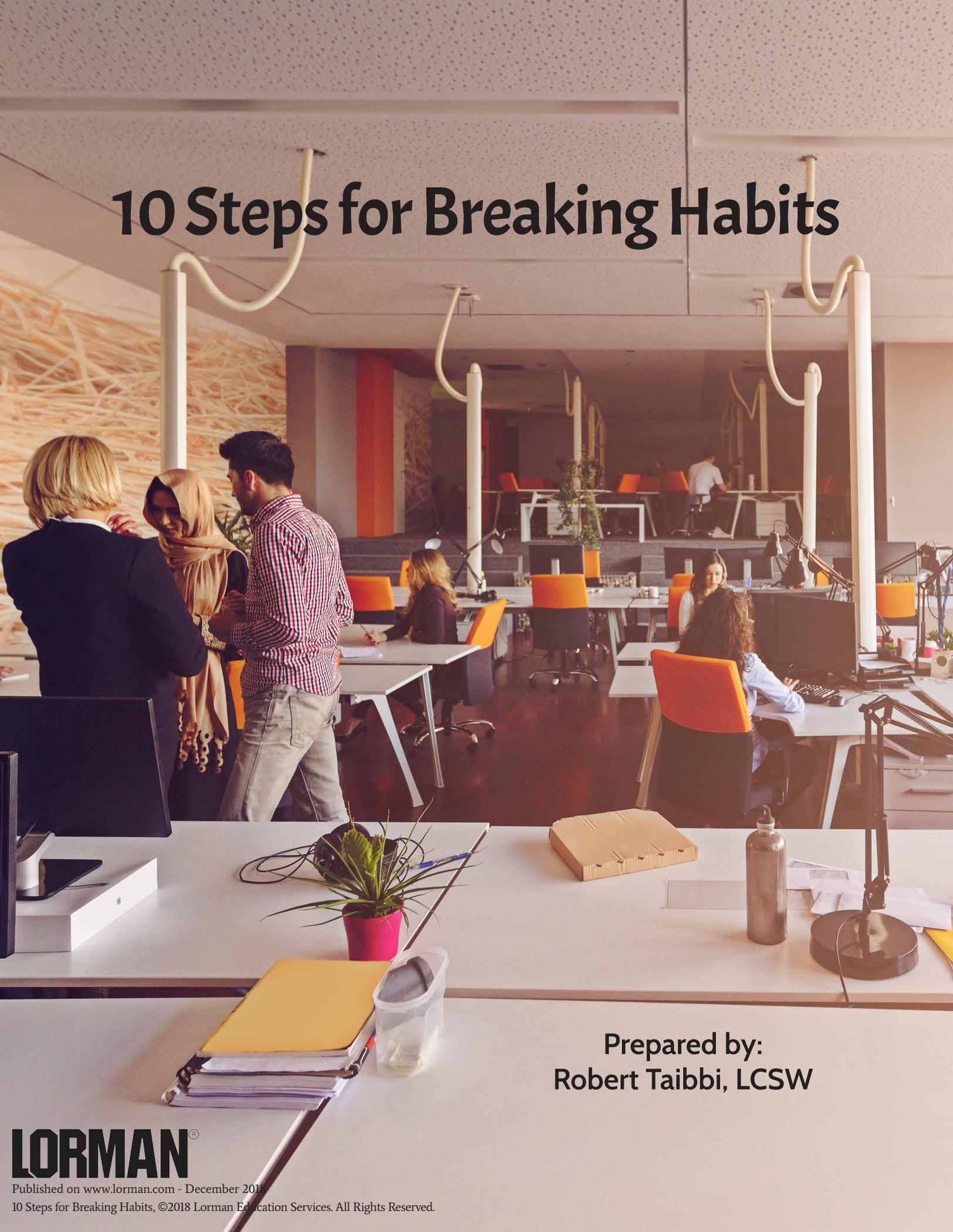


10 Steps for Breaking Habits



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10 Steps for Breaking Habits

Written by Robert Taibbi

Habits not only easily fall into the categories of good or bad, but also sit on a continuum in our ability to exercise control over them: Some are mild, like taking off your shoes and dumping in the middle of the living every night; other moderate like eating dinner in front of the TV, drinking too much when you go to a party, or interrupting others when their talking; and those that are strong and addictive – like smoking, nail-biting, watching porn. Habits become hard to break to because they are deeply wired, by constant repetition, in our brains. And when you add pleasure to them – like you have with drugs or porn – the pleasure centers of the midbrain get fired up as well, and continue to fire long after the habits stop creating the cravings.

Habits are patterns of behavior and it is the patterns that we're trying to break. They are also triggered, sometimes by emotions – the wanting a drink or cigarette when stressed, the nail-biting – other times by situation and environment – the TV and dinner – and often by a combination of both – a mix of social anxiety and party environment leading to the heavier drinking.

Finally, specific habits are usually wrapped in larger ones – the routines that run our lives.

Here is where you know that as soon as you hit the front door after work, the dumping the shoes, the grabbing a beer, the sitting in front of the TV with dinner flow together without much thought; the

break at work that combines going outside and chatting with Kate and having that mid-morning cigarette. Overall auto-pilot behavior is a good thing in that it saves us brain space so we can think about others things without having to make re-invent the wheel and make infinite numbers of decisions all day long. The downside of these patterns comes when those patterns are more bad than good.

So if you have habits you want to break, here are some steps to get you started:

Define the concrete behavior you want to change or develop

Getting more exercise, treating your boyfriend better may sound great but they give you little to mentally or behaviorally grasp onto. You want to think of specific doable behaviors – like not dumping your shoes in the living room but putting them in your closet; not eating in front of the TV but at the dining room table; going for a half hour run 5 days a week; sending your boyfriend a complimentary text once a day rather than sending him nothing or negative ones. Drill down on the concrete.

Define the triggers

The refrigerator may be enough of a trigger to have you go for the beer, just as seeing the junk food on the counter will. Or it may be realizing how worried you are about your upcoming job evaluation or that spark of social anxiety cranks up the drinking. And if you have a harder time realizing emotional triggers, you can work backwards – noticing when you are craving a drink or biting your nails, for example, and using the behaviors as signals to ask yourself what emotionally is going on.

Deal with the triggers

Because we're wanting to break patterns, you now want to do something about the triggers themselves. Here you proactively get the junk food or beer out the house, or you realize that when you are driving home that you are stressed, and instead of marching into the kitchen you sit in the car and listen to music that you like, or do a few minutes of deep breathing to relax. Or you take more time to prepare for your work evaluation so you are less worried, or you take medication or over-the-counter supplements to help you lower your overall stress.

Develop a substitute plan

Breaking habits isn't about stopping but substituting. Here is where you come up with a plan for managing the party without drinking – getting a mocktail and hanging close by your good friend rather than grabbing a drink and being stuck with a bunch of strangers. Or you bring 2 cookies up to your bedroom and read at 10:00 so you don't find yourself wandering around the kitchen all evening and veering towards bingeing. Or you plan to unplug your computer when you get home or stay away from electronics and instead settle in with that new book you got for your birthday to avoid the temptation of drifting into porn.

The key here is mapping this out before that triggers have a chance to kick in.

Change the larger pattern

By changing the larger pattern or routine you further break down the small habit pattern. You go the gym during your lunchbreak

because you know going after work is too hard because you are so tired. Or you realize you don't sit at the dining room table because it is so loaded down with papers and such, and so start by both keeping the table clear and setting the table for dinner when before you leave for work.

By looking at and changing the larger pattern you are actually not only making it easier to tackle the core habit, but are putting your willpower in place and practicing on smaller, easier pattern-breaking behaviors. This can add to your sense of empowerment.

Use prompts

These are reminders to help you break the pattern – putting your running shoes at the side of your bed so you see them first thing in the morning. Or putting reminders and alerts on your phone to check in with yourself and gauge your stress level so you can catch and do stress-reduction before it gets too high and out of your control.

Get supports

Get a running buddy, or a party buddy or someone you can call or an online forum you can tap into when you those cravings start to kick in and you are struggling. Talk to Kate about going to get a quick cup of coffee together rather than standing outside with your cigarettes. Join a support group for moderating your drinking or eating.

Give yourself support and rewards

At some point in your efforts to break a habit you reach a day or point where you go: "Why am I bothering to struggle with this?"

You are feeling discouraged, you are emotionally making your life seemingly harder, there is little payoff.

You need to keep your eyes on the prize but you also need the payoff. Here you deliberately pat yourself on the back for having dinner at the table rather than the couch even though you won't immediately feel better. You take the money you would be spending on alcohol or drugs or cigarettes and save it up to buy something you've always wanted. Again, having folks around you to cheer you on makes it all the better.

Be persistent and patient

That's the name of the game, of course: realizing that it will take time for the new brain connects to kick in, for the old brain-firings to calm down, for new patterns to replace the old. Don't beat yourself up for slip-ups or use them as rationales for quitting. Take it one day at the time.

Get professional help

If you've done the best you can and you are still struggling, consider seeking professional support. This may be a doctor who can prescribe meds for the underlying anxiety and depression, a therapist who can not only help you unravel the source and driver for your habits, but also create some steady support and accountability.

While all habits are not created equally the overarching goal is the same, namely, you taking more charge of your life, being proactive rather than reactive, deliberate rather than routinized.

Ready to take on the challenge?

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