



bad habits or toxic comforting?

by Patricia Alexander

How to Stop Criticizing Yourself (and Others) for More Balance and Peace

Good Advice From Harry Potter:

“You have a power that (your enemy) Voldemort has never had. You can love,” said Dumbledore.

“So, when the prophecy says that I’ll have ‘power the Dark Lord knows not,’ it just means — love?” asked Harry.

“Yes — just love,” said Dumbledore. **“...what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so. He singled you out as the person who would be most dangerous to him... Don’t you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy.”**

—Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince by J. K. Rowling

Have you ever created your worst enemy by focusing on what you fear?

The passage above from the popular Harry Potter series encapsulates a surprising concept: love is a more powerful weapon than hate; and what you hate grows stronger and harder to defeat, as it becomes empowered by attention and energy.

Within this potent concept is the key to changing the things we refer to as our “bad habits” and the power to break the vicious cycle of the guilt we feel when we struggle and fail to change them. It also holds the key to helping those people in our lives who are trying to release their own “bad habits,” while, more importantly, moving ourselves to a more empathetic, less criticizing attitude.

No Bad Habits, Just Toxic Comforts. What if there is no such thing as a bad habit? What if we are just looking for comfort in all the wrong places?

I assert that every so-called “bad habit” is really just a “toxic” comfort. That means it is an attempt to give yourself something you need, even though it creates a negative repercussion, which then creates the need for even more comfort. Sounds circular, doesn’t it?

So how do you break out of it?

Habit: Good and Evil Twins. Habit itself can be benign: at its most innocent, it is merely a tendency to adopt a behavior pattern that has become automatic. This can serve us. Thanks to habit, we know where we always put our keys and we feel odd about starting our day without brushing our teeth.

Habit can, however, become a problem when it creates a behavior that ceases to be moderate, creating a negative consequence, which can lead to habit’s evil twin, addiction. Whether we’re just being immoderate or actually addicted, we can’t break out of either without changing our focus from what we don’t want to what we do want. Author/motivational speaker Alan H. Cohen sums it up nicely: “Everything either has a cost or a payoff.”

And that’s where we get confused. By only looking at the cost of our bad habits/addictions, we become almost powerless to stop them.

- *We hate the cost of overeating:* becoming overweight.
- *We hate the cost of watching too much TV or playing endless computer games:* having less interesting and productive lives.
- *We hate the cost of throwing our clothes on the floor:* they get all wrinkled, make a bigger chore for later and turn our surroundings into chaos.
- *We hate the cost of that third glass of wine:* getting a headache and being sluggish the next day.

Does that stop us? No.

Regret and Hate Do Not Motivate. When your motivation is what you don’t want, you are focusing on the cost, the thing you hate, and empowering it with energy. You’re fueling the regret, the guilt and the shame — none of which are highly motivating factors for positive action.

How well do you respond to being shamed and nagged by others? Not well. Then why would you respond well when you’re being shamed and nagged by yourself?

And while you’re feeling badly about yourself, you are also feeling deprived of the payoff you were enjoying. Putting addiction on hold for a minute, look at the behaviors of eating, watching TV and spending money. These can be fun, entertaining and often feel like a reward for a hard day.

Yet, eating, watching TV, and spending money are not the problem. The problem is overeating, watching an immoderate amount of TV and spending money you don’t have.

The Problem: Being Out of Balance. If we could do these kinds of things in moderation, within a life that has balance, they would no longer reflect bad habits, but good comforts. However, we become

vulnerable to taking our comforts out of the comfort zone and into the toxic zone when we are not consciously choosing to give ourselves the comforts we need and deserve.

A bad habit is like a rock you lift up only to discover life scurrying around with bits of energy from unmet needs underneath it. Mixed with those unmet needs are also ugly bits of shame and guilt for being caught in such a vicious, unproductive cycle. Permit this realization to kindle compassion and you allow yourself to discover a powerful secret key to the core issue. Compassion, love and self-love offer us a weapon more motivating and far more powerful than hate of the habit's negative result.

Comfort is Inevitable; Conscious Comfort is Healthier. The bottom line is that whether we think we deserve compassion or not, we will comfort ourselves one way or another, consciously or unconsciously.

When we do it unconsciously, we increase the odds that we are more vulnerable to taking the comfort to unhealthy extremes, and in the end only create more stress. When we do it consciously, we increase the odds that we can stay in balance and moderation because we are loving ourselves enough to give ourselves what we really need in a resourceful, healthy way.

Thus, love becomes the ultimate weapon for defeating a bad habit.

A Useful Formula. Look at the habit in general without judging it. Look at the specific behavior the habit creates. Look at its cost. Then examine its payoff in terms of the comfort it brings you. Now ask yourself: can you receive that same comfort in a healthier way? Start replacing the bad habit behavior with one or more truly comforting behaviors.

The powerful kicker: focus on the payoff you now get from the healthier behavior versus the toxic behavior and see yourself receiving this benefit tenfold. Focus on the positive result you are going towards instead of the negative cost and shame you are running from.

Let's take it for a spin.

Habit: Wanting a break in the middle/end of a stressful day.

Behavior: Overeating sweets from emotional stress and anxiety.

Payoff (Comfort): Pain lifts briefly as comfort is received from distraction while senses immersed in instant gratification of chocolate.

(Toxic) Cost: Weight gain from too much sugar, cravings for more sugar, shame for overeating, depression and more pain from self-anger causing more emotional stress (vicious circle).

Real Comfort Needed: A healthy break from the stress, that does not create more emotional stress.

Possible "Healthy Comforting" Replacement Behaviors: Receiving a paid massage; seeing an upbeat movie; taking a walk in a park alone or with a friend; enjoying a sunset; reading a book; doing a puzzle; finding a safe way to have a reasonable amount of chocolate (like a fudgcicle on a stick), talking with someone like a counselor, an old friend or trusted relative; writing your thoughts and feelings into a journal or a letter while listening to calming music; reading a self-help book that helps you realize what's in your power and what's not; attending

a spiritual service to align yourself with your highest power; joining a support group for others dealing with same emotional stress.

Focus on Long Term Payoff: See yourself laughing and being more peaceful, no matter what your circumstances; thinner with more energy and smaller clothes; feeling more emotionally resilient and proud of yourself for being that way; able to have a box of candy in the house and eat one or two pieces without polishing off the box.

Now you are empowering yourself with love and proving Dumbledore right!

The Addictive Habit. Back to the bad habits that overlap with addictiveness, like smoking, alcohol abuse and drugs. While addictions certainly add a more deeply embedded hook that is physiological as well as psychological, the concept that love is a more powerful weapon than hate is even more vital.

More compassion is needed when one is in the grip of an addictive habit. It may seem like a heavier rock, but lifting it reveals even larger, hungrier yearnings. It is imperative to look for the emotional payoff being received by the addiction and fill it with healthier choices.

For instance, my brother is trying to quit smoking — again. He recently radically altered his life after being diagnosed with Fatty Liver Disease, eating smaller amounts of healthier food, cutting out sweets and taking Pilates. Yet even as he improved his health and lost his fear, he could not resist starting to smoke "special" cigars.

Emotionally, he craved a treat in a life where he felt deprived of them. He recognized that the cigars were giving him a treat, which included the trip to the cigar store, where he enjoyed discussing his choices. He rationalized that an occasional cigar would not be addictive.

He knew he was deluding himself when his body protested loudly by breaking out into red spots after he smoked. He got rid of the cigars and started focusing on the benefits of health, this time filling his life with treats for his mind, body and soul.

For his mind, he gave himself high definition TV; for his body, he added to his Pilates regime by walking in his beautiful tree-lined neighborhood; for his soul, he took a class at a New Thought church, which taught him how to meditate and use affirmations, like: "I have the strength and the self-love to eliminate choices that do not serve me."

He's doing well and has even found that the meditation techniques have almost completely reduced the withdrawal symptoms of cravings and irritability.

More Balance, Less Vulnerability to Toxic Comfort. As we consciously choose ways to comfort ourselves, we begin to achieve a feeling of balance that makes us less vulnerable to the toxic self-comforting that so quickly becomes tomorrow's bad habit.

What we love is a more powerful weapon than what we hate — and that's truth, not magic.▼

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