How To Break
A Negative Habit

By **Regina Cates**   Author of *Lead With Your Heart*

Romancing your Soul®

~ Written Guide Series ~

How To Break
A Negative Habit

By

Regina Cates

Author of *Lead With Your Heart*

Booklet

How To Break A Negative Habit

Habits are behaviors we do on a regular basis. There are good habits, like exercising regularly, being honest, and not procrastinating. And, there are negative habits we know we would be better off ending because they impact our health and well-being. Like smoking cigarettes, or drinking too much alcohol, or not thinking of the possible consequences before we speak and act.

Bad habits are not easy to break. When we have had a habit for years, we grow accustom to the repetitive behavior to the point we barely acknowledge the habit's existence in our daily life. Or we don't really want to admit our bad habits because it's much easier to overlook them than it is to change them for the better. Also bad habits such as smoking or drinking too much alcohol release dopamine in the brain which is a short-lived feel-good chemical. Which means our bodies react positively to the negative behavior even though the feel-good feeling is temporary.

I know firsthand, breaking damaging habits takes time and effort. I have transformed many bad habits into good habits so I understand the self-love, self-respect, and perseverance it takes. I appreciate the depth of self-reflection necessary to become aware of the triggers fueling our desire to engage in the negative habit. And, no matter how challenging, I also know transforming a negative habit by replacing it with a good one is absolutely possible.

For example, after a 22-year, almost two-pack-a-day cigarette smoking habit, I quit. So I am frequently asked how I managed to stop. My initial answer is, "I just did."

My answer may seem too simple, or an unrealistic response for smokers or those addicted to substances or undesirable patterns of behavior to believe. However, one part of the truth is that at 9 p.m. on a Sunday evening, I smoked my last cigarette. And my over two decade history with cigarettes holds another truth. Quitting happened only after I spent time on the front end, preparing myself physically, psychologically, and emotionally to end the harmful habit for good. I had to do whatever it took to replace the negative habit of smoking with good habits - eating healthy, regular exercise, and freely sharing my thoughts and emotions - no matter how hard it was.

Transforming my decades-long dependency on nicotine took concentration, self-support, self-control, emotional responsibility, and a deep desire to be free of the addiction. It also required me to honestly examine what underlying reasons were motivating my self-destructive bad habit(s).

Don't we need to determine why we engage in negative, self-abusive behavior?

What benefit are we getting?

Isn't recognizing our bad habits necessary to overcoming them?

My journey of being free of the negative habit of smoking began in earnest when I became mindful of my habit. Which means I worked to stay aware of when I smoked, how many cigarettes I smoked each day, where I was when I smoked, who I was with or if I was alone, and what feeling triggered reaching for a cigarette (stress, bad memory, anxiety, feeling unworthy, fear, etc.). By wanting to know the reasons I smoked, and how I was feeling when I reached for a cigarette, I was able to admit the truth. Smoking was a habit of self-abuse I developed in an attempt to suppress destructive emotional turmoil.

Yes, I was intentionally abusing myself! This is the bottom line truth I had to honestly accept. Also I had to acknowledge the self-abuse I was inflicting stemmed from feeling damaged and unworthy. A steady stream of negative self-talk about how horrible I was for being gay and that I was eternally doomed to hell by my Christian religious experience caused me to experience stress which triggered the desire to feel good. I associated smoking with making me feel good. But feeling good from smoking was fleeting. Soon the negative self-talk would beat me up with how weak willed I was for not being able to quit smoking. I was trapped in a cycle of attempting to eliminate the stress of negative self-talk by smoking when smoking actually resulted in greater stress.

The hardest part of quitting was admitting closing my eyes to or intentionally suppressing emotional trauma is not the same as facing it, which would lead to actual healing. For too long I believed the justification - smoking a cigarette eliminated my stress. Digging deeper I had to be honest about what comfort I got from smoking. I had to ask myself why I felt the need to be comforted.

How To Break A Negative Habit

Getting in touch with the triggers that caused me to smoke, allowed me to understand experiencing mistreatment and confusion about what love and acceptance really meant, caused me to not know how to love and respect myself. Over time, the frustration of not being accepted for who I was (gay) grew to the point I turned the anger, pain, rejection, and abuse inward. The result is I developed several self-abusive behaviors, including smoking.

One day, I connected the dots and realized, hurting myself would never be a way to get back at those people who hurt and condemned me. Sure I could continue to harm myself out of a lack of self-worth, yet how was self-abuse contributing positively to my life? The "aha" that harmful behavior only brought undesirable results, allowed me to begin caring for myself enough that I wanted to permanently remove self-destructive behavior from my life.

Of course it is hard to admit we intentionally treat ourselves badly. Being honest about the self-abuse allows us to admit we can stop hurting ourselves.

For me to quit smoking I had to accept nicotine does, over time, change the body and brain chemistry into a physical addiction. But smoking initially is a learned behavior. The fact is, I chose to become a smoker; I developed the detrimental practice of smoking because I did not know how to positively express the pain I had from feeling unworthy. Therefore, in order to break the negative habit, I had to make the choice to create a new pattern of feeling worthy, by becoming a non-smoker. And I had to do so in spite of the unpleasant, yet temporary withdrawal symptoms.

The first action I took to quit smoking was to become mindful of the habit by identifying the psychological and emotional associations I developed with cigarettes. I'd have a meal and finish with a cigarette. I'd have a glass of wine and a cigarette. I'd feel uncomfortable and reach for a cigarette. Stressed and I'd have a cigarette. Since smoking was banned in my office building, I was forced to take a break from the daily routine to go outside. I started relating a smoke break with providing temporary reprieve from the tension of the job. When I encountered worry or feelings of emotional discomfort, I used cigarettes as a relief.

Over time, I associated smoking with eating, drinking, having a good time, and stress-release. By confronting how smoking made my body feel I faced the harsh truth - smoking was not peaceful, self-supportive, or a good time. Regardless of what temporary relief from stress, worry, or feelings of shame and unworthiness I thought I got, I was ignoring, or justifying away, the obvious physical dangers. Smoking did not calm my nerves. It actually made me more nervous than not smoking, because I worried about getting really sick, so I lived in constant terror of it. I did get sick all the time. I smelled bad, had a constant cough, lost my sense of taste, and could not walk up one flight of stairs without becoming badly winded.

Honestly looking at the negative impact to my body, to my relationships, to my future health, was eye-opening. With proof of how my body felt on the "truth" table, I finally woke up, got fed up, and started accepting the reality about my unpleasant obsession. I candidly admitted that from almost the first cigarette I smoked, I wanted to stop. In fact, for 22 years, I'd harped on myself to quit smoking. I would try and fail. Then try again and succeed for a day, a week, or even two weeks. Each time, my intentions to quit forever were good. After trying again and passing up a cigarette or two, soon I made an excuse to have just one. Then I beat myself up with negative self-talk for once again not being strong enough to not smoke. I told myself the addiction was too strong and I just could not deal with the uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms. There were lots of excuses and triggers. Listening to excuses and reacting unconsciously to the emotional triggers meant I tried to change the negative habit for a long time without success.

This cycle of stopping smoking and starting again continued until I understood I could continue "trying" for the rest of my life. Through honestly looking at my behavior I had the realization: to quit smoking— or any other destructive pattern of behavior—we don't try harder, we make ourselves "do."

To successfully "do" what was necessary to finally quit, I needed a plan. I sat down and outlined, step by step, how I would become a non-smoker in one month. During the first two weeks, I remained focused on being emotionally accountable for each cigarette. I forced myself to remain present with, connected to, and responsible for each puff.

How To Break A Negative Habit

I became aware of the habit by not doing anything else while I smoked. No eating, watching TV, talking on the phone, or any other distractions. I focused completely on smoking. Feeling my lungs fill with smoke, I concentrated on the smoke as I exhaled. I intentionally blew the smoke out my nose which burned and caused me to cough badly.

When I finished each cigarette, I put the butt into a jar with a little bit of water. Each time I wanted a cigarette, I first made myself smell the nauseating mixture. It was revolting. This was what I imagined I smelled like to a nonsmoker.

Staying present with and responsible for each cigarette allowed me to see the habit for what it was—learned. I smoked without thought, often unconsciously lighting one cigarette while another still burned in the ashtray. So to stop smoking required me to remain mindful of each of my actions. When I picked up a cigarette, I stayed aware of what I was doing. Being present gave me the self-control necessary to stop trying and to establish a new habit of doing, by consciously passing up cigarettes.

My plan to quit was detailed. For the last two weeks leading up to the target date of my final cigarette, I dramatically cut the number I smoked each day. Weaning myself off cigarettes this way was not about reducing the nicotine in my system so the withdrawal symptoms would be milder, since any nicotine in my system would create a desire for more nicotine. The purpose for the gradual decrease was to get a clear psychological and emotional handle on the habit I had created. On day one, I started with 20, a full pack. The next day I went to 18, the next to 16, then 14, 12, 10, eight.

Over the final seven days, I limited myself to only five cigarettes per day. By the time the target Sunday evening rolled around, I was strangely anxious to quit. I wanted to know myself as a non-smoker. I focused on this goal as I lit the last cigarette and smoked it down to the filter. I put the butt into the jar and claimed my new habit: "I am a non-smoker."

Over the next 30 days I worked very hard to retrain my behavior, to eliminate triggers, and to get control over my mind's negative self-talk. I did not have any cigarettes around and I did not associate with people who smoked. I focused completely on ending my smoking habit for good.

I stayed cigarette free and when I habitually wanted a cigarette, I replaced the smoking action with a new, positive behavior, like drinking a glass of water, or going on a short walk, or eating a carrot stick, or smelling the vile mixture of waterlogged cigarette butts. By removing temptations and staying emotionally present with and responsible for replacing a negative habit with a positive one, I managed not only to quit my dependency on cigarettes but I also lost a few pounds in the process.

As smokers, we may try to quit several times. I sure did. To make certain this time is our last, we must become emotionally responsible for the habit. We must courageously face the fact we live with the constant dread of getting really sick. We must acknowledge we smell bad and have a deep, nasty cough. We must accept the truth, we are intentionally abusing ourselves, exposing others to the harmful effects of secondhand smoke, and wasting money. And we must become responsible for the fact we are allowing ourselves to be controlled by an addiction, rather than being in control of ourselves.

The bottom line is for us to better our life, we have to better ourselves. First, by defining the positive habit we want to replace the negative. Second, by setting a boundary with ourselves to not engage in the negative behavior again, period. And third, to remain focused on keeping the "I refuse to do the negative behavior boundary in place.

The last one is huge because, yes, there were times I was not popular with myself for striving to change for the better. During the first few weeks, when I was getting over the physical withdrawals of being addicted to nicotine, there were countless times I wanted just one more cigarette. But the boundary I set was not to pick up even one cigarette, ever again.

To be stronger than the psychological habit, temptation, and my countless rationalizations, I had to focus with tunnel vision on keeping the boundary firmly in place, out of self-love and self-respect. Concentrating on the boundary to not smoke even one cigarette gave me the willpower to stop smoking, cold turkey.

It has been over two decades since I put cigarettes down forever. The "I am a non-smoker" boundary remains firmly in place. Overcoming such an

How To Break A Negative Habit

addictive and negative habit is why I know our success in breaking any negative habit we have allowed to become an addiction requires preparing ourselves. Whether it is overeating, using shopping as therapy, drinking, or even exercising too much, we must honestly look at the psychological and emotional wounds behind our patterns of self-destructive behavior. We stand in front of the mirror of honesty and stop running from whatever pain causes us to medicate ourselves in the first place. We accept self-love is the way to heal past pain and present suffering. We stop listening to the rationalizations of our mind when it says we can have just one cigarette, one drink, one pill, one last pair of new jeans. Instead of our mind's justification to repeat the negative habit, we intentionally choose to listen to the higher wisdom of our heart when it says I CAN do this! I am worth it. Yes, I do love myself enough to control myself.

We remain determined to care for ourselves, rather than continuing to harm ourselves. Then we develop a self-supportive plan outlining the actions that will allow us to achieve success. We can accomplish anything we want when we respect ourselves enough to take the actions necessary to remain in control of our behavior. And, we replace a negative habit with a new, self-loving and self-respectful habit.

What negative habit(s) do you want to change?

- Stress-eating (another I overcame)

- Biting your fingernails (another I overcame)

- Excessive drinking

- Abusing prescription drugs

- Focusing on the negative

- Allowing people to abuse you (another I overcame)

- Procrastination

- Being glued to personal technology

- Staying in bad relationships (another I overcame)

- Watching too much television

- Lying or stealing or cheating (I also overcame these)

- Interrupting someone when they are speaking

- Not listening to other people to understand them

- Being emotionally disconnected from the present (another I overcame)

Make a list of the negative habits you want to overcome and their positive substitutes.

Negative Habit	Positive Substitute

How To Break A Negative Habit

First, choose the most self-destructive habit on your list and its self-supportive substitute. Concentrate on the self-supportive behavior as your positive go-to action to replace the negative habit. Your goal is to remain focused on the positive.

Second, go inward. Honestly seek what motivations are driving the negative habit. Why are you hurting yourself? Accept you will not change the past or get back at anyone who hurt you by continuing to hurt yourself. Pain does not heal pain. In fact, healing whatever happened to you that caused you to develop the negative behavior requires loving yourself more than you were hurt. Also, don't be afraid or embarrassed to seek professional assistance for support and guidance to help you identify and heal old wounds. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Working with someone who has overcome the same challenge you face will give you tools and support to ensure success. Surround yourself with people who are also working toward the same goal – quitting smoking, stopping overeating, etc.

Third, outline a plan of action to reach your goal within a reasonable time period. Once you set a target date to stop the behavior for good, then stick to it. Keep a healthy boundary in place by remaining dedicated to doing whatever it takes to achieve your goal. And although you must make yourself take the actions necessary, do so by being gentle and self-supportive. If you slip up, calmly start again, with a stronger determination to love yourself more than you do the negative habit. Stay self-supportive. Regardless of what you have told yourself in the past, you do have the power within to take the steps necessary to be successful this time. You are worth the effort. You can get past the temporary pain when the goal is changing yourself for the better.

Fourth, remember at all times you are making the positive change for you and you only. While other people may benefit from the changes you make, any permanent shift in behavior is motivated by the desire to better yourself, for you. Every habit you have, whether good or bad, serves a purpose in your life. With smoking it also serves a biological need because of the addictive nature of nicotine. While the habit of smoking is bad for the long-term effects on your health, the short term result of satisfying your nicotine craving is interpreted by your body as positive. Remember habits provide

some perceived benefit. To be successful we must substitute a real positive habit for a negative one.

Fifth, instead of concentrating on "having" to stop smoking, buying, eating without awareness, drinking, drugging, sleeping around, etc., focus on choosing to be the opposite of the negative behavior. See yourself as a non-smoker, responsible with money, or food, or your sexual behavior. When you envision yourself in control of yourself and your actions, rather than being controlled by a negative pattern of learned behavior, you will be empowered to move from, "I am trying" to "I am doing." For example, "I'm a smoker, but I can be a non-smoker."

Sixth, think of something as a reward when you reach the successful attainment of your goal. When I quit smoking, I began saving the money I would have spent on cigarettes. After I'd been cigarette free for six months, I took part of the money and purchased something I really wanted.

Seventh, surround yourself with people who are supportive. When I quit smoking there was a period of time when I could not be around people who smoked. The temptation was too great. But, after about six months I was truly a non-smoker. Claiming the new status of being a non-smoker allowed me to be around people who smoked without being tempted to light up.

You can overcome any bad habit you want to. The rewards are worth the effort, because overcoming any negative pattern of behavior leads to your having a greater level of self-respect, self-love, and personal empowerment. By developing the positive behaviors necessary to stop a negative habit, you become self-aware. With awareness over your actions, your heart opens and you develop a sense of responsibility which lets you avoid behaviors that hurt yourself and others.

Break any negative habit and you will learn through experience that whatever you want to achieve in life is absolutely possible, when you believe in yourself and take the necessary actions to reach your goal. Once you realize how strong you really are to change a negative habit into a positive one, you will be able to successfully face and overcome any challenge life brings.

Regina