

Balance365 Episode 22 Transcript

Annie: Lauren, hi, how are you?

Lauren: Hi! I am good, how are you?

Annie: I'm good, what are you up to today?

Lauren: Well, I just changed my shorts.

Annie: Do you want to tell people why?

Lauren: Yeah. I was so excited because I got a new pair of jean shorts this weekend and I put them on and then I remembered why I hadn't worn jeans in like four years. Because they were so uncomfortable and I have a 9 month old as most of you know and so there's baby gates all over my house and I'm like trying to get over these baby gates and it was like, "This is awful and this is just a reminder of why I never buy jeans anymore." Like even when I wear jeans I wear jeggings so like I literally have not worn jeans in like 3 years.

Annie: Yeah I don't either. I keep buying jeans thinking I'm going to wear them because it's supposed wardrobe staples, but they just sit in my closet.

Lauren: Yeah and I mean, jeggings are just as good.

Annie: Right, and who doesn't want to be able to like drop into a split or a squat if you need to at a moment's notice.

Lauren: Right. So I changed back into my cloth shorts, you know those like Sophie. Have you ever had those?

Annie: Yes. Yes.

Lauren: I don't even know if they make them anymore.

Annie: They're like old school. I dig it. I can get down with that. I know this is going to be shocking, but I'm wearing black leggings.

Lauren: Yes. That is shocking.

Annie: Shocker.

Lauren: Yeah. That's my staple too.

Annie: That is for sure a wardrobe staple.

Lauren: Over the weekend I also bought another pair of black leggings which I definitely needed.

Annie: Absolutely. You can never have too many pairs of black leggings.

Lauren: No.

Annie: No. Okay so you and I are getting together because we recorded a habits 101 podcast not too long ago and one of the topics we didn't cover in that episode was how to break a bad habit and as simple as I would love it to be, a matter of just "stop that!" Have you seen that Bob Newhart episode.

Lauren: No.

Annie: I think it was on Saturday Night Live but he plays the therapist and this woman comes in and she's like, "I have some, essentially, some bad habits" and he's like "Stop that."

Lauren: That's really helpful, like, "Knock it off."

Annie: Like "Just stop it." I know that's the kind of advice my husband gives. "Just stop it." And I'm like, "it's not that simple. It's complicated." But I think this deserves a whole episode on its own because there really are some strategies behind breaking a bad habit and throughout the episode, when you or I say "bad habits" I think we can agree that we're not trying to cast judgment on anyone's habits or behaviors.

A bad habit just refers something that you want to reduce, you want to eliminate. You want to see less of and that can vary from person to person. What can be a bad habit for me might be a good habit for you and vice versa so I'm not trying to judge-y on this. We're trying to help you give you some tools and strategies that can help reduce or eliminate behaviors that aren't serving you or helping you reach your goals.

Lauren: Right. Just things that you would want to stop.

Annie: Yeah, exactly. And if you're listening to this, it's safe to say you've probably already identified a behavior or some behaviors that you would like to change and, as I mentioned before, what most people try to do, my husband included is they just try to quit. "I'm just going to stop doing that." And that might work for a while but the elements of the habit cycle which we talked about in the Habits 101 podcast which we can link in the show notes, are still present and for that reason, identifying the specific steps of the cycle and identifying those can be really helpful in shifting the behavior you're trying to change. So I thought the first thing we should do is just review the habit cycle. Does that sound okay with you?

Lauren: Sure. I just also wanted to mention that the reason saying "Just stop it" or just trying to stop isn't very effective is because the reason we try to build habits, like when we try to build our healthy habits it's so that you don't have to think about it, it's automatic, you just do it, so then just trying to take a habit you would like to remove and just stop it, does not work.

Annie: No. It would be great if it were that easy. But it's usually not. And the reason it's not that easy is because the three elements of the habit cycle which are what we refer to as the three R's, the reminder, the routine, and reward and depending on who you are talking to or what books you are reading about habits you might hear a little bit different terminology used to describe each of those three steps, like the reminder might also be the stimulus, or the trigger, then you have the routine which is the habit, the behavior, the routine, whatever the thing is that you're doing and then you have the reward which is the benefit you get from doing the behavior. And I think it's really important to remember that when you're listening to this, remember that bad habits can have positive rewards.

Lauren: Right.

Annie: So I think that's really a good first step in examining how to go about breaking or reducing a bad habit is to examine what you're getting out of it and again, bad behaviors or bad habits, again, that's something you want to reduce or eliminate when I say "bad" can have positive rewards.

So let's take, I think, smoking is a really common one. A lot of people have tried to quit smoking, they've tried to quit cold turkey, just dump the cigarettes out and

say, "I'm done." But it totally negates the fact, or overlooks the fact, that smoking actually probably does have some positive rewards built in. And what those positive rewards could look like could mean it allows you some quiet time in the morning, or it's a break from work, it's some social time in your mid-afternoon to go meet up with a girlfriend, or a friend or a spouse and you share this break in your day and the reward is that you get some social time or you get a moment to chill out or a moment to yourself, it can help with relaxation, stress management, so even though there might be some bad "elements" to smoking, it can still have positive rewards. You following me?

Lauren: Yes. I'm following you. And I think the only reason our brains registers things as a habit is because it gives us a reward. So if you kind of think of it that way, whatever you're doing, if it's automatic, that you're trying to stop it's because you are getting some positive aspect out of that behavior. Even if when you first look at it it looks completely negative.

Annie: Yeah, so another one we hear a lot is running Starbucks drive through in the morning. You know, a lot of people might look at that and sort of on the surface level they'd say, well this is a bad habit because I have to pay money, I'm late for work, it doesn't maybe support my health goals depending on what you're choosing when you drive through the Starbucks, but the reward can be that, A) you don't have to cook breakfast, B) it's an extra 5-10 minutes in your car that you get to just mentally prepare for your day, or be by yourself, or if you're like me, turn up some really loud music and just zone out. It's easy. It's convenient. And you get that reward right away.

So while there might be some on paper bad reasons or reasons that don't support this behavior, there are almost always rewards that are benefiting that behavior and the key is when you're trying to reduce or eliminate a bad habit, is to try to replace that bad habit with something that stimulates a similar reward and that's really, really important because if you just try to quit cold turkey, you're going to miss out on that reward and you're probably going to pick up on that really quickly.

So you try to quit smoking, you're going to miss that social time. Or that stress management. Or that moment that you have in your car to just kind of focus and mentally prepare for your day and organize your thoughts. You're going to miss that. So trying to replace the smoking or the Starbucks or whatever you're trying to replace, it can be beneficial to examine what are the rewards you're getting

from it and then try to replace that behavior with something that gives you a similar reward.

Lauren: Right, exactly. Should we get into my favourite example.

Annie: Are you talking about me and Blair?

Lauren: Yes. The one I use all the times is you.

Annie: I didn't intend for it to be this way but it really is a great example. I mean, not to toot my own horn. I'm always tooting my own horn. Let's not mince words here. Blair is about two now, but when she was probably 6 or 8 weeks old I found myself consuming an incredible amount of alcohol at night. And it wasn't something that I had normally done, it was a habit that I kind of just developed after having Blair because that third baby kind of tipped me over the edge or something, I don't know. But what I noticed was that I had started having a glass of wine at night, that turned into two glasses, sometimes two and a half glasses, sometimes even three glasses of wine at night.

And before I knew it I had slipped into this routine of drinking really, really frequently and ultimately, I knew once I kind of realized what I was doing and how frequently it was happening and how almost automatic it was happening, I realized that, okay, this didn't support my finances, this didn't support my health goals, this didn't support my parenting goals, I mean, at that point I was still nursing, and I was putting my kids to bed, slightly intoxicated, like this wasn't the direction I wanted to go. And so I thought, what can I do instead? What am I getting out of this drinking?

And when I looked at the situation, when I kind of panned out, it was very clear to me that what was happening was I was jonesing for a glass of wine shortly after putting Blair to bed. And as you know, putting a newborn to bed can be pretty stressful. And my babies were not, they weren't sweet babies. Like they were tough babies. I love them dearly but they were tough, tough babies.

And so putting her to bed was really, really stressful and you combine with, at the end of a long day, with two other kids in the house, it was summer, everyone's home all day home and it was like "Okay." I was just spent, emotionally, physically, I was just spent and I was reaching for that glass of wine because what was happening was I needed something to kind of take the edge off. I was

stressed out, I was exhausted, so I would come into the kitchen, I would pour a glass of wine and my husband and I would have this little social hour, we would catch up on the day, we would reconnect or whatever.

When I realized that this wasn't a habit I didn't want to continue to engage in, I thought, what can I replace the wine with that still gives me some stress reduction, helps me kind of relax, gives me social time with my husband, so instead of just saying, "I'm going to take the wine out" and cut it cold turkey, I said, "What can I do instead that stimulates that same reward that I was getting from the wine and what I came up with was I ended up just taking either a walk or a long shower, still ten minutes, not a big time investment, either a walk or a shower and then drinking a diet coke or a Lacroix in the kitchen with my husband. And that really did the trick.

I still got the social reward, I still got the stress reduction from the shower or the walk, the me-time, the help me relax, and then the other element of the bad habit that we need to talk about too is I quit buying boxed wine. Which I know you can judge me for my boxed wine all you want but what was happening was the boxed wine in the fridge was just making it too convenient to pour another half a glass, another half a glass, another half a glass, so we just stopped buying wine.

And it's not because wine was bad, wine is off limits or I shouldn't be drinking wine or I'm a bad person if I drink wine, it was just more about curating my environment to support my goals and as soon as I took the wine out of my house, it was kind of "out of sight out of mind." And I think that's another element to breaking a bad habit is looking at your environment and how can you curate your environment to support your goals.

And again, there were nights in there in those weeks following where I thought, "Okay, I want some wine." So my husband went out and bought a bottle of wine, we each had a glass or two and then threw the rest out or he finished the bottle or whatever and that was it. And it was kind of a special occasion instead of having it on tap all the time.

And that worked really, really well for me. And that wasn't to say it was simple and that it was easy and that it didn't take some intention and some practice and effort but I think that's a really good example of examining the reward you're getting out of the behavior and then curating your environment, those two

elements made shifting my behavior from drinking really regularly to drinking rather infrequently.

Lauren: Yeah and I think environment is an important thing to bring up too. And we actually, we have an entire section on environment in Balance365 because it's such a big thing.

You do it with wine, I do that same thing with ice cream or fresh baked cookies. I don't keep big things of ice cream in the freezer anymore. We used to always have it in the freezer and it was just so easy for me. It ended up becoming a habit for me every night to eat a bowl of ice cream. So, I just stopped buying ice cream on a regular basis and if we want ice cream, we will go out as a family and we'll get some ice cream and it's totally fine.

And also, I wanted to just highlight too that you did this whole process consciously. You had already learned about this process and you consciously took the routine or the reminder and the reward and changed your routine out. It wasn't something that just happened, you just put these steps into practice.

Annie: Yeah, and we've talked about that a lot in Balance 365, our habit coaching program, that creating new habits and breaking existing habits a lot of times boils down to practice and each time you practice a new behavior, it's a rep. And building some habits are going to take more reps and some are going to take less reps. But every time you practice that rep, it's kind of like a check in a box. And the more and more and more you do it, the more automatic it's going to become and you don't need to be perfect, like I said, there were nights where we went out and got a bottle of wine. There were nights when you went out with your family and got ice cream. You don't have to be this all or nothing, perfect, right/wrong, one the wagon/off the wagon, you can do it just more consistently and the more consistent you can do it, the better off you're going to be. You don't need to be perfect. You just need to practice getting the reps in.

But on that note of triggers. Sometimes you can't control the trigger. Like in the situation with Blair, I had to put Blair down to bed every night, or my husband did, one of us did, and that was just something that I couldn't control. I couldn't remove from my environment. But sometimes, you can control your triggers.

And when we say triggers, or reminders, the three R's, the reminder, the first step of the habit cycle, they can be environment, people, places, situations, a

recurring event, a pre-existing habit, or even feelings and sometimes acknowledging those triggers, like what's making me feel this way, what's making me feel like I want to engage in this habit, what's going on, where am I at, what time of day is it, can all be kind of clues to how to go about replacing that habit and I think one of the most interesting studies when it comes to triggers or reminders is that study that they did in a hospital, do you remember that one about water?

So it was a hospital cafeteria, and what they did was really simple, they just tracked the water and soda sales in the cafeteria for like two weeks and after a couple weeks they just added more water at various places throughout the cafeteria and they didn't change anything else. And guess what happened at the end of those two weeks?

Lauren: Me, you're asking me?

Annie: Yes. Pop quiz. Go!

Lauren: I know the answer. They bought more water.

Annie: Yes. People bought more water and soda sales went down. They changed nothing else about that cafeteria other than offering more water at various places throughout the cafeteria, and water sales went up, soda sales went down, and I think that's a great example of how curating your environment can help you with building good habits, and reducing or eliminating bad habits and your environment and how that plays a part. If you're trying to eat less ice cream and eat more vegetables, can you put the ice cream in the deep freeze and put the vegetables out on the counter or, you probably don't keep vegetables out on the counter though, do you?

Lauren: I don't. I keep them in the fridge. But I do keep them in the front of the fridge and not in the drawer.

Annie: Yeah, because we've talked about this. Does that crisper drawer do anything?

Lauren: No. Like maybe it does but I don't think so.

Annie: No, I don't think it does. And I only really eat brussel sprouts and carrots and those stay in the fridge. But anyways, it's just one of those things. If you're

trying to eat more fruit. Maybe fruit is something that you would keep on the shelf, can you put that where it's in a more convenient place or more prevalent in your life. On the kitchen counter or in the eye line of your fridge, versus in those crisper drawers where you can't even see them? Can you curate your living room? Can you reshuffle your living room to watch less tv and do more family activities. Or whatever it is you're trying to do but when you think about how living room are set up, they are really set up to often watch tv, right? The couch is facing the tv. The furniture is facing the tv. It's all kind of centred around the Tv. Or can you even remove the tv from the living room? I mean, this is all dependent on whatever your habits are but I think, again, my point is to really evaluate what your environment is doing to support your habits and how shifting your environment can help you create new ones.

Lauren: Right.

Annie: Yeah. The last thing I want to talk about before we finish up is James Clear talks about this which, I love James Clear and his work on habits, but one of the things to remember is that bad habits often have immediate rewards while good habits often have delayed rewards. And what I mean by that is if you look at something like going to the gym, it costs you, you have to pay a lot to go to the gym. You have to pay with your time, with your energy, with your effort, you're going to get sweaty, you're going to have to change clothes, you might have to shower, you're going to maybe have to sacrifice doing something else like family time or work or sitting down and relaxing or drinks with the girlfriends. So you have to kind of pay a lot upfront and often times you don't get the reward you're looking for, whether that's fat loss, weight loss, strength gains, stress reductions. You don't get those until maybe a week, two weeks, a month, six months down the road. So you really have to kind of be able to play the long game. On the flip side, bad habits, and again, I'm using common bad habits, not out of judgment, just things that come up in our community. Bad habits, say, instead of going to the gym you sit down on the couch and you watch TV for three hours. I do that too on occasion, I'm not judging that, so please don't send me hate mail. But, bad habits, the reward in the present is that sitting down on the couch and watching tv or zoning out on Netflix can be a great way to relax, unwind, it can help you numb any stress, emotions, feelings, troubles that you're having. Those rewards are right there in the present.

Lauren: And that takes no effort either.

Annie: Right. You don't have to pay a lot to do that. Like you don't have to pay with your time and your energy and your effort, so one way around that is to try to bring the rewards for good habits into the present. So, again using that gym analogy or gym example, I think a great way to do that is can you turn it into social time? Can you meet a friend or girlfriend at the gym so you can have kind of some social time, that's your reward, the reward then becomes you get to hang out with a friend while you're exercising? I know one of the ones you use, Lauren, is podcasts when you walk, right?

Lauren: Yes, I like walking but what makes it really, really enjoyable for me is that I get to listen to a podcast and I try to make my walking my alone time. So I do take my kids out for walks but I try to find the time where I can walk by myself sometimes too and just listen to a podcast and zone out and make that sort of like relaxation too and just like me-time. I'll also do it with other things. Like folding laundry isn't something I enjoy but I think, like, what would make this more fun or more enjoyable for me and, well, watching my favourite tv show while I'm folding laundry makes the folding laundry not seem so bad.

Annie: Right, my realtor, actually, is a member of our community and she just did that with her, she was training for a marathon in the last year, or half marathon, and what she would do was listen to, I'm not familiar with this so I hope I don't mess this up but the Serial podcast.

Lauren: Oh yeah, I've never listened to it but I heard it's really good.

Annie: Yeah, and she would listen to one episode each run and she wouldn't let herself listen to another episode until her run. So that kind of became the reward for her. Okay, we're going to go run, which she wasn't always thrilled about, in the big picture, she enjoyed running. But you don't show up every run when you're training for a half marathon super jazzed about it. But listening to the Serial podcast, having that reward in the immediate present encouraged her to stick with the training program.

So again, just a review there, bad habits can have positive rewards but often times bad habits have immediate rewards, while good habits can have delayed rewards. And the last reward that I want to add to that and I think we can link this in our show notes is checking off a habit tracker, which a lot of our community members use, a lot of our Balance 365 members use, having that habit tracker to just check off, "I did this thing. I ate protein at breakfast, I took a walk after lunch.

I made my bed today. I brushed my teeth." I mean, whatever habit it is that you're working on, checking off that habit on habit tracker, that little x, that little check mark, whatever it is, can become a really, really ingrained, valuable reward.

Lauren: Yeah, and it sounds simple, but just doing that little simple is surprisingly satisfying. It's just like a "Good job, you did it."

Annie: Yeah, even we see that in our private Facebook community, which, if you're not a member of you really should, we have almost 40,000 women worldwide in that community right now and it's just a wonderful place to be because often times we have people just posting like, "I went to the gym today." And getting that applause, the likes, the cheers, the funny gifs, brings that reward to the present and if you need that support and validation, our group can be a great place to do that.

Lauren: Yeah and everyone in the group, honestly, is happy to do it. It's fun to be able to celebrate other people, so that's rewarding to everyone else in the group too.

Annie: It is. It is because I think a lot of us have been there before where we wanted to maybe celebrate something but for whatever reason, we feel more comfortable doing that with strangers on the internet. We're not strangers anymore, but it can feel a little bit safer.

So, just to review, if you're looking to break a bad habit, step one, review the elements of the habit cycle, the reminder, the routine, the reward. Really, really think about what reward you're getting from that bad habit. Again, bad habits can have positive rewards so think about what are you getting out of the behavior you're engaged in and then how can you pick a different behavior that solicits that same or similar reward so you don't miss out, you don't cut yourself short on any of those rewards.

Step two would be to look at your environment, your trigger which can be your home, your environment, your space, people, places, situations, recurring events, pre-existing habits, maybe how you're feeling, your emotions, and then lastly, try to bring those rewards for good habits into the present as bad habits often have immediate rewards, good habits often have delayed rewards. Lauren, anything you want to add before we wrap up?

Lauren: I think the only thing I would add is that I want to make it really clear that we are trying to keep the reminder and the reward the same and just change the routine. So, like I said at one other point, it's like an Oreo cookie, right, like you keep the outsides the same, you keep the cookie part the same, and you only change the filling. And you just change that filling to something that aligns more with an activity you would want to do. Something that aligns more with your goals. Or something that you perceive as not a negative, that will still give you that same positive reward. So, again, you're keeping the reminder and the reward the same and you're only changing the routine in the middle.

Annie: Yep, and just because we're giving you some hacks on how to break bad habits doesn't mean it's not going to be difficult some days. It's still going to take practice, it's going to take some effort, some intention, you're going to have to be really mindful about it but hopefully by acknowledging the elements of the habit cycle it makes breaking those bad habits a little bit easier than, say, just going cold turkey and stopping.

Lauren: Right, and your wine example, that was, what, a year ago? And it's second nature for you to not drink wine at night, right? Like, you don't...

Annie: Well... It is is. If I have a glass of wine now though it's because I want a glass of wine. And it's not because I feel like I have no other cope with the stress of my life. I'm making a more conscious, mindful decision about my alcohol consumption than just reaching for it out of habit.

Lauren: Right, so it's just like building a habit. It's going to take work in the beginning but as you do it, it gets easier and easier.

Annie: Absolutely. Just get those reps in, right?

Lauren: Yep.

Annie: Alright, thanks, Lauren, this was fun.

Lauren: It was fun. I missed you.

Annie: I know, I know, I missed you, too. We should do this more often. I mean, Jen can come.

Lauren: I missed the last couple because Benny was sick and so I'm just like, I feel like I haven't talked to you in a while and I haven't talked to Jen in even longer.

Annie: I know, recording this podcast with three women who have children who get sick, as children do, across three time zones is ridiculously difficult.

Lauren: Yep.

Annie: Two of us is better than none of us.

Lauren: Right. Hopefully.

Annie: I mean, if I say so myself. Alright, thanks Lauren, we'll talk soon.

Lauren: Alright, bye.

Annie: Bye.