



When habits become *out of control*

a guide to managing unhelpful habits

An introduction



When we do certain behaviours or activities in our lives often enough, they soon become a habit. These can be healthy habits such as exercising, going to bed early, staying hydrated, or eating regular, healthy meals. However, they can also be unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking alcohol, drinking caffeine, gambling, or eating unhealthy foods. And sometimes these healthy or unhealthy habits can become out of control. When this happens, we often feel like we **HAVE TO** do the habit, we feel unable to limit how often we do it, and if we do manage to stop for a short while it causes us significant emotional distress. What has happened is that we have become dependent on these habits to feel good and self-soothe, and our engagement with them has become out of our control. Eventually, this lack of control can harm our mental health, our physical health, our relationships, and every other aspect of our life.

Learning about our habits

What habits can become out of control?

Any habit can become out of control or harmful through doing it to excess. Even usually healthy habits such as exercising or eating can become harmful. However, the most common activities that people engage in that become out of control and significantly harmful to your wellbeing are:

- Drinking alcohol
- Using drugs or other substances
- Gambling
- Playing video games
- Going on the internet
- Watching pornography
- Having sex
- Shopping
- Smoking



How do I know if something has become out of control?

It can be difficult to recognise when a habit has become out of control as it often happens slowly and you may be unsure how much is 'too much', especially as there is no absolute number that works for everyone.

For example, if you are training for a marathon you may be going on long runs every day, and this level of exercise is normal for you and part of a well developed training and nutrition regime. However, if you are not training for a marathon but are running long distances every day without the proper training and nutritional support, this may be one habit that you are doing 'too much'.

On the other hand, if you spend a lot of time on the internet or social media but notice that you have stopped doing other hobbies and have started to miss appointments or cancel plans in order to scroll through Instagram or Tiktok, you may be doing this activity 'too much'.

Similarly, if you like to drink alcohol regularly but are noticing that you are spending so much money on it that you struggle to pay your bills, you may be doing this activity 'too much'.

Therefore, we may notice a habit becoming unhealthy when it starts to negatively impact on our lives in some way.

It may impact on your physical health when you start to experience:

- Difficulty sleeping or not getting enough sleep
- Tiredness
- Not eating regularly
- Becoming ill more often
- Decreased sex drive

It may affect your mental health and you may experience more:

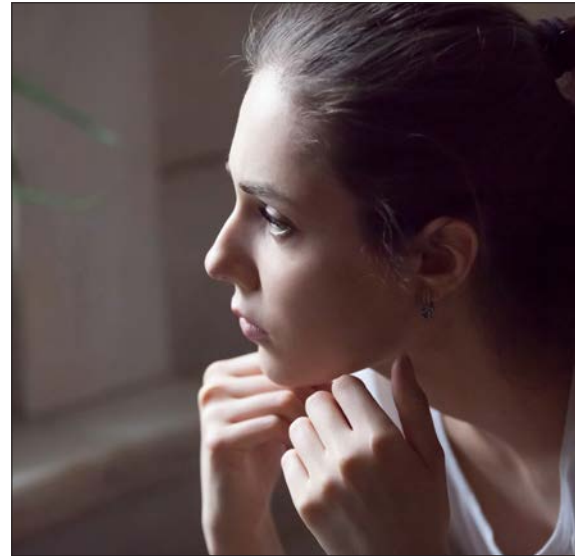
- Mood changes
- Irritability/anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Paranoia
- Feelings of hopelessness

It may affect your behaviours and relationships with others, as you may:

- Exhibit secretive or dishonest behaviour
- Display poor performance/attendance at work or school
- Withdraw from responsibilities
- Withdraw from friends and family
- See relationships breakdown
- Have financial difficulties
- Lose interest in activities, hobbies or events that were once important to you
- Try but fail to reduce or stop the habit

However, a habit typically becomes 'out of control' when you are unable to stop engaging in that behaviour and when trying to stop causes you significant emotional distress.

If you feel that something in your life might be getting out of control, you should reach out for support and guidance from friends, family and professionals.



Why do we keep doing something when we know it is bad for us?

If we know that doing some behaviours or activities to excess can have harmful effects on our physical health, mental health, relationships, and personal and professional lives, why do we keep doing them?

Often, these habits have become a way of soothing our pain. Our brain is unable to differentiate between physical and emotional pain, and so when we experience emotional pain or distress, our brains perceive it in the same way we would a physical injury. However, while many of us are well equipped to respond to a physical injury, we can be uncomfortable with tolerating emotional pain. When we experience a physical injury, we may bandage it, nurture it, and allow our bodies to rest and recover. However, many of us have not learned how to do this for our emotional wounds.

Instead, we turn to unhelpful coping mechanisms; instead of nurturing the emotional wound and allowing it to heal, we try to avoid or minimise the pain we are feeling through external stimulants that create a temporary emotional high, such as alcohol, drugs, exercise, sex, or any of the other activities listed above. This method of self-soothing is well reinforced in our brain's reward pathways.



Self-soothing behaviours

Our brains are highly efficient 'meaning-making' machines, an attribute which allows us to use the information we perceive to help us navigate our environment in the most resourceful way. If we touch something hot, and it hurts us, we store this as an assumption, which allows us to avoid this pain in the future. In a similar way, when it comes to reward pathways, we learn that certain behaviours can lead to a positive consequence. For example, if we're feeling sad and a friend gives us a hug and this makes us feel better, our brain stores this information so that next time we're feeling sad we can go to our friends and ask for a hug, as we know it will make us feel better.

However, sometimes we can learn that certain behaviours such as exercise, shopping, gambling, or drinking alcohol can also result in us feeling temporarily better, and so we turn to that behaviour whenever we're not feeling good. This becomes unhelpful when our brain starts to think: if I keep engaging in this behaviour, maybe I'll never feel bad again. If I keep drinking, or shopping, maybe I can avoid this bad feeling altogether.

Over time, our body and our brain become dependent on this behaviour in order to feel good. You may not necessarily be feeling a positive consequence anymore from that behaviour, but your mind has been conditioned into thinking you need that behaviour in order to function and survive. When we therefore try to stop engaging in that behaviour, our body starts going into panic mode, perceiving this change of behaviour as a threat or danger to our system, and developing what are sometimes referred to as 'withdrawal' symptoms.

“Instead of nurturing the emotional wound and allowing it to heal, we try to avoid or minimise the pain we are feeling through external stimulants that create a temporary emotional high.”

	<p>Hyperarousal zone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heightened emotions and sensitivity • Emotionally overwhelmed • Fight/flight response triggered • Difficulty concentrating • Hyper-vigilance • Racing thoughts • Intrusive imagery
	<p>Window of tolerance 'optimal arousal' zone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings are tolerable • Present, calm and safe • Can think and respond clearly • Reactions adapt to fit the situation • Engaged and alert
	<p>Hypoarousal zone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numbness • Lack of emotions • Disconnected, zoned out • Passive • Lethargic, no energy • Shut down

Why do we need to self-soothe?

Everyone's ability to cope with or tolerate emotional distress is unique and individual. Some people will find it easier to tolerate distressing situations and the emotions that arise from these without needing to self-soothe, whereas others will find the severity of certain emotions intolerable. The amount of distress we can tolerate is sometimes called our 'window of tolerance'. If we have a large window of tolerance there is a large range of situations and emotions that we can tolerate, whereas if we have a narrow window of tolerance, we have a much smaller range of situations and emotions that we can tolerate and are therefore more likely to become easily overwhelmed. The window of tolerance therefore describes how much we can tolerate before we go into 'fight, flight, or freeze' mode. This occurs when our brains perceive something as a significant threat, and we respond to protect ourselves - we try to get away from the feeling as soon as possible.

The image above describes how we may respond in a state of hyperarousal, which tends to be action-oriented, or hypoarousal, which may present in the form of avoidance or numbness. It is most often in this state of hyper- or hypo-arousal when we are outside our window of tolerance that we reach for our soothing behaviours to help us cope with emotional distress.



What can I do instead when I get overwhelmed?

It can often feel overwhelming trying to manage difficult emotions, and so it may seem easier to shut them off completely and pretend they don't exist. However, bottling or ignoring our emotions in this way, sometimes referred to as 'emotional avoidance', will only make things worse.

There are four specific abilities related to emotional regulation that can help us expand our window of tolerance and be less reliant on harmful behaviours to self-soothe. These are:

- Being aware of our emotions
- Identifying and categorising our emotions
- Interpreting our emotions and their physiological effects
- Accepting and enduring negative emotions

Being aware of our emotions

In order to regulate or tolerate our emotions we have to first be aware of them. Take a minute and consider how you know when you are happy, angry, sad, or scared:

- What does it feel like?
- Where do you feel it in your body?
- How do you feel different?
- If this feeling in your body was an image, what would it look like?

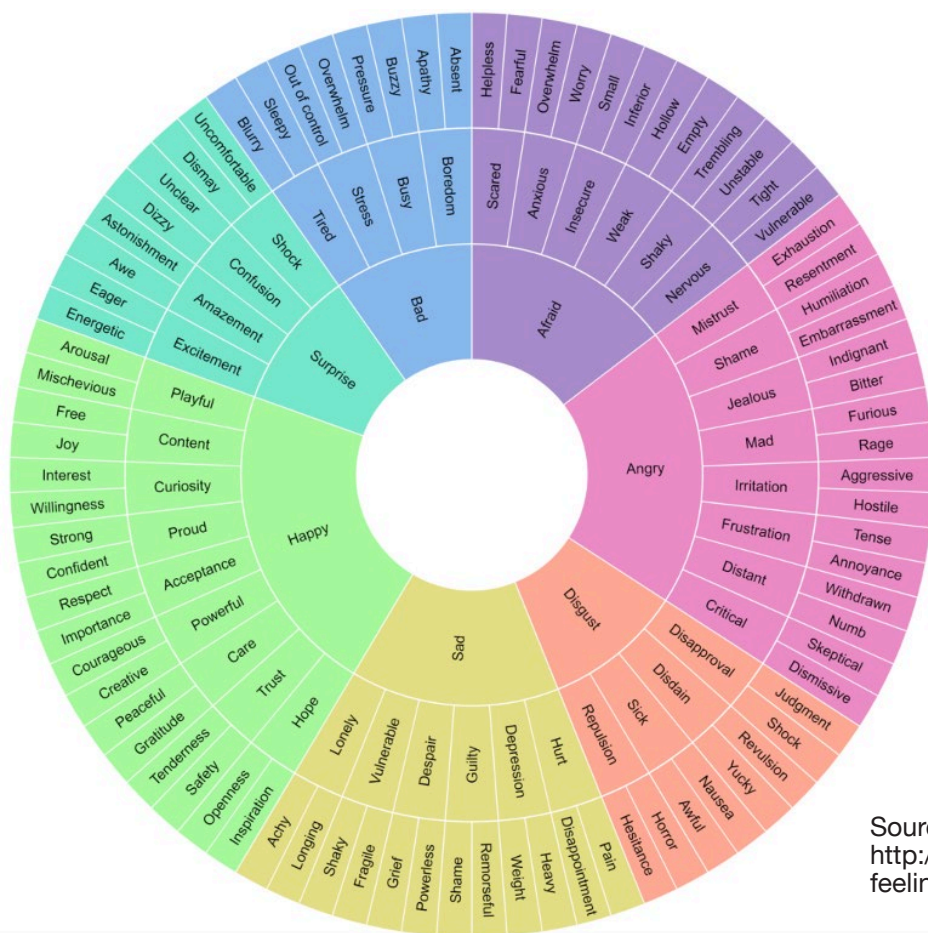
TIP: If you find that you struggle to connect with your emotions, you may benefit from practising mindfulness. This is the practice of being more present and not worrying about things that happened in the past or that might happen in the future. This can help you to connect more with what you are experiencing right now.

Identifying and interpreting our emotions

The emotion wheel below can be a helpful tool to begin to recognise your emotions. The wheel allows you to go a deeper into identifying the specific feeling you are facing. It may sound simple but being able to label exactly what you are feeling in this way can have a profound effect on the power that emotion has over you. We have emotions for a reason, and often it is our brain's way of trying to tell us something. Emotions help our brain communicate what they are experiencing, to allow us to take inspired action in response to this.

For example, if we are feeling sad, we may use the emotion wheel below to realise that our sadness is coming from a place of loneliness, which means we are feeling isolated. So, what we may be needing in that moment is to reach out and be able to connect with someone else.

When we self-soothe using unrelated behaviours or activities such as gambling or exercising, we deprive ourselves of getting our real needs met! This information allows us to therefore respond to our emotions in a healthy way and give ourselves what we need in order to soothe the core pain, or at the very least understand it, rather than cover it up.



Source: <http://www.drAlbertWong.com/feelings-wheel/>

Accepting and enduring difficult emotions

Emotional distress is difficult to tolerate, we may feel like we are unable to cope with the distress and that is why we need to get away from it. However, emotions don't last forever and when we stop our emotions from naturally reaching their peak and going down by themselves, we reinforce the need for avoidance and self-soothing. Therefore, learning to tolerate difficult emotions requires you to sit with the uncomfortable feelings until they start to reduce by themselves and this takes time. Sometimes people give up after a few tries at tolerating their distress if it stays high for a long time and revert back to their self-soothing behaviour. Remember, the more often you do it, the lower your distress will be initially, and the faster it will decline. You need to stick with it.

Expect to be very tempted to use your quick fix self-soothe behaviour to bring down your distress. This is normal, but you must not give in to the urge, especially when your distress is high and the urge is strong. If you use your self-soothing behaviour while your distress is high, you will feel exceptional relief, and it will be that much more difficult to resist the urge to use it the next time.

Sometimes people try to tolerate difficult emotions by promising themselves that they will do their self-soothing behaviour later. However, by doing this, you are not learning to tolerate your emotions as you are still trying to decrease your distress. The purpose of learning to tolerate your emotions is to help you recognise that your self-soothing behaviours are ultimately unnecessary.

Similarly, you may want to reassure yourself when you're feeling significant distress, telling yourself it will be over soon, what you fear is not real/not really going to happen, etc. However, what this does is trivialise or minimise the threat you are facing. This will act as a coping strategy to decrease your distress rather than allowing you to learn that your self-soothing behaviours are unnecessary. You may however, use statements such as: "this is difficult but if I stick it out it will pay off" or "this distress is unpleasant but it is not dangerous," and "I can do this". This helps you to stay with the distress and motivates you to continue without acting as a coping strategy.



Getting your habits back under control

Deciding to take back control of your behaviour is not an easy endeavour. If you have decided this is something you want to do for yourself and for your mental health, well done for making it this far. However, there will be times when it will take effort and determination to overcome your physical and emotional urge to give in to your self-soothing behaviour. At these times, it is important to remind yourself of why you have made this decision, and what you are doing this for. This motivation will act as leverage for you at your most difficult times and help you persevere with your goal.

Some useful questions to ask yourself, and remind yourself of, when you are struggling to make this change:

- Why do I believe I need to stop engaging in this behaviour?
- What is this behaviour getting in the way of me achieving?
- What would be the consequences if I were to continue to partake in this behaviour?
- Who is being negatively impacted by my decision to partake? How is it impacting them?

Challenging unhelpful thinking

Your brain may tell you things to try and throw you off track and back to your self-soothing behaviour telling you that's not that bad:

- “I can stop whenever I want”
- “I'll do it just this once”
- “I don't have a problem”
- “All my friends do it”

Or it may try to tell you that you are bound to fail anyway:

- “I can't cope without it”
- “I'm always going to be a loser”
- “I'm never going to be able to stop, what's the point in even trying”

It is important to recognise the thoughts that come up the most for you and learn how to challenge these and keep yourself on track. For example, some alternative thoughts might be:

- “I can get through this one step at a time”
- “My health and wellbeing are more important to me than engaging in this behaviour”
- “I am stronger than this; I believe in myself”

“There are times when it will take effort and determination to overcome your physical and emotional urge to give in to your self-soothing behaviour.”

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Taking action

Recognising triggers

An important part of moving forward from harmful self-soothing behaviours is recognising what situations or emotions are the most difficult for you to tolerate, or which ones you most often try to avoid or feel better from. It may be that there are a number of situations which cause your distress to surface. These can be referred to as 'triggers'. This could be, for example, feeling lonely, feeling stressed, being criticised, or making a mistake.

Removing temptation

Breaking a self-soothing habit or behaviour can be a difficult journey, requiring a great deal of self-reflection, honesty, and a strong will. One way to make this easier for yourself, is to try and remove any forms of temptation in your life, either in the form of physical access or situations in which you may be exposed to triggers.

For example, saying 'no' to social situations in which there may be alcohol present. Adding your e-mail address to online gambling blacklist sites. Blocking or removing internet shopping apps from your devices.

This may sound or feel extreme at first, particularly if your long-term goal involves hoping to regain a degree of exposure to these situations in your daily life. However, reducing the number of instances which test your boundaries, and your resolve, in the short term, will give you the time and space needed to break the cycle. Ultimately, making it easier for you to be in these situations, and say 'no', in the long term.

Accountability

Breaking a self-soothing habit is not something you have to do by yourself, help and support is always available to you, be it in the form of friends and family members, support groups, or therapy. Having someone who you can turn to, to hold you accountable, and remind you of your goals when you feel your determination slipping, can make all the difference in those moments of weakness.

Relapse

Recovery is often not a linear progression; there will be some days that feel easier than others, and some days when you feel like you've taken a temporary step backwards. This is all part of the journey. It is important to be kind to yourself on these days, remember how far you've come already, and not give up on where you want to be.

Relapse can, in some ways, also be a great learning opportunity to help you understand and identify new triggers, and thus help lay a stronger foundation from which you can bounce back and continue moving forward.

TIP: If you struggle to identify your triggers, speaking to a therapist can be very helpful. They can help you to identify and manage any potential triggers, as well as develop alternative, healthy strategies to use whenever they arise.

Seeking further help

Overcoming shame

It may be that admitting something in your life has gotten out of control or caused significant harm to you, your relationships, your finances, or other aspects of your life is a very scary idea. You may fear that admitting this could lead to judgement, social rejection, or shame.

It is important to be kind to yourself and remember that this is something that can affect absolutely anybody, regardless of gender, age, or socioeconomic status, and is commonly a result of life experiences. Struggling with out of control habits is not something to be ashamed of, nor is it your fault.

However, dealing with a harmful habit without support or guidance can be a very isolating and challenging experience. Left ignored, your control can continue to deteriorate, impacting you physically, emotionally and socially. Please, do not wait until the situation worsens to reach out for help.

Trauma and distress tolerance

Sometimes dependence on self-soothing behaviours can be a symptom of underlying trauma. If you feel your self-soothing behaviours may be a result of unprocessed traumatic experiences in your life, please reach out to a specialist practitioner who can help you make sense of, and process, the underlying cause of your addiction.

First Psychology practitioners who have experience working with trauma can be found on our website, or alternatively, speak to one of our friendly office staff who can help match you with a suitable practitioner.

First Psychology booklets

At First Psychology, we have a number of free pdf booklets and guides which can help you on your journey to regaining control. Some of the titles that you may find particularly helpful are included below:

Your Guide To Mindfulness

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/mindfulness-booklet.pdf>

Understanding And Learning How To Be Self-Compassionate - A Workbook and Guide

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/self-compassion-booklet.pdf>

Eating Disorders And Body Image Issues

<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/eating-and-body-image-booklet.pdf>

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Other resources which may be helpful

Websites

www.gamcare.com - offers free information and support for gambling addiction
www.goforgreatness.org – online porn addiction resources
www.sfad.org.uk – Scottish families affected by alcohol and drugs
www.breakingfreeonline.com - evidence based programme for substance misuse
smartrecovery.org.uk - online meetings for recovery from any addictive behaviour

Books

Understanding and Helping an Addict (and keeping your sanity)
by Dr Andrew Proulx

Rewire: Change Your Brain to Break Bad Habits, Overcome Addictions, Conquer Self-Destructive Behavior
by Richard O'Connor

Overcoming your Addictions
by Windy Dryden and Walter Matweychuk

Eating in the Light of the Moon: How Women Can Transform Their Relationship With Food Through Myths, Metaphors and Storytelling
by Anita Johnston

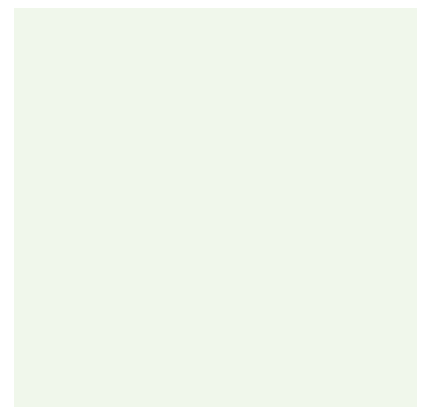
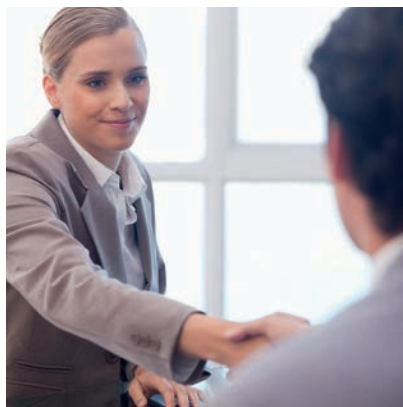
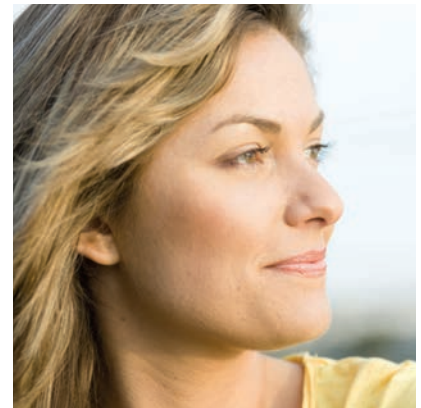


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- Therapy and coaching services for women, men, couples, children, young people and families.
- Employee counselling, CBT & psychological therapies; promotion of wellbeing in the workplace; and rehabilitation and personal injury support.

All First Psychology practitioners have excellent qualifications and experience, so you can come to us knowing that you will see an experienced professional.



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