



Breaking the Pattern

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What is a habit? I expect there are hundreds of definitions out there but I like to work from the definition that a habit is a set sequence of actions that have become so automatic that you hardly notice that you're doing them until you're almost through.

So for example, the nail biters among us probably don't know when they start; the chocoholics have a well worn path to the corner shop that it's hard to interrupt.

But if you accept that a habit is built up from a sequence of tiny steps then flow imperceptibly from one to the other, then perhaps we can begin to work on breaking some of those habits. The first step is to write down in the minutest detail what the steps are. So the chocoholic's steps may look like this:

Look at your watch
Is it time to leave work?
No, more work and then look at watch again.
Time to leave? yes
Begin to salivate as you prepare to leave
Imagine chocolate bar
Check your small change.
Leave work
Walk towards corner shop
Hold inner argument: 'you don't need this chocolate'; 'I want it' 'But you'll regret it' 'I don't care'
Enter corner shop
Look around to see that there's no one there that you know
Choose chocolate bar
Tell shop assistant that you're so hungry

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Hide chocolate bar in your bag
Leave corner shop and extract chocolate bar from bag
Salivate
Berate yourself again
Take first bite
Heaven
Next bit
Heaven
Last bite
Tragedy
'Why did I eat that?'.....

Do you recognise that scenario? Now try to work out at which point you can interrupt that pattern. This may mean inserting some new action that you never used to do. For example, before you leave the office, walk up 2 flights of stairs or drink 2 glasses of water or walk around the block ie something that you don't usually do. If after that you still want the chocolate then go ahead. Do the same thing the next day and make it a little longer. Always allow yourself the chocolate if you still want it.