

# 10 Steps To Kicking Your Bad Habit

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As an old golf pro once said, "The problem is not learning the new; it's forgetting (unlearning) the old!"

If you have ever tried to fix a persistent problem with your swing you will know how true that is. You have to concentrate hard on every step. The new way feels strange, having done it the other way for so long. You get confused, performance slows dramatically, and you make more errors.

Thankfully, all those skills coaching sessions appear to be paying off. You practise and practise and your technique on the range shows obvious improvement. However, as soon as you are out on the golf course and under the stress of competition, your game falls apart and you revert to those old, wrong, ways.

Professional golfers are not immune either. In what is known as the dreaded "performance slump", excellent technique carefully refined through years of hard work is suddenly and inexplicably lost.

## Take the two minute conflict test

This simple but intriguing test will show you firsthand the powerful mental interference effect caused by established skills. Please follow these instructions.

### Step 1

Below is a table of different words. Read each word aloud as you normally would when reading. Record how long it takes you to finish, to the nearest second. Start at the top, reading left to right, line by line, as quickly as you can and correct any mistakes. For example, the first word is "green"; the second is "brown" and so on. Record here [ ] how many seconds you took to finish.

### Step 2

This time, instead of reading the word, you now have to name the **colour of the ink** in which each word is written. Speak up and say it aloud for greater effect. For example, the colour of the first word is "pink" so you have to say "pink" instead of "green". The second is "red", not "brown" and so on. Do the whole list, line by line, from top to bottom. Correct any mistakes. Record here [ ] how many seconds it took you to finish.

green	brown	black	blue	green	pink
blue	pink	brown	green	black	red
blue	red	black	brown	black	pink
green	red	brown	green	pink	blue
red	blue	black	pink	green	brown

## Habit pattern interference

You have just experienced the mental mechanism called habit pattern interference—the main reason why old golfing habits die hard.

When naming the colours, you may have found you had to consciously suppress the tendency to want to read the word, to revert back to your old habit (as in step 1). The old way ("green") kept interfering with the new way ("pink").

Like when you last tried to change your grip, correct your putting action or make a swing change, you had to concentrate hard; you made more errors; it took so much time due to mental confusion; and the experience was frustrating and unpleasant.

You wanted to change but your brain would not let you change. In the case of your ingrained golf technique problem, you were the prisoner of habit. By a process of psychological interference, your old learning disabled your new learning.

Cognitive science tells us that whatever we have practiced and learned is protected from change. When the new golf swing you are trying to learn is different from the old swing, your brain instantly detects this conflict and generates habit pattern interference to protect and preserve the old swing.

This protective mental mechanism is useful because it saves you having to re-learn things every time you play. However, it is a two-edged sword because it cannot distinguish between what is "right" technique and what is "wrong". It simply protects and preserves everything you currently know.

Eventually, you will succeed and make the change over to the new swing but biomechanical experts say that it can take up to 2,000 practices before the new swing consistently replaces the old one. This is called the "adaptation period" and we have all gone through this misery.

In our new theory of human learning, the adaptation period is an indicator of a brain in trouble. The person is no longer learning efficiently and effectively but is struggling to cope with change. This is bad news for golfers trying to fix their swing and improve their game.

It gets worse. Currently available coaching methods do not adequately address the issue of habit pattern errors very well. This is because conventional golf coaching tends to emphasize exclusive practice of the *correct* knowledge and skill, i.e., via hours of repetition or drills.

Admittedly, practice and drills are an essential element when learning *new* skills, i.e., when there is no old incorrect way that might interfere with learning. However, practice is much less effective when trying to *change* an established technique fault because habit pattern interference gets in the way of improvement.

Clearly, we need a better way.

## Old Way New Way Learning

A different approach, developed in Australia and adopted by a growing number of coaches and sporting professionals at institutes of sport here and overseas, is Old Way New Way Learning.

According to Harry Lyndon, a golfer and cognitive psychologist, Old Way New Way is a special way of practising that greatly reduces the mental interference from old habits and therefore accelerates learning.

Instead of spending weeks or months of frustrating practice, with Old Way New Way your swing technique can show 80% improvement after just one or two intensive sessions. This improvement continues and is more or less permanent, depending on how often you practise. Importantly, the new swing will transfer more readily to competition.

Best of all, the entire process is easy to learn, blame-free and very user friendly.

### An example

Let's run through a typical Old Way New Way skill correction session with John who has a very flat swing. This sequence of 10 steps is written from the point of view of a coach conducting the technique correction session but it can easily be adapted by a player performing self-correction, provided you get expert coaching advice from a PGA golf pro.



#### *Step One: Diagnose and describe the problem*

John has a very flat swing which affects the quality of contact with the ball. John's coach wants to make his swing more vertical, or back on plane, in line with good golf technique. This is fully explained to John at the start.



*Step Two: Develop John's awareness of what he's doing wrong*

Make John more aware of his own way of swinging the club so that he becomes more conscious of it. Have him repeatedly swing at the ball in his usual way, i.e., the wrong way, and ask him to describe how it feels to swing that way. For example, he might say, "I can feel the club coming around my shoulder. I roll my wrists, too." Keep up this repetition of the swing and talking about the sensations for five minutes or more, until he can describe his physical sensations freely.



*Step Three: Develop John's awareness of the new way*

Demonstrate the new, correct, swing. Ask John to copy that swing, repeatedly, and then tell you how it feels to swing that way. For example, John might say, "In my new way the swing plane is more vertical. I feel I cock my wrists instead of rolling them. I can feel my left shoulder working more under my chin on the backswing." Keep this up for five minutes or more, until he can describe his physical sensations quite freely.



*Step Four: Call John's own way the Old Way*

Suggest to John, "Let's call the way you usually swing the Old Way?" Get John to agree. From now on, don't talk about John's "wrong" way of swinging—just call it the "old way".



*Step Five: Call the correct way the New Way*

Suggest to John, "Let's call the new swing I showed you the New Way?" Get John to agree. From now on, don't talk about John's "right" way swing—just call it the "new way".



*Step Six: Describe to John the differences between the Old and the New Way*


Tell John what's different. For example, "The difference between your old way and your new way is that in your old way you swing flat and behind you but in the new way you swing up above your shoulder, and your left shoulder works more under and your wrists cock." If you are doing self-correction you would simply say the differences aloud to yourself—it's important to say it aloud, not just inside your head.



*Step Seven: Practising differences—five more comparisons*

John now has to do five more comparisons, making a total of six. This not just mindless repetition but a special kind of practice—the practice of differences. John may do more than six comparisons; but never less. Why? Because it works! Ask John to swing again, first in his Old Way; then in his New Way; and then tell him the differences.

Please note that there is an important change in approach half-way through. That is, for the first two comparisons, *tell* John what the differences are between the old and new ways (as in step 6); but for the remaining three comparisons, you *ask* John to *tell you* what the differences are. Of course, if the Old Way New Way steps are being done as a self-coaching session, then you will have to describe the differences aloud to yourself at each of the

	six comparisons.
	<p><i>Step Eight: Practising the New Way</i> Now comes practice—practice of the <i>new way</i>, this time. Ask John to swing in his new way six or more times. This will consolidate his learning. Opportunities for more practice will occur during normal game play.</p>
<p><i>Step Nine: Reinforcement</i> John now needs to practice his New Way swing as much as possible, to reinforce his learning. He should <i>not</i> do any more deliberate Old Ways. Nor should he do any more comparisons of the Old and New ways. He should only do New Ways from now on. John can expect to be doing New Way swings at least 80% of the time from now on. He may even be doing 100% New Way, depending on how much practice he gets. He may also still be doing some Old Way swings, 20% or less of the time. But he will know immediately when he's done an Old Way on 90% of occasions when it happens. This improved self-awareness enables him to correct himself and so accelerates his learning. Here is how the self-correction process works. Every time John inadvertently does an Old Way swing, he should follow this simple three-step procedure:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. John says aloud to himself "That's my old way."</li> <li>2. He says aloud, "This is my new way (and then he does it that way)."</li> <li>3. He then says aloud, "And the difference is that in my old way I swing flat but in my new way I swing above my shoulder."</li> </ol> <p>That's all he has to do, and then continue with his game from where he left off.</p>	
<p><i>Step Ten: Follow-up</i> If Old Ways are still present two weeks later, re-diagnose the remaining problem with the assistance of the PGA golf pro and repeat the entire correction session. Really difficult technique problems may require more than one Old Way New Way session.</p>	

## Conclusion

Although the Old Way New Way process may at first appear repetitive, it is certainly not mindless repetition. At each successive comparison John is developing new learning connections in his brain that help him change over more quickly to the New Way, and remember it. This is a special kind of skill drill.

Follow each and every step precisely and Old Way New Way will reward your efforts like no other practice session you have ever had before.

One more tip. Old habits die hard and you may find it extremely difficult to change your own, established ways of playing and coaching. Furthermore, the universal human tendency to make the unfamiliar familiar by inadvertently adding, deleting or changing parts of the routine will make it less effective. Taking an accredited Old Way New Way training course and coaching session will enable you to make the change.

**Further information:**

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