

# To break bad habits, we need God's grace, people's support

---

[the catholic spirit.com /faith/focus-on-faith/seeking-answers/break-bad-habits-need-gods-grace-peoples-support/](https://www.thecatholicspirit.com/faith/focus-on-faith/seeking-answers/break-bad-habits-need-gods-grace-peoples-support/)

**Q. Every year I try to change my relationship with God. I try to start praying more regularly, avoid some habitual sins, and be an overall better person. But I always seem to fail. I just slip back into my old habits. What can I do?**

**A.** I think that your timing is perfect. There is nothing like the beginning of the New Year to get people thinking about the changes that they need to make in their life.

We need habits. In fact, we might not really be able to function well without them. There have been a number of studies recently on the topic of “will power.” Researchers asked why some people seem to have more self-control and will power than others. One of the things they found was that will power is a finite resource. During the course of a day or a week, you can use it up. This explains why you are able to pass on the doughnut for breakfast, but by the time the end of the day rolls around, you will eat anything you can get your hands on.

At the same time, those same researchers noted that anyone can grow or strengthen will power. They talk about will power like it is a muscle: When you first begin intentionally using it, it can be weak. But through training, it grows in strength. Therefore, even your attempt to use your will to make good decisions is a powerful force. Even if you fail, you are strengthening your will.

This is the logic behind the classic Catholic understanding of virtue. A virtue is “the habitual disposition to do the good.” Essentially, virtues are “good habits.” The successful life is the virtuous life.

This is why we develop habits. The human mind and the will are finite resources. Therefore, if we set up patterns of thought and behavior, we use less mental energy and less will power. For example, if you were raised to brush your teeth every morning and every night, you perform this task without having to decide every time you do it. You don't have to convince yourself that it is worth it, you don't debate whether you'll do it this time, and the decision to brush your teeth costs virtually no will power. It is a habit, and the choice has been made.

That is the good news about good habits: They are easy to maintain. But that is the bad news as well. Habits are easy to make but hard to break. They are like the proverbial “rut”; since we have traveled down this road in this way for this long, we have created a rut. It takes energy and thought to get out of that rut. But it can be done!

In Charles Duhigg's book “The Power of Habit,” he points out that we often adopt a “habit loop.” It consists of three parts: the cue, the routine and the reward.

Virtually every habit we have follows this pattern. The cue is typically a person, place or thing. For example, a person could have the habit of having a beer or a glass of wine at the end of the night. If they decide that they don't like this habit and try to simply drink less (but don't know why they are drinking alcohol in the first place), they will have limited results.

But if a person is drinking a beer in the evening because the beer symbolizes “work is done — you can now relax,” then they need to introduce another routine that can give them the same reward. What is

something that could signify “off duty”? I know some people who have addressed this habit by drinking “night time” tea. The cue is the time of day. The desired reward is the sense of “your work is done.” And their new routine is to sip on a cup of caffeine-free hot tea.

There is much more that can be said about re-routing habits, but something needs to be said about grace. Grace is real and powerful. Grace gives us the ability to do things that we would be unable to accomplish on our own. The need for grace is apparent when a person realizes that no matter how hard they try, they don't have the power to change.

This is one of the many blessings of Alcoholics Anonymous. Once a person admits that they are powerless to change on their own, they turn to a Higher Power for the strength they lack. This power takes both vertical and horizontal form. Vertically, one needs to rely upon the grace and power that comes from God. Horizontally, a person needs people who can support them in striving to break free from one habit and develop a virtue. For us at the start of this year, it might be a good idea to examine our habit loop, to turn to God for the power to change and to look to other trusted friends for support.

*Father Schmitz is director of youth and young adult ministry for the Diocese of Duluth and chaplain of the Newman Center at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Reach him at [fathermikeschmitz@gmail.com](mailto:fathermikeschmitz@gmail.com).*

«

»