

How to Make Any Change You Want

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was around 14 years old, I spent several months going to a public high school on the outskirts of Detroit. Within a short time, I met a couple of kids I liked. These kids had all been using “snuff” or chewing tobacco for years.

Initially, it was a way to fit in; however, within months I was using this snuff daily and needed it to function. I would get up in the morning and put a pinch of this between my cheek and gum and use it all day. I would use it while I studied at night and it would get my system so “revved up” that I would have a difficult time getting to sleep. I would lie in bed twisting and turning on school nights until 2:00 am and then get up at 7:00 to go to school. I was always tired. I am sure my academic performance suffered a lot. I often would take naps right after school. It was difficult to play sports consistently because I was always tired at the end of the day.

My friends and I would stand outside of the school using this snuff between classes. At parties, we would stand around using snuff as well. It was a great “communal” activity that we all enjoyed. When I went to college, I immediately met other people who did snuff and by sharing this bond, I made friends very quickly.

To my astonishment, when I got to college, I started meeting girls who would want to chew tobacco with me at parties. Instead of just making male friends with chewing tobacco, I was now meeting girls. It was great!

At the time, snuff was something baseball players and athletes used. It had a different sort of image than the kids who smoked. It was an image thing to some extent I guess, but a strange one at that.

However, it was disgusting.

I would often spit out of my window while driving and the spit would cover the side of the windows of my car. Sometimes, if the wind was right, the spit would come back and hit me in the face. My friends would do the same from the passenger seat. My car was always dirty with spit down the sides of it and there was also tobacco spit inside. On more than one occasion, I picked up a cup containing spit believing it was water and swallowed some by mistake. At least once, the spit was not my own. Sometimes, I spilled spit cups in my room and the carpeting of my room was cluttered with all sorts of brown spit stains.

A few years into my snuff habit, a white abscess the size of a small marble appeared in my mouth and it kept growing. I was having a difficult time eating and sometimes when I spoke I would find myself biting it by accident.

When the abscess got large enough, I decided to go see an oral surgeon. I did not make an appointment. I was driving by a medical complex one day and saw a sign. I walked into the waiting room of the oral surgeon and showed the astonished receptionist my mouth. She called the oral surgeon.

He immediately told me I needed an operation. He said something about needing to remove the specimen and then testing it to see if it was “malignant.”

“I need your parent’s consent,” he said.

His assistant gave me a form and walked outside the office, I forged my parent’s signature and returned 2 minutes later.

I was about to have a “walk in” surgery.

The oral surgeon’s nurse took me into an operating room and made me put on a medical robe and lie on a table. They hooked an IV up to me and started packing all sorts of gauze in my mouth. By the time he was ready to operate, there were three people in the room. One was a nurse anesthesiologist, the other was a nurse and then the doctor. He was wearing a mask.

As he was injecting something into my mouth to numb it, he gave me a long lecture about chewing tobacco. He told me that years ago he had seen one of his patients die from brain cancer after a cancer he got from chewing tobacco spread to his brain.

The operation did not take more than 15 minutes. When he was done, he made me look at the growth sitting in a metal dish.

“You could have lost your jaw if that thing spread,” he told me. “You need to quit the tobacco.”

A week or so later, as instructed, I called the oral surgeon’s office and they told me that the growth was not cancerous.

The operation was not enough to get me to quit, though. I kept chewing tobacco all through college and then law school. To my astonishment, when I started practicing law in Los Angeles other attorneys in my law firm chewed tobacco while they worked as well. So, I chewed tobacco while working in my law firm. When I interviewed for my first legal job, an attorney who was interviewing me was chewing tobacco in the interview and offered me some as well.

I had all sorts of reasons for chewing tobacco:

- I convinced myself that the tobacco helped me work better and more effectively.
- I convinced myself that the tobacco made me more relaxed and made life more enjoyable.

I had so many excuses about why this tobacco was good for me that I am sure there were literally hundreds of them. Whenever I thought about stopping, there always seemed to be a good reason for me to continue chewing the stuff.

- At parties, people would come up to me and ask to chew some tobacco with them.
- I might have a giant work project requiring me to stay up very late that would convince me I needed to chew some tobacco.

I there just seemed so many reasons to not quit chewing tobacco.

I'd quit in a burst of a few days, to a few weeks and then always find a reason to start again. It went on like this for years.

Over 10 years ago, I started a legal recruiting business. I got to the point where sitting in my office all day chewing tobacco seemed to be something that simply was no longer the right thing for me to be doing. I would be interviewing people and sitting there spitting tobacco juice in a cup. I would go out on a date and a woman would be turned off by all the empty tobacco tins around my house. I realized that I needed to stop making excuses and one day got so completely fed up that I simply quit and never looked back.

The day I quit for good, I went to a fitness store and spent \$2,500 on an exercise machine. I told myself I needed to develop a new and better habit for myself. I used that exercise machine religiously for years and when it wore out I bought another one. I got into the habit of enjoying exercise instead of tobacco.

For over a year later, I still had the desire to continue using the tobacco; however, I was able to quit completely. Now, the thought of using tobacco is disgusting to me.

In quitting chewing tobacco, I believe I taught myself how to make any sort of change: (1) you need to give yourself more reasons why changing is better for yourself than continuing with the bad behavior, (2) you need to give yourself an empowering alternative, and (3) you need to condition yourself with that new alternative.

It took me at least 15 years to quit the habit and had I understood these two things first, I am sure I could have quit much sooner.

In the grand scheme of things, stopping using a substance like tobacco is a relatively simple task. A more complex task involves something like changing your personality from being depressed to being happy or becoming permanently motivated as opposed to permanently demotivated. Changes like these can all be made as well. What is important is that you understand what it takes to make these changes.

The odds are very good there are very significant changes you need to make in your life that you should make.

One of the most popular sorts of television shows these days are shows about people who need to make a change of some sort.

- There are shows about people who need to lose a great deal of weight and are locked up in camps to make this happen.
- There are shows about people who "hoard" and keep too much stuff around and need drastic steps taken to help them declutter.
- There are shows about people who are abusing substances and need interventions.

While I hate to say it, I find these shows extremely entertaining. In most instances, none of these people have the slightest idea about how to make a change. They are stuck in one way of doing something that is destructive to them and some will die from their inability to change.

The odds are pretty good that there are one or more changes you need to make. Some of the changes you may need to make are:

- Finding a job where you are happy.
- Getting out of a toxic relationship,
- Eating differently.
- Quitting a substance.
- Spending more time with your children.
- Dealing with an emotional issue.

Regardless of the change you need to make, it is important to realize that whatever is holding you back from changing is that you are linking more pain to not changing than changing.

When I was chewing tobacco, I convinced myself that the tobacco made me happier, gave me better relationships with friends, and made me smarter and more able to work. This is absolute crazy thinking. The danger of this thinking was that it made stopping much harder than continuing with the habit. Why would anyone want to be unhappy, have poor relationships with friends and be dumb and unable to work? It is precisely this sort of thinking that prevents most people from making a change: we link more pain to changing than not changing.

I ignored the fact that I had to have surgery to remove a cancer-like growth from my mouth and that the habit was disgusting (among other things). I ignored all of this because I believed that if I quit the substance, I would experience all sorts of unhappiness.

The only way to possibly make any sort of change is to link more pain to not changing than staying the way you currently are. The balance needs to be in favor of changing as opposed to not changing. You need to get leverage over yourself. If you are not changing, it is almost certainly due to mixed associations about the need to change. A lack of change is almost always caused by having mixed associations.

The most important way to change is giving yourself a strong enough reason why. You should list the reasons you need to change and understand that changing is something that will enable you to be a different sort of person--a sort of person who is much better than the one you currently are right now. In order to make a change, you need to make sure that you have a strong enough reason why. The only way you can change is if you believe that not changing is more difficult than changing.

Once you have given yourself a powerful reason why, you then need to give yourself an alternative to your behavior that is empowering. For me, this alternative was exercise. Exercising was something that I felt was good for me, enabled me to feel relaxed, and was something I could look forward to the same way I used to look forward to chewing tobacco.

It was not enough to simply exercise, though. I needed to make sure I did it consistently and developed this as an alternative behavior instead of doing something else. I needed to do this for a long time and not stop. I needed to continue until this healthy action was something that I always did instead of the unhealthy action I formerly did. Pretty soon, I conditioned myself to have a new behavior instead of the old one.

Regardless of the change you are seeking to make, you can generally make a change if you understand the three principles of making a change: (1) you need to give yourself more reasons why changing is better for yourself than continuing with the

bad behavior, (2) you need to give yourself an empowering alternative, and (3) you need to condition yourself with that new alternative.

Whenever I am considering making any sort of change I always try to make a list with two sets of information on opposite sides of the paper. On one side, I list the reasons for making the change and on the other side, the reasons for not making the change. I allow this to guide my decisions of whether or not to make the change. Once I have made the decision to change, I refer back to this often, sometimes as often as once a day.

Then, I find a new behavior for myself and make sure I do it over and over again until I have conditioned it into my conscious and subconscious mind as a way of consistent behavior.

Whatever change you are seeking to make, you can make that change if you follow these three steps.

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