

Out Of The Habit; Tips on how to kick bad habits to the curb; Changing your life for the better requires patience, determination -- and support from your friends and family

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Arlene Spouse used to eat two chocolate bars a day.

Working in a chocolate shop for three years didn't help, but Spouse, the manager at Diva Salon Spa in Calgary's southwest, says she's loved milk chocolate her whole life.

Sometimes, she'd even have it for breakfast.

"People joke about being addicted to chocolate," says the 44-year-old.

"I know I was."

Which is why her accomplishment -- unimaginable to even the most moderate chocolate consumer -- is impressive: she hasn't had a bite of the stuff in 11 years.

No, not even a morsel or a chunk. Nary a cocoa bean.

She gave it up, thinking it would be short-term, when she realized the chocolate was affecting her breast milk and was making her kids colicky.

"Once I stopped, I craved it even more and it was ridiculous," she says.

"My body's reaction to the lack of chocolate was incredible."

That's when Spouse knew she had to give up her love for good.

And it wasn't easy.

For two years, she would salivate at the smell of it.

Which is why the fact that she not only kicked her bad chocolate habit, but has maintained it for more than a decade, is so impressive.

Kicking bad habits and starting new, healthier ones is likely on the brain for many of us, as we're heading into a brand-new year armed with plans to improve ourselves.

For some insight into how to do quit a habit, I spoke with Isabelle Tierney, a Colorado psychotherapist and founder of The Habit Experts, as well as two Calgary experts: Leah Kenyon, professional coach with Kenyon Coaching, and **Chris Hammer**, a leadership and life coach.

Here's what they had to say:

- Pinpoint the emotion behind the habit.

"Habits try to make us meet a deeper need, something that we're looking for, whether it's joy or love or safety," says Tierney.

"When you reach for the ice cream, the alcohol or the drug, ask yourself: What do I really need?"

Chances are you may be feeling bored, lonely or sad, and that your coping strategy is to mindlessly reach for something to make you feel better.

(In Spouse's case, she says her chocolate consumption was a way to cope with stress.)

"If we can recognize when we're doing those acts, stop,

take a moment and acknowledge what we're feeling, then we can deal with the habit," says Hammer.

"The habit may just be an automatic soothing response."

Make note of your emotions; awareness is the critical first step.

- Dealing with the habit means coming up with a replacement strategy.

Spouse says that when she gave up chocolate, she went cold turkey, but indulged in caramel instead.

Perhaps not the most ideal tactic, but she's since cut down the amount she eats.

Ideally, your replacement strategy will be one that has positive long-term effects.

"You need to find something to replace it that will really meet that need without all the negative consequences," says Tierney.

For example, she says, if you eat chocolate for pleasure, consciously choose to do something else when you feel that urge.

Have a bubble bath, she says, or call a friend.

And speaking of friends, be sure to enlist support.

"I would suggest that people seek out support in changing their habits, whether it's seeing a counsellor or a coach or enlisting friends," says Kenyon.

"Support is really important."

- Stick to it, because it's not easy.

"If it were easy, everyone would change habits quickly," says Kenyon.

"It does take commitment and hard work. Don't give up."

Be patient, because you will essentially be rewiring your brain, says Tierney, and that takes time.

"Science says that it takes 21 days to change a habit," says Tierney, "but I see that it depends on how committed people are. Every single time you choose a different habit, you'll rewire your brain."

As Hammer says, it's not about looking at how long a new habit will take to "catch."

Rather, it's about looking at how you want to live your life -- and deciding to live it that way.

But should you mess up and eat a piece of chocolate, have a cigarette or indulge in whatever bad habit you're trying to beat, don't be too hard on yourself.

"We beat ourselves up way too easily and way too early when we're trying to change a habit," says Hammer, adding that that's when we "throw in the towel." "Ignore the pessimistic

thoughts. Those are a habit, too," he says.

"Keep persevering, because it will catch on."

Perseverance pays off , as Spouse knows.

She can now serve chocolate -- without salivating over it -- to others and says being near it doesn't bother her.

"It's liberating," she says. As for her advice for anyone trying to kick a bad habit?

"Just do it," she says. "And if you fall off the wagon, just get back on."