

# Case Study: Managing Bad Habits

30 minute presentation

Updated April 4, 2026

Too much of a good thing can turn into a problem. This presentation is a practical, evidence-led overview of how people can change unwanted habits using industry knowledge.

**Examples:** excess drinking, social media doomsscrolling, smoking/vaping/drug addiction, overworking, lying, over/under eating, stressing, self harming, decision paralysis, self defeating behavior, over reacting, aggressiveness, binge playing/watching..

**Key Takeaway:** bad habits rarely change through willpower alone. Durable change usually comes from better awareness, better environments, better planning, better support, and better recovery after setbacks.



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PREPARED BY

# Roy Massaad

## Product/Software developer

Curious about managing my own bad habits

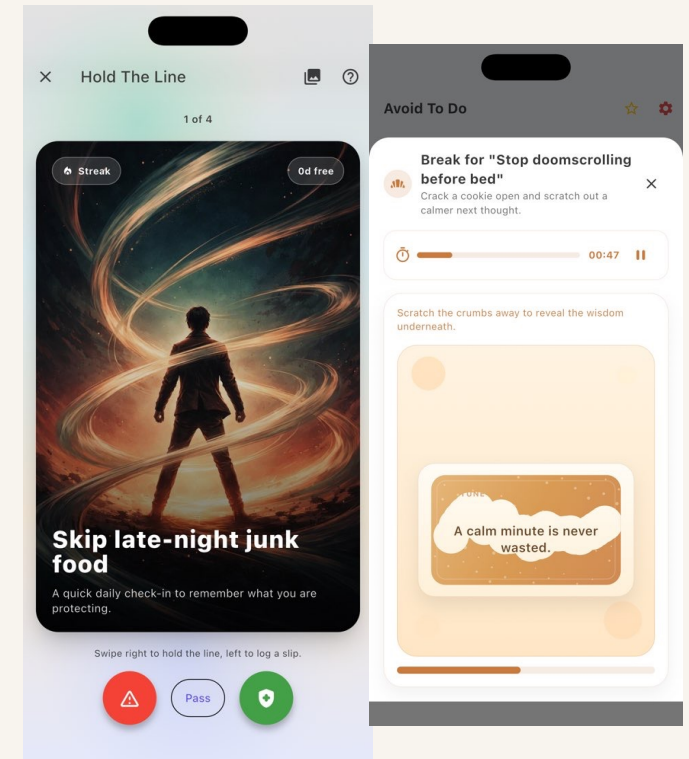
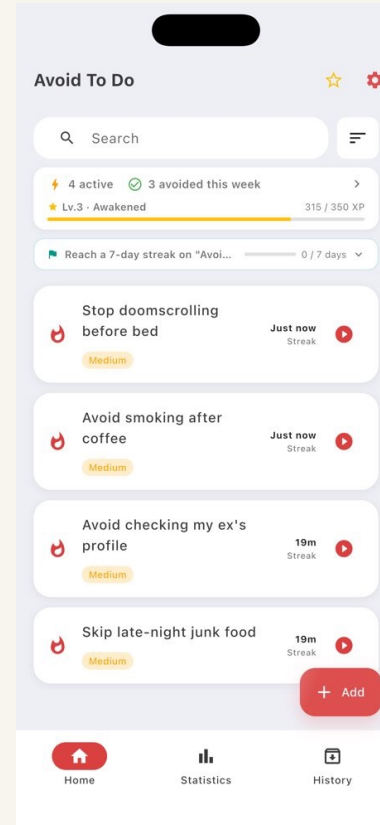
Created 'Avoid: Break Bad Habits' app

A calmer way to change bad habits

PS: Not a SME in clinical support

Interested in sharing industry methodologies I researched and sparking further insight/debate

[avoid.pixel-hat.com](http://avoid.pixel-hat.com)



## Why and How This Topic Matters

Bad habits are common, personal, and they are often deeply shaped by context, repetition, stress, and reward.. So subconsciously driven

### Not just “low discipline”

Automatic behaviors save mental effort. That is useful for routines, but it also makes unhealthy responses easier to repeat.

### The same loop shows up everywhere

Procrastination, doomscrolling, overspending, stress eating, texting the wrong person, and many addictive patterns share similar cue-response dynamics.

### Setbacks are normal

If a lapse is treated like total failure, people often spiral. If it is treated like data, people can recover faster and plan better.

A cue-rich world constantly prompts old behaviors.

Stress, boredom, celebration, and social pressure all matter. We are creatures of habit.

Hence what people need is usually a system to break bad habits, not just motivation.

**18-254**

days to reach 95% automaticity across habits in one real-world study

**5**

core levers that repeatedly show up in effective change systems

## Scope of this Presentation

We are talking about everyday unwanted habits and addiction-adjacent patterns, while staying honest about the limits of self-guided tools.

### In scope

Everyday bad habits, procrastination, toxic patterns, and other stop-doing goals..

How habits become automatic

Why triggers matter

What evidence-based techniques can help

How helper apps can scaffold those techniques

### Out of scope

Severe substance dependence

Withdrawal management

Acute mental-health crisis

Formal treatment when safety or medical risk is primary

### Practical rule of thumb

Apps can increase awareness, structure, and follow-through. They should be seen as scaffolding, not as a full replacement for human support when a problem is serious.

## MECHANICS

# How (Bad) Habits Actually Work

A habit is not just a behavior. It is a loop between cues, urges, responses, rewards, and repeated context.



### Why “just stop” is hard

By the time people notice the behavior, the cue-response pattern may already be running on partial autopilot in your sub-consciousness.

### What interventions try to do

They weaken cues, add friction, create better if-then plans, insert replacement behaviors, and improve recovery after slips.

# It Usually Takes More Than 21 Days

The famous '21 days' rule is catchy, but the real-world evidence is much messier but also more useful.

## Myth

A habit becomes automatic after a fixed number of days for everyone.

## Better framing

Automaticity grows with repetition in a stable context, but the pace varies a lot by person, behavior, and situation.

## What matters most

Consistency, cue stability, and early repetition matter more than chasing a magic number.

## 66 days

average time in the Lally study

## 18-254 days

range to reach 95% of automaticity

## One miss

did not meaningfully derail the process

## Presentation takeaway

Plan for months of shaping, not weeks of hype. That mindset reduces shame and improves persistence. Lifestyle/identity change needed.

## Common Trigger Types

Relapses and bad-habit episodes are often linked to predictable kinds of high-risk situations.

### Negative emotion

stress, loneliness, anger, frustration

### Boredom or fatigue

mindless auto-mode defaulting when attention is low

### Social pressure

people, norms, invitations, expectations

### Environmental cues

place, device, route, time of day

### Positive emotion

celebration, reward, “I deserve it” moments

### Escapism

Flight of fight reflex, bad habits as a worse vs worst case quick resolution/fix

### Practical implication

People rarely need a single “motivation hack.” They usually need different responses for different trigger classes.

# Method 1: Self-Monitoring And Awareness

You cannot redesign a pattern you never see clearly.

Track the target behavior or the successful avoidance of it.

Log slips with context: what happened, when, where, and after what feeling.

Review patterns weekly so the data becomes actionable, not just archival.

## Simple workflow

Notice -> Log -> Review -> Adjust

## Why it helps

Self-monitoring reduces vagueness/denial. Forces a person to face reality. People stop saying “I always do or don’t do this” and start seeing when, why, and how often it happens.

## What to watch for

Tracking alone is not enough though. It works best when it feeds better planning, better friction, or better support.

## Method 2: Trigger Mapping And Stimulus Control

A lot of behavior change is really environment design.

### Ask: what reliably comes before the behavior?

Look for time, place, people, apps, routes, fatigue windows, emotional states, and “celebration” moments. The cue map often matters more than the goal statement.

### Before

phone beside bed  
\$ cards saved in app  
store on the way home  
late-night snacks visible

### After

charger across room  
more friction to buy  
change the route  
put alternatives in sight

### Practical implication (Don't sleep with your devils)

Many bad habits weaken when access becomes less automatic, cues become less visible, and better defaults become easier.

## Method 3: Implementation Intentions

Good intentions often fail in the moment. If-then plans make the response easier to execute under pressure.

### Template

If [cue / risky moment] happens, then I will [specific alternative response].

### Example 1

If I feel the urge to doomscroll after work, then I will walk outside for three minutes before touching my phone.

### Example 3

If I pass the convenience store when stressed, then I will take the side street and buy gum tomorrow if I still want it.

### Why it works

It pre-decides the response before willpower is tired, emotional, or distracted.

### Example 2

If I want to text my ex late at night, then I will message my trusted contact instead.

### Example 4

If I slip, then I will log it, leave the situation, and do one recovery action within ten minutes.

## Method 4: Replacement Behaviors And Urge Interruption

When an urge spikes, the first job is often to break autopilot long enough to choose again.

### Delay

Short time buffers: wait 60 seconds, 5 minutes, or one song.

### Distract

Shift attention with a brief game, task, call, or movement break.

### Soothe

Breathing, grounding, mindfulness, or calming sensory input.

### Substitute

Choose a less costly response.

### Important nuance

An interruption tool does not “solve” the whole habit. It creates a wedge between urge and action so a better response has a chance to happen.

### In practice

This is why short resets, calming activities, and micro-games can be useful: they are not childish extras, they are friction and re-regulation tools.

## Method 5: Social Support And Accountability

Some habits lose power when they stop being secret, isolated, or purely private. (all you need is love)

### What support can do

- reduce isolation
- support recovery after slips
- create accountability when motivation drops
- friend or partner check-ins
- coach, therapist or peer group

### What good accountability sounds like

- “Tell me when you are at risk.”
- “Help me not spiral if I slip.”
- “Ask me what triggered it, not whether I failed.”

### What bad accountability sounds like

Pure shame, surveillance, or all-or-nothing moral judgment. Those often increase hiding and rebound behavior. (being put in a living hell of judgement)

### Practical implication

Support works best when it is easy to reach in the risky moment, not only after everything has already gone wrong.

## Method 6: Reflection And Feedback Loops

Change sticks better when people do not just track events, but learn from them.

### Weekly review

What went well? What triggered trouble? Which moments felt easiest?

### Pattern finding

Is the problem clustered around nights, boredom, stress, or a person/place?

### Progress feedback

Show streaks, relapses, money saved, time reclaimed, or reduced intensity.

### Adjustment

Change the plan, not just the promise.

### The bigger idea

Feedback loops turn behavior change into an adaptive process. Instead of repeating the same promise, people gradually build a better system around the promise.

# What Modern Habit-Change Helper Apps Usually Do

Most digital tools combine a familiar toolkit of behavior-change techniques and motivational design patterns.

Tracking

Streaks

Counters

Money Saved

Reminders

Achievements

Quotes Or Motivation

Basic Progress Charts

## Observation

Many apps are strongest at motivation and monitoring with some integrating trigger-specific planning, contextual avoidance, in-the-moment urge tools, and compassionate relapse recovery in one flow.

# Where Apps Help And Where They Do Not

Digital tools can be helpful, but they sit inside a wider support ecosystem.

## Apps help with

- awareness
- reminders
- friction
- micro-plans
- progress feedback
- recovering structure after a slip

## Humans help with

- emotional regulation
- co-regulation
- accountability that feels relational
- nuance when life gets messy

## Clinical care helps with

- withdrawal, safety risk, severe dependence, trauma, major depression, and complex relapse patterns

## Best framing

Think of an app as a portable sidekick behavior-change scaffold. It is strongest when it makes the next good action easier and the next bad default less automatic.

FIRST LINE OF SUPPORT

# The Honest Framing: Apps Are Scaffolds, Not Substitutes



## Practical close to the case study

The best use of a habit app is to make healthier responses easier in daily life while keeping the door open to more human help whenever the problem exceeds self-management.

## CONCLUSION

# What Actually Helps People Break Bad Habits

The strongest systems usually combine several levers instead of relying on one dramatic burst of motivation.

### Awareness

know the pattern

### Friction

make the bad  
default harder

### Replacement

give the urge  
another path

### Support

make help  
reachable

### Recovery

treat lapses as part  
of the system

### Final takeaway – Practice makes perfect

Bad-habit change is rarely about becoming a perfect person. It is usually about building a better system around imperfect moments.

Bruce said **"I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times"**

Sometimes facing our bad habits consistently in the mirror is all it takes.

## Feedback & Reflections

1. Which trigger type causes the most trouble in real life: stress, boredom, social pressure, or environment?

2. Which habit-change method is most underrated: friction, planning, support, or recovery after slips?

3. Do habit helper apps genuinely help, if not where do they create false confidence?

4. What would a 'good' non-judgmental relapse response look like in your own context?