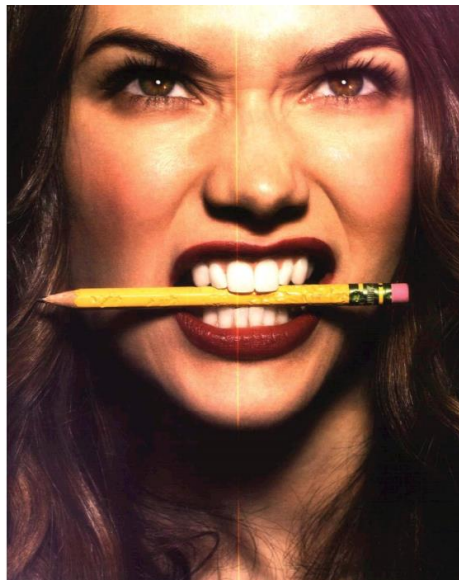




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>>> **H**ow often have you woken up determined to have a successful day at work only to leave in the evening disappointed? Yes, outside forces can send us off track, but we also get in our own way. Our intention to be creative, efficient or focused can be derailed by bad habits which are stopping us from fulfilling our potential.

If you've ever tried to break a bad habit you'll know how hard it is - this is because we can't simply 'think' ourselves out of a habit. 'There is a dual mind at play,' says Wendy Wood, provost professor of psychology and business at the University of Southern California. If the 'intentional mind' is engaged we can make conscious decisions about our behaviour, but when our 'habitual mind' is involved, we struggle to understand why we do what we do, as habits function largely outside of our awareness.

We've picked five common bad work habits to see what we can do to change our behaviour.



1 Grazing at your desk

Have you ever opened a packet of biscuits mid-morning only to find yourself sneaking the empty wrapper into a colleague's bin later to hide the shame? Thankfully Catalyst Behavioral Sciences has practical ways to help. In a 2011 study, it told cinema-goers to eat popcorn with the hand they don't usually use, to short-circuit the well-worn habit pathway in the brain. This saw them eat less, with consumption driven more by hunger. But the agency says gains can be smaller the more tempting the treat, so combine the opposite-hand trick with a study from City University London, which told participants to picture habitual impulses as passengers on a bus they were driving. This 'mind bus' technique teaches you that you can control the route no matter how much noise your passengers (habits) make. Despite only practising this for five minutes a day, those taking part ate 18 per cent less chocolate over a five-day period than those who weren't using the practice.

2 Spending too long on social networks

Snacking has more in common with this bad habit than you may think. Psychotherapist and director of mindfulness retreats company Fresh Perception, Hope Bastine, says both are a sign of boredom or a reaction to feeling socially excluded. 'Women's coping mechanism for stress is called tend and befriend,' she says. 'We talk and sympathise, as it releases the bonding hormones oxytocin and vasopressin. Browsing on Facebook is a non-verbal coping mechanism for when we need social support.' And it seems the water-cooler chat still exists because it eases the pressure we feel at work. 'We're reward seeking animals, so taking time to chat to colleagues replaces one feeling of being liked online with a better reward of being liked in reality,' she adds.

Bastine recommends 'mindfulness tasking' to help break habits that have arisen through boredom. Schedule a specific time to eat or browse online and use that time to 'reframe the mind' so that you feel refreshed and focused when you resume work.

3 Letting emotions in your personal life dictate your mood at work

We know there should be boundaries between our work and personal lives, but sometimes we find it hard to park troubling emotions at the door. Nick Seneca Jankel, author of *Switch On* (Watkins, £9.99), believes if we snap at co-workers or get angry about deadlines, we've formed a bad habit to compensate for something we feel we lack - power, safety, status. Overcoming this, he adds, 'is really challenging, as we have to repeatedly generate in ourselves the feeling we're looking for externally through the bad habit repetition.'

Two or three times a week, try to capture a moment where you lost your temper, and visualise a situation in future where you act differently. This is a way to 'positively derail yourself and take yourself in a different direction'. According to researchers at Cleveland Clinic Foundation, if you visualise something, your brain can be tricked into thinking it has experienced it. The beneficial emotions you connect to this new 'experience' feel rewarding which, in turn, helps support your new habit.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES



“Happy employees outperform less happy peers, proving more accomplished at managerial tasks, leadership and problem-solving”

4 Avoiding exercise at work

4 Joan Kingsley, an organisational psychotherapist and co-author of *The Fear-free Organization* (Kogan Page, £29.99) believes that to break bad habits, you must first ‘be honest’ about them. If you want to fit exercise into your daily work routine, you need to discover what’s blocking you from being active. For Kingsley, although she has read up on the physiological benefits of exercise, she knows she lacks the motivation to take regular long walks. To help her form this habit, she has engaged the services of a personal trainer to accompany her around Hyde Park in London. ‘I have a trainer because I just wouldn’t do it otherwise. I know that about myself,’ she says. As

a first step, Kingsley encourages instigating lunchtime walking groups at work, as it uses team support and our reinforcing love of human interaction as a motivation. Plus, once we see an uptick in our work performance as a result of exercise – what she calls ‘eureka moments’ – we’ll stop feeling guilty for taking a break.

Research by the University of Stanford’s Persuasive Technology Lab suggests the most successful way to form new routines is to build micro-habits into existing schedules. Taking the stairs at work instead of the lift, or deciding to do a 10-minute run three times a week rather than signing up for a marathon, are much better ways of breaking our physical inertia. Over time, these small habits will become part of our routine and we’ll start to perceive ourselves as somebody who actually likes to exercise.

5 Being late frequently

5 Management consultant Diana DeLonzor, who has led studies on lateness, believes that to cut down on tardiness you have to first recognise why you’re late – and act accordingly. If you’re always trying to squeeze that extra chore in, you need to relearn how to tell the time by keeping a task diary. For two weeks, write out how long you think certain chores will take, and then how long they actually took, to retrain yourself into allowing a more realistic timetable for all your annoying admin. To reinforce good new habits, reward yourself for being early to an appointment by relaxing with a coffee and your favourite magazine. The one you’re currently reading is a good place to start!

Although these practical steps can prove useful, Gretchen Rubin, author of *Better Than Before* (Two Roads, £8.99), believes ‘counterproductive behaviours like absenteeism’ happen when employees are unhappy – if you aren’t getting job satisfaction, you’re more than likely to roll up late because you resent being there. Rubin believes that happy employees outperform their less happy peers, proving more accomplished at managerial tasks, leadership, team-working and problem-solving.

So if you’re persistently late for work, or unproductive when you eventually get there, perhaps consider it a subconscious sign that you might not be happy with your current career or life goals. You can begin to tackle this by taking a step back from your everyday routine before it even starts – consider writing down your thoughts in a stream-of-consciousness fashion as soon as you wake up and see what you notice from that.

