

# Can't break a *bad habit*? Harvard experts have the answer!



**First rule of habit change:** Don't beat yourself up if you fail. Instead, learn how to approach setbacks the right way. The key? Tap into your brain's biology, say Paul Hammerness, MD, assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and Margaret ("Coach Meg") Moore, codirector of the Institute of Coaching at Harvard-affiliated McLean Hospital. Here's their suggestions for tackling beliefs that can trip you up—and how you can "train your brain" to change for good!

If you're thinking...

**I can't handle one more thing!**

**WHAT TO DO:**  
**Tame the frenzy!**

Calming your negative emotions is the first step on the road to change, says Dr. Hammerness, who co-authored a book with Moore on brain training called *Organize Your Mind, Organize Your Life* (Harlequin, 2011). And the quickest way to accomplish that is to do something physical—whether it's walking around the block or doing a chore like laundry. And keep at it: The more you prac-



tice switching gears when you're feeling stressed, the easier it'll be to stick to your goals.

**WHY IT WORKS:** Stress, worry and frustration impair the thinking areas of your brain so you can't make a wise decision or come up with a new plan, says Dr. Hammerness. That's why beating yourself up usually doesn't work: It triggers stressful feelings like guilt or hopelessness, which make it harder to find a creative solution.

**I don't have any willpower.**

**WHAT TO DO:**  
**Get some want-power.**

For example, if you're trying to lose weight, don't focus immediately on what habits you "will" or "won't" do ("I will hit the gym three times a week," or "I won't eat fast food"). Instead, think about *why* you want to lose weight. Without that clear "I want" feeling, trying to lose weight will feel like punishment! Most important: Make sure the goal is something *you* truly want—not what someone else thinks is good for you. Coach Meg's tip for making sure: Write or talk about your goal and why you want to achieve it. If your answer elicits strong, positive emotions, you'll probably keep at it until you succeed!

**WHY IT WORKS:** "Your motivation is truly the jet fuel for your change journey," says Coach Meg. Need proof? A weight-loss study at the University of Rochester found that folks with self-generated goals ("I believe it will make me feel better") versus external ones ("I

should lose weight because my doctor said so") were more likely to shed pounds—and to have kept them off after two years. And a Johns Hopkins University study showed health coaching (including self-motivated goal setting) more than doubled the odds of paring pounds in overweight people—and they also had kept off the weight after two years! 

—Lori Murray

**Jon Stewart's smoke-free secret!**

"I used cigarettes to fill a void," Stewart has said of the addiction he kicked in 2000. "It was an activity that I did to make myself feel better." These days, he keeps a gum-ball machine near his desk and grabs a piece whenever he gets the urge to smoke!

