- Habit / Lifestyles

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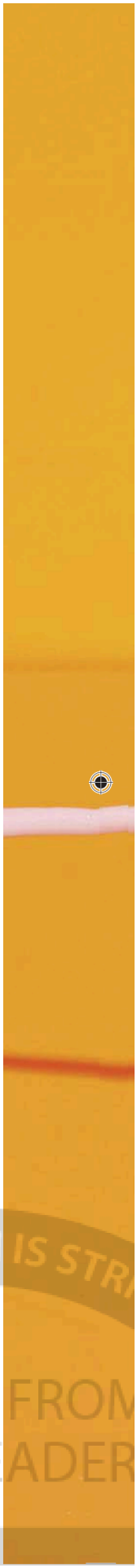
OLD HABITS, DIE HARD

Forget "being good" or exercising willpower – it may not even be a thing. Try these research-based hacks for ditching old not-great routines and building different ones that make you happier and healthier

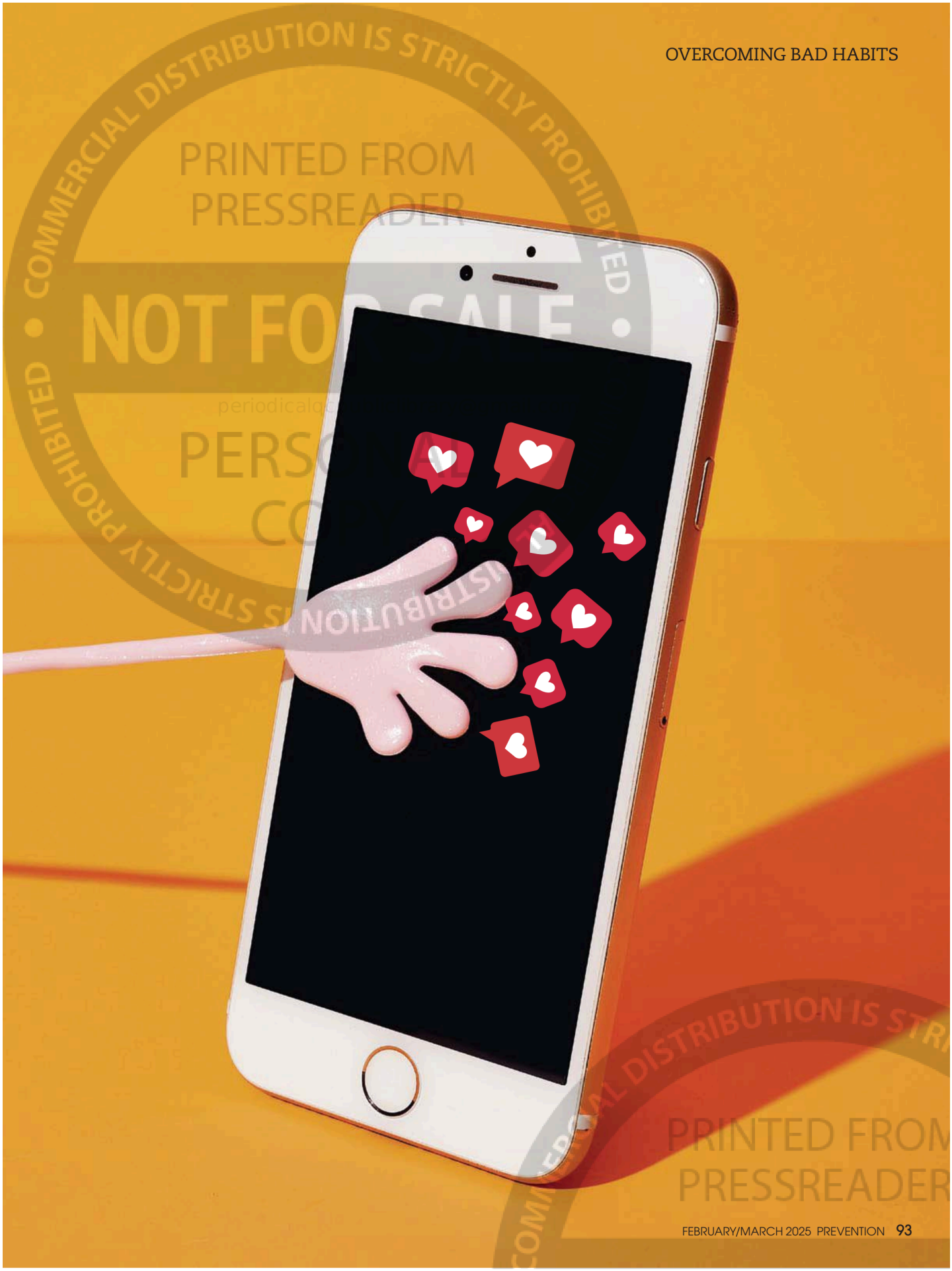


Like most of us, I spend way too much time online. Part of this is for work, but if I'm honest, a sizable chunk of it consists of mindless scrolling. I typically succumb during periods of boredom, though the stress of a deadline has also been known to lead me down a rabbit hole.

Let's say that I'm – oh, I don't know, researching a story on changing bad habits. Soon enough, instead of reading up on the subject, I'm pinning an air fryer recipe on Pinterest and buying a sand-resistant towel. And I've tried willing myself to make today the day I don't check social media 34 times before noon. Yet somehow, as I take my first sip of coffee, my cursor makes its way to that tab seemingly all on its own.

Unfortunately, I learn every day what researchers are finding out: Relying on willpower – the notion that you can overcome temptation and stick to a goal if you simply try hard enough – isn't the most efficient, effective way to change habits. In fact, according to one APA survey, it was the most commonly cited barrier to making healthy lifestyle changes. "There's no clear evidence that willpower even exists," says Dr Judson Brewer, PhD, a professor and author of several books, including *The Craving Mind: From Cigarettes to Smartphones to Love*. One thing is certain: If it does exist, it tends to flake out at the moments we need it most.

Dr Brewer cites research suggesting that during times of stress, such as when ►



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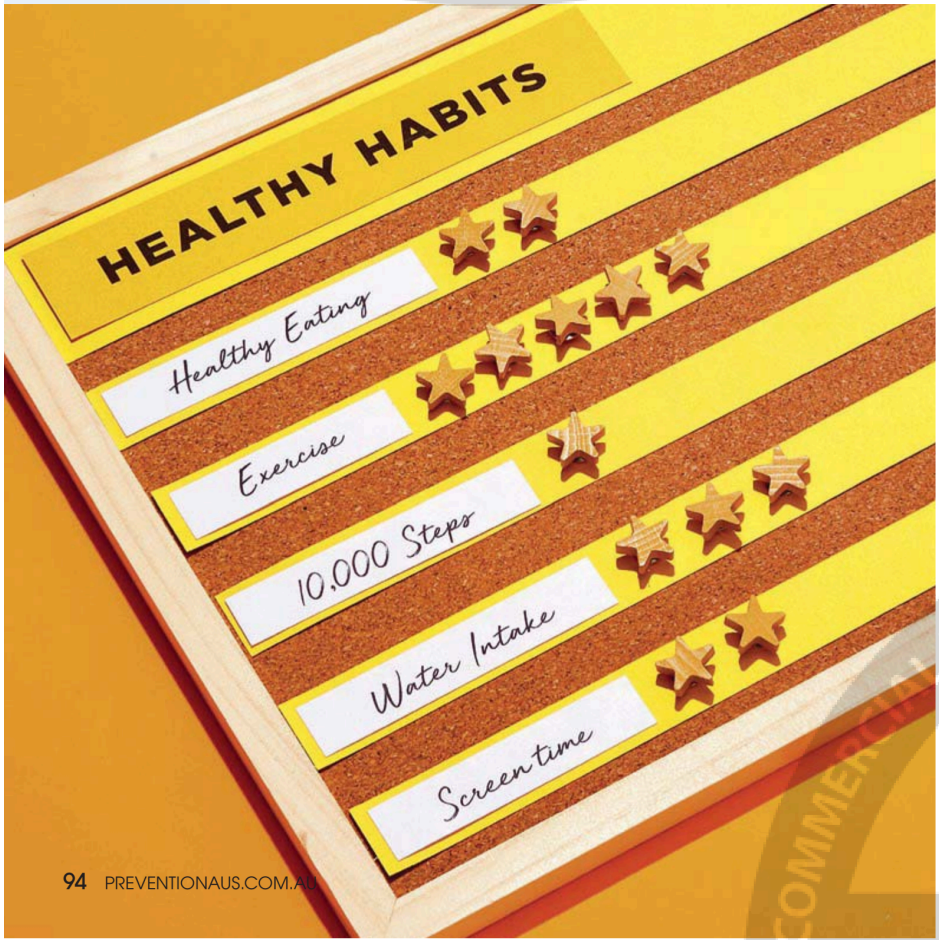
we're hungry, angry, lonely or tired, the area of the brain thought to be responsible for controlling behaviour, called the prefrontal cortex, goes offline, making us more likely to give in to unsavoury habits. If you've ever emptied your coworker's lolly bowl when tensions were running high at work, you've experienced this firsthand.

The new thinking about habit formation offers several strategies for breaking bad habits, none of which rely on white-knuckling it. "Other parts of our minds are much better suited to helping us stop certain patterns of behaviour and create newer, better ones," says Wendy Wood, PhD, a professor of psychology and business and the author of *Good Habits, Bad Habits: The Science of Making Positive Changes That Stick*. "There are ways to do this in spite of the challenges of everyday life that tend to throw us off course."



How habits get so sticky

Like the latest smartphone, our brains have older, basic components alongside newer ones that developed as humans evolved. The newer regions, like the prefrontal cortex, govern rational thinking and decision-making, as in *I should order the grain bowl, not the burger* and *I shouldn't watch baby panda videos with a deadline looming*. A key feature of our older brain involves the "reward-based learning" system, centred in the basal ganglia. "This area simply makes us want to do more of the things that feel good and less of the things that feel bad," Dr Brewer explains.

In cavewoman days, this helped us survive: Because life was precarious and food was scarce, when we spotted fruit, seeds or grass, our brains shouted, "Eat that!" We ate the berries, they tasted good and that in turn prompted our brains to release a chemical called dopamine, which cemented this smart strategy in place. In behavioural neuroscience terms, this is called a habit loop, a three-part system composed of a trigger (the food sighting), a behaviour (eating the food) and a reward (contentment and survival).

A few million years later, famine is less of an issue for most of us, but "plenty of other things came into existence with the ability to make us feel bad," says Dr Brewer – political strife, war, human rights concerns

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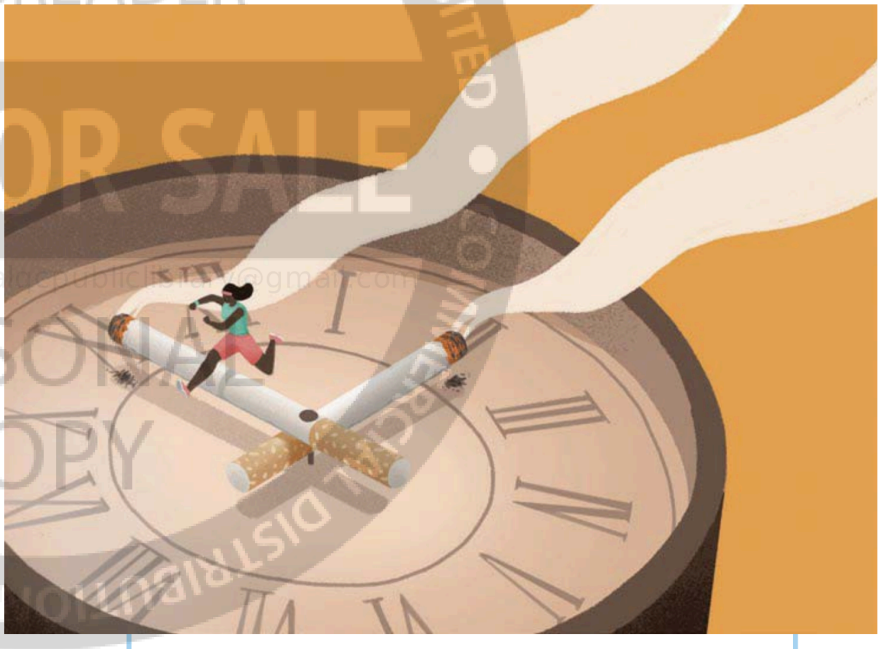
and more mundane things like kid drama. "These are new problems, but our primitive brain wants to use the same old programming, so it sends the message *You're not feeling great. Try doing something that will trigger dopamine and maybe you'll feel better.*"

And many of these things are not great for us. Sugary foods are one of the fastest ways to satisfy that dopamine craving; alcohol and cigarettes can do the same. Plenty of behavioural habits can give us the same buzz: Dating apps, "likes" on social media and online shopping all provide an instant dopamine rush, reinforcing those habit loops.

But once a new pleasure becomes ingrained, it can start to feel different. "The first time you realised you could check your phone while waiting in line, it felt interesting and fun," explains Uma Karmarkar, PhD, a consumer neuroscientist. "You thought, *Oh, I was bored, but now I'm interested.*" Soon enough, though, Scrolling While Bored becomes your new normal. "Now it's no longer a pleasant surprise; in fact, not being able to check your phone while bored actually makes you feel uncomfortable."

In other words, it has become a habit. Karmarkar points out a similar pattern among people who smoke cigarettes: "They don't talk as much about the pleasure they get from having a cigarette during a smoke break, but they do talk about how much they miss that smoke break if they can't have it."



Is going cold turkey the best way to quit smoking?

By the six-month mark, about 95% of people who try to quit smoking cold turkey are back at it. Your best bet for nipping a nicotine habit in the bud is a combination of nicotine replacement therapies (NRTs) or medication (varenicline or bupropion) and counselling, says Dr Brewer. Using an NRT such as a nicotine patch or nicotine gum, for example, increases chances of quitting by 50% to 60%, research shows. Want to boost those odds even more? Get some support, such as from therapy or a smoking-cessation program. A review of 83 studies found that adding behavioural support – whether in person or by phone – to medication, increased people's chances of putting the habit in the rearview by 10% to 20%. ►

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How to get free of your habits

Willpower isn't enough to overcome millennia of hard-wiring to break a pattern that makes you feel good (or stops you feeling bad). To have the best chance of success, try these strategies.

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1 *Get wise to friction*

In 2017, an analytics company examined data from 7.5 million mobile devices to see how far people travelled to exercise. It's no surprise that the shorter the distance, the more likely people were to follow through. What's interesting, says Wood (who wasn't involved with the research), is that those with an average round trip of around six kilometres hit the gym five or more times a month, while those who had to travel about 8.2 kilometres went only once. "Less than [2.5 kilometres] made all the difference between someone with a regular exercise habit and someone without one," she says.

Those extra minutes in the car, Wood says, were what habit formation experts call friction – environmental factors that render us less likely to engage in a particular behaviour. Friction is everywhere: how hard it is to save money when spending requires just a flash of your phone or card; the challenge of focusing on work despite distracting social media apps. The trick, says Wood, "is to increase friction on behaviours we don't want and decrease friction on those we do want."

HABIT HELPER: If you're trying to kick a procrastination habit, delete time-sucking apps from your phone and set up a dedicated workspace in a home office or at a café. Looking to eat less meat? Sign up for a plant-based meal delivery service for a few days a week. Like a direct deposit program that automatically sends part of your pay to your savings account, "just the act of making [your desired habit] easier makes you more likely to stick to your goal," Wood says.

2 *Lather, rinse, repeat, repeat, repeat*

Using the indicator in your car to change lanes and kissing your partner goodbye in the morning may seem like conscious decisions, but Wood argues that these are prime examples of habits "that have become so trained into our minds, schedules and interactions that no thinking or decision-making is involved." That's what allows us to function without mentally exhausting ourselves by planning every tiny movement. If you find yourself automatically pulling a bottle of wine out of the fridge when you prepare dinner or reaching into the chips bowl while you watch TV, it's because you've trained yourself to do so.



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The trick to building a healthier habit, Wood says, is to harness your mental system to work for you, not against you. Do this with actions you can repeat without even having to think about them: Stash your phone in your glove box or boot when you get in the car so you're not tempted to text on the road; ask your server to box up half your meal before serving it; grab an apple before settling in on the sofa to watch TV. The first time will be the hardest, she says, but it grows incrementally easier as you build this habit version of muscle memory. Research suggests that different behaviours tend to require different amounts of repetition before becoming automatic: Adding a piece of fruit to your diet takes about 65 days; drinking something healthy, 59 days; exercising, 91 days.

HABIT HELPER: As a shortcut, tack new habits on to positive or harmless ones that already exist, says BJ Fogg, PhD, habit expert and author of *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything*. After your morning coffee, for instance, meditate for one minute. Before you get into bed, stretch for a few minutes. After you wash your face in the morning, apply sunscreen. "Ask yourself where your new habit or resolution naturally fits into your day," Fogg explains, "and use your existing routine to prompt you to do it." The idea is for both actions to become joined and automatic.

3 *Play a little game*

For years I'd tried to drink more water. Then I joined a shared workspace. The watercooler was next to my desk, and I saw how diligent others were about refilling their bottles. So I created a little game for myself: Any time someone refilled a bottle, I'd take a sip from my own. It worked! I now take multiple sips per hour.

Karmarkar says I've tapped into the benefits of gamification, or turning a task into something fun in order to encourage oneself – think of sticker charts parents use to get their kids to brush their teeth. For an adult, rewards like avatars, badges and points "serve as concrete markers to help you move yourself forward, because accomplishing a goal feels good," she explains. "You're rewarding yourself for making the effort as opposed to punishing yourself for having failed." Indeed, millions of Fitbit users have switched from *I should have walked more* to *I hit 5,000 steps!*



HABIT HELPER: Lots of apps use gamification to help break bad habits and create healthy ones. Habitica (free for iOS and Android) motivates you by turning your goals into a retro video game adventure.

4 *Get curious about your habit*

Dr Brewer calls this strategy "a simple but profound way to beat your next urge to snack, text while driving, shop online or smoke." Rooted in the field of mindfulness, it involves stopping the moment the urge hits and asking yourself, *What am I getting from this?* Let's say you're anxiously ransacking your desk for lollies. "Step back for a moment and observe what's happening," Dr Brewer suggests. "Get curious about your craving. Maybe you'll think, *Wow, I'm like a zombie on autopilot.*" Or perhaps you'll realise you don't even feel like eating lollies right now – it's just what you have conditioned yourself to do when work stress hits. Being present interrupts the habit loop and lets you take back some of the power by making you slow down and "helping you start to see how unrewarding the original behaviour was," Dr Brewer says.

HABIT HELPER: An app created by Dr Brewer called Eat Right Now ($25 a month, iOS and Android) employs mindfulness to help users break the cycle of craving-induced eating. Another option: Ate (free, iOS and Android).

I tried getting curious, and I have to admit I was doubtful that curiosity could feel rewarding enough to satisfy my urge to scroll mindlessly. But after trying it a few times, I found that by reflecting on the why of it, I was in fact able to close the tab before I got sucked into reading. Only time will tell whether it sticks. But now I know that even if there's no will(power), there's a way. P

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