Why Your Body Forces You to Pick, Pull, and Bit #nailbiting #psychiatry #functionalpsychiatry Transcript

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Why These Habits Feel Impossible to Stop

Why are some habits almost impossible to stop, even when you so desperately want to? Skin picking, hair pulling, nail biting, cheek biting. You promise yourself you'll stop.

Then you find yourself doing it again and again without even realizing it. These behaviors are actually more common than most people realize, and importantly, they're treatable.

There are structured, research-supported approaches that actually work. Treatments like habit reversal therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and certain targeted supplements and medications can retrain the brain's regulation system, not through discipline and willpower, but through understanding and nervous system retraining.

Stay with me. I'm going to walk you through how each of these works and what to do. I'm Dr. Arwen Podesta, functional integrative psychiatrist, triple boarded in psychiatry, addiction medicine, and forensic psychiaty.

BFRBs as Nervous System Regulation

For over 20 years, I've been studying and working with how the brain regulates stress and behavior and how those patterns can be reshaped. Because the truth is, some habits are not bad habits, but they're nervous system strategies.

Most people think of these patterns in moral or behavioral terms as if discipline should fix them. You've probably heard or even said to yourself, just stop.

Why can't you just Stop? Or why can you control yourself? But if Discipline worked, insight and shame would have already fixed the problem. Instead, many people find the harder they try, the stronger the urge gets.

And that's not failure, it's feedback. It means the behavior is serving a deeper regulatory function. So instead of asking yourself, why don't I have enough willpower?

Honestly, The better question is, what is my nervous system trying to regulate? So let's talk about understanding the behaviour. These behaviors are known, clinically, as body-focused repetitive behaviors or BFRBs.

Habit Reversal Training and ACT

Things like hair pulling, skin picking, nail biting, cheek biting. They're not random impulses. There are actually ways the brain is trying to restore balance when it's under stress, anxiety, boredom, or sensory overload.

they change sensory input, they narrow focus, They can soothe tension. That means they're self-regulation tools, just ones that happen to cause harm over time.

Now neurobiologically, these behaviors often involve glutamate and serotonin systems, neurochemicals that regulate impulse control, anxiety, and stress.

And when those circuits misfire, the urge feels irresistible. Over time, this forms a habit loop, trigger behavior relief. Because that momentary relief works, the brain repeats it automatically.

That's why punishment and willpower actually fail. They add stress, which fuels the cycle. What we need is a way to replace, not suppress, the pattern.

So let's talk about some evidence-based solutions. Well, a goal of standard is called habit reversal training. It starts with awareness, Not judgment.

You learn to spot the exact sensations or triggers that precede the behavior. And then you introduce a competing response, a neutral action like making a fist, holding a stress ball, or pressing your palm against each other or against your legs.

And the goal isn't to fight the urge, it's to ride it out safely until it passes. Over time, the nervous system then learns it actually doesn't need that old behavior to feel relief.

DBT, Supplements, and Medications

The second approach is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, which also helps you observe urges instead of obeying in. You might mentally label, oh there's the urge, and notice where the body sensation is without acting on it.

This lets you separate the experience from the behavior, building freedom instead resistance. And for those whose behaviors are strongly linked to emotions or emotionally driven, we want to think about adding dialectical behavioral therapy to mindfulness, distress tolerance, coping skills, emotional regulation tools that help reduce the intensity of the emotional triggers.

All these techniques target the nervous system, not personal willpower. There's also supplements and medications that can be adjunctive supports, helping balance the underlying neurochemistry.

N-acetylcysteine, or NAC, helps regulate glutamate and may reduce the intensity of urges. Inositol supports serotonin function and can decrease anxiety that amplifies these behaviors.

Some people also benefit from low dose SSRIs or other medications under medical supervision, of course, especially when anxiety or obsessive urgency is high.

These aren't necessarily first line cures, but they can certainly complement the behavioral work and make it easier to practice these new skills. Of course we always want to discuss these with our licensed clinicians or providers before starting anything new.

Reframing Shame and Getting Help

Let's talk about reframing and moving forward. If your behavior causes damage, infections, or emotional distress, please don't wait and seek help. These are treatable.

Treatments focus on retraining regulation, not adding shame. So if you've spent years asking yourself, why can't I stop? Try replacing that question with, what is my brain trying to regulate?

And when you shift from shame to curiosity, the doorway to change opens. Your brain's not broken. It's using an outdated solution. With awareness, practice, and support, you can teach it a new one.

If this message resonates with you, please share in the comments. When do you notice your habits show up the most? When is it? During stress, during boredom, fatigue, sleeplessness?

Remember, awareness is where healing begins. If you found this helpful, please subscribe for more neuroscience-based insights into behavior and healing.

Thank you for watching, and thanks for your curiosity. And thanks, for taking the time to understand your nervous system more deeply. I'll see you in the next one.