

How does my environment shape my behaviour?



The physical environment is an important driver of healthy habits and behaviour change over time.

Your habit cravings are often triggered by cues in your daily surroundings. For example, at school, if the cafeteria served only tacos and french fries and you chose to eat cafeteria food most of the time, then you would probably eat more tacos and french fries rather than consuming anything else because tacos and fries are readily available and easy to access every day. In this way, our everyday environments play a critical role in our decision making. **Knowing this, it's equally as important to understand what is within your control to change and what is outside your control to change when it comes to your environments.**

To continue thinking about your school environment, as a student many things can be within your control. For example, you can choose who you spend your time with while at school, what you do with your free time, and where you spend your free time.

However, other things remain outside your control. For example, you can't control who your teachers will be, when something will happen that will stress you out, or when you can leave the school grounds.

Being mindful of what you can't control allows you to focus on what you can control. You can then focus on making changes to the elements of your environment that you can control to work towards decreasing unhealthy behaviours. **Simply put, it's important to own what you can control and let go of what you can't.**



Breaking an unhealthy habit

Just like we can change our environments, we can also change or “break” unhealthy habits. It is hard to permanently eliminate an unhealthy habit but—over time—we can change our brain’s response and reward systems that are directly connected to our cues and cravings.

Here are four ways you can help break an unhealthy habit:



Make It Unattractive: Many cigarette packages already show images of the negative effects of smoking. If something is unattractive (like the photo of a smoker’s lung) you are less likely to continue the action that is associated with being unattractive.



Make It Invisible: Removing cigarettes from sight so you are not triggered to smoke each time you see them is a way to make it invisible. When you think of something less, the less often you are likely to pursue it.



Make It Difficult: You can’t smoke a cigarette anywhere. Policies tell you where and when you can smoke. If something becomes increasingly difficult, it’s hard to continue. Although this is not easy, it’s important to remember that adding layers of difficulty when it comes to curbing commercial tobacco use can be a good thing. For example, further increasing the difficulty around when, where, and how to smoke or vape can often help people consume less commercial tobacco over time.



Make It Unsatisfying: An expression that comes from the fitness industry says this: Nothing tastes as good as feeling healthy feels. The same is true with commercial tobacco. Once you choose a different response—like walking, making a healthy meal, or journaling—over time you begin to feel more satisfied with those new behaviours and less satisfied with the old behaviour of having a cigarette or vape.

Even when all of these 4 elements are combined, smoking is still a very difficult habit to quit due to addiction and nicotine dependence. However, the earlier in life that you can start to break the addiction to smoking, the better your health will be over time.

