

What Is the Habit Doing for Me?

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Overcoming Addiction to Substance - Find a Replacement Behavior That Offers a Comparable Result* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains why substances work so well, how to name the state we are after, and why an honest replacement is slower. Search “replacement behavior” on the site to find it.

A substance is anything we take in that shifts our chemistry: soda, coffee, fast food, alcohol, cannabis, a prescription. Screens and apps work the same way. They are effective: significant results, consistent results, fast onset, and little effort. This is a question of efficiency, not morals. The work is to name the state the habit delivers, see how the pull moves through the four stages, and find a route to that state with fewer consequences. Choose one habit. A few words per space is enough.

STAGE ONE

The pull

The bottle on the counter, the phone lighting up, an image in the mind. It arrives as wanting, agitation, anticipation, or a bodily pull. The wanting is the system flagging something as worth pursuing, and it can stay strong long after we have stopped enjoying what it leads to.

STAGE TWO

Interpretation

Already present before we notice it: the conditioned associations, the prior relief, the current stress, the familiar setting, and the learned expectation that this will change how we feel.

What state am I trying to reach with this?

STAGE THREE

Conscious thought and behavior

The story and the action. One drink will help. I deserve a break. I just need to see who texted. Then we drink, scroll, or gamble, or we leave the room, call someone, or stay with the discomfort without completing the expected behavior.

STAGE FOUR

Return, resolution, and recataloging

When the habit happens, relief reinforces the pathway. When it does not, the wanting stays for a while, and then the system begins to regulate without the thing it expected. The old association remains. A new entry sits beside it: the impulse was real, and the action was not inevitable.

A WORKED EXAMPLE, FROM THE ARTICLE

WHAT I REACH FOR	Alcohol.
THE STATE I AM AFTER	Uninhibited, confident, relaxed, less anxious, forgetful of things I would rather not focus on.
THE CUE	Anxiety, or watching a sporting event.
WHERE IT FITS	A couple of beers at the ball game, or a bottle of wine with my wife on our anniversary.
WHERE IT DOES NOT	Ordering a shot to take before the cocktail. Situations that are not enjoyable without being drunk.
THE STORY	“I deserve a break.”
A REPLACEMENT	Working on relationships so the confidence alcohol imitates can arrive while staying authentic and in tune with ourselves and others.
HONESTLY	Slower, and more effort. The state may last longer, without the dependence.
RECATALOGING	The impulse was real, and the action was not inevitable.

If stopping or cutting back could bring physical withdrawal, as with alcohol and some medications, we talk with a doctor before changing anything. This sheet is a reflection, not a treatment plan.

What I reach for, and what it does for me

The big question is the state, not the substance.

WHAT I REACH FOR

The substance, screen, app, or food, and roughly how often.

THE STATE

What I am after

Check every state it delivers. Several at once is common.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Relaxed | ☐ Less anxious |
| ☐ Uninhibited, confident | ☐ Less lonely, a feeling like connection |
| ☐ Absorbed in the present | ☐ Permission to be who I want to be |
| ☐ Relief from overstimulation | ☐ Euphoric, satisfied |
| ☐ Distracted from something I would rather not face | ☐ Numb |
| ☐ In flow: clear goals, steady feedback | ☐ Belonging with the group |

IN MY OWN WORDS, THE STATE I AM AFTER

CONTEXT

Where it fits and where it does not

If I and the people close to me agreed I had a healthy relationship with it, where would it fit? Where does it already feel excessive or unnecessary?

WHERE IT FEELS REASONABLE

WHERE IT FEELS EXCESSIVE OR UNNECESSARY

WHAT IS TOO MUCH?

How would I know, in my own life, that it had become too much? What would someone who loves me notice first?

WITHOUT IT

Could I enjoy, or deal with, the paired activity without the substance? What would make that easier?

The pull through the four stages

Work from one recent time the pull arrived, whether or not we followed it.

THE MOMENT

Where was I, what was happening, and what was I already carrying?

How strong was the pull? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

STAGE ONE

The pull, and its cues

Habits pair the substance with a feeling or an activity: a cigarette after greasy food, a big soda on the commute home.

FEELINGS THAT CUE IT

PLACES, ACTIVITIES, PEOPLE PAIRED WITH IT

STAGE TWO

Interpretation

What did I expect it to do for me, before I thought about it?

STAGE THREE

Conscious thought and behavior

Separate the story from the action.

THE STORY I TOLD MYSELF

WHAT I DID (OR ALMOST DID)

STAGE FOUR

Return, resolution, and recataloging

Both outcomes get cataloged. Both become part of the next stage two.

IF I FOLLOWED THE PULL: WHAT CAME AFTER, AND WHAT GOT CATALOGED

IF I STAYED WITH THE WANTING: HOW LONG UNTIL IT EASED, AND WHAT GOT CATALOGED

Thinking counts as doing. Negotiating with the pull, and talking ourselves into it, are stage three too.

A replacement, honestly

It is rare to find a replacement that matches the fast onset and lack of effort of a substance. Hope involves being both reasonable and honest.

WHAT IT IMITATES

A slower route

The habit imitates something a slower route provides: flow through the arts or sport, regulation through vulnerable connection, belonging in an accepting group, presence through mindfulness, rest through sleep and nature, permission through authentic expression.

WHAT IT IMITATES FOR ME

A ROUTE TO THE SAME STATE

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

THE HONEST COST

A run takes forty minutes and months of getting in shape. A pill takes raising a hand to our mouth.

WHAT THE REPLACEMENT WILL ASK OF ME:

WHAT IT GIVES THAT THE HABIT DOES NOT:

WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY

The stocked fridge, the gas station store, the gathering that requires drunkenness to be fun, the people who encourage the quick fix.

WHAT IT HELPS ME NOT FEEL, AND WHO CAN HELP

WHAT IT HELPS ME NOT FEEL, AND WHAT COULD BE RESOLVED INSTEAD:

WHO HAS ALREADY BEEN THROUGH THIS, OR CAN STAY WITH ME WHILE THE WANTING PASSES:

THE CATALOG

The old association stays. Write the entry we want sitting beside it.

Not every substance or every use is a problem. If the consequences do not outweigh the benefits, and we have other ways to reach the state, that is our freedom.