Being human

Reading 1

Yes / No / Not Given

Breaking the habit

We all think we can break our bad habits – but they can stay with us for life

What is a bad habit? The most common definition is that it is something that we do regularly, almost without thinking about it, and which has some sort of negative consequence. This consequence could affect those around us, or it could affect us personally. Those who deny having bad habits are probably lying. Bad habits are part of what makes us human.

Many early habits, like sucking our thumb, are broken when we are very young. We are either told to stop doing it by our parents, or we consciously or subconsciously observe that others do not have the same habit, and we gradually grow out of it. It is when we intentionally or unintentionally pick up new habits in our later childhood or early adulthood that it becomes a problem. Unless we can break that habit early on, it becomes a part of our life, and becomes 'programmed' into our brain.

A recent study of human memory suggests that no matter how hard we try to change our habits, it is the old ways that tend to win, especially in situations where we are rushed, stressed or overworked. Habits that we thought we had got rid of can suddenly come back. During the study programme, the researchers showed a group of volunteers several pictures, and gave them words to associate with them (for example, see a picture of tea, and associate it with 'breakfast'). They then showed the volunteers the same pictures again, and gave them new words to associate with them (see a picture of tea, and say 'afternoon').

A few days later, the volunteers were given a test. The researchers showed them the pictures, and told them to respond with one of the words they had been given for each one. It came as no surprise that their answers were split between the first set of words and the second. Two weeks later, they were given the same test again. This time, most of them only gave the first set of words. They appeared to have completely forgotten the second set.

The study confirms that the responses we learn first are those that remain strongest over time. We may try to change our ways, but after a while, the response that comes to mind first is usually the first one we learned. The more that response is used, the more automatic it becomes and the harder it becomes to respond in any other way.

The study therefore suggests that over time, our bad habits also become automatic, learned behaviour. This is not good news for people who picked up bad habits early in life and now want to change or break them. Even when we try to put new, good intentions into practice, those previously learned habits remain stronger in more automatic, unconscious forms of memory.

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2 Read Questions 1–7 below and underline the words that you think will help you find the right place in the passage.

Questions 1–7

Do the following *statements agree with the claims of the writer in the Reading passage?*

Write

YES	*if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer*
NO	*if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer*
NOT GIVEN	*if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this*

1 We usually develop bad habits when we are very young.
2 We can only break bad habits if people tell us to do so.
3 Bad habits may return when we are under pressure.
4 Researchers were surprised by the answers that the volunteers gave in the first test.
5 The volunteers found the test more difficult when they did it the second time.
6 People find it more difficult to remember things they learnt when they were young.
7 If we develop bad habits early in life, they are harder to get rid of.

Reading 2

Summary completion with a box

Fighting fear using virtual reality

Computers are not just for entertainment, shopping or research purposes – as one woman found out when she tried to cure her fears

Most people have at least one thing they are afraid of. A fear of things like snakes, spiders, dogs, heights or open spaces affects over 90% of the population. In extreme cases, a fear can develop into a **phobia**, where the fear of something is so powerful it can affect the way the sufferer lives their life. About 10% of people suffer from a phobia. Most sufferers never seek treatment, because the most common type of cure – 'exposure therapy' – involves them being **exposed** to the object of their fear, and this is the last thing many of them are prepared to do.

There is now a new cure for phobias, using something called **virtual** reality exposure **therapy** (VRET). The concept is simple. The person with the phobia wears a virtual reality headset. A computer, controlled by a **therapist**, then **simulates** a variety of situations in which the sufferer is gradually exposed to the object of their fear, which they view on the headset's screen. At the same time, the therapist explains why they should not be afraid of it. The technique is surprisingly successful, as this case demonstrates.

Sara Considine had a serious spider phobia, and had developed several spider-related behaviour patterns. Before going to bed, for example, she would check her room for spiders, then seal the windows with tape so none could get in. She had frightening dreams about spiders every night. Eventually, she decided to get treatment.

During twelve one-hour virtual reality sessions over a three-month period, Ms Considine started very slowly. First, she stood a long way from the virtual spider and just looked at it. Slowly, she moved a little closer. The therapist controlling the computer programme then made the virtual spider move. After just two sessions, Ms Considine reported that although she still saw spiders in her dreams, they were no longer frightening, and she had even managed to have an amusing 'conversation' with one of them. A few sessions later, the therapist encouraged her to hold the virtual spider in her virtual hand, and put it in places where the presence of a real spider would cause her fear. The next stage was to introduce touch. A large toy spider was placed next to her. Ms Considine then reached out to touch the virtual spider she could see on the screen, and at the same time her real hand touched the toy spider.

After her sessions were over, Sara Considine was able to stop her spider-related behaviour. She even took up camping, something she would never have considered before therapy. More recently she has appeared on a television nature programme, where for the first time she was able to hold a real spider in her hands.

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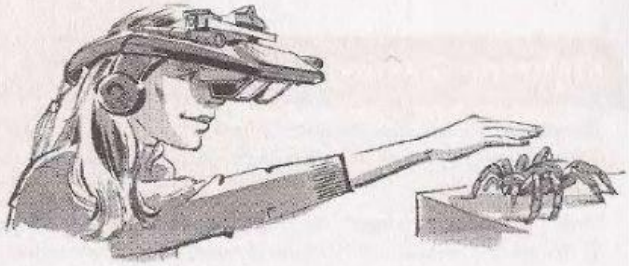

5 Now find the part of the passage that deals with Sara Considine's VRET treatment course and answer Questions 1–5.

Questions 1–5

Complete the summary using the list of words and phrases, A–J, below.

Treating a phobia using VRET

Sara Considine's programme of treatments lasted for **1** ..... months. At first, the sessions did not move very **2** ..... , as she just **3** ..... the virtual spider through her headset. It only took two sessions for her to stop being **4** ..... the spiders in her dreams. After a while, she could hold the virtual spider in her virtual hand, and the next stage involved making physical **5** ..... with a toy spider.

A	afraid of	**F**	quickly
B	amused by	**G**	slowly
C	contact	**H**	touch
D	held	**I**	three
E	observed	**J**	twelve

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