HOW TO BREAK AN UNPRODUCTIVE HABIT

In most cases, beneath an unproductive habit and supporting it is something which is feeding and strengthening that habit. A person engages in an unproductive habit which he knows is hurting his school effort only because it is accomplishing something else for him, a thing about which he may not even be aware. For example, one delays studying, perhaps because by delaying he can hold off temporarily the frustrating feeling he receives when he begins to study. Thus his tendency to delay is only symptomatic of something deeper, namely, personal frustration in studying. However, the personal frustration is also related to the symptom. This fact permits a very productive approach to breaking up the bad habit pattern. If one could break the habit of delaying in studying, he would be more efficient and in this example, it would reduce the frustrating feeling experienced in studying.

In some situations old bad habits which aren't accomplishing anything anymore are almost the total problem. In these cases one merely has fallen into a net of behaviours for some earlier known or perhaps unknown reason. Perhaps this behavior is quite unrelated now to the original reason for the behavior, but the habit persists and is not very adaptive. In this case, only the habit needs to be broken. It is this type of situation where the procedure presented below is most useful. Yet this procedure may also contribute something toward alleviating the deeper kinds of problems discussed about because of the interactive relationship of the symptom with the deeper cause. The most appropriate thing to do with the case where the unproductive habit reflects something deeper is to talk with a counselor. At the same time one still might use this suggested procedure to break up the maladaptive habit pattern.

1. **Ask yourself what are the personal rewards you receive from the behavior which you desire to eliminate.** You must be receiving something from it if you do not want to continue the habit and yet it seems difficult to eliminate. Sometimes this personal reward is hidden and camouflaged. If you cannot identify the reason for it, you might be able to find help in understanding the problem if you seek the assistance of a counselor.

2. **Identify the specific behavior you wish to eliminate.** Do not be general, be specific! For example, do not say that you desire to stop delaying when it is time to study. Say instead that when the study period arrives you will sit in a particular chair you have chosen without delay, you will begin work within one minute and will not leave the chair until you have accomplished whatever you have agreed with yourself to do in the situation. **Be specific!**

3. **Try to identify a set of behaviors which are incompatible with the habit you would like to break.** An incompatible response is one which, if done, automatically and by its own nature, eliminates the possibility of the undesired habit's existing. For example, if a person wanted to break a smoking habit, one incompatible response with smoking is chewing gum. It is difficult to chew gum and smoke at the same time. Again, one cannot write something down and daydream at the same time.
Thus, find a number of responses or behaviors incompatible with the undesirable habit which you might use as a substitute to replace the undesirable habit. These behaviors should also be pleasurable so that you will want to continue enjoying the new substitute response.

4. **Set up a system of rewards and punishments for yourself.** Reward yourself for success in breaking the habit and punish yourself for failure to do what is required to break the habit. This might be accomplished in the following way. First, list all of the little things you like to do such as going to the movies, watching t.v., going to a ball game, having a date, etc. Next, list all the things you do not like to do. These things should be **deprivations** of something you like to do rather than things which cause difficulty for yourself. For example, instead of giving some money away, one might **not allow himself** to go to the movies, to watch t.v., to go to a certain ball game, to have a date this week, and other such punishments of deprivation.

5. **Be satisfied with modest but definite gains.** Set up your goals over a period of time for accomplishing what you desire to do in the way of breaking the undesired habit. Plan this program for steady progress with **gradual** improvement in mind rather than to count on dramatic changes. Plan in detail, particularly in the early phases, what your rewards will be for the accomplishments achieved and the deprivations you will receive if you do not obtain your goals. Chart your progress each day. Stick to this system! You will find that you will gradually improve. Above all, do not become discouraged because of failures and do not fear to ask help from a counselor. Your "will power" is very weak at the beginning and may need assistance. However, with time and steady progress the strength of the desired responses will increase.