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**Seth Slater M.F.A.**  
The Dolphin Divide

## Bursting Through Bad Habits

Why giving up requires not giving in.

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Want to kick a habit, or encourage someone else to give up theirs? You might be in for disappointment unless you take a driving test first:

You're sitting in your driveway, about to start your car, but when you try the ignition, all you get from the engine is a choking rumble. The car shudders, then dies. Until now, your ride has been highly reliable. How many times do you turn the ignition?

Once or twice before the swearing starts, right?

Then maybe a time or two more with a little pleading and cajoling before giving up for good and calling a tow truck. Seems reasonable—you gave it the good old college try, after all. So that's what—four or five tries, maximum?

What if, on the other hand, your car has a long history of unreliability, but you've always managed to get it started at some point? Well, then that's another story entirely.

Now swearing and cajoling is followed not by quitting, but by a whole host of other behaviors, some more productive than others. You might bang on the dashboard. Or promise—with the utmost sincerity and your most patient of possible voices—that if the car starts just this once, you'll take it out on the town for a quart or two of the most expensive oil you can find.

You might pop the hood and root around, checking connections and getting your fingernails dirty. Or you might throw it into neutral and try to push-start the old beast. You might start asking yourself if you can recall the correct order for attaching jumper cables, or ...

Point being, you won't give up nearly as easily on an old clunker as on a more steadfast steed.

But if nothing works, you'll give up eventually just the same.

The difference, of course, is how much time and energy you'll be willing to spend in attempting the engine-starting payoff you're accustomed to achieving before throwing in the towel for good.

When it comes to behavior—especially habitual behavior—the stronger the reliability of an eventual payoff is, and the longer the behavioral history built into acquiring it, the more persistent one’s reward-seeking efforts will be.

That’s something to keep in mind if you’re contemplating kicking a habit or coaching someone else to kick theirs. Persistence in the face of disappointment can be a great quality. It can see us through rough times and help us hold out for a brighter future. Unfortunately, it can also be a stumbling block to working one’s way into the clear when it comes to getting rid of unwanted behaviors.

But it can be done.

The trick is to anticipate and work through what behaviorists call extinction bursts—absolute explosions of the unwanted behavior—that predictably arrive just before the behavior vanishes for good.

Sometimes, extinction bursts can be quite dramatic.

Previously in *The Dolphin Divide* (“Five More Minutes in the Bathtub? What Delaying Now Might Mean in 15 Years,” Dec. 20, 2011), I’ve written about Lisa, a dolphin who had developed the bad habit of leaping into the air at unwanted times. For reasons that need not be repeated here, Lisa had found this behavior rewarding for years, so it came as quite a shock to her when she was handed a cease and desist order by a new trainer.

To extinguish the behavior, the trainer simply ignored all unwanted leaps rather than rewarding them with fish snacks. From Lisa’s point of view, this must have felt a lot like having a car suddenly stop turning over.

So, Lisa did what any reasonable dolphin (or car owner for that matter) might. She tried harder. Lisa leaped higher. Then she leaped lower. Then she leaped while vocalizing (I’m not sure whether she was swearing, pleading, or promising). She offered sets of leaps: 1, 2 (pause—no fish); 1, 2 again (pause—no fish); 1, 2, 3 (pause—no fish); 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (pause—no fish).

“Are you kidding?” she must have been thinking. “Perhaps you missed all that. Here, let me try again.”

And then Lisa would take it from the top, beginning the routine again from the very first set of high leap-low leap. Sometimes she changed the routine, but she continued to offer—over the days and weeks that followed—an elaborate and persistent display of leaping behaviors.

It might have been tempting to have given the dolphin an A for effort, but an untimely fish-snack toss at any time during the extinction burst period would only have prolonged Lisa’s undesired leaping habit.

Good trainers know better.

Predictably, Lisa’s unwanted leaping vanished shortly after the dramatic behavioral extinction burst she displayed. That didn’t mean Lisa never leaped again. It just meant that she stopped leaping at inappropriate times.

So, want to quit smoking? Give up gum balls? Dine out less often? All absolutely attainable goals. Just be on the lookout for extinction bursts—they mean you’re almost there.