

Follow the four Rs to break lifelong bad habits

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If you feel like biting your nails, distract yourself by taking cutters into the garden instead.

For a long time, I've had a bad habit. Running late. Scenario: I need to leave the house ASAP. I'm preoccupied, multi-tasking, so do stupid things like forgetting to put the lid on the juicer. "Oh no!" Waste time cleaning up.

Now I'm putting lipstick on without a mirror as I rush towards the car, throw things in, then turn around and have the dreaded "Have I remembered to ...?" conversation with myself. The list is long: turn off the gas, unplug my tongs, deadlock the front door, close all windows? And where is my mobile? I bolt back into the house. Oven off: yes. Tongs off: yes. Ring my phone. It's under the tea towel. Out the door I run. Hang on, where are my sunglasses?

In case anyone thinks it's solely a female dilemma, no. My male friend says he goes back and checks the door often because he is so distracted by his phone, he can't remember locking it. Last week he filled the dog's bowl with water, ran out to the car, started the engine and thought: "I'd better go back and check the dog has water."

So off I go to a lecture by US neuroscientist and University of California, Los Angeles, psychiatrist Jeffrey Schwartz, who's in Australia to speak at the annual Mind and Its Potential conference. His topic is the neuroscience of habit. I turn up late.

Schwartz, an expert in neuroplasticity (how the brain continually changes) and co-author of *You are Not Your Brain*, is a specialist in obsessive-compulsive disorder. One of his more unusual claims to fame is that he coached Leonardo DiCaprio in the role of Howard Hughes in *The Aviator*, training him to be obsessive compulsive in those scenes where he kept washing his hands, fearing germs. DiCaprio says Schwartz's work is "a testament to mind over brain ... sheer willpower can truly make you break free".

The first thing Schwartz says is that habits form even before they become outward. As children, beliefs or behaviours are embedded into our brains like a microchip, possibly helpful to our survival because these behaviours made the adults happy or as a defence mechanism. But many are now unhelpful and destructive with no reward; like rats who drink bad-tasting poison when the bell goes because the chocolate milk was there so many times before. Learned behaviour becomes hardwired into our circuitry.

Basically, to give up a habit we have to use our mind's executive function, to rewire the brain's chemical functions and thus give up a thought process. The phrase in neuroplasticity is "What fires together wires together". So things need unpicking and restitching.

Schwartz says the belief that the brain and its neural hardware governs our mind and its thoughts is untrue. "It's the opposite: the mind controls the brain. We need to empower the mind to change the brain. The brain is passive, the mind is active, focusing attention and making decisions."

Our habit of disempowering thinking can lead to avoidant behaviours (procrastinating, not exercising, watching too much TV and running late); or excessive pleasure-seeking activities, for example promiscuous sex or drinking to get a dopamine hit (the reward chemical). Schwartz has developed a four-step program to take us off automatic pilot.

The four Rs — relabel, reframe, refocus, revalue — have revolutionised treatment for obsessive behaviours. The “habit centre” of the brain, the striatum, is deeply embedded in the core of the brain and Schwartz uses functional magnetic resonance imaging to demonstrate that sufferers who use his mindfulness-based process rewire neurons in their brains.

The first step is to relabel: just state what is happening without judgment. “Oh, I am having the urge to eat fatty foods/wash my hands. I’m not bad. My brain is just hardwired this way from childhood conditioning, hence produces certain chemical/hormonal urges and reactions.” Then reframe: remind yourself why this is bothering you and think: “My mind can rise above it. I am not my brain.” Reframing changes the narrative, or distortions of thinking, which will then change how neurons fire, he says.

There are many common deceptive or distorted thoughts, Schwartz says, including: “I must be perfect all the time.” Black-and-white thinking: “Everyone is better than me.” Or catastrophising: “It’s a huge problem, I can’t cope.” Or false generalisations that take into account only the negatives; or overreacting to one mistake (“I am defective”) which forms a self-fulfilling loop. Another is emotional reasoning: “I feel anxious and horrible, something must be wrong.” Then there is projecting (“They didn’t call. They are thinking bad things about me”), which prompts feelings of rejection. There are comparisons (“Everyone else can ...”) and false expectations (“If she loved me, she would ...”).

To give an example of reinterpreting the narrative, Schwartz ran an experiment where participants, while undergoing functional magnetic resonance imaging, were shown distressing images of an accident. Understandably, emotional areas of the brain lit up. Other participants were shown the images and told to explain how they would react if they were on the scene as an emergency worker. The executive function areas of the brain lit up. What we focus on can change our neurobiology.

Which leads into the next step, to refocus. It’s about making better choices, overriding the circuits — “I don’t have to listen/believe the negative-speak” — then putting direct attention on positive, wholesome behaviour. In this gentle way you are not trying to stop the thoughts and habits but are absorbing your mind in other things. Even if you break the loop for 15 minutes a day, the brain is automatically rewiring.

When you feel like chewing your nails, go into the garden with cutters; knit; start cooking; if driving or at work, do a brief breath meditation, proven to increase executive brain function and quieten emotions and adrenalin.

The final step is to revalue. The brain's ventromedial prefrontal cortex is related to things that are relevant and valuable to us. Research has shown that when this area is activated it breaks bad habits: there are significant behavioural changes when you ask people to reflect on their core values and link these in with reasons to stop a habit. Core values may include creativity, family and friends, faith, music.

To find what is really of value to us, we need to get in touch with our true inner self, Schwartz says. Give over to guidance from what he calls "the wise advocate" who loves and protects us. Spiritualists may call it God or consciousness; psychologists, the inner nurturing parent; Buddhists, the higher self. It's the voice that knows what we need. And what we all need is to live meaningful, happy lives ... oh, and to get to places on time.