

4 Ways to Exorcise Your “Ex” This Valentine’s Day



By Marianne Beach, GalTime.com

It's a new year but you're still stuck on that old guy. And now the most romantic holiday of the year is fast approaching. Wouldn't Valentine's Day be the perfect time to exorcise that ex and move on for good?

Kelly McGonigal, psychologist at Stanford University and author of the new book *The Willpower Instinct: How Self Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It*, thinks so. "Valentine's Day is all about declaring who you care about most," she declares. "And if you've thrown away enough time on a go-nowhere relationship, the person at the

top of your V-Day list should be *you*.”

Sounds good, right? But maybe easier said than done. After all, an “ex” habit can be hard to break.

“Anything that reminds you for your ex can bring back a flood of feelings,” says McGonigal. “You may look back with ‘euphoric recall,’ remembering only the highs and none of the lows. Even if the relationship was a disaster, you may not want to believe that you wasted your time and heart on a jerk.”

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So what does it take to break the “ex” habit once and for all? McGonigal says you’ll need a good dose of self-control with a dash of self-compassion. And she has four great tips, based on the latest science of willpower to help you move on.

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1. Find a Role Model.

Science shows that we can catch willpower from people we admire, and strengthen our resolve just by bringing them to mind. Look to your own life, pop culture, or the news for a “ditch-the-ex” role model. Who’s your favorite example of a strong woman who kicked a man to the curb, and is doing just fine on their own (or on the rebound!)? Think of yourself as following in her footsteps, and bring her to mind when you’re tempted to stalk your ex on Facebook.

2. “I Won’t” Is Easier When You Have a New “I Want.”

The best way to make an old habit less tempting is to find a new addiction. The bad news is you can’t order a new crush from Zappos. So how do you replace the longing for an ex without jumping into a new relationship? Find a new goal – like running a race for charity or writing your own romance novel – or return to an old passion you’ve left behind, like

cooking, bellydancing, or blogging. When that “something’s missing” feeling comes up, get busy on your goal instead of fantasizing about getting back with your ex.

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3. Take Care of Yourself.

Stress is the #1 trigger for any addiction, including old flames. Feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, or anxious triggers a physiological need to connect, and you crave what psychologists call “contact comfort.” Stress also makes your brain focus on potential reward, and ignore potential risk. So you’re likely to imagine the warm embrace of a romantic reunion, and forget the shame or regret you felt after the last hook-up. Pre-empt stress-induced longing by treating yourself to some serious self-care. Schedule a girls’ night, pull out that yoga DVD, get a manicure and massage, or whatever calms your nerves and lift your spirits.

4. Beware the White Bear.

There’s one guaranteed way to make sure you *never* forget your ex: try to push him out of your mind completely. Psychologists call this the “White Bear Effect.” If you try not to think about a white bear, one will pop into your mind. This is true for all kinds of temptations. Dieters who try not to think about chocolate become obsessed with it, and eat more of it. Smokers who try not to think about cigarettes only end up smoking more. One study even found that if you try not to think about an old flame, you’re more likely to dream about him! So when an ex comes to mind, don’t panic, and certainly don’t take it as some kind of sign! Remind yourself why he’s an ex, then put your attention back on someone you really care about – *you*.