework. My programs give you the daily guidance, expert support, and community to make it stick. Find the right fit for your challenge:



Anxiety, Worry & Stress

If anxiety, worry, or stress brought you here — this is your path. A guided program with video lessons, AI coaching, community support, and weekly live calls with me.

goingbeyondanxiety.com →



Emotional Eating

If food is your go-to when you're stressed or anxious, the root is often anxiety itself. Going Beyond Anxiety helps you address the habit loop at its source.

goingbeyondanxiety.com →



Substances, Alcohol & Digital Habits

If alcohol, smoking, substances, or compulsive digital habits are your challenge — Mindshift Recovery, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, offers science-based programs designed for lasting change.

mindshiftrecovery.org →

Dr. Jud Brewer is a New York Times bestselling author, neuroscientist, and addiction psychiatrist. He is the director of research and innovation at Brown University's Mindfulness Center and has helped over 100,000 people change their habits.