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1. Title

Understanding and Changing Habit Loops in Recovery

2. Why This Matters (Recovery Context)

There is no such thing as an "addictive personality," but there are powerful "addictive habit loops" that drive behaviour.

Old addictive habits are never truly deleted from the brain, much like a file on a computer.

They can only be overwritten by new, healthier habits.

Relapses are not random events. They occur when healthy habits are neglected, allowing the old, buried addictive habit loop to re-emerge when a trigger appears.

Understanding how habit loops work gives you a clear framework and practical strategies to regain control over addictive behaviours.

3. What's Happening in the Brain and Body

A craving is a powerful "unwanted wanting" that feels like a need.

This feeling is caused by a surge of neurochemicals in the brain.

A craving is temporary; it is a neurochemical surge that typically lasts about 20 minutes and will pass.

The detailed neurobiology of habit loops was not covered in detail in the session.

4. The Addiction Lens

The habit loop is the engine of addiction. It creates a cycle that is difficult to break.

Cravings are the driving force of this loop. Without the craving, the addictive behaviour is less likely to occur.

Over time, the reward reinforces the initial cue, making the loop stronger and more automatic. For example, the mere sight of a pub (the cue) can trigger the entire cycle.

Recovery focuses on two key actions: first, actively disrupting each stage of the addictive habit loop, and second, building and reinforcing new, healthy habit loops to overwrite the old ones.

5. Core Model or Framework

The core model discussed is the **Habit Loop**, which consists of four parts:

1. **Cue (or Trigger)**: The prompt that starts the behaviour.

2. **Craving**: The motivation or desire to act.

3. **Response**: The action or behaviour itself.

4. **Reward**: The outcome that reinforces the loop.

Other useful frameworks mentioned:

HALT(S): A mnemonic to identify internal triggers: **H**ungry, **A**ngry/**A**nxious, **L**onely, **T**ired, **S**tressed/**T**hirsty.

The 4 Ds of Managing Cravings: **D**elay, **D**istract, **D**ecide (by reviewing goals), and **D**iffuse (using techniques like cognitive diffusion).



6. What This Looks Like in Real Life

The Computer File Analogy: Trying to eliminate a bad habit is like deleting a file. It's not truly gone until it's overwritten multiple times. If you stop reinforcing the new habits, the old one can easily be recovered.

Triggers: Cues can be external (people you use with, places like a pub, things like ashtrays) or internal (feelings like stress, shame, anxiety, pain, or even ruminating thoughts).

Self-Delusion: An example was given of a person with an alcohol problem who refused to get rid of an expensive wine collection, calling it a "financial investment." This is a way the mind justifies keeping triggers present.

Testing Yourself: A common but dangerous idea is to go to a place like a bar just to "prove" you are strong enough not to use. This is testing the fire to see if it's hot and is not a good strategy.

Habit Stacking: This involves adding a new desired habit to an existing automatic one. For example: practicing balancing on one leg while you brush your teeth.

7. Practical Strategies for Recovery

Disrupting the Addictive Habit Loop

1. Manage the Cue (Trigger)

Be the Master of Your Environment:

- Remove all paraphernalia (e.g., ashtrays, alcohol in the house).
- Change your daily routes to avoid triggers like bottle shops.
- Change your social circle if certain people are triggers for use.

Manage Your Internal State (using HALTS):

- If **Hungry**, eat something.
- If **Angry** or **Anxious**, exercise or talk to a therapist.
- If **Lonely**, call a friend or connect with support networks.
- If **Tired**, get some rest.
- If **Stressed** or **Thirsty**, rehydrate or use stress-management techniques.

Therapy: Work with a therapist to address deep-seated internal triggers. True progress in therapy requires persistence through the challenging stages.

2. Manage the Craving

Remember it's Temporary: Cravings are a neurochemical surge that lasts about 20 minutes. You can wait it out. Set a timer.

Use the 4 Ds: Delay, Distract, Decide, Diffuse.

Breathing Exercises: Use techniques like box breathing or resonance breathing to calm the nervous system.

Physical Strategies:

- **Exercise:** A powerful way to manage cravings.
- **Eat or Drink Something:** A healthy snack or a large glass of water can help. Some people use a thickshake to create a feeling of fullness that is incompatible with using.

Cognitive Strategies:

- **Cognitive Diffusion:** (from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) Create distance from



your thoughts.

- **Connect with Your Values:** Remind yourself why you are in recovery and what is important to you.

Medications: Medications like naltrexone can help reduce cravings, but they do not do the work for you. They are a tool to assist your own efforts.

3. Manage the Response

Make it More Difficult:

- **Financial Control:** Limit access to money.
- **Social Control:** Block and delete contacts of dealers or using-friends.
- **Environmental Control:** Ban yourself from venues (e.g., casinos, pubs).
- **Legal Control:** The consequences of illegal acts to get drugs can be a deterrent.

4. Manage the Reward

Minimise the "Payoff":

- **Play the Tape Forward:** Think through the real consequences of using. What happened last time?

- **Write a Letter to Yourself:** Document in detail the negative consequences of past use. Read it when you are tempted, to remind yourself of the reality, not the illusion.

- **Contingency Management:** Give a trusted friend a significant amount of money (\$200, \$500). If you stay sober for the agreed period (e.g., a week or a month), you get it back. If you use, they keep it. This creates a financial disincentive.

Disulfiram: This medication creates a severe, unpleasant physical reaction (nausea, headache, chest pain) if alcohol is consumed. It only works if you take it, but can be effective for those who are motivated in the morning but struggle later in the day.

Building New, Healthy Habit Loops

The Goal: Overwrite the old addictive loop with multiple healthy habits (e.g., exercise, diet, sleep, relationships, meditation, purpose).

1. Create a Cue

Make the cue obvious and consistent. For exercise, lay out your gym clothes and shoes by the bed.

Habit Stack: Link a new habit to an existing one. For example:

- Do balance exercises while brushing your teeth.
 - Do a chin-up every time you walk through a specific doorway.
- Get a dog that needs walking twice a day, ensuring you get out of the house.

2. Create a Craving

Reframe your mindset. You can learn to crave healthy activities by focusing on their benefits. Visualise the positive outcomes: feeling good, looking good, having more energy, being able to play with your children, sleeping better.

3. Make the Response Easier

Reduce Friction: Identify and remove all the small obstacles that stop you.



- If it's "too cold," sleep in your gym clothes.
- If you're "too busy," analyse where your time goes (e.g., doom-scrolling) and prioritise your health.

Challenge Self-Delusion: Be aware of the excuses your brain makes to avoid the healthy habit (e.g., "I'm just keeping up with current affairs").

4. Make the Reward Obvious

Focus on the immediate positive reinforcement.

Notice how exercise improves your mood, reduces pain, and helps you sleep.

Acknowledge the feeling of accomplishment and the long-term health benefits.

9. Key Take-Home Messages

You have the power to control your addiction by understanding and intervening in your habit loops.

Recovery is a two-part process: systematically breaking down the old, addictive habits and deliberately building new, healthy ones to take their place.

Consistency is key. You must practise your new habits repeatedly until they become automatic, overwriting the old patterns.

10. Optional Reflection Questions

What is one of my main addictive habit loops (Cue -> Craving -> Response -> Reward)?

What are my top 3 external triggers? What is one change I can make to my environment this week?

What are my most common internal triggers (e.g., HALTS)? How can I plan to respond to them differently?

What is one healthy habit I want to build? How can I use habit stacking to make it easier to start?

What are the small points of "friction" that stop me from following through on healthy habits, and how can I remove them?