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Five keys to keeping bad habits in the past

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How to break a bad habit, including eating a ton of sweets.

A new year often brings a new resolve to break bad habits.

For many of us, these habits are the same ones that have topped our list for years.

To start, willpower may be as strong as the wind blowing the snow across the Prairie expanses. Come February, our stamina wanes when the gusts aren't there to surge us ahead at the same pace. Then we're left with a hidden roadway covered over by drifts of snow that obscure our path ahead.

For 2014, I propose we look beyond our willpower. Yes, that's right. What if it's really not your fault?

Innovative research is continually expanding our knowledge of the brain, our body's own "supercomputer." It has many electric pathways we can program t

our advantage. With my patients, we seek out hidden factors that fuel bad habits.

These steps to success can help you navigate the road to a guilt-free and victorious 2014.

Let's use an example: the bad habit of eating too many sweets.

1. Identify your habit: Sweets include the candy cane you pulled off the Christmas tree, advent calendar chocolate and sugary New Year's Eve cocktails, as well as carbohydrates such as bread and pasta, and those delightful potato latkes at Hanukkah.

2. Uncover what is fueling it: Carbohydrate-rich foods trigger release of serotonin, our main happy neurotransmitter, and the reason I'm still smiling after writing the paragraph above.

Unwanted yeasts in our digestive tract feed on sugars. Estrogen-progesterone imbalance before a woman's period triggers sweet cravings. Stressors spike cortisol and blood glucose, leading to foggy thinking, waist-centred weight gain and the need for an energy boost, by way of caffeine or a sugar rush.

3. Treatment. One size does not fit all. Our best bet is to use a personalized approach to treat the underlying cause.

We may want to boost serotonin, improve good gut bacteria, balance hormones, reduce the body's stress or substitute foods. But beware -- studies have shown that those who use artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame or sucralose, actually end up gaining more weight! Our body is not fooled.

4. Brain Training: We can rewire the brain by changing our focus. Since we're on the topic of sweets, I'll use an acronym I call Making PIEs, where P stands for Positive, I is Internal and E is Exclamations!

For every habit to break, we're going to make a positive statement in the present tense. For example, you could say, "I am choosing foods rich in nutrients and feeling great!"

Every time the thought of eating sweets, feeling fat or feeling deprived pops into your head, you will replace it with your PIE.

5. Brain Building: The brain is an evolving organ, and it needs mental and physical exercise to keep it sharp. In fact, physical exercise has been shown to increase the size of our hippocampus, the brain's memory centre. Finally, a time when making PIEs and working out belong together!

So as you're breaking bad habits in 2014, don't forget that "size matters," and so do you.

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