

Break Bad Habits: Rewire Your Brain in 14 Days

There's that certain something that you do all the time that you know isn't good for you, but no matter how hard you try, you just can't reverse it. It might be that you procrastinate, overeat, control everything at work, skip out on exercise or chronically neglect relationships.

Whatever it is, it's not only affecting your health directly, but also indirectly, by causing you stress. Deep down, you know that promising yourself to change one more time just isn't going to do it. It's too late for that.

Or is it?

[Dr. Lee Rice](#), Vistage speaker and authority in sports medicine, wellness, and preventative medicine, certainly doesn't think so. He believes that to improve your health, you first have to evaluate your life. "Only 10% of us die naturally from old age in our sleep," he says. "Another 10% die prematurely from bad luck. The rest of us -- all 80% -- will kill ourselves with bad habits."

Once your life is in balance, you'll experience reduced stress, muscle deterioration, and illness, and increased happiness, flexibility, and self-esteem -- not to mention a longer life potential.

But how exactly do you turn lifelong bad habits inside out? How do you get over the rationalization and justification that lead to small unhealthy decisions that rack up toward an increasingly unhealthy, unhappy-about-it you?

Dr. Rice says it takes as little as 14 days to "rewire your brain" or create new brain pathways that make habits easier to follow, so the habits become more effective and long-lasting. Will it be hard? Yes. But "the mind is much more powerful than we've ever given it credit for," he says. "Wellness is an integration of mind and body, and allowing yourself to change for the better" is the first step. But you have to be honest with yourself. If you define yourself prematurely, you won't be able to change the behavior.

Healthy Reminders

- Get puffing. Ideally, you should be getting 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise -- the kind that makes you puff lightly, so you can talk, but not sing -- on most days of the week, for a total of about 3 hours per week. Work those large muscle groups.
- Strength train two times per week: one set on all muscles.
- Toss in some interval training to improve your recovery time. Bring your heart rate up for about 30 seconds, then slow down again.
- Get flexible and coordinated: stuff you need for daily living. Play a sport. Practice Yoga.
- Take a look at your nutritional intake. Stock up on fruits, veggies, lean meats and fish, whole grains and legumes. Cut back on "empty" calories: simple sugars, saturated fats, alcohol, caffeine.
- Evaluate your life: love, work, play, and control. Are all areas in shape?
- Get your cholesterol checked. The total should be <200, HDLs should be >50, and LDLs should be <100.

No excuses!

Think these don't apply to you because of special circumstances? Challenge those issues. Talk to your doctor about a program that will be best for you.

How to Rewire Your Brain

Here's how to increase your ability to change:

1. Be rigorously honest with yourself. You can only make changes when you accept yourself as you are.
2. Acknowledge that you are who you choose to be, not who you were yesterday.
3. Know that it takes about 14 days to begin to form a lasting habit. Those first two to three weeks are the hardest, physically and emotionally. Give yourself the time.
4. Write your life story. Literally. Explain why you are the way you are, and how and why you continue to convince yourself you can't change.
5. Write the truth about why you haven't made changes and what changes are possible. Be honest. Take care to evaluate the way you use language. If you find yourself phrasing statements in the negative -- like "I can't" or "It's too hard" -- consider how to rephrase these statements as things you can do and that are easier for you to stick with.
6. List the life values most important to you, and explore your purpose in life. Do your habits align with these values and mission? If they don't, you'll likely experience stress.
7. Now write the story of who you want to be. The truth is, people have tremendous capability to change. Write down what it will take to get you to make those changes. What will success look and feel like? How will you measure successes along the way?
8. Write down how you might undermine these goals. What should you do to avoid these pitfalls? The most common are 1) rationalizing, 2) denial and 3) minimizing the truth.
9. Announce the changes you plan to make. Ask for the help and support you need from friends and family or from medical professionals. Your commitment will be much more powerful if you do.
10. After six weeks, recognize that you'll probably miss the benefits of your new habit if you stop.
11. Celebrate milestones along the way!

The Benefits

An added benefit to achieving your desired goals? "Your behaviors, your environment, and your mind can influence your genes," Dr. Rice says, "by affecting the proteins in your brain that turns those genes on and off." That's a powerful comment, considering that we have 30,000-100,000 genes (no one knows exactly), and seven chronic diseases have been mapped out genetically so far. He's suggesting that continuing to challenge yourself to learn new things (and avoiding substances that may "numb" your brain) will keep your brain sharp, and happiness and satisfaction can help ward off diseases, even if you are predisposed to them.

You can, if you want to pay about \$60,000, get a personal gene map and find out if you are predisposed to any of those seven diseases. But it may be more rewarding to make practicing healthy behaviors a habit, something automatic that you don't even have to think about. Reach for that chocolate cupcake or third beer? *Wouldn't think of it.* Skip the daily 30-minute walk with a friend? *That would be like not brushing my teeth all day.*

Healthy habits can also influence you immediately. For example, your brain will have better recall and problem-solving skills after you exercise. So if you're facing a big problem, consider taking a walk or hitting the gym. But listen to your body -- if you are experiencing aches and pains, daytime sleepiness, or odd behavior, you may be pushing it too far.

Getting Over "Can't"

Dr. Rice tells his patients who have really hit a wall either emotionally or mentally, "If all you ever do is all you've ever done, then all you'll ever get is all you've ever got." It's a mouthful, but it makes sense. If you want a different outcome, you must make a break with the past. You have to be committed to succeed, just as you are with your business. Not just interested, but committed. You know you're truly committed when you do it even when it's not convenient.

Adopting new healthier habits takes research, planning, nurturing, fine-tuning, advice and counsel, support, execution, celebration when you reach goals, and starting over when things go awry, just like with a new project or business. What do you really want, and what are you willing to do to get there?

Dr. Lee Rice has made his Powerpoint presentation on this topic available to Vistage members. [Download the slideshow here.](#)

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