

Success in Self-Control

This is the universal experience of the athlete ... the heart-racing thrill of finishing first ... the gut-wrenching angst of finishing last. But before athletes can even enter competition, they must first train the mind ... tighten the muscles ... toughen the body.

However, even athletes—considered models of self-control—can allow harmful habits to slip into their lives and sabotage their valiant efforts for victory. Self-control must not only be regained, but also sustained. And as it is with athletes, so it is with us—if we are going to win in the game of life, glorifying the God who created us by cultivating His character within us—we must have strict discipline. We must develop strict habits. We must enter strict training. The apostle Paul made this point clear. ...

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.”
(1 Corinthians 9:25)

Have you ever watched athletes competing in the Olympics—almost in disbelief—and thought, *How on earth can they do that? It seems impossible!* The answer isn't rocket science. It's practice, practice, practice. It involves developing the habit of doing a simple half turn again and again and again until it feels natural ... until it can be done, in essence, without thinking.

Those who tenaciously train in this way can identify with these figurative words spoken by the apostle Paul ...

“I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave.”
(1 Corinthians 9:27)

When we have a major challenge, a necessary change we must make, then these words are most appropriate ...

*“Let us discern for ourselves what is right;
let us learn together what is good.”*
(Job 34:4)

What Are Habits and Addictions?

In your quest for knowledge and discernment, it is critical that you learn the all-important differences between habits and addictions ... because you control the one, while the other controls you.

- **Habits are learned patterns** of behavior or attitudes repeated so often that they become typical of a person.
“Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good” (Titus 3:14).
- **Addictions are a compulsive**, enslaving dependence on something, resulting in detrimental patterns of thinking and behaving. There are “substance addictions” (for example, alcohol, tobacco, heroin, inhalants) and “process addictions” (for example, gambling, eating, shopping, sex).
“People are slaves to whatever has mastered them” (2 Peter 2:19).

Questions and Answers

“What is the difference between a common habit and a compulsive addiction?”

With any behavior, repetition leads to the forming of a habit that then can develop into an addiction. The difference between a repeated habit and an enslaving addiction is the amount of time it takes from your everyday life, the power it has over your life, and the negative impact it has on your life.

If the behavior has mastery over your life rather than you having mastery over it, then it is an addiction. But if you are determined to allow only God to have mastery over you, He will give you the power to either gain and maintain mastery over the behavior or to have victory over it and stop it.

“Sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.”
(Romans 6:14)

Beauty or Beast

Pit bull terriers simply behave as they are trained. They develop learned behaviors and, consequently, can become brutal killers, beloved pets, or brilliant service dogs for law enforcement, search and rescue teams, and therapy. In the same way, a habit is learned behavior that becomes a powerful force in your life, whether for good or bad ... for virtue or vice.

All habits are ...

Habitual—occur with regularity

Automatic—happen without thinking

Behavioral—reflect inner morals

Intense—grow stronger and more ingrained

Tenacious—persist and become hard to change

Satisfying—provide a degree of pleasure

“No one can serve two masters.

*Either you will hate the one and love the other,
or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.*

You cannot serve both God and money.”

(Luke 16:13)

The Harmful Habit Checklist

- Are my thoughts consumed with it?
- Is my time scheduled around it?
- Could my health be harmed by it?
- Does my guilt increase because of it?
- Are my finances affected by it?
- Am I defensive when asked about it?
- Are my relationships hurt by it?
- Am I upset when I can't do it?
- Is my spiritual growth hindered by it?
- Have I been asked to stop it?
- Would I discourage my children from doing it?
- Do I hide it from others?
- Would Jesus avoid doing it?
- Does it diminish my witness for Christ?

The Cycle of Addiction

No one enters this life with even the slightest thought of engaging in behavior that will develop into an enslaving addiction. Nonetheless, many develop addictions later on through simple repetition of behavior that appears, at least temporarily, to satisfy a deep desire or meet a neglected need. The progression of this “cycle” that both leads to addiction and then perpetuates it generally looks something like the following:

- **Past Pain** ... motivation for finding a way to ease the continual hurt of past experiences (Proverbs 14:13).
- **Mood-altering activity** ... attempting to temporarily relieve emotional or psychological pain (Psalm 13:2).
- **Addiction** ... unbridled participation in mood-altering activities on a regular basis (Romans 6:20–21).

- **Violating values** ... breaking your own personal convictions by engaging in mood-altering, addictive behaviors (2 Chronicles 29:6).
- **Guilt** ... feeling conscience-stricken for having wrong attitudes and committing wrong actions (Psalm 38:4).
- **Shame** ... believing that you are a bad person who is without worth or hope because of your addictions (Psalm 44:15).
- **Present Pain** ... motivation for finding a way to ease the continual pain produced by the shame that accompanies addictive behaviors

Past/Present Pain



Questions and Answers

“I’m an overeater. What do I say when someone offers me food I really shouldn’t have?”

As with any addictive behavior, it is essential that you say *no* to those things that trigger your addiction, whether it be sugary food, alcohol, a drug, a cigarette, or even an invitation to join in a shopping excursion. Of course, the best means of escape whenever possible is to simply avoid people and situations where you might be tempted. However, to be prepared for facing your weakness, you must practice saying *no* ... and mean it!

*“It [the grace of God] teaches us to say ‘No’
to ungodliness and worldly passions,
and to live self-controlled, upright
and godly lives in this present age.”*
(Titus 2:12)

“When I became a Christian, shouldn’t that have changed my addictions and my tendency to sin?”

While you have been saved from the penalty of sin (eternal separation from God) and while the power of sin over you has been broken, you still have tendencies to think, feel, and act in sinful ways. You must still choose to not sin when you are tempted.

*“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life,
to put off your old self, which is being corrupted
by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude
of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be
like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*
(Ephesians 4:22–24)

Key Verse to Memorize

"I can do all this through him [Christ] who gives me strength."
(Philippians 4:13)

Key Passage to Read

Galatians 5:13–17

How to Break a Bad Habit

- **Will** to do God's will. (Psalm 40:8)
- **Ask** God for wisdom to know and accomplish His will. (James 1:5)
- **Accept** by faith that God has already given you the wisdom you need. (1 John 5:14)
- **Write** out the strategy that God has placed on your heart. (Job 42:2)
- **Identity** the wrong beliefs supporting your habit. (Proverbs 14:15)
- **Plan** ways to remove possible reinforcements of your bad habit. (Proverbs 14:14)

- **Share** your plan with an accountability partner. (Proverbs 15:22)
- **Resolve** to stay the course. (Ephesians 6:11)

Develop and Demonstrate Good Habits

- **Moral Sensitivity** (Psalm 119:11)
 - **Study** the Scriptures daily.
 - **Memorize** the Beatitudes.
- **Accountability** (James 5:16)
 - **Be open** to the truth when others criticize you.
 - **Daily** or weekly, talk with a friend who will help you "kick the habit" that plagues you.
- **Forgiveness** (Matthew 6:14–15)
 - **Know** that forgiving others is required for you to receive the forgiveness of God.
 - **Forgive** by releasing that person into the hands of God.
- **Communion with God** (Psalm 104:34)
 - **Spend** time alone with God every day.
 - **Close** your mind to invading thoughts and focus on God's presence and His character.

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