

THE FIRES WITHIN



Breaking the Cycles of Addiction
and Compulsive Behaviors
Through CBT, Zen, & 12 Step Practice

KONSEKI and RAY



THE FIRES WITHIN™

A Comprehensive Guide to Breaking the Behavioral Cycle.

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Written by Konseki and Ray

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DEDICATION

From Konseki:

To all those out there still lost and suffering from the grasp of addiction and compulsive behaviors:

This is the beginning of hope – not as a promise, but as a practice.

This is the beginning of peace – not as an escape, but as engagement with life as it is.

This is the beginning of clarity – not as judgment, but as compassion.

This is the beginning of freedom – not from the past, but through it.

This is the beginning of willingness – not as effort, but as openness.

This is the beginning of reconciliation – not as a transaction, but as a sacred act of healing.

This is the beginning of integration – not as an effort, but as an embodiment.

This is the beginning – not of weakness, but of wisdom.

May you be happy. May you be safe. May you be in good health and spirits. May you navigate through life with ease. – Konseki

From Ray:

Thank you for taking your precious time to read this book. You will learn lots about yourself, your behaviors, and your emotions. Using the tools in the toolbox will keep you and others safe. Please use them! There's a saying that "Hurt people - hurt people.", and it's true. We never want to hurt people again – you, me, and everyone else. Changing ourselves is a hard journey, but the road to recovery leads to happiness and freedom. It's worth the journey. And be sure to connect with your spiritual side because we all have one. He gave me strength when weak, hope when lost, and happiness in darkness. I dedicate this book to you and to your bright future. - Ray

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FOREWORD

Angulimala

The story of Angulimala and the Buddha is a vivid parable of radical transformation. It shows that even the most destructive patterns can be turned towards healing when met with compassion, insight, and practice.

Angulimala was feared across the land. He had murdered many, collecting a grisly necklace of fingers from his victims. His rage and delusion seemed beyond redemption.

One day, he saw the Buddha walking calmly along the road. Angulimala chased after him, but no matter how fast he ran, he could not catch up. Exhausted, he shouted: “Stop, monk!” The Buddha replied, “I have stopped, Angulimala. It is you who have not stopped.”

In that moment, Angulimala realized the truth – the Buddha had stopped harming, stopped hatred, stopped delusion. Angulimala had not. Struck by this insight, he laid down his weapons, asked for guidance, and became a monk. Though the villagers distrusted him, he persisted in meditation and service, eventually finding peace.

Why This Matters for Transformation

No one is beyond change – even the most destructive fires can be transformed.

Compassion breaks cycles – the Buddha’s calm presence revealed a new way forward.

Practice sustains transformation – Angulimala’s journey required daily discipline.

Our book’s goal: to help readers face their own “inner Angulimala” – the fires of anger, lust, shame, and rejection – and discover that transformation is always possible.

“No fire is too fierce to be transformed.”

INTRODUCTION



What You'll Find in This Book

This book is organized to take you on a journey of understanding and transformation:

Part 1: Understanding Your Emotions (Chapters 1-2)

We'll explore the science of emotions, introducing you to our database of 1,348 distinct emotional states (the complete list is in Appendix 1). You'll learn that emotions aren't good or bad—they're information. And learning to read that information is the first step toward freedom.

Part 2: The Behavioral Cycle (Chapters 3-9)

We'll walk through each phase of the cycle: Build-Up, Acting Out, Justification, and Pretend Normal. You'll learn to recognize the warning signs in your body, thoughts, and behaviors. You'll understand how trauma triggers fit into the cycle. And you'll begin to see the patterns that have kept you stuck.

Part 3: Breaking Free (Chapters 10-20)

This is where transformation happens. We'll give you concrete tools from CBT, Zen practice, and 12-Step recovery. You'll learn meditation techniques, thought-stopping exercises, community-building strategies, and self-compassion practices. This isn't just about stopping destructive behaviors—it's about building a life you actually want to live. We'll also walk you through the four communication styles - so you and the people you love can finally understand each other.

Part 4: Special Topics (Chapters 21-30)

We'll address specific challenges: relationships, sexuality, trauma healing, relapse prevention, and building long-term recovery. These chapters go deep into areas that often get glossed over in other recovery books.

Part 5: Living in Recovery (Chapters 31-40)

Recovery isn't a destination—it's a lifestyle. These final chapters help you integrate everything you've learned into a sustainable, joyful way of living. This is about thriving, not just surviving.

The Personal Sidebars

You'll notice several types of content throughout:

Ray's Story: Personal experiences from Ray's journey through addiction, therapy, and recovery. These stories show the raw, honest struggle—and the hope.

Konseki's Story: Reflections from Konseki's perspective, often drawing on Zen wisdom and spiritual insights. These stories offer a different lens on the same journey.

Tool Box: Practical exercises, techniques, and practices you can use immediately. These are the concrete tools that will help you change.

Remember This Phrase: Key recovery mantras that you can return to again and again. Simple truths that guide you through difficult moments.

VERY IMPORTANT POINTS

These messages should not be ignored and warrant a deep understanding.

We recommend reading this book slowly, doing the exercises, and giving yourself time to process. This is deep work. There's no rush.

Why This Book?

If you're reading this book, you probably want to understand yourself better. You want to know why you do what you do—especially the things that hurt you and the people you love. You're tired of the cycle. You're tired of the shame. You're ready for something different.

We see you. We understand. We've been there.

Methods described here can be used for most any addiction: food, social media, alcohol, drugs, gambling, shopping, sex, and others.

This book exists because both of us—Konseki and Ray—spent years trapped in patterns we couldn't break. We hurt people we loved. We made promises we couldn't keep. We swore "never again," only to find ourselves right back in the same destructive behaviors. We became master manipulators to win our victims' trust. We wore many masks so people would never know who we really were. But we desperately wanted to understand WHY we were this way.

What we discovered changed everything. And we wrote this book to share it with you.

Ray's Story: I remember sitting in my therapist's office, broken and desperate. My family was falling apart. I had lost their trust. I had hurt the people I loved most. I didn't want to be that person anymore, but I didn't know how to stop. I signed up for the most intense therapy program I could find because I needed answers. I needed to understand WHY I kept doing these things. That journey led me here—to recovery, to healing, and eventually to writing this book with Konseki. If you're in that desperate place right now, know this: understanding is possible. Change is possible. Healing is possible. We're going to walk that path together.

What Makes This Book Different

There are hundreds of recovery books out there. Many of them are excellent. So why did we write another one?

Because we discovered something that changed how we understand addiction, compulsive behavior, and recovery. It's called the **Behavioral Cycle**, and once you see it, you can't unsee it. More importantly, once you understand it, you can finally break free from it.

This book integrates three powerful approaches:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) — the *Mind* pillar. Learning to recognize, examine, and change the thoughts that drive the cycle.
- Zen practice — the *Body* pillar. Getting out of your head and into the body through meditation, breath, and presence. Being rather than doing.
- 12-Step Recovery — the *Spirit* pillar. Turning your life over to something greater than yourself, building a moral compass, walking the road with people who have walked it before.

We call this the Body, Mind, and Spirit approach. It's not just about stopping destructive behaviors—it's about building an entirely new way of living.

Konseki's Story: I attended a Southern Baptist military school from fifth grade through tenth grade. Our motto, emblazoned on our crest, was 'Body, Mind, and Spirit.' I didn't understand the significance of those words back then. But today, after decades of recovery work integrating CBT, Zen practice, and 12-Step principles, I finally grasp the profound wisdom of that motto. True recovery—real transformation—requires all three. We cannot heal our minds without connecting to our bodies. We cannot sustain recovery without spiritual community. This book brings these three dimensions together because that's what works. That's what changed my life. That's what will change yours.

The Three Pillars

CBT is based on a simple yet powerful idea: our thoughts influence our feelings, which in turn influence our behaviors. When we change our thoughts, we change our lives.

Zen doesn't argue with thoughts. It watches them. Where CBT challenges distortions, Zen invites us to see their impermanence. Together, they offer both intervention and insight.

The 12 Step Program is more than a recovery method — it's a spiritual path. Born from the experience of addiction and redemption, it offers a structured journey from powerlessness to purpose. When combined with CBT's clarity and Zen's stillness, The Steps become a living rhythm for lifelong healing.

Recovery is not a destination. It's a rhythm. A breath. A return. In this book, we explore a path that is both ancient and modern, spiritual and scientific. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) teaches us to examine our thoughts and behaviors with clarity and precision. Zen Buddhism invites us to sit in stillness, to witness the mind without judgment. The 12 Step Program offers a communal, spiritual structure for surrender, accountability, and service.

Each of these disciplines offers a piece of the puzzle. Together, they form a map, not just for sobriety, but for a life of meaning, presence, and freedom. This is not a quick fix. It's a lifetime practice. But it is possible. And it begins now.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for anyone trapped in patterns they want to break:

- People struggling with addiction (drugs, alcohol, sex, food, gambling, technology)
- Those caught in compulsive behaviors that they can't seem to stop
- Anyone who keeps making the same mistakes despite knowing better

- People who have hurt others and desperately want to change
- Loved ones trying to understand someone caught in destructive cycles
- Therapists and counselors looking for a comprehensive framework

But most importantly, this book is for you if you're ready to do the work. This isn't a quick fix. This isn't a magic formula. This is an invitation to understand yourself deeply, face difficult truths with compassion, and build a new life from the ground up.

The Trauma Connection

Here's something crucial we need to address right from the start: addiction isn't the problem. Addiction manages the problem.

Most people living in the chaos of addiction don't want to be there. They simply don't know how to live without their addictive behaviors. Why? Because those behaviors are managing something deeper—usually trauma.

Trauma comes in many forms:

- Childhood abuse or neglect
- Significant losses or abandonment
- Physical, emotional, or sexual violations
- Witnessing violence or experiencing war
- Chronic stress or invalidation
- Accidents, medical trauma, or natural disasters

Trauma isn't always dramatic. Sometimes it's quiet, persistent, and easy to dismiss. But it leaves its mark. And for many people, addictive patterns become a way of dealing with that distress—a behavior that begins out of pain, not pleasure.

Konseki's Story: In Zen psychology, we understand that suffering is at the heart of addiction, not reward-seeking or pleasure-chasing. People use substances or behaviors to alter their moods, to deal with difficult emotions, to manage situations they don't know how to face. The addiction itself isn't the enemy—it's a symptom. The real work is addressing what drives the behavior in the first place. When we focus only on stopping the addiction without resolving the underlying trauma, we leave the core issue untouched. This is why relapse happens so frequently. The trauma remains, demanding to be managed. Understanding this changes everything.

A Word About Compassion

Throughout this book, we will challenge you. We will ask you to look at hard truths. We will invite you to take responsibility for your actions. But we will never shame you.

Shame keeps people stuck. Compassion for you creates change.

You are not a bad person trying to become good. You are a hurt person learning to heal. There's a profound difference.

Everything in this book comes from a place of deep respect for your struggle and profound belief in your capacity for change. We have walked this path. We know how hard it is. We also know that healing is possible.

Ray's Story: I remember sitting in my therapist's office, broken and desperate. My family was falling apart. I had lost their trust. I had hurt the people I loved most. I didn't want to be that person anymore, but I didn't know how to stop. I signed up for the most intense therapy program I could find because I needed answers. I needed to understand WHY I kept doing these things. That journey led me here—to recovery, to healing, and eventually to writing this book with Konseki. If you're in that desperate place right now, know this: understanding is possible. Change is possible. Healing is possible. We're going to walk that path together.

Konseki's Story: "The mind stores what the heart avoids. But healing begins with unpacking." Emotional baggage is the accumulation of unresolved experiences (grief, shame, trauma, regret, anxiety) that we carry like boxes in a dusty attic. We may not see them daily, but they shape our reactions, relationships, and self-worth. I've found that some of my strongest emotional responses weren't about the present; they were echoes from the past. Old wounds, unspoken truths, and buried memories cluttered my ability to live freely. What we don't unpack, we relive. Healing means opening the boxes, one by one. I've learned that cleaning the attic isn't about forgetting; it's about freeing up space for growth. Let's start our Spring Cleaning together, NOW!

Ready? But First – Why Change?

Take a deep breath. You've taken the hardest step by opening this book. Now let's walk forward together.

Welcome to The Fires Within™.

Welcome to understanding.

Welcome to freedom.

Let's begin.

Why People Don't Change — Until They Do

Most people in recovery have been told some version of this: "You'll change when you're ready."

That's almost true. The full version is harder, and it's the version that matters: **people change when staying the same becomes more painful than changing.**

That's it. That's the whole secret. It isn't willpower. It isn't motivation. It isn't even a particularly good day. It's the moment the math flips — when you finally see that the cost of *not* changing is higher than the cost of changing.

This is why information doesn't change us. We've all read the books, listened to the talks, and sat through the lectures. The data is on our side. But knowing the truth isn't the same as *feeling* the weight of it. Until the cost lands — until it gets specific, concrete, personal — knowledge sits on a shelf, doing nothing.

So before you read another word, we want you to do something unusual for a self-help book: **turn to Appendix 3 right now and start filling in the Reasons for Change worksheet.** Don't skip this. Don't promise yourself you'll come back to it. Don't read on first and "see what the book says." The whole book lands differently — the chapters land deeper, the practices stick longer, the hard work feels less impossible — when you've named your reasons out loud, on paper, before anything else.

The worksheet asks four questions for each reason you have:

- 1. What is the reason for change?** Specific. Concrete. Not "for my family" — *for whom, specifically*. Not "for myself" — *for what part of myself*.
- 2. Why does this reason matter to me?** Not why it matters to your wife, your parole officer, your sponsor, or your therapist. To *you*.
- 3. What will I gain by changing?** Honestly. Specifically. Not "happiness" — *what will tomorrow look like that today doesn't*.
- 4. What will I lose if I don't?** This is the hardest column. It's also the one that does the work. The reasons that wake you up at 3 a.m. live here.

Fill in as many rows as feel true. Some readers fill in three. Some fill in fifteen. There's no right number.

Then come back to that worksheet often. Re-read it before every chapter. Re-read it before every hard conversation. Re-read it before every intervention you try. The reasons you write down today are the first ones you'll forget when the Build-Up phase starts whispering its old script. That's why we put them on paper. That's why we put them at the back of the book, where you can flip to them at any moment.

The book teaches you *how* to break the cycle. The worksheet reminds you *why* you want to.

CHAPTER 1 – The Science of Emotions



Understanding the Language of Your Inner World

Here's a question: How are you feeling right now? If you're like most people, you might answer with one of the basics: good, bad, okay, fine, stressed, tired. Maybe you'd use more specific words like angry, sad, or anxious. But here's the thing—those common words barely scratch the surface of what you're actually experiencing.

Human beings can experience 1,348 distinct emotional states. Not five. Not fifty. One thousand, three hundred, and forty-eight.

Most of us have never learned their names. We've never been taught to recognize them in our bodies. We've certainly never learned how to work with them skillfully. And this ignorance—this emotional illiteracy—is at the root of so much suffering.

Ray's Story: When I first started therapy, my therapist asked me how I was feeling. I said 'fine.' She pushed: 'What are you feeling right now, in this moment?' I got irritated. 'I just told you—I'm fine.' She waited. The silence was uncomfortable. Finally, I said, 'I don't know. Frustrated, I guess? Angry that you keep asking?' She smiled gently and said, 'Good. That's a start. Now let's get more specific. Is it frustrated-angry or defensive-angry or scared-angry?' I looked at her like she was speaking another language. Scared-angry? What did that even mean? But as we worked together, I began to understand. My 'fine' was covering up a complex mix of emotions I didn't know how to name: shame about being in therapy, fear that I couldn't change, grief over what I'd lost, and underneath it all, a deep loneliness.

Learning to identify and name those emotions was the first step toward healing them.

Why Emotional Literacy Matters

Think of emotions as your internal guidance system. They're constantly giving you information about:

- What's happening in your environment
- Whether your needs are being met
- If you're safe or in danger
- What requires your attention
- Where you need to set boundaries
- When something isn't aligned with your values

Emotions aren't the enemy. They're not something to suppress, ignore, or run from. They're messengers. The problem isn't that you have emotions—the problem is that most of us never learned to read the messages.

When you can't identify what you're feeling, you can't address what you're experiencing. It's like having a check engine light on in your car but never looking under the hood. You just keep driving, hoping it goes away. Meanwhile, the problem gets worse.

In addiction and compulsive behavior, this emotional illiteracy becomes dangerous. When you can't name what you're feeling, you can't manage it. When you can't manage it, you turn to behaviors that make it go away temporarily—drugs, alcohol, sex, food, gambling, whatever your substance or behavior of choice might be. But the feeling always comes back. It has to, because you never actually dealt with what was causing it.

Konseki's Story: In Zen practice, we talk about 'bare attention'—the ability to observe what is without immediately reacting to it. When an emotion arises, can you simply notice it? Can you name it? Can you

feel where it lives in your body? Most people can't. They immediately try to fix it, suppress it, or act it out. But there's enormous power in the pause between feeling and acting. That pause is where freedom lives. That pause is where you learn that emotions are impermanent—they arise, they peak, they pass. You don't have to do anything with them except allow them to be. But first, you have to know what 'them' is. You have to learn the language of your inner world.

The 1,348 Emotions: A Database of Human Experience

Over the course of developing this book and our recovery programs, we compiled a comprehensive database of human emotional experience. This isn't our invention—these emotions have been documented by psychologists, neuroscientists, and contemplatives for decades. But most recovery programs focus on a handful of basics: anger, sad, afraid, ashamed. Our list is complete.

We went deeper. Much deeper.

Our database contains 1,348 distinct emotional states, organized into ten categories and five difficulty levels. You'll find the complete database in Appendix 1. This gives you a precise vocabulary for what you're experiencing. Instead of saying 'I feel bad,' you can identify: 'I'm feeling inadequate, which is triggering old shame, and underneath that is a fear of abandonment.'

See the difference? Precision matters. When you know exactly what you're feeling, you can work with it. When it's just a vague cloud of 'bad,' you're stuck.

Our Ten Categories

Every emotion in our database falls into one of our ten categories. These aren't arbitrary—they're based on fundamental human experiences:

1. ANGRY

From mild irritation to explosive rage. Anger tells you that a boundary has been crossed, that you or someone you care about has been harmed, or that something unjust is happening. Anger is energy—it can be destructive, or it can fuel necessary change.

Examples: frustrated, irritated, resentful, furious, outraged, bitter, hostile, vindictive

2. AFRAID

From slight nervousness to paralyzing terror. Fear alerts you to potential danger—real or perceived. It's your survival mechanism. But fear can also be based on past trauma rather than present reality, which is why learning to differentiate between them matters.

Examples: nervous, worried, anxious, panicked, terrified, apprehensive, uneasy, dread

3. SAD

From disappointment to deep grief. Sadness acknowledges loss—of a person, a dream, a version of yourself, a future you'd imagined. Sadness is not depression (though they're related). Sadness is natural, healthy, and necessary. Depression is sadness that has nowhere to go.

Examples: disappointed, melancholy, heartbroken, grieving, despondent, lonely, hopeless, dejected

4. ASHAMED

The feeling that there's something fundamentally wrong with who you are. Shame says 'I am bad,' whereas guilt says 'I did something bad.' Shame is one of the most toxic emotions in addiction because it keeps people hiding, lying, and stuck. Shame loves secrecy.

Examples: embarrassed, humiliated, mortified, worthless, defective, inadequate, exposed, dirty

5. GUILTY

The recognition that you've done something that violates your values or has harmed others. Guilt can be healthy—it's your conscience working. But excessive guilt, especially over things you can't control,

becomes destructive. Learning to separate appropriate guilt from shame is crucial.

Examples: remorseful, regretful, sorry, self-reproaching, at-fault, responsible, culpable

6. DISGUSTED

A visceral rejection of something perceived as toxic, contaminated, or morally repugnant. Disgust can be about food, smells, or behaviors—including your own. Self-disgust is particularly damaging in recovery.

Examples: repulsed, revolted, nauseated, appalled, sickened, contaminated, tainted

7. CONFUSED

Uncertainty, disorientation, and inability to make sense of what's happening. Confusion often precedes clarity, but it's uncomfortable. Many people act out just to escape the discomfort of not knowing.

Examples: bewildered, perplexed, disoriented, uncertain, ambivalent, conflicted, lost, stuck

8. SURPRISED

The response to unexpected events is both positive and negative. Surprise can range from pleasant astonishment to shock and trauma. It's the emotion of the unexpected.

Examples: astonished, amazed, shocked, stunned, startled, dumbfounded, blindsided

9. HAPPY

From contentment to ecstatic joy. Happiness is more than just pleasure—it includes satisfaction, peace, gratitude, and connection. Many people in active addiction have forgotten what genuine happiness feels like because they've been chasing artificial highs.

Examples: content, pleased, delighted, joyful, grateful, peaceful, fulfilled, euphoric

10. BORED

The feeling of dissatisfaction or uneasiness with life as it is — a restless sense that the present moment is not enough. In recovery, boredom is one of the most underestimated triggers. Many people act out simply to escape the discomfort of stillness, ordinariness, or the absence of stimulation. Learning to sit with boredom — without medicating it — is a foundational skill of long-term recovery.

Examples: restless, listless, uninterested, dissatisfied, weary, apathetic, jaded, indifferent

Tool Box: The Daily Emotion Check-In: Practice this every day for one week: Set a timer for three random times during the day. When it goes off, stop what you're doing and ask yourself: 'What am I feeling right now?' Try to identify at least three emotions. Be specific. Not just 'stressed'—what kind of stressed? Overwhelmed-stressed? Worried-stressed? Frustrated-stressed? Write them down. Notice where you feel them in your body. After a week, review your notes. What patterns do you see? Which emotions show up most often? This simple practice builds emotional literacy faster than anything else.

Our Five Difficulty Levels

Not all emotions are equally easy to identify or work with. We've organized our 1,348 emotions into five difficulty levels:

Beginner (40 emotions)

These are the basics—the emotions most people can identify fairly easily: words like angry, sad, happy, afraid, and ashamed. If you're just starting to build emotional literacy, start here. Master these before moving on to higher levels.

Intermediate (200 emotions)

More nuanced variations and blends. Frustrated, anxious, disappointed, embarrassed, resentful. These require more awareness and practice to identify accurately.

Expert (941 emotions)

Subtle, complex emotional states. Wistful, ambivalent, vindicated, melancholic, rueful. These often involve mixed feelings or require you to differentiate between similar emotions.

Master (500 emotions)

Highly specific states that capture precise inner experiences. These are the emotions that most people go their whole lives without naming, but once you learn them, you realize you've felt them hundreds of times.

Impossible (107 emotions)

Rare, extremely subtle, or culturally specific emotional states. These represent the outer edges of human emotional experience. Don't worry if you never master all of these—most people don't.

Ray's Story: I started at the beginner level and honestly struggled even there. I could identify 'angry' but I couldn't tell you if I was defensive-angry, frustrated-angry, or scared-angry. They all felt the same to me—just this big red blob of bad feeling. My therapist had me work with flashcards. Seriously, flashcards, like I was learning a foreign language. And you know what? I was. I was learning the language of my own inner world. It took months before I could reliably identify what I was feeling in real-time. But once I could, everything changed. I could say to my wife, 'I'm feeling defensive right now because I'm scared, you're going to leave me,' instead of just blowing up at her. That's the power of precision. That's the power of naming what's true.

Emotions Are Physical

Here's something crucial: emotions don't just happen in your mind. They happen in your body. Every emotion has a physical signature—a set of body signals that tell you what you're feeling before your conscious mind catches up.

When you're angry, you might notice:

- Jaw clenching
- Fists tightening
- Heat rising in your chest or face
- Heart rate increasing
- Muscles tensing

When you're afraid, you might notice:

- Stomach dropping
- Hands getting cold or sweaty
- Breathing is becoming shallow
- Muscles freezing or urge to run
- Heightened alertness

When you're ashamed, you might notice:

- Face flushing
- Eyes wanting to look away
- Shoulders curling inward
- Throat tightening
- Wanting to hide or disappear

Learning to read your body's signals is just as important as learning emotional vocabulary. Your body knows what you're feeling before your mind does. If you learn to listen, you get early warning of an emotional Build-Up.

Konseki's Story: Zen practice is fundamentally about embodiment—bringing awareness into the body. We sit in meditation not to escape the body but to inhabit it more fully. When I teach people to meditate, I don't start with the breath or the mind. I start with sensation. Can you feel your feet on the floor? Can you feel the weight of your body in the chair? Can you notice the temperature of the air on your skin? This is how you learn to live in your body instead of in your head. And once you're in your body, you can feel your emotions as they arise—

before they take over, before you act them out. The body is honest. The mind lies. Learn to trust the body.

Emotions Are Not Good or Bad

This might be the most important thing in this entire chapter: emotions are not moral categories. They're not good or bad, right or wrong. They just are.

Anger isn't bad. Fear isn't weakness. Sadness isn't pathological. Shame isn't evidence that you're defective. These are all just emotions—information about your inner and outer world.

What matters is what you do with them.

You can feel angry and choose to express it constructively. You can feel afraid and still move forward. You can feel ashamed and talk about it rather than hide it. You may feel an urge to act out, but pause before following through.

The emotion itself isn't the problem. The problem is when you:

- Deny that you're feeling it
- Judge yourself for feeling it
- Let it control your behavior
- Use substances or behaviors to avoid feeling it
- Act it out in ways that hurt yourself or others

Recovery isn't about not having difficult emotions. It's about having them and not letting them run your life.

Remember This Phrase: Feel it, don't feed it. When a difficult emotion arises, your job is to feel it—fully, completely, without trying to make it go away. What you don't have to do is feed it. You don't have to ruminate on it, tell everyone about it, act it out, or make it worse. Just feel it. Let it move through you. It will pass. All emotions do.

⚠️ CRITICAL SECTION FOR MEN AHEAD ⚠️

If you're a man, read this carefully.
If you love a man, share this with him.
This information could save a life.

⚠️ MEN: THIS COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE

The Power of Naming What You Feel and Telling Others!

Here's something critical that doesn't get talked about enough: it's important to tell people how you feel using the actual names of the emotions.

Women, generally speaking, are much better at this than men. They've been socialized to talk about feelings, to name them, to share them. Men? We stink at it. We're taught that feelings are weakness, that expressing them is unmanly, that we should just 'deal with it' or 'tough it out.'

This is killing us. Literally. Men die from stress-related diseases at higher rates. Men commit suicide at higher rates. Men struggle with addiction at higher rates. And a big part of the reason is that we don't express what we're feeling until it explodes.

THE COST OF SILENCE

- **Men:** 3.5 times higher suicide rate than women
- **Men:** Higher rates of addiction and substance abuse

- **Men:** More likely to die from violence and incarceration
- **Common factor:** Unexpressed emotional pain?

So here's what you need to know: when you tell someone how you feel, don't expect them to say, 'Oh, I'm very sorry. Please forgive me. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings.' Because they won't. They might laugh. They might poke fun at you. They might dismiss it. They might tell you you're being too sensitive.

And you know what? You're still the winner because you expressed your emotions. No buildup.

Why? Because you expressed yourself. You didn't hold that emotion inside where it could build and build until it turned into anger or rage. You let the pressure out. You told the truth about your inner experience. That's strength, not weakness.

Think of your emotions like steam in a boiler. If you keep adding heat (stress, triggers, unprocessed feelings) and never release the pressure (by expressing what you feel), eventually that boiler explodes. And when it does, people get hurt—including you.

But if you release the pressure regularly—'I'm feeling frustrated right now,' 'I'm scared about this,' 'I'm hurt by what you said'—the pressure never builds to dangerous levels. You stay in control. You keep yourself and others safe.

This is ESPECIALLY important for men. We're taught to be strong and silent, to solve problems without complaining, to never show weakness. But unexpressed emotions don't just go away. They accumulate. They compound. They turn into Build-Up. And Build-Up leads to Acting Out.

So practice saying: 'I feel [specific emotion name].' Not 'I feel like you're...' or 'I feel that...' Those aren't feelings—they're thoughts disguised as feelings. Actual feelings: 'I feel angry.' 'I feel hurt.' 'I feel scared.' 'I feel ashamed.' 'I feel inadequate.'

It gets easier with practice. And the payoff is huge: less Build-Up, fewer explosions, better relationships, and a much better relationship with yourself.

YOUR CHALLENGE THIS WEEK:

**Say 'I feel [emotion name]' out loud to someone
at least once per day for seven days.**

Don't wait until you're comfortable.

Start today. Start now.

Your life might depend on it.

Ray's Story: I grew up believing that real men don't cry, don't complain, don't talk about feelings. My dad never said 'I'm scared' or 'I'm hurt' in his life. So neither did I. I just stuffed it down and acted like everything was fine. The problem? All those stuffed emotions had to go somewhere. For me, they came out sideways—in manipulation, in sexual acting out, in controlling behavior. When I finally learned to say 'I'm feeling scared right now' or 'I'm feeling inadequate,' my wife didn't always respond the way I wanted. Sometimes she just looked at me like, 'Okay, so?' But that was fine. I didn't need her to fix it. I just needed to let the pressure out. That simple practice—naming what I felt out loud—probably saved my marriage and my life.

The CBT Connection

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is built on a simple yet powerful idea: your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are interconnected. Change one, and you change the others.

THOUGHTS → EMOTIONS → BEHAVIORS

Here's how it works:

Your thoughts influence your emotions. If you think 'I'm worthless,' you'll feel ashamed. If you think 'They're disrespecting me,' you'll feel angry. If you think 'Something bad is going to happen,' you'll feel afraid.

Your emotions influence your behaviors. When you feel ashamed, you might hide or isolate. When you feel angry, you might lash out. When you feel afraid, you might avoid or escape.

Your behaviors reinforce your thoughts and emotions. If you hide when you feel ashamed, it confirms the thought that you're not worthy of being seen. If you lash out when you're angry, it confirms the thought that you can't control yourself.

This is the cycle that keeps people stuck. But here's the good news: because thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all connected, you can interrupt the cycle at any point.

You can challenge the thought: 'Is it really true that I'm worthless? What's the evidence?'

You can change the behavior: 'I feel ashamed, but I'm going to reach out to someone instead of hiding.'

You can work with the emotion: 'I notice I'm feeling afraid. Where do I feel it in my body? What is it trying to tell me?'

The Behavioral Cycle (which we'll explore deeply in the next chapters) shows how this connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors creates predictable patterns—patterns you can learn to recognize and interrupt.

Tool Box: The Thought-Feeling-Behavior Map: Next time you notice a strong emotion, pause and map it: 1) What am I feeling? (Name it specifically) 2) What thoughts are going with this feeling? (Write down the exact words in your head) 3) What do I want to do

right now? (What behavior is this emotion pushing toward?) 4) What actually aligns with my values? (What would I do if I was at my best?) This creates space between feeling and action. That space is where recovery happens.

Building Your Emotional Vocabulary

Learning 1,348 emotions might sound overwhelming. Don't worry—you don't have to memorize them all. The full list, organized by category and proficiency level, is in Appendix 1. The goal is to expand your vocabulary gradually, building precision over time.

Start with the Beginner level. Practice identifying those 40 emotions in your daily life. Once you're comfortable, move to Intermediate. Keep going as far as feels useful.

Our companion emotion games (available at the-fires-within.com/games) make this process easier and even fun. You'll play games that help you match emotion words to facial expressions, scenarios, and body signals. You'll build your vocabulary without it feeling like homework.

We're also developing workshops and downloadable handouts to support your learning—check the-fires-within.com for updates on when these become available.

But whether you use the games or workshops or not, the key is practice. Every day, multiple times a day, check in: What am I feeling? Name it. Feel where it lives in your body. Notice what thoughts are attached to it. Watch what it makes you want to do.

This is how emotional literacy is built—one moment of awareness at a time.

Moving Forward

You now understand why emotional literacy matters. You've been introduced to the 1,348-emotion database, the ten categories, and the five difficulty levels. You know that emotions are physical, not moral, and that they're all connected to your thoughts and behaviors.

In the next chapter, we'll introduce the Behavioral Cycle—the pattern that shows how emotions, thoughts, and behaviors combine to create destructive cycles. You'll see how the Build-Up phase begins, often with emotions you haven't learned to name or manage.

But before we go there, take some time with the exercises in this chapter. Build your vocabulary. Practice your check-ins. Learn to inhabit your body. This foundation matters.

The more precisely you can name what you're feeling, the more power you have to change what you're doing.

Let's build that power together.

For Parents, Teachers, and Caregivers

Teaching children to identify and express emotions is one of the most important skills we can give them. Children who learn emotional awareness early are better equipped to handle difficult feelings without turning to destructive coping mechanisms later in life.

To help children build emotional literacy:

- Use emotional awareness flip cards to teach children how to identify, name, and express their emotions. These cards include emotion names, definitions, facial expressions, and body sensations, making emotional learning concrete and accessible.
- Practice interactive emotional awareness games that make learning about feelings engaging and fun. Games help children (and adults) recognize emotions in themselves and others, understand the difference between similar feelings, and build their emotional vocabulary naturally.
- Make emotional check-ins a daily practice. Ask children 'How are you feeling today?' and help them use specific emotion words instead of just 'good' or 'bad.'
- Model healthy emotional expression yourself. When you name your own emotions ('I'm feeling frustrated right now because...'), children learn that all emotions are normal and can be expressed safely.

For flip cards, teaching resources, and free interactive emotional awareness games, see **Additional Resources in the Appendix.**

Konseki's Stories: Boredom and Dis-ease. Boredom and dissatisfaction were big triggers for me to engage in my addictive and destructive behaviors. It's about wanting to be someone else, somewhere more exciting and less boring. Not being satisfied with your current situation. When I feel this way, it leads to fantasizing and then progresses to acting out with destructive behaviors. I wanted to feel alive, and my compulsive behavior gave me a false sense of that feeling. Learning to identify this feeling of dis-ease with life has been a game-changer for me. I can now navigate through it and live life with ease.

Cold Mountain Wisdom — Han Shan and the Bowl

Han Shan was a Chinese Buddhist hermit who lived more than a thousand years ago on Cold Mountain. We don't know his real name. He wrote his poems on rocks, trees, and cave walls. Three hundred of them survived. They are simple, direct, sometimes harsh, sometimes funny.

He once observed something, I think, that every person in recovery eventually sees: most of us are like bugs in a bowl. All day we climb up the side, slide back down, climb up, slide back. We bump into each other. We blame the bowl. We curse the climb. We never look around at the other bugs doing exactly the same thing.

Han Shan's quiet teaching is this: notice the other bugs. Walk over. Say hello. The bowl is not the problem. The pretending you are alone in the bowl is the problem. Recovery happens in the company of other people in the bowl.

My Ah-Ha Moment:

Life is NOW! Right here in the moment. I can choose to ignore it and dream of better days. Or, I can embrace it—good, bad, indifferent—and continue along the path.

CHAPTER 2 – Meet Your Behavioral Cycle



The Pattern That Keeps You Stuck—And How to Break It

In the last chapter, you learned about emotional literacy—why it matters to know what you're feeling and how to name it precisely. Now we're going to show you what happens when you don't have that skill. We're going to show you the pattern that traps people in addiction, compulsive behavior, and cycles of harm.

We call it the Behavioral Cycle.

This isn't something we invented. It's well-known in addiction therapy and treatment programs. Therapists have been teaching this framework for decades. But here's the thing: most people struggling with addiction or compulsive behavior have never heard of it. They're stuck in the cycle without knowing there IS a cycle.

We can live in this cycle for years—decades, actually—without understanding what is happening. We think we are broken, weak, or fundamentally flawed. But once we understand this cycle, we can see and recognize it clearly and take action to get out of it.

Now we want YOU to know it too. Because once you see the cycle, you can interrupt it. Once you understand the pattern, you can change it. And once you break free, you can build a completely different life.

Ray's Story: I'll never forget the day my therapist first showed me the Behavioral Cycle diagram. She drew a circle with four sections and started labeling them: Build-Up, Acting Out, Justification, Pretend Normal. I felt this weird mix of relief and horror. Relief because finally someone was putting words to what I'd been

experiencing. Horror because it meant I was predictable—that my 'unique' struggle was a textbook pattern. But here's what I learned: predictable is good. Predictable means you can see it coming. Predictable means you can prepare. Predictable means you can change it. That simple diagram became my roadmap out of hell.

The Four Phases of the Behavioral Cycle

The Behavioral Cycle has four distinct phases. Each phase has its own characteristics, warning signs, and opportunities for intervention. Let's look at the big picture first, then we'll explore each phase in detail in the chapters that follow.

Phase 1: Build-Up

This is where the cycle begins. Build-Up is the accumulation of stress, negative emotions, unmet needs, and triggering events that create pressure in your system. It's like filling a balloon with air—at first there's plenty of room, but eventually the pressure becomes unbearable.

During Build-Up, you might experience:

- Increasing stress or anxiety
- Unresolved conflicts in relationships
- Feeling overwhelmed, inadequate, or out of control
- Physical tension (tight chest, clenched jaw, headaches)
- Sexual tension (building obsession, intrusive fantasies)
- Intrusive thoughts about your substance or behavior
- Excessive social media viewing or posting
- Isolation or withdrawal from support systems
- Irritability or mood swings

Build-Up can last hours, days, or weeks. The key thing to understand: this phase is where intervention is most effective. If you can catch the Build-Up early and release the pressure safely, you never get to Acting Out.

Phase 2: Acting Out

This is the moment when the pressure becomes too much and you engage in the harmful behavior—whatever that behavior is for you. Using drugs or alcohol. Binge eating. Compulsive sexual behavior. Gambling. Shopping. Violence. Self-harm. Whatever pattern you're trying to break, this is when it happens.

Acting Out provides temporary relief from the Build-Up. It's like releasing the air from the balloon—the pressure drops immediately. But that relief comes at a cost: shame, consequences, broken promises, hurt relationships, physical harm, legal problems, and financial damage.

Acting Out can be a single event (one relapse) or a period of escalating behavior (a binge that lasts hours or days). Either way, it's the phase most people focus on because it's the most visible. But here's what's crucial to understand: by the time you get to Acting Out, the cycle was already well underway. The real work happens in Build-Up.

Phase 3: Justification

After Acting Out comes the mental gymnastics. Your brain needs to explain why you did what you just did—especially when it contradicts your values, your promises, your self-image. So you create justifications.

Common justifications include:

- 'I deserved it after the week I had'
- 'Nobody understands how hard this is for me.'
- 'It's not that bad compared to what others do.'
- 'I'll make up for it tomorrow.'
- 'They pushed me to this.'
- 'Just this once won't hurt.'
- 'I can't help it—this is just who I am.'

Justification serves a psychological purpose: it reduces cognitive dissonance. You can't hold two conflicting beliefs ('I'm a good person' and 'I just did something harmful'), so your brain resolves the conflict

by creating a story that makes the behavior acceptable, understandable, or inevitable.

The danger of Justification is that it prevents learning. If you can convince yourself that what you did was okay (or at least unavoidable), you don't have to change anything. You don't have to feel the full weight of consequences. You don't have to take responsibility. And that guarantees you'll do it again.

Phase 4: Pretend Normal

This is the phase where you convince yourself (and try to convince others) that everything is fine. You're back in control. The Acting Out was a one-time slip. You've learned your lesson. It won't happen again. You don't need help. Life goes back to 'normal.'

Pretend Normal is characterized by:

- Minimizing what happened ('It wasn't that bad')
- Hiding evidence of Acting Out
- Avoiding conversations about the behavior
- Resisting support, therapy, or accountability
- Resuming normal routines as if nothing had happened
- Making promises to yourself (and others) that you can't keep

Here's the insidious thing about Pretend Normal: it FEELS like stability. You're functional. You're going to work, pay bills, and show up for family obligations. On the surface, things look fine. But underneath, the Build-Up is already starting again.

And this is how the cycle perpetuates. Pretend Normal flows right back into Build-Up. The unresolved issues, the unprocessed emotions, the unmet needs—they're all still there. They start accumulating again. Pressure builds. And eventually, you're right back at Acting Out.

Remember This Phrase: Pause, don't react. When you feel the pressure building, when you notice the warning signs of Build-Up, when you're on the edge of Acting Out—pause. Just stop. Take three breaths. This simple pause creates space between impulse and action.

That space is where your power lives. That space is where recovery happens.

Why the Cycle Is So Powerful

The Behavioral Cycle is incredibly powerful because it's self-reinforcing. Each phase makes the next phase more likely:

- Build-Up creates pressure that demands release → Acting Out
- Acting Out creates shame and consequences → Justification
- Justification prevents accountability → Pretend Normal
- Pretend Normal avoids addressing root causes → Build-Up starts again



WITHOUT INTERVENTION, THE CYCLE JUST KEEPS REPEATING.

And often, it gets worse over time. The **Build-Up** phase gets shorter. The **Acting Out** phase intensifies. The **Justification** phase gets more elaborate. The **Pretend Normal** phase gets more desperate.

This is why people say 'I don't know how it happened again' or 'I really thought this time was different.' The cycle has its own momentum. It runs on autopilot. And once you're in it, breaking free feels impossible.

But here's the good news: it's not impossible. The cycle CAN be broken. You just need to understand how.

Where Trauma Fits In

Remember what we said in the Introduction: addiction isn't the problem; it manages the problem. The 'problem' is usually trauma.

Trauma shows up most clearly in the Build-Up phase. Trauma triggers—situations, people, sensations, memories that activate your

nervous system's threat response—create the pressure that drives the cycle.

Here's how it works:

You experience something that reminds your nervous system of past trauma (even if you're not consciously aware of the connection). Your body goes into fight-or-flight mode. Stress hormones flood your system. Your heart races. Your breathing gets shallow. Your muscles tense. You feel anxious, afraid, angry, or overwhelmed.

This is Build-Up. And if you don't have healthy ways to process these trauma responses, the pressure becomes unbearable. Acting Out becomes the only relief valve you know.

This is why addressing trauma is essential for breaking the Behavioral Cycle. If you're constantly being triggered by unresolved trauma, you're constantly in Build-Up. No amount of willpower will keep you from Acting Out when the pressure gets high enough. You have to heal the wounds that are creating the pressure in the first place.

Konseki's Story: In Zen, we understand that suffering arises from attachment and aversion—clinging to what we want and pushing away what we don't want. The Behavioral Cycle is this principle in action. Build-Up is the accumulation of aversion: experiences, emotions, sensations we're trying to avoid. Acting Out is the desperate attempt to escape that suffering through temporary pleasure or numbness. But the escape never works. The suffering returns, often intensified. True freedom comes not from escaping suffering but from changing our relationship to it. When we can sit with discomfort without needing to fix it or flee from it, the cycle loses its power. This is why meditation practice is so powerful for recovery—it trains us to stay present with what is, even when what is feels unbearable.

The Behavioral Cycle as a Tool

Here's what changed everything for us: realizing that the Behavioral Cycle isn't just a description of what happened in the past. It's a tool for what happens in the present and future.

Once you know the cycle, you can use it:

To recognize where you are right now

'Am I in Build-Up? What warning signs am I noticing? What pressure is accumulating?' This awareness alone can interrupt the cycle.

To predict what's coming next

'I'm in Build-Up, and the pressure is getting intense. If I don't do something different, Acting Out is coming. What intervention can I use right now?'

To understand your patterns

'What triggers my Build-Up? How long does it usually last? What thoughts come during Justification? How do I Pretend Normal?' Understanding your specific pattern helps you intervene more effectively.



TO KEEP YOURSELF SAFE

"I can feel Acting Out approaching. I need to call my sponsor, go to a meeting, reach out to my therapist, and remove myself from this situation." Knowing my cycle helps me recognize danger before it's too late.

AND



TO KEEP OTHERS SAFE

"My Buildup includes irritability and withdrawal. When I notice these signs, I need to tell my family, someone, that I'm struggling so they're not in the line of fire if I lose control."

This is the power of understanding the Behavioral Cycle. It transforms you from a victim of an unconscious pattern into someone who can see the pattern, predict it, and change it.

Tool Box: Mapping Your Personal Cycle: Take out a piece of paper and draw a circle. Divide it into four sections: Build-Up, Acting Out, Justification, Pretend Normal. Now fill in YOUR specific pattern: Build-Up: What triggers it? What emotions come up? What physical sensations? How long does it last? Acting Out: What's your specific behavior? How long does it last? What are the consequences? Justification: What stories do you tell yourself? What excuses? What blame? Pretend Normal: How do you minimize? How do you hide? How do you convince yourself it won't happen again? Be brutally honest. This is YOUR cycle. Understanding it precisely is the first step to breaking it.

You Don't Have to Do This Alone

Here's something critical we need to emphasize: understanding the Behavioral Cycle is powerful, but you don't have to break it by yourself. In fact, trying to do this alone is one of the biggest mistakes people make.

Each phase of the cycle has opportunities for intervention—and many of those interventions involve reaching out for help:

During Build-Up:

- Call your therapist or counselor when you notice pressure building
- Attend a group therapy or 12-Step meeting to talk about what you're experiencing
- Reach out to your sponsor, accountability partner, or trusted friend
- Join a support group specific to your addiction or compulsive behavior

When you're on the edge of Acting Out:

- Emergency call to your support network: 'I need help right now'
- Go to an emergency therapy session or crisis meeting
- Use a crisis hotline (they exist for addiction, mental health, and specific behaviors)
- Text or call someone who understands and won't judge

After Acting Out:

- Don't hide—tell your therapist, sponsor, or group what happened
- Process the shame and consequences with professional help
- Work with a counselor to understand what triggered the Acting Out
- Increase meeting attendance or therapy frequency temporarily

During Justification and Pretend Normal:

- Let your support system challenge your rationalizations
- Work with a therapist to identify your specific justification patterns
- Stay connected to group therapy even when you 'feel fine.'
- Maintain accountability structures that don't let you minimize

Isolation is the enemy of recovery. The cycle WANTS you to hide, to convince yourself you can handle it alone, to avoid 'burdening' others with your struggle. Don't fall for it.

Professional counseling, group therapy, 12-Step meetings, recovery communities—these aren't optional extras. They're essential tools for breaking the cycle. They provide:

- Accountability (harder to Pretend Normal when people know the truth)
- Early warning systems (others can spot your Build-Up before you can)
- Reality checks (challenge your Justifications)

- Skills training (teaches you interventions for each phase)
- Community (reminds you that you're not alone in this struggle)
- Hope (seeing others break the cycle proves it's possible)

If you're not currently working with a therapist, attending group therapy, or attending 12-Step meetings, we strongly encourage you to start. The cycle is too powerful to break alone. You deserve support. You need support. And support is available.

Konseki's Story: In Zen Buddhism, we emphasize *sangha*—community. The Buddha taught that the path to freedom has three pillars: the teacher (Buddha), the teaching (*dharma*), and the community (*sangha*). All three are necessary. You can't walk this path alone. Western culture glorifies the lone hero, the self-made person, the individual who conquers through sheer willpower. But that's a myth. Real transformation happens in a relationship, in a community, with support. When I was deep in my own cycle, I isolated. I convinced myself that asking for help was a weakness. That belief almost killed me. When I finally joined a recovery *sangha*—a community of people walking the same path—everything changed. Not because they fixed me, but because they witnessed my struggle without judgment. They held space for my pain. They reminded me of my inherent worth when I couldn't see it myself. Don't do this alone. Find your sangha.

Breaking the Cycle: Preview

In the chapters that follow, we'll explore each phase of the Behavioral Cycle in depth. You'll learn:

- How to recognize Build-Up early through body signals and thought patterns
- Specific interventions for each phase
- How to interrupt the cycle before Acting Out
- How to process shame and consequences without Justification
- How to move from Pretend Normal to genuine recovery
- How to address the trauma that drives the cycle

But for now, we want you to understand the basic framework. We want you to see your own experience reflected in these four phases. We want you to recognize that you're not uniquely broken—you're caught in a predictable pattern. And predictable patterns can be changed.

A Word of Hope

If you've been stuck in this cycle for years—or decades—you might be feeling discouraged right now. 'If it's this predictable, why haven't I stopped it already? If it's this well-known, why am I still struggling?'

Here's the truth: knowing the cycle intellectually and being able to interrupt it in real time are two different things. It takes practice. It takes support. It takes new skills. It takes healing the trauma that drives the Build-Up. It takes building a life where you don't NEED the Acting Out behavior because you have healthier ways to manage stress and meet your needs.

All of that is possible. All of that is what the rest of this book is about.

For now, just sit with this knowledge: you're not broken. You're caught in a cycle. And cycles can be broken.

Ray's Story: When I first learned about the Behavioral Cycle, I felt this weird mix of hope and despair. Hope, because finally I had a framework for understanding my behavior. Despair because I realized I'd been going around this same circle for thirty years. But here's what I eventually understood: every time around the cycle, I had opportunities to change course. I just didn't know they were there. I didn't know what Build-Up felt like. I didn't recognize the warning signs. I didn't have the tools to intervene. Once I learned those things, everything changed. I still got triggered. I still felt pressure building. But I didn't have to Act Out. I had other choices. And each time I made a different choice, the cycle weakened. Eventually, it stopped controlling my life. That's what I want for you.

Moving Forward

You now understand the big picture of the Behavioral Cycle. You know the four phases and how they connect. You've started to recognize your own pattern within this framework.

In Chapter 3, we dive deep into the Build-Up phase—where the cycle truly begins and where intervention is most powerful. You'll learn to recognize the early warning signs in your body, your thoughts, and your behaviors. You'll understand how trauma triggers fit into Build-Up. And you'll start building the skills to interrupt the cycle before it gains momentum.

The Build-Up phase is where your power lives. Let's learn to use it.

Konseki's Story: Patterns, Not Accidents I used to think my struggles were isolated moments, bad days, poor choices, lapses in judgment, moments I could sweep under the rug and no one would ever know. But the truth is, they were patterns. Predictable, almost scripted. Especially when it came to Acting Out. I would plan for days how my acting out would play out. These weren't loud or violent thoughts or fantasies. They were under the guise of loving someone, which was a conditioned core belief that sex = love. But in reality, it was a habitual choice to hurt someone else because I was hurting. What's that old saying: Hurt people, hurt people. Of course, at the time in my distorted thinking, I didn't see it as hurt. It felt more like I was connecting with another lonely soul. Studying My Cycle taught me something profound: behavior is not destiny. It's a learned response. And what is learned can be unlearned. The loops that bind us can be broken, but only if we dare to see them, name them, and choose a different path.

CHAPTER 3 – The Buildup Phase



The Pressure Slowly Builds

This is the most important chapter in this book.

Not because Build-Up is the most dramatic phase—it's not. Not because it's the most visible—it's often invisible to everyone else. This chapter matters because Build-Up is where you have the most power. It's where intervention works best. It's where the cycle can be stopped before it gains momentum.

If you learn to recognize Build-Up early and intervene effectively, you never have to get to Acting Out. That's freedom. That's recovery. That's the life you're trying to build.

Ray's Story: For years, I couldn't see my Build-Up coming. One minute I'd feel fine, the next I'd be Acting Out. But when I started paying attention—really paying attention—I realized the Build-Up had always been there. I just didn't know what I was looking for. My jaw would tighten. I'd start isolating. I'd get irritable over small things. My fantasies would intensify. These were all warning signs, but I'd dismissed them as normal stress. Learning to recognize my Build-Up pattern changed everything. Now I can feel it starting days before it gets dangerous. And that gives me time to intervene.

What Build-Up Really Is

Build-Up is the accumulation of stress, unprocessed emotions, unmet needs, and triggering events that create increasing pressure in your system. Think of it like a pressure cooker. At first, there's plenty of room. The steam builds slowly. But without a release valve, the pressure eventually becomes dangerous.

Build-Up has three key characteristics:

- It's gradual - usually builds over hours, days, weeks, or even years
- It's cumulative - each stressor adds to the total pressure
- It's progressive - gets worse until something releases it

Build-Up can be triggered by external events (conflict, stress, trauma reminders) or internal states (loneliness, shame, boredom). Often, it's a combination of both.

Recognizing Build-Up: Body Signals

Your body knows you're in Build-Up before your mind does. Learning to read these physical signals is your early warning system—your “check engine light” so to speak:

Common physical signs:

- Muscle tension (especially jaw, shoulders, neck)
- Chest tightness or difficulty breathing
- Rapid heartbeat or palpitations
- Stomach issues (nausea, butterflies, digestive problems)
- Headaches or migraines
- Fatigue or restlessness
- Changes in appetite (eating more or less)
- Sleep disruption (insomnia or excessive sleeping)
- Sexual tension or obsessive thoughts

Tool Box: Body Scan Practice: Set a timer for three times today. When it goes off, stop and do a 60-second body scan. Start at your head and move down: Is your jaw clenched? Shoulders tight? Chest constricted? Stomach churning? Hands in fists? Just notice. Don't judge. Don't try to fix. Just observe. Write down what you notice. After a week, you'll start seeing your Build-Up pattern in your body.

Recognizing Build-Up: Thought Patterns

Build-Up also shows up in how you think. Certain thought patterns are red flags:

- All-or-nothing thinking ('Everything is ruined')
- Catastrophizing ('This will never get better')
- Blame (external: 'This is their fault' or internal: 'I'm worthless')
- Obsessive thoughts about your substance or behavior
- Fantasy and preoccupation
- Minimizing ('It's not that bad')
- Entitlement ('I deserve this after what I've been through')
- Isolation thoughts ('Nobody understands')

Konseki's Story: In meditation, we practice noticing thoughts without attaching to them. A thought arises—'I'm so stressed'—and we simply observe it, let it pass. But in Build-Up, thoughts become sticky. They loop. They intensify. They demand attention. This is how you know you're not in normal stress—you're in dangerous Build-Up. The thoughts won't let go. They follow you. They wake you up at night. When this happens, don't try to fight the thoughts. That just makes them stronger. Instead, return to the body. Feel your feet on the floor. Notice your breath. The body anchors you when the mind is spinning.

Recognizing Build-Up: Behaviors

Build-Up changes how you act. Watch for these behavioral warning signs:

- Isolation (canceling plans, avoiding people)
- Increased substance use (caffeine, nicotine, alcohol)
- Excessive social media or screen time
- Skipping meetings, therapy, or support groups
- Avoiding responsibilities
- Picking fights or being argumentative
- Neglecting self-care (hygiene, exercise, healthy eating)
- Taking unnecessary risks
- Testing boundaries
- Seeking out triggering situations or people

These behaviors serve a function: they're attempts to manage the Build-Up pressure. The problem? They usually make it worse.

Common Triggers: HALT and Beyond

In 12-Step programs, they teach HALT: don't get too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. These four states make you vulnerable to Build-Up. But there are many other triggers:

HALT Triggers:

- Hungry: Low blood sugar affects mood and decision-making
- Angry: Unprocessed anger builds pressure fast
- Lonely: Isolation creates vulnerability
- Tired: Exhaustion depletes your coping resources

Additional Common Triggers:

- Relationship conflict or rejection
- Financial stress
- Work pressure or failure
- Shame or humiliation
- Boredom or lack of purpose

- Anniversaries or reminders of trauma
- Success or positive events (yes, really!)
- Changes in routine
- Physical illness or pain
- Smelling certain odors

Remember This Phrase: Pause, don't react. When you notice Build-Up starting—when you feel the pressure rising—pause. Stop what you're doing. Take three deep breaths. This creates a space between the trigger and the action. In that space, you have choices!

Understanding Triggers

Let's talk about triggers—what they are and why understanding them gives you power.

Did you know the word *trigger* comes from a Dutch word meaning “to pull”? That’s worth sitting with. A trigger doesn’t *make* you do anything — it pulls. And the space between the pull and your response is where all your freedom lives.

Most of us live on autopilot:

Trigger — Response

Something happens, and we react before we even realize we’ve reacted. The work of recovery is to open a gap in that sequence:

Trigger — Space for choices — Response

That space is everything. It’s the difference between reacting and responding — between autopilot and self-piloting. Being triggered isn’t dysfunctional; it’s human. It’s our *reaction* to a trigger that may or may not be healthy. Usually, a trigger is a replay of an earlier experience we haven’t fully resolved. When we recognize that, we can begin to reframe the event so it no longer carries the same charge, and evoke an alternative thought — one that is positive and resource-enhancing. We become what we practice.

Nine common categories of triggers:

1. Feeling self-conscious
2. Feeling disrespected
3. Feeling controlled
4. Being taken advantage of
5. Feeling vulnerable
6. Relationship experiences
7. Boundary concerns
8. Feeling uncomfortable about something that has happened
9. Fearing what might happen

When you notice yourself triggered, three searching questions can help you find the space:

- What is unresolved in my own life that I'm imagining something — a drink, a drug, sex, food — might fix?
- How does my story about my family of origin shape who I think I am now?
- What makes me happy about myself today?

A trigger is anything—a person, place, situation, sensation, smell, sound, image, or memory—that activates an emotional or psychological response, often connected to past trauma or negative experiences. Triggers bypass your rational mind and go straight to your nervous system. They create an automatic reaction that feels overwhelming and out of your control.

Common types of triggers:

- Sensory: A certain smell, sound, touch, taste, or visual
- Situational: Being in a place where trauma occurred or acting out happened
- Interpersonal: Conflict, criticism, rejection, or certain relationship dynamics

- Temporal: Anniversaries, holidays, or times of day associated with trauma
- Emotional: Feeling a certain way (shame, fear, anger) that echoes past experiences
- Internal: Thoughts, memories, or physical sensations that remind you of the past

Here's a powerful example: a certain smell can be a trigger that takes you back to a bad place. Maybe it's the cologne someone wore when they hurt you. Maybe it's the smell of alcohol that reminds you of your drinking days. Maybe it's a perfume that brings back memories of betrayal. Your rational mind knows you're safe now, but your body doesn't. The smell activates the trauma memory, and suddenly you're back there—feeling the same fear, shame, or pain you felt then.

The power of naming and sharing your triggers:

Here's something crucial: when you're triggered, TELL SOMEONE. Say it out loud: 'I just got triggered by [specific thing].' This simple act takes away much of the trigger's power.

Why? Because triggers thrive in secrecy and silence. When you keep a trigger to yourself, it controls you. Your nervous system is activated, your Build-Up is accelerating, and you're dealing with it alone in your head. The trigger has full power.

But when you name it and share it—"That smell just triggered me" or 'Being in this situation is triggering my trauma response'—several things happen:

- You move from unconscious reaction to conscious awareness
- You ground yourself in the present moment by speaking
- You activate your support system
- You break the isolation that triggers create
- You disempower the trigger by bringing it into the light

You don't need to explain the whole story. You don't need to justify or analyze. Just name it: 'I'm triggered right now.' That's enough. That's powerful.

The more aware you become of your specific triggers, the better you can prepare for them. Keep a trigger log. Write down:

- What triggered you (be specific)
- What emotion or memory it activated
- How intense the reaction was (1-10 scale)
- What you did in response
- What helped you regulate

Over time, patterns will emerge. You'll start recognizing your triggers before they fully activate. You'll learn which ones are most dangerous. You'll develop strategies for each one. And most importantly, you'll learn that triggers don't have to control you—you can manage your response to them.

Ray's Story: One of my biggest triggers was feeling criticized or inadequate. My dad was highly critical when I was growing up, and anytime someone questioned my work or abilities, I'd spiral into shame and rage. For years, I didn't connect the dots—I just thought I was 'sensitive' or had a 'temper.' Once I understood it was a trigger from childhood trauma, everything changed. Now, when I feel that familiar shame rising, I can say to my wife or my therapist: 'I'm triggered right now. This is my inadequacy wound.' Just naming it takes away so much of its power. It doesn't make the feeling go away, but it gives me space to choose my response rather than just react.

Trauma Triggers and Build-Up

As we discussed in Chapter 2, trauma often drives the Behavioral Cycle. Trauma triggers activate your nervous system's threat response, which dramatically accelerates Build-Up.

A trauma trigger can be anything that reminds your nervous system of past danger: a smell, a sound, a situation, a person's tone of voice, a time of year, a body sensation. Even when you're not consciously aware of the connection, your body remembers.

When triggered, you might experience:

- Sudden intense anxiety or panic
- Flashbacks or intrusive memories
- Feeling like you're back in the traumatic event
- Rage disproportionate to the current situation
- Emotional numbness or dissociation
- Overwhelming urge to escape or act out

This isn't regular stress. This is your trauma being activated. And it requires different interventions than the normal Build-Up.

Tool Box: Grounding for Trauma Triggers: When you're triggered and feel yourself dissociating or panicking, use the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique: Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste. This brings you back to the present moment and out of the trauma response. Your body is here, now, safe. Not there, then, in danger.

Interventions During Build-Up

Here's the good news: Build-Up can be interrupted. You have many tools available. The key is using them EARLY, when the pressure is still manageable.

Physical Interventions:

- Exercise (walk, run, gym, yoga)
- Cold water (splash face, cold shower)
- Deep breathing (4-7-8: inhale 4, hold 7, exhale 8)
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Get adequate sleep and nutrition

Mental/Emotional Interventions:

- Journal about what you're feeling

- Name the emotions precisely (use your 1,348-emotion database!)
- Challenge distorted thoughts
- Practice self-compassion
- Meditation or mindfulness

Social/Relational Interventions:

- Call your sponsor or accountability partner
- Attend a meeting or group therapy
- Reach out to a trusted friend
- Talk to your therapist
- Tell someone: 'I'm in Build-Up and need support'

Environmental Interventions:

- Remove yourself from triggering situations
- Change your environment (leave the house, go to a meeting)
- Avoid people, places, or situations that intensify Build-Up
- Create safety (lock away substances, use internet filters, etc.)

The earlier you intervene, the easier it is. Don't wait until the pressure is unbearable.

Ray's Story: I used to wait until I was on the edge of Acting Out before I'd do anything. By then, nothing worked. The pressure was too high. Now I intervene at the first signs of Build-Up. Jaw tight? I go for a walk. Isolating? I call my sponsor. Fantasies starting? I reach out to my therapist. It feels awkward sometimes—like I'm overreacting to small things. But those 'small things' become big things if I ignore them. Better to intervene when it's easy than wait until it's impossible

When to Ask for Help

You don't have to manage Build-Up alone. In fact, you shouldn't. Here's when to reach out:

- When you first notice Build-Up starting (don't wait!)
- When your usual interventions aren't working
- When you feel Acting Out approaching
- When you're triggered by trauma
- When you're experiencing a physical or emotional crisis
- When you're isolating or avoiding people

Your support network exists for exactly this reason. Use it.

Build-Up vs. Normal Stress

How do you know if you're experiencing normal life stress or dangerous Build-Up? Here are the differences:

Normal Stress:

- Specific to a situation (deadline, conflict, challenge)
- Decreases when the situation resolves
- Manageable with normal coping skills
- Doesn't trigger obsessive thoughts about acting out

Dangerous Build-Up:

- Feels overwhelming and persistent
- Unrelenting, uncontrolled ruminating negative thoughts
- Continues even after stressors resolve
- Normal coping doesn't work
- Triggers thoughts/urges about substance or behavior
- Leads to isolation, justification, and setup behaviors

When in doubt, treat it as Build-Up and intervene. Better safe than sorry.

Your Build-Up Pattern

Everyone's Build-Up looks different. Understanding YOUR specific pattern is essential. Spend time mapping it:

- What typically triggers your Build-Up?
- What physical sensations do you notice first?
- What thoughts become intrusive?
- What behaviors change?
- How long does your Build-Up usually last?
- What early interventions work best for you?
- Who should you call when you're in Build-Up?

Write this down. Share it with your support system. The more precisely you understand your pattern, the better you can interrupt it.

Moving Forward

You now understand Build-Up—what it is, how to recognize it, and how to intervene. This knowledge is power. Use it.

In the next chapter, we'll explore what happens when Build-Up isn't interrupted: the Acting Out phase. Understanding this phase helps you see the full consequences of letting Build-Up continue unchecked. It also helps you know what to do if Acting Out happens—because recovery isn't about perfection, it's about what you do next.

But remember: your goal is to never get there. Your goal is to catch Build-Up early and stop the cycle before it gains momentum.

That's where your freedom lives.

Konseki's Story: The Quiet Hum of the Build Up For me, the Build Up phase was always quiet. It started as a hum beneath the surface of stress, resentment, boredom, that gnawing sense of being misunderstood. I was probably living in my Build Up, and the rest of the Cycle, for over 50 years without being aware of it. I'd no sooner Act Out when the Justification and Pretend Normal stages took effect.

No sooner than the brief high of my Acting Out wore off, I was right back in the throes of my Build Up. In fact, I don't think anyone could ever tell the difference between when I was in Build Up and when I was in Pretend Normal. I was a functioning addict who hid my destructive compulsive behaviors very well. Even after years of CBT, I wasn't ready to give up the distorted feeling of contentment that my addictive and compulsive behaviors brought me. I wasn't aware of how all my unresolved past trauma was still affecting me. It wasn't until I integrated the direct experience and stillness of Zen, and the community and regimen of the 12 Step programs, that I began to slow things down and clearly see how the Cycle was playing out in my life. I realized that I didn't have to take this recovery journey alone. Only then could I begin to break the links in the chain by interrupting the thoughts and feelings in the Build Up before they reached Acting Out. Communicating what I was really feeling to others became natural. I didn't have to pretend anymore. Life became a lot easier to navigate with this newfound awareness.

CHAPTER 4 – The Acting Out Phase



The Pressure Relieved, Destroying Everyone in Close Proximity

This is the chapter nobody wants to read. It's about what happens when Build-Up isn't interrupted—when the pressure becomes unbearable, and you engage in the harmful behavior you've been trying to stop.

We need to talk honestly about this phase. Not to shame you. Not to scare you. But if you understand Acting Out—what it is, why it happens, and what to do when it does—you'll be better equipped to minimize harm and get back on track.

Remember: recovery isn't about perfection. It's about progress. It's about what you do next.

What Acting Out Actually Is

Acting Out is the moment when accumulated Build-Up pressure overwhelms your coping resources and you engage in the substance use or compulsive behavior you've been trying to avoid.

It's important to understand what Acting Out does:

- Provides immediate relief from Build-Up pressure (this is why it's so powerfully reinforcing)
- Creates temporary escape from difficult emotions
- Releases physical and psychological tension
- Produces short-term pleasure or numbness

But this relief comes at enormous cost:

- Physical harm (to yourself or others)
- Emotional damage (shame, guilt, despair)
- Relationship consequences (broken trust, hurt people you love)
- Legal problems (arrests, loss of license, jail time)
- Financial damage (money spent, jobs lost)
- Reinforcement of the cycle (making next Acting Out more likely)

The immediate relief is real. That's what makes this phase so dangerous. Your brain remembers that Acting Out reduced the pressure, which strengthens the cycle for next time.

Ray's Story: I used to think Acting Out just 'happened' to me—like I had no control, no warning. But that wasn't true. The warning was the Build-Up I'd been ignoring for days or weeks. By the time I Acted Out, my nervous system was so dysregulated that the behavior felt inevitable. And here's the brutal truth I need to say: simply, acting out just felt good. In that moment, I just thought about myself and not others. I wasn't thinking about how I was harming others—my wife, my family, people who trusted me. I was completely selfish. The relief was instantaneous—all that pressure just... gone. For about five minutes. Then came the shame tsunami. The self-hatred. The terror about what I'd done and who might find out. The realization of who I'd hurt. That's when I'd realize: the 'relief' wasn't relief at all. It was just trading one pain for a worse one—and hurting people I loved in the process.

The Spectrum of Acting Out

Acting Out isn't binary—it's not all-or-nothing. There's a spectrum:

Slip

A brief, limited engagement with the behavior that you interrupt quickly. You recognize what's happening and stop before it escalates fully.

Lapse

A more significant engagement, but still contained. You Act Out but don't spiral into extended behavior. You stop yourself and seek help.

Relapse

A full return to the addictive or compulsive behavior pattern. May last hours, days, or longer. Often includes denial and resistance to help.

Binge

Intense, extended Acting Out with escalating severity. Disconnected from consequences. Dangerous physically and psychologically.

Understanding this spectrum matters because your response should vary based on severity. A slip requires acknowledgment and course correction. A full relapse might require intensive intervention, possibly including hospitalization or residential treatment.

The Shame Spiral

What often makes Acting Out worse isn't the behavior itself—it's what happens immediately after. The shame.

Shame says: 'I am bad. I am broken. I am worthless. I will always be this way.' Shame is different from guilt (which says 'I did something bad'). Shame attacks your core identity.

The shame spiral works like this:

- Act Out → Feel intense shame → Isolate to hide the shame → Shame intensifies in isolation → Build-Up accelerates → Act Out again to escape the shame

This is how one slip becomes a full relapse. This is how relapse becomes chronic. The shame is actually more dangerous than the original Acting Out because it guarantees you'll do it again.

Konseki's Story: Buddhist psychology teaches that shame is a 'near enemy' of conscience. It looks like moral awareness but it's actually toxic. Healthy conscience says: 'I caused harm. I need to make amends and change my behavior.' Shame says: 'I am inherently defective. There's no point in trying.' One leads to healing. The other leads to more suffering. When you Act Out, watch for shame. Notice it. Name it. Don't believe what it tells you about who you are. You are not your worst moment. You are not your addiction. You are a person in pain who is learning to heal.

What to Do During Acting Out

This might sound strange, but if you're in the middle of Acting Out and you realize what's happening, you still have choices:

Stop if you can

Even mid-behavior, you can choose to stop. Yes, the Build-Up pressure is high. Yes, stopping feels impossible. But you CAN do it. Call someone immediately for support.

Minimize harm

If you can't stop, can you reduce the damage? Use protection. Don't drive. Don't involve others. Don't escalate to more dangerous behavior. Every harm you prevent matters.

Don't add violence

If your Acting Out includes potential for violence (to yourself or others), this becomes priority one. Call crisis services. Get to a safe location. Don't let harming someone become part of your Acting Out pattern.

Reach out mid-Acting Out

Call your sponsor, therapist, or crisis line WHILE you're Acting Out. Tell them what's happening. Let them interrupt the cycle. This takes tremendous courage, but it can save your life.

What to Do After Acting Out

What you do in the hours and days after Acting Out determines whether this becomes a learning experience or the start of a deeper spiral. Here's what recovery looks like after Acting Out:

1. Don't hide (most important)

Tell someone immediately. Your therapist, sponsor, group, accountability partner. Don't wait. Don't minimize. Don't pretend it didn't happen. Shame thrives in secrecy. Bring it into the light.

2. Get medical attention if needed

If you've harmed yourself physically, overdosed, or engaged in risky behavior, get medical help. Don't let shame or fear prevent you from getting care.

3. Process what happened

With your therapist or sponsor, do a thorough analysis: What triggered the Build-Up? What were the warning signs you missed? What was happening in the hours before Acting Out? What were you feeling? What interventions did you try? What could work differently next time?

4. Make amends where appropriate

If your Acting Out hurt others, take responsibility. Apologize sincerely. Make real amends. This isn't about getting forgiveness—it's about acknowledging harm and changing behavior.

5. Adjust your recovery plan

Acting Out is data. It's showing you where your current plan isn't working. Maybe you need more meetings. More intensive therapy. Medication. Residential treatment. Whatever it is, be willing to adjust.

6. Resist Justification (see next chapter)

Your brain will immediately start creating stories about why this happened and why it's not that bad. Don't let it. Stay accountable to the truth.

Tool Box: Post-Acting Out Emergency Plan: Create this plan NOW, before you need it. Write down: (1) Three people I will call immediately (with phone numbers), (2) Medical/crisis resources I might need, (3) What I will tell my support people (be specific: 'I acted out. I need help.'), (4) Commitments I will make (attend meeting within 24 hours, see therapist within 48 hours, etc.), (5) What I will NOT do (isolate, minimize, justify, Act Out again to escape shame). Put this somewhere you can access it when you're in crisis. Follow it even when shame is screaming at you to hide.

Acting Out Is Not Failure

Here's what we need you to understand: Acting Out doesn't mean you've failed at recovery. It means you're human. It means you're in the middle of learning something incredibly difficult.

Every person in recovery has Acting Out experiences. Some have many. What separates people who stay stuck from people who heal is what they do after Acting Out.

People who stay stuck: hide, minimize, justify, isolate, give up.

People who heal: tell the truth, seek support, process what happened, learn from it, adjust their plan, and keep going.

You get to choose which path you take.

Ray's Story: I can't count how many times I Acted Out in my first year of serious recovery work. Each time, I thought: 'That's it. I'm done. I'll never change.' The shame was crushing. But my therapist kept saying: 'The Acting Out isn't the problem anymore. You're going to Act Out while you're learning new patterns. The question is: what do you do next?' Slowly, I started believing her. I started telling the truth faster. Processing what happened more honestly. Adjusting my recovery plan more aggressively. And you know what? The Acting Out episodes got further apart. They got less severe. Eventually, they stopped altogether. Not because I became perfect, but because I learned to interrupt the cycle earlier and earlier. If you Act Out, don't quit. Tell someone. Learn from it. Keep going.

Moving Forward

Acting Out is the most visible, most dramatic, and most painful phase of the Behavioral Cycle. But it's not where the cycle does its most damage.

The real danger comes in the next two phases: Justification and Pretend Normal. These are the phases that guarantee you'll Act Out again. These are the phases that keep you trapped in the cycle.

In the next chapter, we'll explore Justification—the mental gymnastics your brain does to explain away what just happened and avoid real accountability.

Understanding Justification is critical because it's the bridge between 'I Acted Out' and 'I'm back in recovery.' Cross that bridge honestly, and you'll heal. Stay stuck in Justification, and the cycle continues.

Konseki's Story: The Whirlpool If the Abuse Cycle was the storm, the Addictive Cycle was a whirlpool. It's silent, deep, and relentless. It began with a trigger: rejection, loneliness, boredom, shame. Sometimes it was external - a harsh word, a cold glance, an arousing image. Sometimes it was internal: a voice whispering, You're not enough. You deserve this. Then came obsession. My mind became a courtroom, replaying scenes, building cases, scripting fantasies. I wasn't living in reality anymore. I was living in the echo of my own thoughts. Compulsion followed like gravity. The behavior, whatever it was, felt automatic, inevitable. I told myself that I had control, but the truth was, it controlled me. Afterward, there was temporary relief. A fleeting calm, a counterfeit peace. But it never lasted. Soon came consequences and shame, heavy and suffocating. And here's the cruel twist: that shame became the next trigger. The Cycle didn't just repeat; it fed on itself.

Power and Control

Compulsive behavior isn't just self-destructive. It's other-destructive. Whether the behavior is sexual, financial, physical, emotional, or chemical, Acting Out almost always involves taking something from someone else — their safety, their trust, their dignity, their time, their resources, their bodies. Understanding this is essential. Recovery requires you to face what your behavior has done to others, not just to yourself.

The Power and Control Wheel — developed by domestic violence advocates in the 1980s — names the patterns through which one person dominates another. Adapted to the language of compulsive behavior, the patterns include:

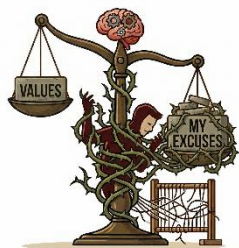
- Intimidation — making someone afraid through looks, gestures, anger, or destruction.
- Emotional manipulation — name-calling, humiliation, gaslighting, the silent treatment.
- Isolation — controlling who they see, where they go, what they're allowed to do.
- Minimization and denial — making light of the harm, blaming the victim, calling the abuse trivial.
- Using dependents — turning children, family, or anyone vulnerable into leverage.
- Economic abuse — controlling money, sabotaging work, creating financial dependence.
- Coercion and threats — threats to leave, to harm self, to harm them, to expose.
- Privilege and entitlement — treating someone as inferior, making big decisions alone.
- Sexualizing power — using sex as control rather than connection.
- Lying as control — keeping the other person uncertain about what's real.

You may recognize patterns you used. You may recognize patterns used against you. Often both — many people who act out today were once on the receiving end of these patterns themselves.

Acting Out IS power-seeking. The compulsion gives you a sense of control in a moment when you feel powerless inside. The harm to others is the consequence the compulsion ignores. This is why simply “stopping the behavior” isn’t enough. The underlying need to feel powerful — to escape feeling small, ashamed, or out of control — has to be addressed differently. Otherwise the cycle finds new ways to express itself.

This work runs through Step Work (especially Steps 4, 8, and 9), Victim Empathy, and the communication chapter that follows. Power itself isn’t bad. The problem is power over. The recovery work is learning to use power with — collaboratively, in service of mutual respect.

CHAPTER 5 – The Justification Phase



The Stories We Tell Ourselves

After Acting Out comes the mental gymnastics. Your brain immediately goes to work creating a story—an explanation for why you did what you just did. Especially when that behavior contradicts your values, your promises, your self-image, or your commitments to others.

This is Justification. And it's one of the most dangerous phases of the Behavioral Cycle because it prevents you from learning, growing, and changing. Justification keeps you stuck in the cycle by making Acting Out seem acceptable, understandable, or inevitable.

Let's expose these justifications for what they are: lies we tell ourselves to avoid accountability.

What Justification Is

Justification is the mental process of creating explanations, excuses, or rationalizations for harmful behavior in order to reduce psychological discomfort.

Your brain can't comfortably hold two contradictory beliefs at once:

- 'I'm a good person who cares about others' AND
- 'I just did something harmful that hurt people I love'

This creates cognitive dissonance—psychological tension that feels unbearable. So, your brain resolves the conflict by creating a justification that makes the behavior seem acceptable:

- 'I'm still a good person BECAUSE this wasn't really that bad.'
- 'I'm still a good person BECAUSE I was forced into this by circumstances.'
- 'I'm still a good person BECAUSE they deserved what I did.'
- 'I'm still a good person BECAUSE everyone does this.'

Justification protects your self-image but at enormous cost: it prevents real accountability, blocks genuine learning, and guarantees you'll repeat the behavior.

Ray's Story: I was a master at justification. Every time I Acted Out, I had a story ready. 'I've been under so much stress—anyone would have done this.' 'My wife doesn't understand what I'm dealing with.' 'This is just how men are wired.' 'At least I'm not as bad as [insert person who's worse].' These stories felt true in the moment. They let me avoid facing what I'd actually done. But every justification I created was a brick in the wall that kept me trapped. As long as I could explain away my behavior, I never had to change it.

Common Justification Patterns

Here are the most common justifications people use. See if you recognize any of your own:

Entitlement Justifications

- 'I deserved this after the week I've had.'
- 'I work so hard, I've earned this.'
- 'Everyone else gets to do what they want—why can't I?'
- 'I've been good for so long, one time won't hurt.'

Minimization Justifications

- 'It's not that bad compared to what others do.'
- 'At least I didn't [worse behavior].'
- 'Nobody got hurt.'
- 'It was only once.'

Victim Justifications

- 'They pushed me to this'
- 'I wouldn't have done this if they hadn't [whatever]'
- 'Nobody understands how hard this is for me'
- 'The world is against me—what else am I supposed to do?'

Deterministic Justifications

- 'I can't help it—this is just who I am'
- 'I have a disease, I'm not responsible for my actions'
- 'My brain is wired this way'
- 'It's genetic/biological/hardwired'

Comparative Justifications

- 'Everyone does this.'
- 'This is normal behavior.'
- 'My friends/coworkers all do worse.'
- 'In other cultures, this is accepted.'

Future-Promise Justifications

- 'I'll make up for it tomorrow.'
- 'This is the last time, I promise.'
- 'Next time will be different.'
- 'I'm going to change starting Monday.'

Notice the pattern? Every one of these justifications shifts responsibility away from you and toward something or someone else. Everyone prevents you from facing the truth about what you did and why.

Konseki's Story: In Zen, we practice radical honesty—seeing things exactly as they are, without the stories our mind adds. Justification is the opposite. It's the mind creating elaborate stories to avoid seeing clearly. When I was deep in my cycle, I had justifications for everything. 'I'm just being spontaneous.' 'I'm embracing life

fully. This was done to me, and I turned out okay (this was one of my biggest justifications). 'I'm not hurting anyone.' These stories kept me from seeing the truth: I was out of control and causing harm. Real freedom came when I could sit with my behavior without the stories. When I could say: 'I did this. It was harmful. I choose differently going forward.' That's accountability. That's the beginning of change.

External vs. Internal Justification

Justifications come in two forms:

External Justification: Blaming circumstances or other people

- 'My boss is a nightmare—of course I acted out.'
- 'If my spouse were more understanding, I wouldn't need to do this.'
- 'The stress of this job made me act out.'
- 'They disrespected me, so they deserved what they got.'

Internal Justification: Blaming your own inherent flaws

- 'I'm just broken—I'll always be this way.'
- 'This is my addiction talking, not me.'
- 'I have a disease, so I can't control this.'
- 'I'm a bad person—what did you expect?'

Interestingly, both forms accomplish the same thing: they remove your agency. External justification says, 'Forces outside me made this happen.' Internal justification says, 'Forces inside me that I can't control made this happen.'

Both are lies. You have agency. You have a choice. Justification just helps you avoid facing that truth.

Why Justification Is So Dangerous

Justification might seem harmless—just a way to feel better after you've messed up. But it's actually one of the most destructive phases of the cycle. Here's why:

It prevents learning

If you believe the justification ('I had to do this because of stress'), you never learn what actually triggered your Build-Up or how to intervene earlier next time.

It blocks accountability

You can't take responsibility for something you've explained away as inevitable or someone else's fault. Without accountability, there's no amends, no rebuilding trust, no change.

It damages relationships

When you justify harmful behavior to others, they lose trust in you. They hear: 'I'm not actually sorry. I think what I did was understandable.' That destroys the connection.

It guarantees repetition

This is the most dangerous part. If your justification makes Acting Out seem acceptable or inevitable, your brain remembers that for next time. You've just taught yourself: 'When X happens, Acting Out is okay.' The cycle strengthens.

It transitions you to Pretend Normal

Once you've justified what happened, you can go back to 'normal life' without actually changing anything. Pretend Normal flows directly from Justification.

Remember This Phrase: Tell the truth faster. The quicker you can move from justification to honest accountability, the faster you'll heal. Don't let the justifications sit and harden into beliefs. Challenge them immediately.

Justification vs. Accountability

What's the difference between justification and genuine accountability?
Let's compare:

Justification says:

- 'I had to because...'
- 'It's not my fault because...'
- 'Anyone would have done the same.'
- 'It wasn't that bad.'
- 'They deserved it.'

Accountability says:

- 'I did this. I'm responsible.'
- 'I understand why I did it, but that doesn't make it okay.'
- 'I caused harm. I need to make amends.'
- 'I need to change my behavior.'
- 'I'm going to get help so this doesn't happen again.'

See the difference? Justification protects your ego. Accountability faces reality and creates change.

Tool Box: The Justification Detector: Write down your most common justifications. Be brutally honest. Now, for each one, ask: (1) Is this actually true, or is it a story I'm telling myself? (2) Does believing this help me change, or keep me stuck? (3) What's the accountability version of this statement? (4) What would I say to a friend who gave me this justification? Practice catching your justifications in real-time. When you hear yourself making excuses, stop. Say out loud: 'That's a justification. What's the truth?' This practice breaks the automatic pattern.

Breaking the Justification Pattern

How do you stop justifying and start being accountable? Here are practical steps:

1. Expect your brain to justify

Don't be surprised when justifications arise. Your brain is doing what brains do—trying to protect your self-image. Just recognize it: 'There's the justification.'

2. Write down your justifications

When they come up, write them down word-for-word. Seeing them on paper makes their dishonesty more obvious.

3. Test them with someone else

Tell your therapist, sponsor, or group: 'Here's what I'm telling myself about what happened.' Let them challenge your justifications. Trust their reality check.

4. Ask: Does this help me change?

Even if a justification has some truth to it, if believing it keeps you stuck, it's not serving you.

5. Practice the accountability version

For every justification, create an accountability statement. Say it out loud. Write it down. Share it with your support system.

6. Make amends without justifying

When you apologize or make amends, don't include justifications. 'I'm sorry I did X' is accountability. 'I'm sorry I did X, but I was stressed, is a justification disguised as an apology.

Ray's Story: The hardest thing I ever learned in recovery was how to apologize without justifying. I'd say to my wife: 'I'm sorry I acted out, but I was under so much pressure, and you weren't available and...' She'd stop me every time: 'No buts. Either you're sorry, or you're explaining why it's not your fault.' She was right. Real apologies don't have buts. Real accountability doesn't have excuses. Learning to say 'I did this. It was wrong. I'm sorry. I'm going to change without adding any justifications—that's when my recovery actually started. That's when people could finally trust me again.

Moving Forward

Justification is the phase that most directly prevents recovery. Build-Up can be interrupted. Acting Out can be minimized. But Justification? Justification actively sabotages your healing by preventing you from facing the truth.

The good news: once you learn to recognize your justification patterns, you can interrupt them. You can choose accountability instead. You can tell the truth faster.

In the next chapter, we'll explore the final phase of the cycle: Pretend Normal. This is where justification leads—back to 'business as usual' without actually addressing what caused the cycle in the first place.

Understanding Pretend Normal is crucial because it's the bridge that takes you right back into Build-Up. It's how the cycle perpetuates. It's what keeps people stuck for years, decades, or a lifetime.

Let's break that pattern together.

Konseki's Story: The Story-Telling Mind The mind is a storytelling machine. That's not a metaphor — that's the work it does, every minute, all day. Something happens, and the mind immediately wraps it in a story. The story explains. The story justifies. The story protects. The story keeps you the hero of your own life. In Zen, we call this the *story-telling mind* — and we practice noticing when it's doing its work. When I sat through my first long retreat, I was shocked at how much my mind was making up about every little thing. The teacher rang the bell. *"Why did he ring it now? Is something wrong?"* My knee ached. *"This shouldn't hurt. I must be doing it wrong."* All stories. All instant. All believed. Justification is the storytelling mind protecting an addiction. Every time I Acted Out, my mind delivered the story before I even sat down to think. *"I deserve this."* *"Just this once."* *"She was the one who started it."* *"It's not as bad as what other people do."* I wasn't constructing these arguments — they arrived ready-made. Bare attention is the antidote. Not "stop telling stories" — the mind will keep doing what it does. But you can notice the story arising. *"Ah, there's the story about deserving this. I see it. I don't have to believe it."* That single move — noticing the story instead of

swallowing it — is enough to break Justification's grip. The story still arises. But it doesn't have to drive the bus.

CHAPTER 6 – The Pretend Normal Phase



Mask Wearing - The Most Dangerous Illusion

This is the final phase of the Behavioral Cycle, and in many ways, the most insidious. It's called Pretend Normal because that's exactly what it is: pretending everything is back to normal when nothing has actually changed.

Pretend Normal looks like recovery. It feels like stability. You're going to work, paying bills, fulfilling responsibilities, and showing up to family obligations. On the surface, life looks fine. But underneath, the unresolved issues that drove the cycle in the first place are still there—unaddressed, unhealed, and quietly building pressure for the next round.

This is how people stay stuck in the Behavioral Cycle for years, decades, or a lifetime. They never fully Act Out again to the point of catastrophic consequences, but they never fully heal either. They just keep going around and around the cycle, Pretending Normal between episodes.

Let's expose this phase for what it is—and learn how to break free from it.

What Pretend Normal Looks Like

Pretend Normal has specific characteristics you can learn to recognize:

Minimizing what happened

- 'It wasn't that bad.'

- 'I'm making too big a deal out of this.'
- 'Everyone slips up sometimes.'
- 'I'm being too hard on myself.'
- 'The police will just give me a warning and let me go. No big deal.'
- 'My family will think everything is ok with me.'
- 'I act normally with my victim, so they think what I did was OK and not to tell anyone, for doing what's normal.'

Avoiding the topic

- Refusing to talk about the Acting Out with the therapist, sponsor, or group
- Changing the subject when it comes up
- Getting defensive or angry if someone brings it up
- 'I don't want to dwell on the past.'

Resuming 'normal' routines without change

- Going back to work, family life, and social activities as if nothing had happened
- No adjustments to recovery plan
- No increased accountability or support
- 'Everything's fine now.'

Making promises you can't keep

- 'That was the last time, I promise.'
- 'I've learned my lesson.'
- 'I won't need therapy/meetings anymore.'
- 'I can handle it on my own from here.'

Resisting support or accountability

- Skipping therapy sessions or meetings
- Avoiding sponsor or accountability partners
- 'I don't need as much support now.'

- 'I'm past that phase.'

Hiding evidence

- Deleting messages, clearing browser history
- Not telling the complete truth about what happened
- Keeping secrets from the support system
- Creating alibis or cover stories

The hallmark of Pretend Normal: everything LOOKS fine, but nothing has fundamentally changed.

Ray's Story: I spent years in Pretend Normal. I'd Act Out, feel terrible for a few days, then go back to 'normal life.' I'd tell myself: 'Okay, that was bad. I learned my lesson. I'm not doing that again.' And I'd believe it. For a while. Days, weeks, sometimes months. I'd be the perfect husband, the dedicated employee, the responsible guy. But I never addressed what drove the Acting Out in the first place. I never dealt with my trauma. I never built real coping skills. I never stayed connected to support. So the pressure would start building again. Slowly. Quietly. And I'd tell myself everything was fine—right up until the moment I Acted Out again. Pretend Normal felt like recovery. It wasn't. It was just the eye of the storm.

Why Pretend Normal Is So Dangerous

Pretend Normal is dangerous precisely because it looks and feels like recovery. Here's why it keeps you trapped:

It prevents real change

If you believe everything is back to normal, you don't address the root causes of the cycle. You don't heal trauma. You don't build new skills. You don't change the conditions that created Build-Up in the first place.

It isolates you

When you're Pretending Normal, you pull away from the people who could help you. You skip meetings. You cancel therapy. You avoid

honest conversations. You tell yourself you don't need support anymore—right when you need it most.

It rebuilds false trust

People around you start to believe things are better. They let their guard down. They stop asking hard questions. This gives you more freedom to operate without accountability, which sets up the next Acting Out.

It flows directly into Build-Up

This is the most critical point: Pretend Normal IS the beginning of the next Build-Up. The unresolved issues, the unprocessed emotions, the unmet needs—they're all still there, accumulating pressure. You're already in the cycle again; you just don't know it yet.

It can last for years

Some people spend years in Pretend Normal, with periodic Acting Out episodes they minimize and move on from. They never hit 'rock bottom' dramatic enough to force real change, but they never actually heal either. They just suffer quietly, maintaining the appearance of normalcy while being slowly destroyed inside.

Konseki's Story: Zen practice teaches us about the difference between 'seeming' and 'being.' You can seem peaceful while your mind is in turmoil. You can seem recovered while the cycle is still running beneath the surface. Pretend Normal is all seeming, no being. In my own recovery, the hardest thing was accepting that looking functional wasn't the same as being healed. I could hold a job, maintain relationships, present well to the world—and still be deeply sick. Real recovery required me to stop pretending. To stop performing normalcy. To actually sit with what was broken and do the painful work of healing it. That meant staying in therapy even when I 'felt fine.' Attending meetings even when I didn't think I needed them. Being honest about my struggles, even when it was embarrassing. Pretend Normal offers the illusion of peace. Real recovery requires truth.

The Cycle Completes

Here's how Pretend Normal connects back to Build-Up, completing the cycle:

You Act Out. You feel terrible. You justify what happened ('I was stressed,' 'They pushed me to it'). Then you move into Pretend Normal: 'Okay, that's over. I'm fine now. Life goes back to normal.'

But the issues that created Build-Up in the first place haven't been addressed:

- The trauma that triggers your nervous system—still there
- The lack of emotional coping skills—still there
- The relationship conflicts—still there
- The unmet needs—still there
- The isolation patterns—still there

So the pressure starts accumulating again. Slowly at first. A stressful day here. A conflict there. A trigger you didn't expect. The same old patterns are resurfacing.

And because you're Pretending Normal, you're not using the tools that could interrupt Build-Up early. You're not going to meetings. You're not calling your sponsor. You're not being honest in therapy. You're not monitoring your warning signs. You're just... Pretending.

Until the pressure becomes unbearable again. And you Act Out again. And the cycle continues.

Breaking Out of Pretend Normal

How do you break out of Pretend Normal and into genuine recovery? Here's what real recovery looks like:

Stay connected to support

- Continue therapy even when you 'feel fine'
- Attend meetings regularly, not just during crisis

- Maintain contact with sponsor and accountability partners
- Don't isolate when things seem stable

Keep doing the work

- Continue processing trauma
- Keep building emotional skills
- Practice daily check-ins and body awareness
- Work your recovery program consistently

Stay honest

- Tell the truth about struggles, even small ones
- Don't minimize or hide 'minor' slips
- Share what you're really feeling, not just what looks good
- Let people see your actual recovery journey, not a performance

Address root causes

- Heal the trauma driving the cycle
- Resolve relationship conflicts
- Meet your legitimate needs in healthy ways
- Build a life that doesn't require escape

Maintain accountability structures

- Regular check-ins with support system
- Honest sharing in group settings
- Technology accountability (if relevant to your Acting Out)
- Transparency with people affected by your behavior

Recognize and interrupt Build-Up early

- Monitor your warning signs continuously
- Intervene at first signs of pressure building
- Increase support during high-risk times
- Don't wait for crisis to ask for help

The difference between Pretend Normal and genuine recovery is simple: in Pretend Normal, you're waiting for the next crisis. In genuine recovery, you're actively building a different life.

Tool Box: The Recovery Maintenance Plan: Create a written plan for maintaining recovery when things are stable (not just for crisis). Include: (1) Weekly non-negotiables (meetings, therapy, check-ins), (2) Monthly recovery practices (intensive processing, group participation, sponsor contact), (3) Daily monitoring (body check-in, emotion naming, Build-Up awareness), (4) Red flags that mean you're slipping into Pretend Normal (skipping meetings, minimizing, isolating), (5) People who have permission to call you out when they see Pretend Normal, (6) What genuine recovery looks like for you (specific, observable behaviors). Review this plan monthly with your support system. Adjust as needed. This is your protection against Pretend Normal.

From Pretend Normal to Real Recovery

Real recovery doesn't look like Pretend Normal. Real recovery is:

- Messy and honest, not polished and performative
- Connected to community, not isolated and self-sufficient
- Continuously growing, not 'fixed' and finished
- Accountable and transparent, not secretive and defensive
- Addressing root causes, not just managing symptoms

Real recovery means saying:

- 'I'm still in recovery and always will be.'
- 'I need ongoing support and accountability.'
- 'I'm working on healing my trauma.'
- 'I'm learning new skills every day.'
- 'I'm building a different life, not just avoiding Acting Out.'

This isn't Pretending Normal. This is being honest. And honesty is where freedom lives.

Ray's Story: I know I'm in genuine recovery—not Pretend Normal—when I can talk openly about my struggles without shame. When I'm attending meetings, even though 'everything's fine.' When I'm honest with my therapist about the small warning signs I'm noticing. When I'm asking for help before I'm in crisis. When I'm doing the uncomfortable work of healing trauma instead of just avoiding triggers. Pretend Normal feels easier in the short term—you don't have to keep doing the hard work, you can just relax and be 'normal.' But it's a trap. The cycle is still there, just dormant. Real recovery is harder moment-to-moment, but it's actually freedom. It's building a life where I don't need to Act Out because I'm addressing my pain in healthy ways. That's the difference.

You've Completed the Cycle

Congratulations. You now understand the complete Behavioral Cycle:

- Build-Up: Where pressure accumulates and intervention is most powerful
- Acting Out: Where the pressure is released through harmful behavior
- Justification: Where you create stories to avoid accountability
- Pretend Normal: Where you return to 'normal' without real change

You understand how each phase flows into the next. How the cycle self-reinforces. How it can trap people for decades. And most importantly, you understand that the cycle CAN be broken.

In the chapters ahead, we'll go deeper into the tools, practices, and transformations that permanently break the cycle. We'll explore trauma healing, building new skills, creating genuine connections, and living in sustained recovery.

But for now, just sit with what you've learned. You're not trapped. You're not broken. You're caught in a pattern—a pattern you now understand. And patterns can be changed.

Remember This Phrase: Recovery is a lifestyle, not a destination. You don't 'arrive' at recovery and then stop doing the work. You build a recovery lifestyle where the work IS your life—and it becomes joy, not burden.

Konseki's Story: No Audience on the Cushion Pretend Normal has one weakness: it needs an audience. The whole performance falls apart the moment no one's watching. That's why meditation is so threatening to it. You sit down. No one is there. There's nothing to perform for. There's no one to convince that you're fine. And so, slowly, the mask starts to feel heavy. The first time I really sat — not just "sat" but actually settled into a serious practice — I noticed how exhausted I was from being someone else all day. Pretend Normal had been running so long it felt like my actual personality. The cushion gave it nowhere to go. What surfaces when the mask comes off isn't pretty. The first weeks of any genuine meditation practice can be brutal: shame, grief, anger, loneliness — all the things Pretend Normal had been holding down. People sometimes quit at this stage because they think they're getting worse. They're not getting worse. They're meeting themselves. Stay with it. The cushion doesn't lie, but it also doesn't punish. It just shows you. And what you eventually discover, after the storm of unmasked emotion passes, is that the *true* self underneath is far more livable than the polished-up version you've been performing. You don't need an audience. You don't need a mask. You just need to be home in your own skin. Zen calls that the *original face* — the one you had before you learned to hide.

CHAPTER 7 – Breaking The Cycle - Interventions



Tools You Can Use Today

Before you read this chapter, return to Appendix 3 — Reasons for Change. Re-read what you wrote there. The interventions in this chapter land harder when the reasons are present. The reasons you put on paper are the rope you reach for in the middle of a Build-Up. Reach for them now.

You now understand the Behavioral Cycle in its entirety. You know the four phases. You recognize the warning signs. You understand how each phase flows into the next, creating a self-reinforcing pattern that can trap you for years.

Now comes the most important question: How do you break it?

This chapter is about interventions—specific, practical tools you can use to interrupt the cycle at every phase. These aren't theories. These are battle-tested strategies that have worked for thousands of people in recovery. Some will work better for you than others. Your job is to try them, find what fits, and build your own intervention toolkit.

Let's get to work.

Three Levels of Intervention

Interventions work at three different time scales:

Short-Term Crisis Interventions (Minutes to Hours)

These are emergency tools for when you're in immediate danger of Acting Out or are already in the middle of it. They're designed to interrupt the behavior RIGHT NOW and prevent catastrophic consequences.

Intermediate Build-Up Interventions (Hours to Days)

These tools address Build-Up before it becomes unbearable. They help you recognize pressure early and release it safely before you get to the edge of Acting Out.

Long-Term Lifestyle *Changes* (Weeks to Years)

These are the foundations of genuine recovery—the practices, relationships, and habits that prevent Build-Up from accumulating in the first place. This is where you build a life that doesn't require escape.

You need all three levels. Crisis interventions keep you safe in the moment. Build-Up interventions catch problems early. Lifestyle changes address root causes. Let's explore each.

Short-Term Crisis Interventions

When you're on the edge of Acting Out—or already in the middle of it—you need tools that work FAST. Here are the most effective crisis interventions:

Physical Interruption

- Leave the situation immediately (get in your car and drive, go for a walk, leave the house)
- Cold water shock (splash face, take cold shower, hold ice)
- Intense physical exercise (run, do pushups until exhaustion, hit a punching bag)
- Deep pressure (weighted blanket, tight hug, press against wall)

Emergency Contact

- Call your sponsor, therapist, or accountability partner RIGHT NOW
- Text your crisis support list: 'I need help. I'm in danger of acting out.'

- Call a crisis hotline (addiction, mental health, suicide prevention)
- Go to an emergency meeting or drop-in support group
- Don't wait. Don't minimize. Make the call.

STOP Technique (Stop, Take a breath, Observe, Proceed mindfully)

- STOP what you're doing—freeze in place
- TAKE three deep breaths (4 count in, 7 count hold, 8 count out)
- OBSERVE: What am I feeling? What am I thinking? What do I really need?
- PROCEED mindfully: Choose the recovery response, not the addiction response

Delay Strategies

- Set a timer for 15 minutes. Promise yourself you'll wait that long before acting.
- During those 15 minutes, do ANYTHING else (call someone, exercise, shower)
- Often the urge will decrease significantly in that time
- If it doesn't, set another 15-minute timer. Keep delaying.

Reality Check Questions

- 'If I do this, what happens in the next hour?'
- 'What about tomorrow? Next week? Next year?'
- 'Who gets hurt if I act out right now?'
- 'Is five minutes of relief worth the consequences?'
- 'What would I tell my best friend to do in this situation?'

Ray's Story: I remember one night when the urge to act out was overwhelming. I was already in my car, already driving toward the place I knew I shouldn't go. My hands were shaking. My heart was racing. Everything in me said: 'Just this once. Nobody will know.' But I'd learned the STOP technique in therapy. So I pulled over. Literally

stopped the car. Took three deep breaths. Asked myself: 'What am I really feeling right now?' The answer was: terrified. Lonely. Ashamed that I still struggled with this. I didn't want to act out—I wanted to escape those feelings. So I called my sponsor. Right there in the parking lot, at 11 PM, I called him. He answered. We talked for 20 minutes. The urge didn't disappear, but it became manageable. I drove home instead. That night taught me: crisis interventions work. But only if you actually use them.

Intermediate Build-Up Interventions

These interventions work best when you catch Build-Up EARLY—before the pressure becomes unbearable. The goal is to release pressure safely and address what's driving the Build-Up in the first place.

Emotional Regulation Techniques

When difficult emotions are building, you need ways to process them without acting out:

- Name the emotion precisely (use your 1,348-emotion database!)
- Feel where it lives in your body (chest, stomach, shoulders, jaw)
- Allow it to be present without trying to make it go away
- Journal about it: 'I'm feeling [emotion] because [reason]. What I really need is [need].'
- Talk to someone about it: 'I'm struggling with [emotion]. Can I process this with you?'

Urge Surfing

Urges come in waves. They peak and then subside—if you don't feed them. Urge surfing is about riding the wave without acting:

- Notice the urge without judgment: 'There's the urge'
- Observe how it feels in your body (tension, heat, restlessness)
- Watch it intensify, peak, and then start to decrease

- Breathe through it like a wave: it will pass
- Typical urge peak: 5-15 minutes. You can handle 15 minutes.

Konseki's Story: In Zen, we learn that everything is impermanent—including urges, cravings, and difficult emotions. They arise, they peak, they pass. Always. The problem is we usually react before they pass. We try to escape the discomfort. But if you can just sit with it—really sit with it, feeling it fully in your body without acting on it—you discover something profound: you're stronger than the urge. The urge can't actually control you unless you give it power. This is urge surfing. In meditation, we practice this with every itch, every uncomfortable sensation, every wandering thought. We notice it. We don't react. We watch it pass. And it always does.

RAIN Technique (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture)

A powerful mindfulness practice for working with difficult emotions:

- **RECOGNIZE:** What am I feeling? Name it clearly.
- **ALLOW:** Let it be here. Don't push it away or try to fix it.
- **INVESTIGATE:** Where do I feel this in my body? What thoughts come with it? What does this emotion need?
- **NURTURE:** Offer yourself compassion. "This is hard. It's okay to feel this. I'm here for myself."

Cognitive Interventions (Challenging Thoughts)

Build-Up is driven by thoughts as much as emotions. Challenge the thinking that fuels the cycle:

- Identify the thought: 'Nobody cares about me,' 'I deserve this,' or 'Nothing will change.'
- Question it: 'Is this actually true? What's the evidence?'
- Reframe it: 'Some people care. I'm struggling to feel connected right now.'
- Replace it: 'I can reach out. I can connect. I can get support.'

HALT Check-In

When you notice Build-Up starting, ask yourself:

- Am I Hungry? (When did I last eat a real meal?)
- Am I Angry? (What am I upset about that I haven't addressed?)
- Am I Lonely? (When did I last have a meaningful connection?)
- Am I Tired? (Am I getting adequate sleep and rest?)

Address whichever applies. Sometimes Build-Up is just your body needing basic care.

Tool Box: Daily Build-Up Prevention Practice: Every evening, spend 5 minutes reviewing your day: (1) What Build-Up signs did I notice today? (body tension, irritability, isolation, intrusive thoughts), (2) What triggered them? (stress, conflict, lack of sleep, HALT issues), (3) What interventions did I use? (What worked? What didn't?), (4) What do I need to do tomorrow to prevent Build-Up? (get more sleep, reach out to someone, attend a meeting, practice self-care). This daily review catches Build-Up EARLY, rather than letting it accumulate for days or weeks.

Long-Term Lifestyle Changes

Crisis and Build-Up interventions are essential. But if you're constantly in crisis, you're not truly recovering—you're just preventing disaster. Long-term recovery requires building a life that doesn't generate constant Build-Up. This means addressing root causes.

Trauma Healing

If trauma drives your cycle (and for most people it does), you must heal the wounds:

- Work with a trauma-informed therapist (EMDR, Somatic Experiencing, or similar)
- Process traumatic memories safely with professional support
- Learn to recognize trauma triggers and respond differently

- Develop new neural pathways that don't lead to Acting Out
- This takes time. Be patient. Healing is not linear.

Building Emotional Skills

Most people in active addiction never learned healthy emotional coping:

- Learn to identify emotions precisely (practice with the 1,348 emotions)
- Practice expressing emotions to safe people
- Develop tolerance for sitting with discomfort
- Build skills for self-soothing and self-compassion
- Learn healthy ways to meet your needs

Creating Support Systems

Isolation kills recovery. Connection heals. Build your support network:

- Attend regular meetings (12-Step, SMART Recovery, therapy groups)
- Work with a sponsor or accountability partner
- Maintain regular therapy (even when you 'feel fine')
- Build authentic friendships in the recovery community
- Stay connected to family members who support your recovery
- Don't isolate when things are going well—that's when the next Build-Up starts

Meditation & Mindfulness Practice

Regular meditation changes your brain and your relationship to urges:

- Start with 5 minutes daily (sitting quietly, focusing on breath)
- Gradually increase to 20-30 minutes
- Practice noticing thoughts and urges without acting on them
- Develop the ability to pause between impulse and action
- This is training for real life—when urges arise, you know how to sit with them

Konseki's Story: My First Encounter with Meditation I remember when I was first introduced to meditation. My mom had just passed, and I was looking for healthier ways to cope. Full disclosure: Meditation is boring! But therein lies the beauty of it. My first night sitting with a meditation group: the usual spiel, feel your feet firmly on the floor, feel the air around you, notice your breathing. BORING! All I could think about was getting out of that room and going somewhere for a cup of coffee. My mind kept racing with anxiety about the future, or reminiscing with remorse and regret about the past. I couldn't keep my focus on the present moment, which is the goal of meditation. The present moment sucked! In truth, I really didn't like hanging out alone and sitting with the thoughts racing a mile a minute through my own mind. It was not a pleasant place to be. But I stuck with it. And over time, I began enjoying spending time with myself. Things that used to bother me no longer had a lasting effect. I became my own best friend and found myself looking forward to those boring moments when I could hang out with my new best friend.

Physical Health Foundation

Your body affects your mind. Basic self-care prevents Build-Up:

- Regular sleep (7-9 hours, consistent schedule)
- Nutritious food (regular meals, not skipping, not binging)
- Exercise (movement that feels good to your body)
- Limit substances (caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, drugs)
- Medical care (address physical health issues, take prescribed medications)

Meaningful Purpose & Activities

When your life has meaning beyond avoiding Acting Out, the cycle loses power:

- Find work or activities that give you purpose
- Engage in service to others (volunteer, sponsor others, give back)

- Develop hobbies and interests that bring genuine joy
- Build relationships based on authentic connection, not using
- Create a life worth protecting

Ray's Story: For the first year of recovery, I was just trying not to act out. Every day was about avoiding the cycle. But that's exhausting, and it's not sustainable. Real change came when I started building a different life. I went back to school. I started volunteering. I reconnected with old hobbies I'd abandoned. I built real friendships in my recovery community. Slowly, my life became about what I was moving toward, not just what I was running from. The cycle still tries to start sometimes—Build-Up happens. But now I have a life I don't want to lose. I have people counting on me. I have a purpose. That changes everything.

Stopping Addictive Thoughts

Addictive thoughts—fantasies, obsessions, rationalizations—feed the cycle. Learning to interrupt these thoughts is crucial:

Awareness & Identification

- Notice when addictive thinking starts: "There's the fantasy again."
- Recognize it for what it is: the addiction talking, not the truth
- Don't judge yourself for having the thoughts—just notice them

STOP Technique for Thoughts

- STOP the thought as soon as you notice it
- Say internally: "That's addiction thinking. Not helpful."
- REDIRECT to something else (call someone, change environment, engage in activity)

Thought Replacement

- Don't just stop the thought—replace it with something else

- Have recovery mantras ready: 'I am choosing recovery' or 'This thought doesn't serve me'
- Redirect attention to the present moment: 'What do I see? What do I hear? What do I feel?'
- Engage in incompatible activity (can't fantasize while having a real conversation)

Exposure Without Engagement

Advanced practice: Notice the thought, but don't engage with it:

- 'There's a fantasy about acting out.'
- 'I see it. I'm not going to follow it.'
- 'It's just a thought. Thoughts aren't facts. Thoughts aren't commands.'
- Let it pass like a cloud in the sky

Remember This Phrase: Thoughts are not facts. Urges are not commands. Just because you think it or feel it doesn't mean you have to do it. You have the power to choose your response.

Building Your Personal Intervention Plan

You now have dozens of intervention tools. But having tools isn't enough—you need a plan for when and how to use them. Here's how to create your personalized intervention plan:

Step 1: Know Your Warning Signs

- List your specific Build-Up signals (from Chapter 3)
- Rank them by timing: Which comes first? Second? Last before Acting Out?
- Know your point of no return: What's the last intervention point before you lose control?

Step 2: Match Interventions to Build-Up Stages

- Early Build-Up (first warning signs): Use intermediate interventions

- Middle Build-Up (pressure building): Use stronger interventions, increase frequency
- Late Build-Up (near the edge): Use crisis interventions, emergency contact

Step 3: Create Your Emergency Contact List

- List 3-5 people you can call ANY TIME
- Include their phone numbers (in your phone AND written down)
- Tell them in advance: 'I might call you in crisis. Please answer.'
- Include crisis hotlines (addiction, mental health, suicide prevention). These numbers and additional contact information are available in the Appendix under Additional Support

Step 4: Identify Your Best Interventions

- Which tools from this chapter resonate most with you?
- Which have worked in the past when you actually tried them?
- Start with 3-5 you'll commit to using
- Practice them when you're NOT in crisis so they're automatic when you are

Step 5: Plan for High-Risk Situations

- What situations reliably trigger your Build-Up?
- What's your plan for each one?
- How will you avoid them when possible?
- What interventions will you use when you can't avoid them?

Step 6: Daily & Weekly Maintenance

- What daily practices prevent Build-Up? (meditation, check-ins, meetings)
- What weekly practices maintain recovery? (therapy, sponsor contact, group)
- Schedule these. Make them non-negotiable.

Tool Box: Emergency Intervention Card: Create a physical card (index card size) that you keep in your wallet, or store it digitally on your cell phone. On it, write: (1) My #1 warning sign that I'm in Build-Up: [specific sign], (2) When I notice this, I will: [specific intervention], (3) Emergency contacts (3 names and numbers), (4) Crisis hotline: [number], (5) My recovery *mantra*: [phrase that helps you]. Read this card daily. When a crisis hits, pull it out and follow it. Don't think. Just follow the plan.

When Interventions Don't Work for You

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, interventions don't work. You act out anyway. This doesn't mean you've failed. It means you need to adjust your approach:

- Your Build-Up got too far before you intervened (catch it earlier next time)
- You're not using the interventions that actually work for YOU (try different ones)
- You need more intensive support (increase therapy, add residential treatment, join more groups)
- Underlying trauma needs professional treatment (work with a trauma specialist)
- You're trying to do this alone (build a stronger support network)
- Your environment is too triggering (might need to change jobs, living situation, relationships)

If interventions consistently aren't working, that's important data. Don't give up—adjust. Talk to your therapist, sponsor, and support system about what's not working. They can help you troubleshoot and find better approaches.

Moving Forward

You now have a comprehensive toolkit for breaking the Behavioral Cycle:

- Short-term crisis interventions when you're in immediate danger
- Intermediate Build-Up interventions to catch problems early
- Long-term lifestyle changes that address root causes
- Techniques for stopping addictive thoughts
- A framework for building your personal intervention plan

These tools work. Thousands of people have used them to break cycles that seemed unbreakable. But tools only work if you use them. And using them requires practice, commitment, and support.

Don't try to implement everything at once. Start with 2-3 interventions that resonate with you. Practice them. Get good at them. Then add more. Build your toolkit over time.

Recovery is a skill. Like any skill, it improves with practice. You'll get better at recognizing Build-Up. You'll get faster at intervening. You'll find the tools that work best for you.

In the next chapters, we'll go deeper into specific aspects of recovery—trauma healing, building authentic relationships, developing spiritual practice, and creating a sustainable recovery lifestyle.

But for now, you have what you need to start breaking the cycle. The question is: Will you use these tools?

Your freedom depends on your answer.

Remember Angulimala's Story from the Foreword: "No fire is too fierce to be transformed."

Konseki's Story: A Poem That Changed My Perspective

The Five Stages of Walking Down the Same Street

Anyone in recovery long enough learns there is a poem — and I won't reproduce it here because the words belong to its author, Portia Nelson — that describes five stages of walking down the same street.

I'll describe the shape of it in my own words, and then the next time you fall in a familiar hole, see if you don't recognize where you are in this sequence.

Stage one: *I walk down the street. I fall in a hole. I don't see how I got in. It takes a long time to get out. It is not my fault — the hole was there.*

Stage two: *I walk down the same street. I pretend I don't see the hole. I fall in. I can't believe I am in the same place. It is still not my fault.*

Stage three: *I walk down the same street. I see the hole. I still fall in. By now I know it is a habit. My eyes are open. I am responsible. I get out faster.*

Stage four: *I walk down the same street. I see the hole. I walk around it.*

Stage five: *I walk down a different street.*

Recovery is not the moment you stop falling into the hole. Recovery is the long slow walk from stage one to stage five, with stage three being the hardest — the place where you can see what is happening, you know you are doing it, and yet some part of you keeps walking forward anyway. Most of what we call relapse happens in stage three.

Be patient with yourself in stage three. It is the stage that asks the most of you. And it is the stage where the change becomes real.

CHAPTER 8 – Aspects of Recovery



Building a Life, Not Just Avoiding a Cycle

You know the Behavioral Cycle. You have intervention tools. You understand how to interrupt the pattern when it starts. That's powerful. That's essential. But if that's all you have—if your entire recovery is just about NOT doing the harmful behavior—you're missing something crucial.

Recovery is not just the absence of addiction. It's the presence of something better.

This chapter is about what recovery actually looks like in daily life. Not just crisis management. Not just avoiding triggers. But building a life so full, so meaningful, so connected that the old behaviors lose their appeal. This is where recovery transforms from something you DO into something you ARE.

Recovery as Lifestyle, Not Destination

One of the biggest mistakes people make in early recovery is thinking, 'Once I get through this hard part, I can go back to normal life.'

There is no going back to 'normal life.' Normal life is what created the cycle in the first place. Normal life is what you're trying to escape from.

Recovery is not temporary. It's not a phase you graduate from. It's a completely different way of living—a lifestyle you build intentionally, practice daily, and maintain for the rest of your life.

This might sound exhausting. But here's the truth: a recovery lifestyle becomes easier, more natural, and more joyful over time. It stops

feeling like work and starts feeling like freedom. You're not giving up a life of pleasure for a life of restriction. You're trading a life of chaos and shame for a life of peace and authenticity.

Ray's Story: For the first year, I white-knuckled it. Every day was a battle. Every urge was torture. I thought: 'When will this get easier? When do I get to relax and just be normal?' My sponsor finally said something that changed everything: 'Ray, you're waiting for recovery to be over so you can go back to your old life. But your old life is what got you here. Recovery isn't punishment you endure until you're free. Recovery IS freedom. Stop waiting for it to end and start living it.' That shift—from enduring recovery to living recovery—changed everything. Once I stopped fighting it and started building it, peace came.

Daily Practices That Sustain Recovery

Recovery isn't maintained by big dramatic moments. It's maintained by small daily practices—the unglamorous, unsexy habits you do every single day, whether you feel like it or not.

Morning Check-In

Start each day with awareness:

- How am I feeling physically? (body scan)
- What emotions am I carrying into today?
- What are my intentions for today?
- What support do I need today?
- What am I grateful for?

Five minutes. Every morning. Non-negotiable.

Meditation Practice

Even 10-20 minutes daily changes your brain:

- Sit quietly, focus on breath
- Notice thoughts and urges without acting on them
- Practice the pause between stimulus and response

- Build capacity to sit with discomfort
- This is training for real life—when triggers happen, you know how to respond skillfully

Connection & Accountability

Isolation kills recovery. Connection sustains it:

- Daily contact with someone in recovery (text, call, meeting)
- Weekly sponsor or accountability partner check-in
- Regular therapy sessions (don't skip when you 'feel fine')
- Attend support group meetings consistently
- Be honest about struggles, even small ones

Physical Self-Care

Your body supports your recovery:

- Adequate sleep (7-9 hours, consistent schedule)
- Regular meals (don't skip, don't binge)
- Movement/exercise (find what feels good)
- Limit caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, other substances
- Take prescribed medications consistently

Evening Review

End each day with reflection:

- Where did I notice Build-Up today?
- What interventions did I use?
- Where did I practice recovery principles?
- What do I need to do differently tomorrow?
- What am I grateful for from today?

These practices might seem basic. They are. But basic doesn't mean unimportant. These are the foundations that prevent Build-Up, maintain awareness, and keep you connected to recovery.

Konseki's Story: In Zen monasteries, every day follows the same rhythm: wake at the same time, meditate, eat, work, meditate, eat, work, meditate, sleep. Same schedule. Every single day. When I first encountered this, I thought: 'How boring. How rigid.' But I came to understand: this isn't rigidity, it's freedom. When the external structure is reliable, your mind is free to do the real work. You're not constantly deciding what to do next or negotiating with yourself about whether to practice. You just do it. Recovery works the same way. Create a daily rhythm. Stick to it. Let the structure hold you so your energy can go toward healing instead of decision-making.

Body, Mind, Spirit Integration

Throughout this book, we've emphasized the Body/Mind/Spirit framework—CBT for the mind, Zen for the spirit, and both grounded in the body. A sustainable recovery lifestyle integrates all three:

Body

- Notice body signals (Build-Up shows up in your body first)
- Use physical interventions (exercise, cold water, breathing)
- Practice body-based healing (yoga, somatic therapy, massage)
- Honor your body's needs (rest, nutrition, movement, pleasure)

Mind

- Challenge cognitive distortions (CBT thought work)
- Process emotions skillfully (name them, feel them, let them pass)
- Build new neural pathways (practice new responses until they're automatic)
- Continue learning (read, attend workshops, deepen understanding)

Spirit

- Connect to something larger than yourself (however you define it)
- Practice meditation, prayer, or contemplation

- Engage in service to others
- Cultivate meaning, purpose, and values
- Develop capacity for forgiveness, compassion, and love

When all three are integrated, recovery becomes holistic. You're not just managing symptoms—you're healing at every level.

Building Authentic Relationships

Active addiction destroys relationships. Recovery requires building new ones—based on honesty, vulnerability, and genuine connection.

Honesty as Foundation

No more hiding. No more masks. No more performing:

- Tell the truth about your struggles
- Share your feelings, even when uncomfortable
- Admit when you're wrong
- Ask for help when you need it
- Let people see the real you, not the version you think they want

Vulnerability as Strength

Being vulnerable isn't weakness—it's the only path to real connection:

- Share your fears and doubts
- Admit you don't have all the answers
- Let people support you
- Receive help as graciously as you give it
- Drop the 'I've got it all together' facade

Healthy Boundaries

Recovery requires knowing what's yours and what's not:

- Say no when you need to
- Protect your recovery time (meetings, therapy, self-care)

- Limit contact with people who trigger Build-Up
- End relationships that don't support your recovery
- Create space for relationships that do

Reciprocity & Service

Healthy relationships involve both giving and receiving:

- Support others in their recovery journey
- Sponsor someone or be accountable to someone
- Show up for people who showed up for you
- Give back to your recovery community
- Let yourself be needed

Remember This Phrase: Connection is the opposite of addiction. The more authentic connection you build, the less appeal addiction has. Invest in relationships like your life depends on it—because it does.

Maintaining Accountability Structures

You can't stay accountable to yourself alone. You need external structures that keep you honest:

- Regular therapy (weekly or bi-weekly minimum)
- Sponsor or accountability partner (frequent contact)
- Support group meetings (at least weekly)
- Check-ins with family or friends (people who know your recovery)
- Structured reporting (some people use apps, daily logs, or regular emails to accountability partners)
- Transparency about struggles (don't hide slips or close calls)

Accountability isn't punishment. It's love. It's people caring enough about you to notice when you're struggling and call you on it. Let them.

Relapse Prevention vs. Recovery Living

There's a difference between relapse prevention and recovery living:

Relapse Prevention mindset:

- Focus: Don't act out
- Strategy: Avoid triggers, white-knuckle through urges
- Measure of success: Days without acting out
- Experience: Constant vigilance, exhausting

Recovery Living mindset:

- Focus: Build a meaningful life
- Strategy: Address root causes, develop healthy coping, create connection
- Measure of success: Quality of life, depth of relationships, personal growth
- Experience: Increasingly natural, joyful, sustainable

Both are important. Early recovery often requires a heavy focus on relapse prevention. But as you progress, the emphasis should shift toward recovery living. You stop being defined by what you're NOT doing and start being defined by what you ARE doing.

Ray's Story: I remember the moment I realized I'd shifted from relapse prevention to recovery living. I was at my grandson's birthday party. For the first time in years, I was fully present—not monitoring my urges, not white-knuckling through triggers, not planning my next meeting. I was just... there. Laughing. Playing. Connected. Later, I realized I hadn't thought about acting out once that entire day. Not because I was suppressing it, but because I was genuinely engaged in something better. That's when I knew: recovery wasn't just working. It was becoming who I am.

Finding Balance & Equanimity

Recovery requires balance—not swinging between extremes, but finding a sustainable middle path.

Work-Life Balance

- Don't neglect recovery for work (or work for recovery)
- Set boundaries around work hours
- Make time for rest, play, and connection
- Recovery should enhance your life, not consume it

Emotional Balance (Equanimity)

- Practice staying centered through ups and downs
- Don't get too high on success or too low on setbacks
- Develop capacity to ride emotional waves without reactive behavior
- This is a practice, not a destination

Self-Care vs. Self-Indulgence

- Self-care: Activities that genuinely nourish you
- Self-indulgence: Escapes that feel good temporarily but harm long-term
- Learn the difference for yourself
- Recovery requires self-care, not deprivation

Cultivating Patience, Tolerance, & Forgiveness

These qualities don't come naturally to most people in active addiction. They must be cultivated intentionally.

Patience

- Recovery takes time—there are no shortcuts
- Healing is not linear (you'll have setbacks)
- Be patient with yourself as you learn new skills
- Be patient with others as they learn to trust you again

Tolerance

- Develop capacity for discomfort (emotions, urges, situations)
- Practice sitting with what is, not what you wish it were
- Build resilience through small exposures to difficulty
- You're stronger than you think

Forgiveness

- Forgive yourself for past harm (you were sick, not evil)
- Forgive others who harmed you (holding resentment poisons you)
- Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting or condoning
- It means releasing the burden so you can move forward

Konseki's Story: Buddhist *metta* practice is about cultivating loving-kindness—for yourself, for loved ones, for strangers, even for people who've harmed you. This practice changed my recovery. I spent years hating myself for what I'd done. That self-hatred kept me stuck. Learning to offer myself compassion—"May I be happy, may I be safe, may I be at peace"—felt impossible at first. But I kept practicing. Slowly, the hatred loosened. Forgiveness became possible. Not as a one-time decision, but as a daily practice. And as I forgave myself, I found I could forgive others too. Resentment lost its grip. That's freedom.

Service & Giving Back

One of the most powerful aspects of recovery is service—helping others who are still struggling.

Why service matters:

- Reminds you where you came from (humility)
- Reinforces your own recovery (teaching deepens learning)
- Creates meaning and purpose
- Builds authentic connection

- Gets you outside yourself (antidote to self-obsession)

Forms of service:

- Sponsor someone in a 12-Step program
- Lead or co-lead support groups
- Share your story (meetings, speaking engagements, writing)
- Volunteer in recovery-related organizations
- Be available when someone calls in crisis
- Support newcomers at meetings

The 12th Step principle: 'Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others.' Service isn't optional—it's essential to sustained recovery.

Tool Box: Creating Your Recovery Rhythm: Design your ideal recovery week: Monday: [activities, practices, meetings], Tuesday: [activities, practices, meetings], etc. Include: (1) Daily non-negotiables (meditation, check-ins, self-care), (2) Weekly commitments (therapy, meetings, sponsor contact), (3) Monthly practices (intensive work, service, community), (4) Time for rest, play, and connection, (5) Flexibility for life (but protect core recovery time). Write this down. Review weekly. Adjust as needed. A recovery rhythm creates structure that holds you when willpower fails.

Spiritual Practice (However You Define It)

The 'spirit' in Body/Mind/Spirit doesn't require religious belief. It means connecting to something larger than yourself—however you understand that.

For some people, that's:

- Traditional religious practice (prayer, worship, scripture study)
- Meditation and mindfulness
- Connection to nature
- Service to others

- Creative expression (art, music, writing)
- Deep relationships and love
- Recovery community itself
- A sense of purpose or meaning

The form doesn't matter. What matters is cultivating:

- Humility (you're not the center of the universe)
- Gratitude (recognizing what you have)
- Connection (to others, to life, to something beyond yourself)
- Meaning (a reason to stay in recovery beyond just avoiding consequences)

Without the spiritual dimension, recovery often feels hollow—just white-knuckling through urges. With it, recovery becomes a path of growth, transformation, and genuine joy.

'In Recovery' vs. 'Recovered'

Some people say 'I'm in recovery' (ongoing). Others say 'I'm recovered' (past tense). Which is correct?

Both. And neither. Here's why:

'In recovery' acknowledges:

- This is an ongoing practice, not a destination
- Vigilance is still needed
- The work continues daily
- Humility about the power of addiction

'Recovered' acknowledges:

- Profound transformation has occurred
- You're not the same person you were
- The cycle no longer controls you

- Freedom has been found

The truth: Recovery is both a state (you've healed) and a practice (you maintain that healing). You can be recovered from active addiction while being in recovery as a lifestyle. Don't get hung up on language. Focus on living it.

Moving Forward

You now understand recovery not as a temporary fix but as a complete lifestyle—a way of being in the world that integrates body, mind, and spirit.

The aspects of recovery we've covered—daily practices, authentic relationships, accountability, balance, service, spiritual practice—these aren't extras you add when you have time. They ARE recovery. They're what transforms 'not acting out' into 'living fully.'

In the chapters ahead, we'll explore specific challenges and advanced practices: working with difficult emotions, healing trauma, building intimacy, navigating relationships, and more.

But the foundation is here: recovery is a lifestyle. Not something you do. Something you are.

Build it daily. Live it fully. Your freedom depends on it.

CHAPTER 9 – Your Inner Child



Healing Your Wounded Past

Inside every adult struggling with addiction or compulsive behavior is a wounded child who never learned how to cope with pain, fear, shame, or loneliness in healthy ways.

This isn't a metaphor. It's not poetic language. It's literal psychological reality.

When trauma happens in childhood—and for most people with addiction, it did—part of your emotional development stops. You continue to age chronologically. Your body grows. Your mind learns. But emotionally, a part of you stays frozen at the age when the trauma occurred. That frozen part is your Inner Child.

This chapter is about understanding that wounded child, learning to care for them, and bringing them into the present so they can finally heal. This is some of the deepest, most important work in recovery. It's also some of the hardest. But it's worth it.

Let's begin.

Konseki's Story: Self-Understanding - isn't indulgence, it's survival. Without it, we repeat patterns, sabotage relationships, and chase solutions that don't fit. With it, we begin to see clearly: our triggers, our needs, our values, our wounds. I've learned that the more I understand myself, the less I fear my emotions and the more

intentional and healthier my choices become. Self-awareness is the root system of emotional growth. Without it, everything else withers.

What Is the Inner Child?

The Inner Child is the part of you that carries unhealed childhood wounds—the part that still feels the fear, shame, abandonment, or pain from your early years.

When psychologists talk about 'emotional arrest' or 'arrested development,' they mean this: your emotional growth stopped or slowed significantly at the point of trauma. You might be 30, 40, 50, or 60 years old chronologically, but inside, there's a scared 5-year-old, an angry 8-year-old, a shamed 12-year-old, or a rejected 15-year-old who never got to finish growing up.

That child still operates inside you. When you're triggered, it's often that child responding—not your adult self. When you feel overwhelming shame, fear, or rage that seems disproportionate to the situation, that's your Inner Child reacting to a present situation as if it were the past trauma.

The cycle happens because your Inner Child keeps trying to cope with pain the only way they know how—the way they learned as a child. And those coping mechanisms (hiding, lying, acting out, numbing, people-pleasing, manipulating) don't work anymore. But the child doesn't know that. The child is just trying to survive.

Inner Child: Think about the age when you first experienced trauma, neglect, or harm. That's likely the age where your Inner Child lives. For some people, it's very young—toddler age. For others, it's preteen or teenage years. You might have multiple Inner Child parts at different ages, each carrying different wounds. This is normal. Each wounded part needs attention and healing.

How Childhood Trauma Creates the Cycle

The Behavioral Cycle doesn't start in adulthood. It starts in childhood. Here's how:

When a child experiences trauma (abuse, neglect, abandonment, violence, sexual harm, emotional cruelty, or even just chronic invalidation), they develop coping strategies to manage overwhelming emotions they don't have the capacity to process. Sometimes this invalidation is overt and threatening—like when a parent says, 'Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about.' This teaches the child that their feelings are wrong, that expressing them is dangerous, and that they must stuff them down to stay safe. This is the root of emotional suppression that follows people into adulthood. These childhood coping strategies might include:

- Dissociation (mentally checking out)
- Fantasy and escapism
- People-pleasing to stay safe
- Perfectionism to avoid punishment
- Hiding and lying to avoid consequences
- Acting out anger when it feels safe
- Seeking any form of comfort or pleasure to escape pain
- Numbing through whatever's available (food, screen time, self-soothing behaviors)

As a child, these strategies work. They help you survive. But as an adult, these same strategies become the Behavioral Cycle. The Build-Up is the accumulated pain your Inner Child never processed. The Acting Out is the Inner Child's attempt to escape or soothe that pain. The Justification is the Inner Child explaining why it had to happen. The Pretend Normal is the Inner Child trying to appear okay so no one punishes them.

You're not 'choosing' to stay in the cycle. Your wounded Inner Child is running your coping responses, using the only tools they ever learned. Until you heal that child and teach them new ways to cope, the cycle continues.

Ray's Story: I never saw my mother and father hug or kiss one another. Not once in my entire childhood. So I never knew how to

be emotionally intimate with my wife. I had no role model for expressing love physically or emotionally. I didn't learn how to be a husband or a father because I never saw it modeled. My Inner Child never learned that relationships involve affection, vulnerability, and emotional connection. So as an adult, I didn't know how to do it. I could fix things—my dad taught me that. I could work hard. I could provide. But emotional connection? I was still that little boy who never saw it, trying to figure it out with no map. No wonder my marriage struggled. I was asking my Inner Child to do something he'd never been taught. And here's another layer: I had to be perfect, better than everybody else, to feel special and loved. The problem is that I suffered lifelong anxiety and the fear that I never had enough education to be better than everyone else. As a result, I needed lots of anxiety medication to not suffer anxiety attacks most of my adult life. I sought extra love and attention as an adult—constantly trying to fill the hole that the wounded child felt inside.

Emotional Arrest: Stuck at the Age of Trauma

Emotional arrest means you continue to age chronologically—your body grows, your mind matures in many ways—but emotionally, part of you stays frozen at the age when significant trauma occurred.

This shows up in predictable ways:

- Emotional reactions that seem childlike or immature
- Difficulty regulating emotions (tantrum-like responses)
- Black-and-white thinking ('all good' or 'all bad')
- Intense fear of abandonment or rejection
- People-pleasing to avoid conflict
- Inability to set boundaries or say no
- Overwhelming shame at the smallest mistakes
- Feeling small, powerless, or helpless in certain situations

You might be a successful professional, a parent, a leader in your community—but in intimate relationships or high-stress situations,

that arrested part takes over. Suddenly, you're not the capable adult. You're the terrified child again.

Konseki's Story: I was emotionally arrested at about 15, the age when I was sexually assaulted by a teacher at military school. I continued to grow physically and intellectually. I went to college, held jobs, and functioned in the world. But emotionally? I was stuck at 15. I didn't know how to have adult relationships. I didn't know how to process complex emotions. I didn't know how to trust. For decades, that 15-year-old was running my emotional life, trying to manage adult situations with a teenager's tools. No wonder I kept falling into the same patterns. It wasn't until I did serious Inner Child work in therapy that I could finally start growing up emotionally.

Reparenting Yourself

If your Inner Child didn't get the parenting they needed as a child, you can provide it now as an adult. This is called reparenting.

Reparenting means:

- Offering yourself the love, acceptance, and validation you didn't receive
- Setting boundaries and providing safety (the child needs protection)
- Comforting yourself when you're scared or hurting
- Talking to your Inner Child with kindness instead of criticism
- Meeting your own needs instead of abandoning yourself
- Being the parent you wish you'd had

This isn't self-indulgence. It's essential healing. Your Inner Child is still waiting for someone to show up for them. That someone is you—the adult you.

How to practice reparenting:

1. Recognize when your Inner Child is activated

Notice when you feel disproportionately scared, ashamed, or small. That's your Inner Child responding. Pause and acknowledge: 'The child is here right now.'

2. Offer what the child needs

Ask: 'What does this child need right now?' Safety? Comfort? Reassurance? Permission to feel? Give it to them internally or through self-care actions.

3. Speak to your Inner Child with compassion

Instead of: 'You're being ridiculous. Stop overreacting.'

Try: 'I know you're scared. It makes sense that you feel this way. I'm here. You're safe now.'

4. Validate their feelings

'What happened to you wasn't okay. You didn't deserve that. It wasn't your fault. Your feelings are valid.'

5. Provide what was missing

If the child needed protection—protect them now. If they needed to be seen, see them now. If they needed permission to be imperfect—give that permission now.

Inner Child: Reparenting isn't about blaming your actual parents. Most parents did the best they could with what they knew and what they'd experienced in their own childhoods. Reparenting is about taking responsibility now for giving yourself what you needed then. It's about breaking the cycle so you don't pass the same wounds to the next generation.

The Left-Hand Letter: A Powerful Healing Tool

One of the most therapeutic Inner Child exercises is writing a letter to your parents (or whoever raised you) using your non-dominant hand.

Why your non-dominant hand? Because it's awkward, slow, and childlike. It forces you to slow down. It accesses a different part of

your brain. It feels like a child's handwriting because it IS—it's the child in you writing.

The exercise:

- Get paper and a pen
- Write with your non-dominant hand (left if you're right-handed, right if you're left-handed)
- Write a letter to your parent(s) or caregiver(s)
- Tell them how you felt about the good times and the difficult times
- Don't edit. Don't censor. Let the child speak
- Cry if you need to. Most people do. That's part of the healing.

This isn't about sending the letter. Your parents might not even be alive. This is about giving your Inner Child a voice—letting them say what they never got to say.

Ray's Story: Writing that left-hand letter to my mom and dad was one of the hardest things I've ever done. My parents had already passed away, so I knew they'd never read it. But my therapist said: "This isn't for them. It's for the child in you who never got to say these things." I wrote about the good times—fixing things with my dad, feeling loved by my mom. But I also wrote about the painful times—never seeing affection between them, the strict discipline, feeling like I had to be perfect to be loved. The handwriting looked like a little kid's. I cried the whole time I wrote it. I cried when I read it out loud in group. But when I finished, something had shifted. That child finally felt heard. That was 15 years ago. I still have the letter.

Integration: Bringing the Child into the Present

The goal of Inner Child work isn't to get rid of the child or to keep them locked away. It's integration—bringing that wounded part into the present so they can finally grow up.

Integration means:

- The child's needs are acknowledged and met by your adult self
- The child's pain is witnessed and validated
- The child learns they're safe now (trauma is in the past, not the present)
- The child begins to trust the adult self to handle things
- The child can relax and let the adult be in charge

When integration happens, you stop swinging between 'adult mode' and 'child mode.' Instead, you become a whole person who can access both adult wisdom and childlike joy, playfulness, and wonder—without the wounds running the show.

How integration happens:

Dialogue with your Inner Child

In therapy or journaling, have conversations between your adult self and your Inner Child. Let the child express fears. Let the adult offer reassurance and protection.

Visualization

Close your eyes. Picture your Inner Child. What do they look like? What do they need? Imagine yourself (as the adult) giving them what they need—a hug, words of comfort, protection, permission to play.

Getting your needs met

If your Inner Child never got to play, play now. If they never felt safe, create safety now. If they never received affection, practice self-compassion now. If they were never allowed to tell jokes and be heard, give yourself permission to be funny and playful. If they were never seen or validated, make sure you see yourself—acknowledge your feelings, your needs, your worth. The child needed to be heard, celebrated, and enjoyed. Give that to yourself now. Tell jokes. Laugh. Be silly. Let yourself be seen and appreciated for who you are, not just for being perfect or useful.

Trauma processing with a professional

Deep trauma work helps the child process what happened, so it's no longer stuck in the present. This **MUST** be done with a trained therapist. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is one of the most effective treatments for trauma, especially extreme trauma. EMDR uses bilateral stimulation (eye movements, tapping, or sounds) to help your brain reprocess traumatic memories so they no longer trigger you. Other effective approaches include Somatic Experiencing and Internal Family Systems. For severe childhood trauma, EMDR is often the gold standard—it can help you process what talk therapy alone can't reach. Ask your therapist if they're trained in EMDR. If not, seek out an EMDR specialist. This work changes lives.

Inner Child: Integration is not a one-time event. It's a process. You'll return to Inner Child work many times throughout recovery. Each layer of healing reveals deeper layers. That's normal. That's the work. Be patient with yourself—and with the child.

Getting Your Needs Met

One of the most profound wounds from childhood is learning that your needs don't matter. For many people with wounded Inner Children, your needs were not a priority in your family. Other people's needs—your parents', your siblings', everyone else's—always came first. You learned early: 'What I need isn't important. Other people matter more than I do.'

This creates a pattern that follows you into adulthood: people-pleasing.

The People-Pleasing Trap

People-pleasing behavior means always putting other people first. You say yes when you want to say no. You ignore your own needs to meet everyone else's. You exhaust yourself helping others while your own life falls apart. You need their affirmation that you're OK—their approval, their validation, their reassurance that you matter.

Other people become more important than you. Always.

Here's what drives this: that wounded Inner Child believes, 'If people approve of me, I'm OK. If they need me, I have value. If they're happy with me, I'm safe.' So you orient your entire life around making others happy, being useful, and being needed. You become indispensable. You become the helper, the caretaker, the one everyone can count on.

And it's exhausting. Because it's never enough. No amount of external validation fills the hole inside. You keep seeking affirmation from others, but it doesn't stick. You need constant reassurance. Constant approval. Constant evidence that you're OK.

The Real Problem

Helping people is good. Service matters. Being kind and generous is beautiful. But here's the crucial point:

If you don't take care of yourself, you will always need others' affirmation that you're OK.

You'll stay trapped in the people-pleasing cycle:

- Ignore your needs → Feel empty → Seek validation from others → Get temporary relief → Ignore your needs again → Cycle repeats

This doesn't work. It's not sustainable. And it keeps your Inner Child dependent on others for something they can only get from you: the belief that they matter.

The Shift: From External to Internal Validation

Recovery requires a fundamental shift: You need YOUR affirmation that you're OK. Not theirs. Yours.

You are a good person—not because others say so, but because you know it in your bones. You have worth that exists independent of anyone else's opinion. You matter because you exist, not because you're useful.

This shift is terrifying for people-pleasers. Your Inner Child learned that approval from others equals survival. Letting go of that—trusting

your own assessment of yourself—feels dangerous. What if you're wrong? What if you're not actually OK?

But here's the truth: Other people's approval is unreliable. It changes. It depends on their mood, their needs, and their capacity. You can't control it. Basing your worth on external validation is like building a house on sand—it will never feel stable.

You need internal validation. You need to know—deep in your core—that you're OK. That you're good. That you matter. Regardless of what anyone else thinks.

Exercise: Discovering Your Good Qualities (Don't skip this!)

This exercise is harder than it sounds, especially for people with wounded Inner Children who've spent a lifetime focusing on their flaws. But it's essential.

Get a piece of paper. Write down your good qualities. Not what you do for others. Not how useful you are. YOUR good qualities. Who you are as a person.

Examples:

- I'm kind
- I'm loyal
- I have a good sense of humor
- I'm thoughtful
- I'm creative
- I'm resilient (I've survived hard things)
- I care about people
- I try to do the right thing
- I'm honest
- I keep trying, even when things are hard

List at least 10 good qualities. If you get stuck, ask yourself: 'What would someone who loves me say about me?' Write those things down.

Now read the list. Out loud if possible. Let yourself see how good you are. Not perfect. Not without flaws. But good. Worthy. Deserving of love and care—including from yourself.

This isn't arrogance. This is truth. You are a good person. You've made mistakes—everyone has. But mistakes don't define your worth. Your inherent goodness does.

Inner Child: The wounded child desperately needs external validation because they never got it from the people who mattered most. But the healed child learns: 'I can validate myself. I can see my own goodness. I can affirm my own worth.' This doesn't mean you don't need others—healthy relationships matter. But it means you're not dependent on others for your basic sense of OK-ness. That comes from within now.

Tool Box: My Good Qualities List: Create your list of good qualities and keep it somewhere you can see it—on your phone, on your mirror, in your wallet. When the old voice says 'You're worthless,' or 'You don't matter unless you're helping someone,' pull out the list. Read it. Remind yourself: 'This is who I am. This is my worth. I don't need anyone else to tell me I'm OK. I already know.' Add to the list as you discover more good qualities. Let it grow. Let it be evidence of your inherent worth.

Meeting Your Needs Isn't Selfish

People-pleasers often believe: 'If I focus on my needs, I'm selfish.' This is a lie the wounded Inner Child learned.

The truth: Taking care of yourself is essential, not selfish. You can't pour from an empty cup. If you're depleted, exhausted, and running on fumes from constantly serving others, you have nothing genuine to give. You're just performing. Going through motions. Seeking validation.

When you take care of your own needs—rest, play, connection, safety, validation—you fill your cup. Then you can serve others from overflow, not from depletion. Your help becomes genuine, not

performative. You give because you want to, not because you need their approval.

Healthy balance looks like:

- Know your needs and meet them regularly
- Say no when you need to, without guilt
- Ask for help when you need it
- Validate your own worth internally
- Then—from that place of fullness—serve others genuinely

This is sustainable. This is freedom. This is the healed Inner Child saying: 'I matter. My needs matter. I can take care of myself. And from that place of health, I can love and serve others well.'

Getting your needs met isn't the end of the journey. It's the foundation. When your Inner Child finally believes 'I matter, my needs are valid, I'm OK'—that's when real healing begins. That's when you can build a life based on genuine connection instead of desperate approval-seeking. That's recovery.

Reclaiming Lost Growth

When emotional development was interrupted, certain capacities never fully developed:

- Trust (if betrayal happened early)
- Emotional regulation (if emotions were punished or ignored)
- Boundaries (if yours were violated or you had to suppress your needs)
- Self-worth (if you were shamed or criticized)
- Intimacy (if love was conditional or absent)

Reclaiming lost growth means developing these capacities now—learning as an adult what you should have learned as a child.

This happens through:

- Therapy (learning emotional skills you didn't get to develop)
- Healthy relationships (experiencing what healthy connection feels like)
- Practice (trying new behaviors even when they feel awkward)
- Self-compassion (being patient with yourself as you learn)
- Community (recovery groups where you can practice with support)

You're not broken. You're just behind in certain areas because trauma interrupted your development. With time, support, and practice, you can catch up.

Why This Must Be Done with Support

Inner Child work is powerful. It can also be destabilizing if done alone or without proper support. Here's why you need professional guidance:

- Trauma work can trigger overwhelming emotions
- Dissociation or flashbacks may occur
- You might need help differentiating past from present
- Deep grief may surface that requires containment
- Some wounds need specialized trauma therapy (EMDR, SE, IFS)
- Acting Out can intensify temporarily as defenses break down

Do this work:

- With a trauma-informed therapist
- In the context of group therapy, where others witness your story
- With ongoing support from a sponsor, recovery community, or trusted friends
- When you're stable enough in recovery to handle the intensity

Don't do this work:

- Alone
- In early recovery, when you're still stabilizing
- Without a safety plan for when things get overwhelming
- If you're actively suicidal or in crisis

Inner Child work is essential. But timing matters. Get support. Don't rush it. The child has waited this long—they can wait until you have the right help in place.

Ray's Story: When I first started Inner Child work, I thought I could do it alone through meditation and journaling. I was wrong. About two weeks in, I had a complete breakdown—sobbing uncontrollably, dissociating, unable to function. I'd opened wounds I didn't have the skills to handle alone. Thank God I was in residential treatment with 24/7 support. My therapist helped me understand: this work requires a container. You can't do this level of healing in isolation. You need professionals who know trauma. You need people who can hold you when you fall apart. This isn't weakness—it's wisdom.

Common Inner Child Wounds

Different childhood experiences create different Inner Child wounds. See if you recognize yours:

The Abandoned Child

Parent(s) physically or emotionally absent. Child learned: 'I'm not worth staying for.' Adult struggles with: fear of abandonment, clinging in relationships, or pushing people away before they can leave.

The Neglected Child

Basic needs unmet (emotional, physical, attention). Child learned: 'My needs don't matter.' Adults struggle with: not knowing what they need, difficulty asking for help, and feeling invisible.

The Rejected Child

Actively unwanted, criticized, or compared unfavorably. Child learned: 'I'm not good enough.' Adult struggles with: shame, perfectionism, and chronic feelings of inadequacy.

The Shamed Child

Made to feel inherently bad or wrong for existing. Child learned: 'I am defective.' Adult struggles with: toxic shame, hiding authentic self, and compulsive behaviors to escape shame.

The Violated Child

Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Boundaries violated. Child learned: 'I'm not safe. I have no control.' Adult struggles with: trust issues, hypervigilance, difficulty with intimacy, and reenactment of trauma.

The Parentified Child

Had to parent siblings or their own parents. This should NEVER happen. Children are not meant to do adult activities. They should not be raising their siblings—that is the adult's job, not the child's. Children deserve to be children and enjoy their childhood, not carry adult responsibilities. But when it does happen, the child learns: 'I must be the adult. My needs don't count.' Adult struggles with: inability to relax, caretaking to the point of burnout, difficulty receiving help, and chronic anxiety from early over-responsibility.

If you were a parentified child: You deserved to play, to be cared for, to have your needs met. It was not your job to hold the family together. That was stolen from you, and it wasn't fair. Give yourself permission now to let others take care of you sometimes. You don't have to be responsible for everyone anymore.

The Scapegoated Child

Blamed for family problems. Child learned: 'Everything is my fault.' Adult struggles with: excessive guilt, difficulty setting boundaries, and taking responsibility for others' emotions.

Inner Child: You might recognize yourself in multiple categories. Most people with complex trauma have several wounded Inner Child parts. Each part may need different healing. This is why professional help matters—a good therapist can help you work with each part systematically.

Tool Box: Daily Inner Child Check-In: Each morning or evening, take 2 minutes to check in with your Inner Child: 'How are you feeling today, little one?' Listen for the answer. What emotions come up? What does the child need? Can you give them reassurance, comfort, or safety? This simple practice builds connection between your adult self and your wounded child. Over time, the child learns they're not alone anymore.

Moving Forward

You now understand the Inner Child—not as a cute metaphor but as the real, wounded part of you that's been driving the Behavioral Cycle.

This child isn't your enemy. They're not the problem. They're the hurt part of you that never learned healthier ways to cope. They deserve compassion, not criticism. They deserve healing, not blame.

Inner Child work is some of the deepest healing you'll do in recovery. It's not easy. It's not quick. But it's transformative. When you finally heal those childhood wounds, when you reparent yourself with the love and safety you needed then, when you integrate that child into your present adult life, the cycle loses so much of its power.

You stop reacting to the present as if it were the past. You stop using child-level coping for adult-level problems. You stop running from pain and learn to sit with it, process it, and let it pass.

The wounded child becomes the healed child. And the healed child becomes part of a whole, integrated, free adult.

CHAPTER 10 – How We Communicate



I Don't Hear You

Communication is the front door to every relationship — including the relationship you have with yourself. This is so important. The way you ask for what you need, the way you respond when you're hurt, the way you say no — these aren't just etiquette. They're survival skills. In recovery, communication patterns are often what kept the cycle going long after you wanted to stop it.

Most of us never learned to communicate well. Our families modeled what they knew. Some grew up where every disagreement turned into a fight. Some grew up where nobody ever said what they meant. Some grew up where silence was a weapon — where saying "I'm fine" was the safest answer no matter what was true. Whatever you learned, that's what you've been doing.

The good news: communication is a skill. It can be learned. And learning it changes everything — your relationships, your recovery, your sense of who you are.

In this chapter we explore four styles of communication. Three of them are the patterns most of us fall into. One of them — the fourth — is the goal.

The Four Communication Styles

Researchers and therapists agree there are four basic ways people communicate when they want something, when they're upset, or when they're trying to set a limit:

1. Passive

You don't say what you need. You don't ask for what you want. You go along with what others decide. You agree even when you don't agree. You hope someone notices what you're feeling without you having to say it. When they don't, you feel resentful — but you keep that to yourself, too.

Passive communication says: "Your needs matter more than mine. My job is to keep you happy. I don't deserve to take up space."

It feels safe in the short term. It breeds resentment in the long term. And it makes Acting Out almost inevitable — feelings don't disappear when you don't express them; they go somewhere else.

2. Aggressive

You say what you need by demanding it. You speak louder. You blame. You criticize. You make sure the other person knows they're wrong, you're right, and there's no room for discussion. You may not even realize you're doing it — it can feel like "just being honest" or "telling it like it is."

Aggressive communication says: "My needs are urgent. Yours are obstacles. I'll get heard one way or another."

It gets short-term compliance. It destroys trust. And it almost always escalates — the people around you either fight back, withdraw, or learn to fear you.

3. Passive-Aggressive

You don't directly say what you need. Instead, you communicate through silence, sarcasm, sabotage, or strategic forgetfulness. You agree out loud and undermine in private. You let the other person know you're upset without ever stating what's wrong. The signals are clear — but plausibly deniable.

Passive-aggressive communication says: "I'm angry, but I can't say so. I'll punish you indirectly until you figure it out."

It's the most exhausting style for everyone — including you. The unexpressed anger doesn't stay unexpressed. It seeps. And it's a perfect setup for Build-Up.

4. Assertive

You say what you need clearly and respectfully. You ask for what you want without demanding it. You disagree without making the other person wrong. You set limits without apology. You take responsibility for your own feelings without making someone else responsible for them.

Assertive communication says: “My needs matter. Your needs matter. I trust we can both speak honestly and figure this out.”

It’s the only style that actually works. It builds trust. It expresses what’s true. It leaves space for the other person to be honest back. It’s the foundation of every healthy relationship — including the relationship between recovery and the rest of your life.

One of the most important parts of assertive communication is setting boundaries — saying what you can and can't do, what you will and won't accept, what you need to feel safe. Boundaries aren't walls. They're not punishments. They're not about controlling other people. They're about protecting your own well-being so you can stay in a healthy connection.

Setting a boundary in a caring, compassionate way doesn't hurt the other person. It tells them where the safety lines are, so the relationship can grow without damaging either of you. Some examples:

- *“I love spending time with you. I can't talk on the phone after 10 PM — let's catch up tomorrow.”*
- *“I want to support you. I'm not in a position to talk about that today. Can we set a time later this week?”*
- *“I hear that you're upset. I'm not okay with being yelled at. When you can talk calmly, I'm here.”*
- *“I need to leave by 3 PM today. That's my limit, and I have to honor it.”*
- *“I appreciate the offer. I'm not going to drink tonight. Thank you for understanding.”*

Notice what these have in common: they say what's true, they care about the other person, and they don't apologize for the limit. That's the core of healthy boundary-setting in assertive communication.

Where These Patterns Come From

If you're recognizing yourself in passive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive patterns, the first thing to know is: you didn't choose this. You learned it.

Children adapt to whatever family system they're born into. If you grew up where expressing needs led to punishment, you became passive — invisibility was safer than honesty. If you grew up where anger was the only emotion that got attention, you became aggressive — being loud got needs met. If you grew up where direct conflict wasn't allowed but tension was constant, you became passive-aggressive — you found indirect ways to discharge what couldn't be spoken.

These patterns helped you survive your childhood. They're not character flaws. They're adaptations. (We covered this in Chapter 9 — Inner Child work is essential here.)

But what kept you safe as a kid often keeps you stuck as an adult. The communication style that worked at age six is sabotaging your relationships at age forty.

How Communication Feeds the Behavioral Cycle

Communication patterns and the Behavioral Cycle are deeply linked.

Build-Up: Unexpressed feelings build pressure. The passive person remains silent, accumulating resentment and frustration. The passive-aggressive person stuffs their anger, which leaks sideways. Both are perfect setups for Build-Up.

Acting Out: Compulsive behaviors are often a way of expressing what you couldn't say directly. You can't tell your partner you're lonely, so you act out. You can't say "I'm furious," so you find a way

to hurt them indirectly. Or your aggressive style explodes at someone who didn't cause the underlying pain.

Justification: Aggressive and passive-aggressive styles are full of cognitive distortions (“They deserved it”; “They should have known”). Justification thrives in communication patterns that avoid honesty.

Pretend Normal: “Everything’s fine” is a passive communication. So is silence about what really happened. Pretend Normal is held together by un-spoken truths.

Healthy assertive communication interrupts the cycle. When you can say what’s true — clearly, respectfully — you stop building pressure that has to go somewhere.

Building Assertive Communication

Assertive communication can be learned. Here are the core skills:

- “I” statements. Speak from your own experience, not about the other person. “I feel hurt when our plans change at the last minute,” not “You always change our plans.”
- Specific requests. Ask for what you want, concretely. “Could we agree to confirm by Friday?” — not “You should be more organized.”
- The pause. Before responding to something difficult, pause. Take a breath. Notice what you’re feeling. Choose your words.
- Honor others’ no. Assertive communication includes accepting when others say no without retaliation, withdrawal, or guilt-tripping.
- Stay with the topic. Don’t bring up old grievances. Don’t widen the fight. One topic at a time.
- Repair. When you slip into an old pattern (and you will), name it. “I just got aggressive — let me try that again.” That alone repairs more than perfection ever could.

These aren't natural at first. They take practice. They feel awkward. That's normal. Assertiveness is the recovery muscle for relationships — it gets stronger when you use it.

Ray's Story: I was a people-pleaser. Always passive in communication. Whatever opinion someone else held, that became mine too. Why? Because I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. I didn't want to disagree, because disagreeing meant expressing what I was feeling — and I didn't want people to know what I was feeling. I didn't want a verbal fight. I didn't want anyone angry at me. I needed them to like me so I could feel good about myself. I'd absorbed the message early: men don't express their feelings. So I gave away too much of me. Every conversation became about solving the other person's problems. Sgt. Joe Friday on *Dragnet* always said, "All we want are the facts, ma'am." That was me. Science and emotions don't mix, I told myself. I was wrong. The longer I stayed silent about what I felt, the more those feelings showed up sideways — through Acting Out, through resentment, through the very compulsions I was trying to escape. Recovery taught me that assertive communication isn't a luxury. It's survival.

Konseki's Story: Right Speech In the Eightfold Path, the Buddha called it Right Speech — the third spoke of the wheel, sitting between Right Intention and Right Action. The traditional formulation has four parts: speak truthfully, speak kindly, speak helpfully, and speak only when speaking is better than silence. For most of my life, I failed all four. I lied — to myself first, then to everyone close to me. I spoke harshly when I was angry and unctuously when I wanted something. I gave advice nobody asked for and stayed silent about things people needed to hear. I used words to manage how others saw me rather than to communicate what was true. In Zen practice, we learn that speech arises from the same mind that creates the storm. If the mind is agitated, the words will be too. If the mind is at war with itself, speech becomes a weapon. The work isn't to memorize the rules of "good communication." The work is to settle the mind so that speech can come from somewhere quieter than reaction. Right Speech, in this

sense, is not different from assertive communication. The form is similar — clear, respectful, honest. But the source matters. Words from a settled mind land differently than words from a fragmented one. The same sentence, spoken by two different inner states, is heard as two different things. When I listen to my own speech now, I ask: Is this true? Is it kind? Is it useful? Is it the right time? When the answer to all four is yes, I speak. When even one is no, I sit with it longer. I'm still learning. But when I do practice this way, my words finally start to do what words are supposed to do — connect, rather than control.

That's worth fighting for.

CHAPTER 11 – Victim Empathy



Feeling Our Victim's Pain

This is one of the hardest chapters in this book. It's about facing what we often don't want to face: the harm our actions have caused to others.

Victim empathy means seeing your behavior through the eyes of the people you've hurt. It means feeling—really feeling—the pain, fear, betrayal, and damage you've inflicted on others when you were Acting Out.

This isn't self-punishment. This isn't about wallowing in shame. This is about developing the capacity to see beyond yourself—to understand that your actions have real consequences for real people whose lives matter just as much as yours does.

Victim empathy is one of the most powerful tools for breaking the Behavioral Cycle because it interrupts the self-centered thinking that drives Acting Out. When you can truly see the harm you cause, it becomes much harder to justify the behavior.

Let's do this difficult but essential work.

What Victim Empathy Is

Victim empathy is the ability to understand and feel the emotional experience of someone you've harmed. It's seeing your actions from their perspective—feeling what they felt, understanding how it changed them, recognizing the ongoing impact of what you did.

It's NOT:

- Self-flagellation or excessive guilt
- Dwelling in shame until you act out again
- Excusing your behavior because you 'feel bad.'
- Fake remorse to manipulate forgiveness

It IS:

- Genuine understanding of another person's pain
- Recognition that your actions had real, lasting consequences
- Motivation to change so you never cause that harm again
- Foundation for authentic amends
- Tool for interrupting the cycle BEFORE you act out

Victim empathy is uncomfortable. It should be. Facing the harm you've caused is supposed to be difficult. But that discomfort is what motivates real change.

The Self-Centered Nature of Acting Out

When we're in the grip of the Behavioral Cycle—especially during Build-Up and Acting Out—we become completely self-focused. We often just focus on what we want in the moment, driven by an overpowering thought or feeling, and do not care about others when we commit destructive acts. We don't realize what others are paying for what we want. Our temporary relief comes at the cost of their permanent pain.

In that moment:

- We only think about our own gratification, relief, or escape
- We don't consider how our actions will affect others
- We minimize or ignore the harm we're about to cause
- We tell ourselves lies: 'They won't find out,' 'It won't hurt them,' 'They deserve it.'

- We see others as objects for our use, not as people with feelings

This self-centered thinking is how the cycle perpetuates. As long as we're only thinking about ourselves—our pain, our needs, our desires—we can justify almost anything.

Ray's Story: When I was Acting Out, I was completely in my own head. I wasn't thinking about my wife at home, wondering where I was. I wasn't thinking about my children, who needed a father they could trust. I wasn't thinking about the people I was using and manipulating. I was thinking about ME—my needs, my relief, my gratification. It was only later, in therapy, when I was forced to really look at the impact of my actions, that I understood: I had been treating people like objects. Like they existed to serve my needs. Like their pain didn't matter. That realization was crushing. But it was also the beginning of change. Once I could see the harm I caused, I couldn't unsee it. And I couldn't keep doing it.

The Ripple Effect: Who Gets Hurt

When you Act Out, the harm doesn't stop with your direct victim. It ripples outward, affecting multiple people in multiple ways:

Primary Victims

The people directly harmed by your actions:

- Their lives are changed forever
- They may develop PTSD, anxiety, depression, or their own trauma
- They may struggle to trust others again
- They carry the emotional scars for years or decades
- Some never fully recover
- They may need extensive therapy—sometimes for years—to make sense of what you did
- The cost of healing from your actions becomes their burden to carry

- Their goal becomes learning to thrive, not just survive, after what you did to them

Families of Victims

Parents, siblings, children, partners of those you've harmed:

- They watch someone they love suffer
- They may blame themselves for not protecting their loved one
- Family relationships are forever changed
- They struggle with their own anger, grief, and helplessness

Your Own Family

Your spouse, children, parents, siblings:

- Trust is destroyed—often irreparably
- Children lose the parent they need and deserve
- Spouses lose the partner they thought they had
- Financial stability may be destroyed
- They may have to move, change schools, lose their home
- They carry shame by association
- Family relationships are damaged or severed completely

Financial Impact

The economic devastation of your actions:

- Families may need to live with relatives since they can't pay rent without you
- Legal fees drain savings
- Jobs are lost (yours and sometimes theirs)
- Children's education funds disappear
- Credit is ruined
- Bankruptcy may follow

Community Impact

The wider circles affected:

- Employers who trusted you
- Friends who believed in you
- Communities that welcomed you
- People who looked up to you
- All experience betrayal, hurt, and loss of safety

These aren't abstract consequences. These are real people whose real lives are permanently altered by your actions. This is what victim empathy requires us to face.

Konseki's Story: In one of my victim empathy exercises in group therapy, we had to write a letter from our victim's perspective—imagining what they would say to us if they could be completely honest. I wrote as the person I had harmed, describing the fear, the confusion, the lasting damage. I had to imagine their sleepless nights, their difficulty trusting anyone after what I did, the way it changed their entire life trajectory. Writing that letter destroyed me. I cried for hours. But it also saved me. Because I finally understood: my actions weren't victimless. My pain didn't justify causing pain to someone else. That letter sits in my journal as a reminder: never again.

Victim Empathy as Intervention

Here's the most important thing about victim empathy: it can be used as an intervention to reconsider taking destructive actions BEFORE you act out.

When you feel the Build-Up starting and the urge to Act Out intensifying, victim empathy can interrupt the cycle. Here's how:

Traditional thinking process during Build-Up:

- Feel emotion (pain, desire, anger, loneliness)
- Think about acting out (fantasy, planning, justification)
- Act (follow through on the behavior)

Victim empathy intervention:

- Feel emotion (pain, desire, anger, loneliness)
- PAUSE for victim empathy ('If I do this, who gets hurt? What will they experience?')
- Think differently (is temporary relief worth permanent damage?)
- Act differently (choose recovery response instead of acting out)

This should become a habit in your thinking process. After you feel the emotion and before you act, insert empathy. Ask yourself:

- 'If I do this, who will I hurt?'
- 'How will they feel when they find out?'
- 'What long-term damage will this cause?'
- 'Can I live with causing that pain?'
- 'Is my temporary relief worth their permanent suffering?'

When you can genuinely feel the answers to these questions—not just think them intellectually, but FEEL them—the urge to Act Out often loses its power. It becomes much harder to justify behavior when you're truly connected to the harm it causes.

Remember This Phrase: Before you act, ask: 'Who will I hurt when I do this? Can I live with causing that pain?' Real empathy stops harm.

Tool Box: The Empathy Pause: Next time you feel the urge to Act Out, try this: STOP. Close your eyes. Picture the face of the person who will be most hurt by your actions. Imagine them finding out. Imagine their pain, their tears, their sense of betrayal. Imagine them lying awake at night trying to understand why you did this to them. Imagine the long-term impact on their life. Sit with that for 60 seconds. Really feel it. Now ask: 'Can I do this to them?' Often, when empathy is real, the answer becomes clear.

The Difference Between Empathy and Self-Punishment

It's important to understand: victim empathy is not the same as shame-based self-punishment. They can feel similar, but they lead to very different outcomes.

Self-Punishment (Unhealthy):

- 'I'm a terrible person. I'm irredeemable.'
- Leads to hopelessness and despair
- Often triggers more Acting Out to escape the shame
- Focused on your own badness
- Keeps you stuck in the cycle

Victim Empathy (Healthy):

- 'I caused real harm. I need to change so this never happens again.'
- Leads to motivation and commitment to recovery
- Interrupts the cycle by connecting you to consequences
- Focused on others' suffering and your responsibility to prevent future harm
- Moves you toward healing and change

Empathy isn't about making yourself feel terrible. It's about developing genuine concern for others that motivates better choices. The goal is change, not self-flagellation.

Developing Victim Empathy

For many people—especially those with narcissistic traits or severe emotional arrest—victim empathy doesn't come naturally. It must be developed through practice:

1. Educate yourself about impact

- Read accounts from survivors of harm similar to what you caused

- Listen to victim impact statements
- Learn about the long-term effects of the type of harm you inflicted
- Don't minimize what you learn—sit with the uncomfortable truth

2. Imagine specific people

- Picture the actual people you've harmed
- Imagine their daily lives after your actions
- Consider how they explain what happened to their children, friends, therapists
- Think about the ongoing impact years later

3. Write from their perspective

- Write a letter AS your victim TO yourself
- Describe what happened from their point of view
- Express their feelings, fears, and ongoing struggles
- Don't censor or minimize—be brutally honest

4. Participate in victim empathy groups

- Many treatment programs offer victim empathy work in group settings
- Hearing others' accounts builds empathy for your own victims
- Accountability from group prevents minimization

5. Practice daily empathy

- Notice how your actions affect others in small ways
- Practice considering others' perspectives regularly
- Build the empathy muscle through daily use

6. Work with your therapist

- Professional guidance prevents victim empathy from becoming toxic shame
- A therapist can help you process difficult emotions that arise

- They can tell when you're genuinely developing empathy vs. performing it

Making Genuine Amends

Victim empathy naturally leads to the desire to make amends. But amends must be genuine and appropriate:

This work aligns directly with **Steps 8 and 9** of 12-Step recovery — listing those we've harmed (Step 8) and making direct amends wherever possible (Step 9). The integration is powerful: Step Work provides the structure, CBT clears the cognitive distortions that justified the harm, and Zen cultivates the steadiness to face it without flinching. Together, they turn amends from a transaction into a genuine act of healing.

When amends are appropriate:

- When contact won't retraumatize the victim
- When you've done significant recovery work first
- When the victim is open to hearing from you
- When your therapist and sponsor agree it's appropriate
- When your motivation is their healing, not your guilt relief

When amends are NOT appropriate:

- When contact would harm or re-traumatize the victim
- When there's a legal no-contact order
- When you're early in recovery and unstable
- When your real motivation is to feel better about yourself
- When the victim has clearly communicated, they don't want contact
- When sending a letter to their home, even addressed to a family member, it could be found or read by your victim, hurting them more. They might feel that a family member was communicating with the person who harmed them, leading

them to believe the family was not protecting them. They would not feel safe in their own home.

If direct amends aren't appropriate:

- Make a living amends by changing your behavior permanently
- Support organizations that help people harmed in similar ways
- Share your story (anonymously if needed) to prevent others from causing similar harm
- Dedicate your recovery to ensuring this never happens again

Remember: Amends are for the victim, not for you. If your apology or attempt at restitution would cause them more pain, the most loving thing you can do is leave them alone and ensure you never harm anyone that way again.

Ray's Story: I wanted so badly to apologize directly to some of the people I'd harmed. I wanted them to know I was sorry, that I'd changed, that I understood now. My therapist stopped me: 'Ray, who is that apology really for? Is it for them, or is it to relieve your guilt?' That was hard to hear. But she was right. Some of the people I hurt have moved on with their lives. They don't need me reopening wounds. My job isn't to get their forgiveness. My job is to never, ever hurt anyone like that again. That's my living amends. Every day I stay in recovery, every person I help in my recovery community, every time I make a different choice—that's my apology. Not words. Actions.

Konseki's Story: Please Call Me By My True Names

by Thich Nhat Hanh

*Don't say that I will depart tomorrow —
even today I am still arriving.*

*Look deeply, every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest;*

*to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.*

*I still arrive in order to laugh and cry,
to fear and to hope.*

*The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.*

*I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.*

*I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of the pond,
And I am the grass snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*

*I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself in the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.*

*I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his "debt of blood" to my people
dying slowly in forced-labor camps.*

*My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the earth.*

*My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter
at once
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.*

I keep this poem close. When I want to cast myself as victim or villain, Thich Nhat Hanh reminds me I am both — the harmed and the harming, the cry and the laughter. Real empathy isn't pity for those we've hurt. It's recognition that the same humanity in me lives in them. Compassion is the door this poem opens.

Moving Forward

Victim empathy is painful work. Facing the harm you've caused is one of the hardest things you'll do in recovery. But it's also one of the most transformative.

When you develop genuine empathy for those you've harmed, several things happen:

- The justifications you used to tell yourself stop working
- The cycle becomes harder to perpetuate
- You develop real motivation for change (not just avoiding consequences)
- You become capable of authentic relationships based on seeing others as real people
- You can finally make amends—real ones, not performative ones

Victim empathy doesn't erase what you've done. The harm you caused is real and permanent. But empathy ensures you never cause that harm again. And that matters.

In the next chapters, we'll explore other difficult emotions and situations in recovery. But victim empathy remains foundational. Keep returning to it. Keep practicing it. Keep letting it inform your choices.

The people you harmed deserve that. And so does the person you're becoming.

CHAPTER 12 – Sitting With Difficult Emotions



Learning to Feel Without Acting Out

Emotions are The Fires Within™. They're what drive the Behavioral Cycle. When difficult emotions arise and we don't know how to sit with them, we escape into Acting Out. Recovery requires learning to feel emotions without running from them.

This chapter is about the most difficult emotions to sit with—the ones that most commonly trigger Build-Up and Acting Out. For each emotion, you'll learn what it feels like, why it's hard to tolerate, and specific strategies for sitting with it without escaping into destructive behavior.

This isn't about eliminating difficult emotions. That's impossible. Emotions are part of being human. This is about developing the capacity to feel them, understand them, and let them pass without acting destructively.

Let's explore The Fires Within

Why We Must Feel Emotions, Not Escape Them

The Behavioral Cycle exists because we try to escape uncomfortable emotions instead of feeling them. Every Acting Out is an attempt to avoid, numb, or escape emotional pain.

But here's the paradox: the more you run from emotions, the more power they have over you. The only way through difficult emotions is through them—actually feeling them, sitting with them, letting them move through your body and eventually pass.

Emotions are temporary. Even the most intense emotion only lasts minutes to hours if you don't feed it with thoughts or actions. Emotions are made of neurochemicals and electrical impulses that naturally decay. But when you Act Out to escape an emotion, you:

- Reinforce the belief that the emotion is unbearable
- Never build tolerance for that feeling
- Create new problems that generate more difficult emotions
- Stay trapped in the cycle

Recovery means learning to feel. All of it. The good, the bad, the unbearable. Not because suffering is noble, but because it's the only path to freedom.

The Second Arrow (Zen Teaching): The Buddha taught about the Two Arrows. The first arrow is the difficult emotion itself—pain, loss, anger, desire. This arrow is inevitable. Life shoots first arrows at everyone. But the second arrow is our reaction to the first arrow—the suffering we create by resisting, judging, or trying to escape the emotion. We shoot this arrow at ourselves. The first arrow hurts. The second arrow is what makes it unbearable. In recovery, we can't always avoid the first arrow. But we can learn not to shoot the second one. We can feel anger without adding self-judgment. We can feel desire without acting on it. We can feel pain without adding resistance. The first arrow passes naturally. The second arrow keeps us stuck. This chapter is about recognizing the difference—and learning to put down the second arrow.

ANGER

What it feels like:

- Heat rising in chest, face, neck

- Muscle tension, especially jaw and fists
- Rapid heartbeat, rushed breathing
- Urge to yell, hit, break something, or hurt someone
- Tunnel vision on the source of anger

Why it's hard to sit with:

Anger is a secondary emotion—it usually covers hurt, fear, shame, or feeling disrespected. It gives a sense of power and righteousness that feels good temporarily. Sitting with anger means feeling the vulnerable emotions underneath, which is terrifying.

How it triggers the cycle:

Anger builds rapidly and demands release. Acting Out feels justified ('They deserve it,' 'I have a right to be angry'). Anger-driven Acting Out (rage, violence, revenge, destruction) creates massive consequences and shame, fueling the next cycle.

Strategies to work with anger:

CBT approach:

- Identify the thought fueling anger: 'They disrespected me,' 'This isn't fair,' 'They should have...'
- Challenge it: 'Is this thought actually true? Am I catastrophizing? What evidence do I have?'
- Reframe: 'I'm hurt and disappointed, not in danger.'
- Recognize anger as a secondary emotion: 'What am I really feeling under this anger?'

Zen approach:

- Notice anger arising: 'There's anger.'
- Feel it in your body without judgment: 'Heat in chest, tension in jaw.'
- Breathe into the sensation without trying to make it go away
- Watch the anger peak and then naturally subside (usually 5-15 minutes)

- Remember: You are not your anger. You're the awareness noticing anger.

Immediate interventions:

- Physical release: intense exercise, hit a punching bag, go for a run
- Cold water: splash face, take a cold shower, hold ice
- Deep breathing: 4 count in, 7 count hold, 8 count out (repeat 10 times)
- Time out: Leave the situation for 20 minutes minimum
- Call someone: sponsor, therapist, friend who can listen without escalating

Ray's Story: My anger was always about feeling disrespected. Someone would criticize me or ignore me, and rage would flood my body. For years, I acted on it—yelling, breaking things, using my anger to control others. In recovery, I learned that under the anger was a terrified child who believed: 'If I'm not respected, I don't matter.' Once I could feel that fear—really sit with it instead of covering it with rage—the anger lost its grip. Now when anger comes, I ask: 'What am I afraid of? What hurts?' Usually the answer is there. And when I address the real emotion, anger doesn't need to run the show.

Tool Box: The Anger Pause: When anger hits: (1) Name it: 'I'm feeling angry', (2) Locate it: Where in your body? (chest, jaw, fists), (3) Breathe: 10 slow, deep breaths into the sensation, (4) Ask: 'What am I afraid of? What hurts?', (5) Wait: 15 minutes before any action. The intensity will decrease. Then decide how to respond from your adult self, not your angry child.

LUST / DESIRE / AROUSAL

What it feels like:

- Sexual arousal, physical tension
- Obsessive thoughts, fantasy, mental imagery
- Restlessness, agitation, can't focus on anything else

- Compulsion to seek release or gratification
- Feeling of intense need or craving

Why it's hard to sit with:

Sexual arousal is designed to demand action. It's deeply biological. The brain floods with dopamine, creating intense focus on gratification. For people with sexual compulsivity, arousal can feel overwhelming and unbearable.

How it triggers the cycle:

Lust is often the most direct path to Acting Out for people with sexual addictions. The Build-Up of arousal leads quickly to Acting Out (porn, affairs, solicitation, etc.). Justification is easy ('It's natural,' 'Everyone does it,' 'I deserve this'). Shame follows, creating more Build-Up.

Strategies to work with lust:

CBT approach:

- Identify triggers: What situations, thoughts, or emotions precede arousal?
- Challenge automatic thoughts: 'I NEED this' vs. 'I WANT this but don't need it.'
- Recognize pattern: 'This is Build-Up. I know where this leads.'
- HALT check: Am I Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired? Address the real need.

Zen/Urge Surfing approach:

- Notice arousal without judgment: 'There's desire.'
- Feel it as a physical sensation in the body (tension, warmth, agitation)
- Don't feed it with fantasy or mental imagery
- Breathe and observe the wave: it will peak and subside
- Typical peak time: 10-20 minutes if you don't engage with it

Immediate interventions:

- Physical interruption: cold shower, intense exercise, leave the environment
- Call accountability partner or sponsor immediately
- Delay: 'I'll wait 15 minutes before any action' (then another 15)
- Incompatible activity: Talk to someone, go to a public place, engage hands and mind

Konseki's Story: Sexual arousal was my go-to escape from every difficult emotion. Lonely? Arousal. Anxious? Arousal. Bored? Arousal. My brain had learned to convert any discomfort into sexual craving. Urge surfing changed everything. Instead of immediately acting on arousal, I practiced just sitting with it. Feeling the physical sensations. Watching the thoughts. Breathing. At first, 30 seconds felt impossible. But I kept practicing. Eventually, I could sit through entire waves of arousal without acting. The arousal would peak—intensely—and then naturally decrease. I learned: I'm stronger than the urge. The urge can't actually control me unless I give it power. That's freedom.

SHAME

What it feels like:

- Wanting to disappear, hide, or curl up
- Feeling inherently bad, worthless, or defective
- Heavy weight in the chest or stomach
- Inability to make eye contact
- Belief that if people knew the 'real you,' they'd reject you

Why it's hard to sit with:

Shame attacks your core identity. It says 'I am bad' (not 'I did something bad'). Shame is toxic, isolating, and feels permanent. The urge to escape shame is overwhelming because shame makes you believe you don't deserve to exist.

How it triggers the cycle:

Shame is both a cause and a consequence of Acting Out. Childhood shame drives the original wounds. Acting Out creates more shame. Shame drives more Acting Out to escape the shame. It's a vicious loop. Shame thrives in secrecy and isolation.

Strategies to work with shame:

CBT approach:

- Distinguish shame from guilt: Guilt says, 'I did something bad.' Shame says, 'I am bad.'
- Challenge shame thoughts: 'Is it true that I'm worthless? What's the evidence?'
- Reality test: 'Would I say this to a friend who made the same mistake?'
- Separate behavior from identity: 'I did something harmful. I can change my behavior. I'm not irredeemable.'

Connection approach (most powerful for shame):

- Share shame with a safe person: sponsor, therapist, group
- Shame loses power when brought into light and met with compassion
- Connection is the antidote to shame
- Practice self-compassion: 'I'm struggling. This is hard. I deserve kindness.'

Immediate interventions:

- Don't isolate: reach out to someone safe immediately
- Challenge the shame story: Write what shame is saying, then write reality
- Self-compassion practice: 'I'm human. I make mistakes. I'm worthy of love anyway.'
- Remember: Shame thrives in darkness. Bringing it to light begins healing.

Ray's Story: My shame was so deep I couldn't look people in the eye. I believed that if anyone really knew me—knew what I'd done, who I really was—they'd be disgusted. That shame kept me isolated for years. The turning point came in group therapy when I finally shared my darkest secret—the thing I swore I'd never tell anyone. I was shaking, crying, certain they'd reject me. Instead, another man said: 'Thank you for sharing that. I've done similar things. I thought I was the only one.' In that moment, shame lost its power. I wasn't alone. I wasn't uniquely defective. I was human. Broken, yes. But human. And humans can heal. Connection broke the shame. Every time.

BOREDOM

What it feels like:

- Restlessness, agitation, inability to settle
- Everything feels meaningless or empty
- Craving stimulation or excitement
- Time moves slowly, nothing satisfies
- Desperate for something—anything—to happen

Why it's hard to sit with:

Boredom feels like emptiness. For people used to chaos, intensity, or constant stimulation, boredom is terrifying. It means being alone with yourself, with no distraction. Boredom reveals what you've been running from.

How it triggers the cycle:

Boredom is a major relapse trigger. When life gets 'too quiet,' the brain seeks excitement. Acting Out provides instant stimulation and intensity. Boredom says: 'You deserve excitement. Nothing is happening. Go make something happen.'

Strategies to work with boredom:

CBT approach:

- Challenge the thought: 'Is boredom actually unbearable, or just uncomfortable?'

- Reframe: 'Boredom is my brain adjusting to normal life after years of chaos.'
- Recognize: 'My brain is seeking dopamine. That's natural but doesn't require Acting Out.'

Zen/Mindfulness approach:

- Sit with boredom: Notice the restlessness without trying to fix it
- Practice doing nothing: Just sit, breathe, and observe the mind
- Find richness in the ordinary: What's happening right now that you're missing?
- Boredom meditation: Notice boredom arising, sit with it, watch it pass

Healthy stimulation:

- Physical activity: exercise, walking, sports
- Creative expression: art, music, writing
- Learning: read, podcast, documentary
- Connection: call a friend, attend a meeting, visit someone
- Service: help others, volunteer

Konseki's Story: After years of living in chaos—the rush of Acting Out, the adrenaline of almost getting caught, the intensity of shame—normal life felt unbearably boring. I'd be sitting in my apartment, nothing 'wrong,' and I'd want to crawl out of my skin. Boredom became a huge relapse trigger. In Zen practice, I learned: boredom is just another feeling. It's not an emergency. I practiced sitting with it—literally, in meditation. Just being bored. Feeling restless. Not running. Eventually, I discovered something under the boredom: fear. Fear that without intensity and chaos, I was nobody. Learning to be okay with quiet, ordinary, 'boring' life was one of the hardest parts of recovery. But also one of the most freeing.

ANXIETY / FEAR

What it feels like:

- Racing thoughts about future disasters
- Rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, chest tightness
- Feeling of impending doom or catastrophe
- Inability to focus or make decisions
- Physical symptoms: sweating, trembling, nausea, dizziness

Why it's hard to sit with:

Anxiety tells you something terrible is about to happen. Your body is in fight-or-flight mode. Every instinct says: DO SOMETHING. Sitting with anxiety feels like ignoring danger. Your brain screams that you need to act NOW.

How it triggers the cycle:

Anxiety is one of the most common triggers for Acting Out. The discomfort is so intense that escape feels necessary. Acting Out provides temporary relief from anxiety, which reinforces using it as a coping mechanism. Anxiety about consequences drives more Acting Out to escape the anxiety. Vicious cycle.

Strategies to work with anxiety:

CBT approach:

- Identify catastrophic thoughts: 'What's the worst that could happen?'
- Reality check: 'How likely is that outcome? What's more realistic?'
- Challenge mind-reading: 'I think they hate me' vs. 'I don't actually know what they think.'
- Challenge fortune-telling: 'This will definitely fail' vs. 'I don't know the future.'
- Ground in present: 'Right now, in this moment, am I actually safe?'

Somatic/Body approach:

- Deep breathing: 4-7-8 breath (in 4, hold 7, out 8)

- The **Golden Breath** (vagus nerve activation): When under stress, we tend to take shallow breaths centered in the upper chest. We don't expand this cleansing breath to our belly. Deep belly breathing activates the vagus nerve—the body's primary relaxation nerve. When you breathe deeply from your belly, the vagus nerve creates an automatic physiological relaxation response. It's virtually impossible not to relax when this nerve is activated. Try it: Place one hand on your chest, one on your belly. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 counts, letting your belly expand (not your chest). Hold for 7 counts. Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 counts, belly pulling in. The vagus nerve does the rest. It really works!
- Progressive muscle relaxation: tense and release each muscle group
- 5-4-3-2-1 grounding: Name 5 things you see, 4 you hear, 3 you touch, 2 you smell, 1 you taste
- Physical movement: walk, stretch, exercise

Zen/Mindfulness approach:

- Notice anxiety without trying to fix it: "There's anxiety."
- Breathe into the physical sensations
- Recognize: "This is temporary. Anxiety peaks and passes."
- Separate yourself from anxiety: You're not anxious. You're experiencing anxiety.

Ray's Story: I lived with anxiety my entire adult life. Needed medication just to function without panic attacks. The anxiety was rooted in my Inner Child's belief: 'I'm not good enough. I don't have enough education. I'll be found out.' That anxiety drove me to seek extra attention, to perform, to try to be perfect. And when the anxiety got unbearable, I'd Act Out to escape it. In recovery, I learned I don't have to fix anxiety or make it go away. I just have to sit with it. Breathe through it. Recognize it's my scared child, not reality. The anxiety still comes. But now I have tools. I don't have to Act Out to escape it.

Konseki's Story: Most of Them Never Happened My favorite quote when getting caught up in anxiety about the future is from Mark Twain: *"I'm an old man. Throughout my life, I've had many problems. Most of them never happened."* When I repeat this quote when I feel anxious, it snaps me back to the present and reminds me that I am okay in this moment.

Additional Difficult Emotions

Other emotions that commonly trigger Build-Up and Acting Out:

LONELINESS

- Feeling: Disconnected, isolated, nobody cares
- Why hard: Humans need connection. Loneliness feels like an existential threat.
- Strategy: Reach out (call someone, go to a meeting, text a friend), Practice self-companionship (you can be your own good company)

GRIEF & LOSS

- Feeling: Deep sadness, emptiness, yearning for what's gone
- Why hard: Loss is permanent. Grief can't be 'fixed.'
- Strategy: Allow the tears, Share grief with others, Remember: Grief is love with nowhere to go. Let yourself feel it.

Konseki's Story: Grief Doesn't Ask Permission It arrives, stays, and reshapes everything. Grieving isn't just about death. It's about change, abandonment, disappointment, and the quiet erosion of what once was. Over time, these losses pile up and get buried, and we carry them around like ashes in our lungs. I've lost people, places, and dreams. Some I mourned openly. Others I tucked away, thinking I'd moved on. But grief doesn't disappear – it's always there. And when it's unprocessed, it shows up as anger, numbness, fatigue.

RESENTMENT

- Feeling: Bitter anger at perceived unfairness or betrayal

- Why hard: Feels justified. Keeps you connected to the person/situation hurting you.
- Strategy: Recognize resentment poisons you, not them. Practice forgiveness (for your freedom, not their benefit), and address the underlying hurt

GUILT

- Feeling: 'I did something wrong and should make it right.'
- Why hard: Sits heavily, demands action or atonement
- Strategy: Distinguish healthy guilt (motivates amends) from toxic guilt (self-punishment), make appropriate amends, forgive yourself, and change behavior

ENVY / JEALOUSY

- Feeling: Others have what you want, and it's not fair
- Why hard: Highlights what you lack, creates bitterness
- Strategy: Practice gratitude for what you have, recognize social comparison is suffering, Focus on your own path, not others'

Building Emotional Tolerance

Sitting with difficult emotions is a skill. Like any skill, it improves with practice. Here's how to build emotional tolerance:

Start small

- Practice with mildly uncomfortable emotions first
- Sit with slight boredom, minor irritation, small disappointments
- Build tolerance gradually before tackling overwhelming emotions

Practice when NOT in crisis

- Meditate daily to practice noticing emotions without reacting
- Use minor frustrations as training: traffic, slow internet, long lines

- The more you practice in low-stakes situations, the better you'll be in high-stakes ones

Name emotions precisely

- Use your 1,348-emotion vocabulary
- 'I'm feeling resentful' is more useful than 'I'm upset.'
- Naming creates distance and reduces intensity

Feel emotions in your body

- Where do you feel anger? Anxiety? Shame?
- Breathe into the physical sensation
- Physical awareness prevents emotions from running wild in your head

Set a timer

- 'I'll sit with this feeling for 5 minutes without doing anything.'
- Often, the intensity decreases significantly in that time
- Prove to yourself: emotions are temporary

Get support

- Call sponsor or friend: 'I'm feeling [emotion]. I'm not going to act on it. I just need to talk.'
- Attend meetings when emotions are intense
- Don't try to tough it out alone

Tool Box: The Emotion Surfing Practice: When a difficult emotion hits: (1) STOP whatever you're doing, (2) NAME the emotion precisely (using your emotion vocabulary), (3) LOCATE it in your body (Where do you feel it? What's the sensation?), (4) BREATHE into the sensation (10 slow breaths), (5) OBSERVE without judgment ('There's anger. It's intense. It's here.'), (6) WAIT (Set 5-minute timer. Don't act yet.), (7) CHOOSE response (After 5 minutes, choose adult response, not reactive escape). Repeat as needed. Each time you successfully surf an emotion without Acting Out, you prove to yourself: You're stronger than the feeling.

Moving Forward

You now have specific strategies for working with the most difficult emotions:

- Anger (feel the hurt underneath)
- Lust (urge surf the wave)
- Shame (connect with others)
- Boredom (sit with the emptiness)
- Anxiety (grounded in present reality)
- Plus, tools for loneliness, grief, resentment, guilt, and envy

These emotions will keep arising. That's not failure—it's being human. The goal isn't to eliminate difficult emotions. The goal is to develop the capacity to feel them without Acting Out.

Remember the Second Arrow: The emotion itself is the first arrow—inevitable, part of life. Your reaction to it—the resistance, the judgment, the escape attempt—is the second arrow that creates real suffering.

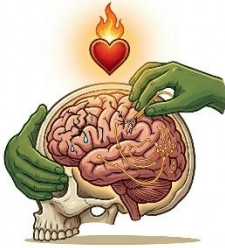
Learn to sit with the first arrow. Don't shoot the second one.

When you can do this—when you can feel anger without rage, desire without Acting Out, shame without isolation, boredom without seeking chaos, anxiety without escape—you're free.

The Fires Within don't have to burn you. You can sit with the heat. You can let it pass.

That's recovery.

CHAPTER 13 – Cognitive Behavior Therapy



Rewiring the Brain

Your thoughts create your reality. This isn't mystical thinking or positive affirmations—it's neuroscience. The thoughts you think, especially the repetitive ones you barely notice, shape your emotions, drive your behaviors, and ultimately determine whether you stay trapped in the Behavioral Cycle or break free.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most researched, evidence-based approaches to changing destructive patterns. It's the 'Mind' in our Body/Mind/Spirit framework. CBT teaches you to recognize the thoughts driving your behavior, challenge the distorted thinking that fuels the cycle, and replace destructive thought patterns with healthier ones.

This chapter provides a comprehensive foundation in CBT—not just theory, but practical tools you can use immediately to rewire your thinking and change your life.

What Is CBT?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy was developed in the 1960s by Dr. Aaron Beck, originally for treating depression. Beck noticed that his depressed patients had automatic negative thoughts that seemed to appear without effort—thoughts like 'I'm worthless,' 'Nothing will ever work out,' 'People don't like me.' These thoughts weren't based on reality, but they felt true. And they drove the patients deeper into depression.

Beck's insight: If you can change the thoughts, you can change the feelings and behaviors that follow. This became the foundation of CBT.

Since then, CBT has been adapted for anxiety, PTSD, OCD, eating disorders, substance abuse, and—crucially for our purposes—addiction and compulsive behavior. Thousands of research studies confirm: CBT works. It's not the only approach that works, but it's one of the most effective tools we have for breaking destructive patterns.

CBT is based on a simple but powerful premise:

Your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are interconnected. Change one, and you change the others. Most importantly: your thoughts are not facts. They're interpretations. And interpretations can be examined, challenged, and changed.

The CBT Triangle: How Thoughts Drive Everything

At the heart of CBT is a simple model:

THOUGHTS → FEELINGS → BEHAVIORS

Here's how it works:

- 1. A situation triggers a thought (usually automatic, barely conscious)**
2. The thought generates an emotion
3. The emotion drives behavior

Example:

Situation: You send a text to a friend. They don't respond for 3 hours.

Automatic Thought: "They're ignoring me. They must be mad at me."

Feeling: Anxiety, hurt, anger

Behavior: Send multiple follow-up texts. Or withdraw completely. Or act out to escape the discomfort.

But what if the thought was different?

Alternative Thought: 'They're probably busy. I'll hear from them when they can.'

Feeling: Calm, patient

Behavior: Go about your day. Respond warmly when they eventually reply.

Same situation. Different thought. Completely different outcome.

This is the power of CBT: When you change your thoughts, you change your emotional experience and your behavior. You're not at the mercy of external events. You have agency through how you interpret and respond to those events.

Ray's Story: In early therapy, I was convinced that other people MADE me angry. 'You don't understand—they disrespected me! Of course I got angry!' My therapist asked: 'What thought went through your mind when they said that?' I said, 'That they think I'm worthless. That I don't matter.' She said, 'And is that thought true? Do you actually not matter?' I paused. 'Well... no.' 'So the anger came from your interpretation—your thought—not from their words.' That blew my mind. I'd spent my whole life believing my emotions just happened TO me. Learning that my thoughts created my emotions—and that I could change my thoughts—was revolutionary. It meant I had control. Not over others, but over myself. That's freedom.

Automatic Thoughts vs. Core Beliefs

CBT distinguishes between two types of thoughts:

Automatic Thoughts

These are the quick, surface-level thoughts that pop into your head throughout the day. They're often barely conscious—you might not even notice them unless you're paying attention. Examples:

- 'I'll never get this right.'

- 'Everyone's judging me.'
- 'I deserve to feel good right now.'
- 'Nothing I do matters.'

Automatic thoughts drive immediate emotions and behaviors. They're like the weather commentary running in your head all day.

Core Beliefs

These are the deep, fundamental beliefs you hold about yourself, others, and the world. They're usually formed in childhood and operate as background assumptions you rarely question. Examples:

- 'I am unlovable.'
- 'The world is dangerous.'
- 'I can't trust anyone.'
- 'I am worthless unless I'm perfect.'

Core beliefs generate automatic thoughts. If your core belief is 'I am unlovable,' then your automatic thoughts will be things like 'They're going to leave me,' 'Nobody really cares,' 'I have to perform to be accepted.'

CBT works on both levels:

- Short-term: Challenge and change automatic thoughts
- Long-term: Identify and modify core beliefs

For most people in recovery, the real work is in the core beliefs. Automatic thoughts are symptoms. Core beliefs are the disease.

Cognitive Distortions: The Mind's Favorite Lies

Cognitive distortions are systematic errors in thinking—predictable ways your mind twists reality to fit negative core beliefs. Everyone has them. People with addiction and compulsive behavior tend to have them in overdrive.

Learning to recognize these distortions is the first step to challenging them. Here are the most common cognitive distortions, with examples from addiction and recovery:

1. ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING (Black-and-White Thinking)

Seeing things in extremes with no middle ground.

- 'If I'm not perfect in recovery, I'm a complete failure.'
- 'I slipped once, so my recovery is ruined.'
- 'Either I'm in total control, or I'm completely out of control.'

Reality: Most of life exists in shades of gray. Progress isn't linear. One slip doesn't erase months of good work.

2. OVERGENERALIZATION

Taking one event and making it a universal pattern.

- 'I relapsed. This always happens. I'll never stay sober.'
- 'That person rejected me. Nobody will ever want me.'
- 'I failed this test. I'm stupid and always fail.'

Reality: One event doesn't define a pattern. Each situation is unique.

3. MENTAL FILTER (Selective Abstraction)

Focusing exclusively on negatives while filtering out positives.

- 'I got through 29 days without acting out, but I messed up on day 30. The whole month was a waste.'
- 'Sure, I did 10 things right today, but I made one mistake. That's what counts.'

Reality: Your brain is focusing on the 1% negative and ignoring the 99% positive. Both exist.

4. DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

Rejecting positive experiences by insisting they don't count.

- 'People only compliment me to be nice. They don't mean it'
- 'Sure, I stayed sober today, but that doesn't matter. It's not a real achievement.'
- 'I only succeeded because it was easy. It doesn't prove anything.'

Reality: Positive experiences are just as real as negative ones. Discounting them keeps you stuck.

5. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Making negative interpretations with no evidence.

Mind Reading: Assuming you know what others think

- 'They're late. They must think I'm not worth showing up for.'
- 'My sponsor didn't answer. He's given up on me.'

Fortune Telling: Predicting negative outcomes with certainty

- 'I'll definitely relapse. It's just a matter of time.'
- 'This will never work out. Why even try?'

Reality: You can't read minds. You can't predict the future. Your assumptions aren't facts.

6. MAGNIFICATION & MINIMIZATION (Catastrophizing)

Blowing negatives out of proportion while shrinking positives.

- 'I felt an urge today. This is terrible! I'm about to lose everything!'
- 'I've been sober 6 months. That's not a big deal. Anyone could do that.'

Reality: Urges are normal. Six months is a huge achievement. Keep perspective.

7. EMOTIONAL REASONING

Believing something is true because it feels true.

- 'I feel like a failure, so I must be a failure.'

- 'I feel like everyone hates me, so they must hate me.'
- 'I feel like acting out, so I must need to act out.'

Reality: Feelings are not facts. You can feel something intensely and be completely wrong.

8. SHOULD STATEMENTS

Using rigid rules about how you or others should be.

- 'I should be further along by now.'
- 'I should be able to handle this without help.'
- 'They should understand what I need without me asking.'

Reality: 'Should' creates guilt, shame, and resentment. Replace 'should' with 'could,' 'would prefer,' or 'it would be better if.'

9. LABELING

Assigning a fixed identity based on behavior.

- 'I'm an addict.' (as identity, not condition)
- 'I'm a failure.'
- 'I'm damaged goods.'

Reality: You are not your behavior. You are a person with certain behaviors that can change.

10. PERSONALIZATION

Taking responsibility for things outside your control.

- 'My friend is upset. It must be my fault.'
- 'If I were a better person, they wouldn't have left.'
- 'The meeting didn't go well. I must have said something wrong.'

Reality: You're not responsible for others' emotions or choices. You're only responsible for yourself.

Remember This Phrase: Your automatic thoughts are not facts. They're interpretations—and interpretations can be questioned, examined, and changed. The question isn't 'What am I thinking?' It's 'Is this thought helping me or hurting me? Is it accurate? What's a more balanced way to see this?'

The CBT Thought Record: Catching and Challenging Thoughts

The thought record is CBT's core tool. It's a systematic way to catch automatic thoughts, examine them, and replace them with more balanced thinking.

Here's the basic structure:

1. SITUATION

What happened? (Just the facts, no interpretation)

Example: 'My sponsor didn't return my call for 2 days'

2. AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

What went through your mind?

Example: 'He's given up on me. I'm doing too much work. He doesn't care.'

3. EMOTIONS

What did you feel? (Rate intensity 0-100)

Example: 'Hurt (80), Angry (60), Anxious (70)'

4. EVIDENCE FOR THE THOUGHT

What facts support this thought?

Example: 'He didn't call back for 2 days'

5. EVIDENCE AGAINST THE THOUGHT

What facts contradict this thought?

Example: 'He's been available for 6 months. He said he had family visiting this week. He's called me back every other time. Two days isn't that long.'

6. ALTERNATIVE/BALANCED THOUGHT

What's a more accurate, balanced way to see this?

Example: 'He's probably busy with family. He'll get back to me when he can. Two days doesn't mean he's abandoned me.'

7. RE-RATE EMOTIONS

How intense are the emotions now?

Example: 'Hurt (30), Angry (10), Anxious (20)'

Notice what happened: The emotions decreased significantly just by examining the thought. You didn't suppress the feelings. You didn't think positively of them. You just looked at the evidence and found a more accurate interpretation.

Tool Box: Daily Thought Record Practice: For the next week, do one thought record daily. Pick a moment when you felt a strong emotion (anger, anxiety, shame, craving). Write out the 7 steps. Don't skip the evidence sections—that's where the work happens. Over time, this process becomes automatic. You'll catch distorted thoughts in real-time and challenge them on the spot. That's when CBT becomes second nature.

CBT for the Behavioral Cycle

The Behavioral Cycle is driven by thoughts. Every phase has characteristic thought patterns:

BUILD-UP PHASE THOUGHTS:

- 'I deserve relief.'
- 'Nobody understands how hard this is.'

- 'Just thinking about it won't hurt.'
- 'I can handle this without telling anyone.'

ACTING OUT PHASE THOUGHTS:

- 'Just this once.'
- 'I've already gone this far.'
- 'I'll deal with consequences later.'
- 'This doesn't really count.'

JUSTIFICATION PHASE THOUGHTS:

- 'It wasn't that bad.'
- 'I had a good reason.'
- 'Anyone in my situation would have done the same.'
- 'At least I didn't...'

PRETEND NORMAL PHASE THOUGHTS:

- 'I've got this under control.'
- 'It was just a slip. I'm fine now.'
- 'I don't need to tell anyone.'
- 'I can manage on my own.'

CBT teaches you to catch these thoughts early—especially in Build-Up—and challenge them before they drive behavior.

Example of challenging Build-Up thoughts:

Automatic Thought: 'I deserve relief. This has been so hard.'

Challenge: 'Do I deserve relief through behavior that will create more suffering? What's a healthier way to get relief?'

Alternative: 'I do deserve relief. I'll call my sponsor, take a walk, or use a healthy intervention. Acting out isn't relief—it's just trading today's discomfort for tomorrow's crisis.'

Behavioral Activation: Acting Your Way into New Thinking

CBT isn't just about changing thoughts. It's also about changing behaviors—and sometimes, you act your way into new thinking rather than thinking your way into new acting.

The 12-Step community has a phrase for exactly this: *"Fake it till you make it."* It's not about being fake — it's the same insight CBT calls behavioral activation. Act first, and authentic feeling follows. You don't have to feel like you're in recovery to act like it. The action comes first. The integrity follows. CBT and the 12 Steps teach the same truth in different languages.

Behavioral activation means doing healthy behaviors even when you don't feel like it:

- Go to the meeting even when you don't feel motivated.
- Call your sponsor even when you don't think it will help.
- Exercise even when you don't have energy.

What happens: The behavior changes your emotional state, which, in turn, changes your thoughts. You don't wait to feel better before acting. You act first, and the feelings follow.

This is crucial in recovery because you can't wait until you 'feel like' doing recovery. You do recovery, and then you feel like you're in recovery.

Ray's Story: I used to think, 'I'll go to meetings when I feel motivated.' But I never felt motivated. My therapist said, 'Go anyway. The motivation comes after you show up, not before.' So I started going even when I didn't want to. And she was right. After about 15 minutes into the meeting, my mood would shift. I'd feel connected. I'd remember why I was there. The behavior created the feeling, not the other way around. Now I know: When I least feel like doing recovery is when I most need to do recovery.

Changing Core Beliefs: The Deeper Work

Challenging automatic thoughts provides short-term relief. But for lasting change, you need to address core beliefs.

Common core beliefs in addiction:

- 'I am fundamentally flawed/defective.'
- 'I am unlovable.'
- 'I can't trust anyone.'
- 'The world is unsafe.'
- 'I must be perfect to be acceptable.'
- 'My needs don't matter.'

These beliefs were usually formed in childhood, often as a result of trauma, neglect, or chronic invalidation. They've been reinforced for years, if not decades. Changing them takes time and repetition.

The process:

1. IDENTIFY the core belief

Look for themes in your automatic thoughts. What underlying belief do they all point to?

2. GATHER EVIDENCE that contradicts the belief

Write down every experience that doesn't fit the belief. Even small things count.

3. CREATE A NEW CORE BELIEF

What's a more balanced, accurate belief? Not overly positive—just realistic.

Old: 'I am unlovable.'

New: 'I am a person capable of being loved. Some people will love me, some won't. That's normal.'

4. ACT IN ACCORDANCE with the new belief

Behave as if the new belief is true, even if you don't fully believe it yet. Eventually, the belief catches up.

CBT in Daily Recovery

CBT becomes most powerful when it's integrated into daily life:

- Start each day with a thought check: 'What thoughts am I carrying into today?'
- When strong emotion arises, pause and ask: 'What thought just went through my mind?'
- Challenge one cognitive distortion daily
- Do a thought record when you notice Build-Up thoughts
- Share your thought records with your therapist or sponsor
- Practice behavioral activation when you don't feel motivated

Over time, CBT stops being a technique you use and becomes how you think. You catch distortions automatically. You challenge them in real-time. Your thinking becomes more balanced, flexible, and grounded in reality.

Tool Box: The 3-Question Check: When you notice a thought that's creating distress, ask three questions: (1) Is this thought actually true? (What's the evidence?), (2) Is this thought helpful? (Does thinking this help or hurt me?), (3) What would I tell a friend who had this thought? (We're often kinder to others than to ourselves). These three questions short-circuit distorted thinking fast.

Moving Forward

CBT is the 'Mind' component of Body/Mind/Spirit recovery. It teaches you to:

- Recognize that thoughts are not facts
- Identify cognitive distortions
- Challenge automatic thoughts systematically

- Change behaviors even when feelings lag behind
- Modify core beliefs over time
- Use thought records to interrupt the Behavioral Cycle

CBT doesn't work alone—it's most powerful when combined with Zen practices (Spirit) and 12-Step community (Moral Compass). But it provides the mental toolkit for breaking destructive patterns and building healthier thinking.

Your thoughts created the life you're living now. New thoughts will create a different life. That's not motivation-poster optimism. That's how the brain works. Change your thoughts, change your life.

The question is: Are you willing to examine your thoughts rather than just believe them?

Your freedom depends on your answer.

Konseki's Story: Two Practices, One Mind When my first therapist taught me CBT, I thought I already had this skill. After all, I'd spent years on the cushion watching thoughts arise and pass. *Aren't cognitive distortions just thoughts you observe without identifying with them?* I was wrong. Or rather, I was half right. Zen meditation taught me to *notice* a thought without grabbing it. "There's catastrophizing." "There's mind-reading." "There's the old story about not being good enough." Watching, not believing. CBT taught me something Zen didn't quite emphasize: after you notice a thought, you can *engage* with it. You can ask: *Is this actually true? What's the evidence? What's a more accurate interpretation?* That's not something you do on the cushion — Zen would say don't add a second arrow. But off the cushion, in the middle of an addictive urge, that engagement is a powerful tool. I realized the two practices weren't competing. Zen built the noticing muscle. CBT gave me what to do once I noticed. The Buddha had a phrase for it: *abandon the unskillful, cultivate the skillful*. CBT calls it cognitive restructuring. Same instruction, different tradition. I still meditate every morning to keep the noticing muscle sharp. And when a distorted thought catches me during the day, I have the CBT thought record ready. Two practices. One mind. Both necessary.

Neurons That Fire Together, Wire Together

In the late 1940s, the neuropsychologist Donald O. Hebb described how learning actually changes the brain. His principle — now remembered as the phrase "**neurons that fire together, wire together**" — holds that when brain cells are activated at the same time, repeatedly, the connection between them grows stronger and easier to fire again (Hebb, 1949).

This is the foundational cellular mechanism behind neuroplasticity, the brain's lifelong ability to rewire itself. Our thoughts, experiences, and habits are not just passing events. Repeated often enough, they physically reshape the brain's wiring. In a real sense, the more we think about something, the more we build it in — and the harder it becomes to let it go.

That law cuts both ways, and it is worth taking to heart. The more we rehearse a thought, the deeper its groove. Dwell on resentment, fear, or shame day after day, and we strengthen the very circuitry we are trying to escape — we are, without meaning to, practicing the thing that hurts us. The encouraging news is that the same principle works in our favor: when we stop feeding a thought, its pathway weakens; and when we deliberately practice healthier ones — through the reframing of CBT, through gratitude, through meditation — we lay down and strengthen new wiring in their place.

This is why repetition is the quiet engine of recovery, and why what we choose to practice matters so much. We become what we rehearse. So, beware what you wire.

CHAPTER 14 – Zen Buddhist Teachings



The Spirit

Addiction is, at its core, a spiritual problem. Not religious—spiritual. It's a problem of meaning, connection, and wholeness. It's the feeling that something is fundamentally wrong, that there's a hole inside you that needs to be filled, a suffering that needs to be escaped.

You've tried filling that hole with behaviors, substances, people, achievements. Nothing works for long. The hole remains. The suffering returns.

Zen Buddhism offers a radically different approach: Stop trying to fill the hole. Stop trying to escape the suffering. Instead, turn toward it. Sit with it. Understand its nature. And in that understanding, find freedom.

This is the 'Spirit' in our Body/Mind/Spirit framework. CBT teaches you how to think differently. Zen teaches you how to be differently. Together, they create lasting transformation.

What Is Zen Buddhism?

Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism that originated in China (as Chan Buddhism) in the 6th century and later developed in Japan. The word 'Zen' comes from the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word 'Chan,' which itself comes from the Sanskrit word 'dhyana,' meaning meditation or meditative state.

Here's what Zen is NOT:

- It's not a religion you have to convert to
- It's not about belief in a deity
- It's not escapism or avoiding reality
- It's not sitting around doing nothing
- It's not mysticism or magical thinking

Here's what Zen IS:

- A practice of direct experience and present-moment awareness
- A method for seeing reality clearly, without distortion
- Training in non-attachment and letting go
- A path to understanding the nature of suffering
- A way of life that emphasizes ethics, mindfulness, and wisdom

You don't have to be Buddhist to practice Zen. You don't have to give up your existing faith tradition. Zen is compatible with Christianity, Judaism, Islam, atheism, agnosticism—anything. It's a practice, not a belief system.

Many people in 12-Step recovery find that Zen provides the spiritual component they're looking for without requiring them to adopt beliefs that don't fit. Zen asks you to look directly at your experience and see what's true. Nothing more.

Konseki's Story: I came to Zen after years of addiction had stripped everything away. I wasn't looking for another belief system to cling to—I'd tried that. I was looking for something real, something I could verify through my own experience. Zen offered exactly that. It didn't ask me to believe anything. It asked me to sit down, shut up, and pay attention. In that stillness, I began to see the patterns of my mind—the constant craving, the aversion, the grasping. I saw how I created my own suffering. And in seeing it clearly, I found a way out. Not through escaping, but through understanding. Zen saved my life not by giving me answers, but by teaching me how to be with the questions.

The Four Noble Truths: The Foundation of Buddhist Teaching

The Buddha's core teaching can be summarized in four statements, known as the Four Noble Truths. These aren't commandments or beliefs—they're observations about the nature of human experience. If you're in recovery from addiction, you've already verified these truths in your own life.

FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: Life involves suffering (*dukkha*)

The Pali word '*dukkha*' is often translated as 'suffering,' but it's broader than that. It includes dissatisfaction, unease, stress, discomfort—the pervasive sense that something isn't quite right.

This doesn't mean life is only suffering. It means that even in moments of pleasure and happiness, there's an undercurrent of impermanence and instability. Everything changes. Everything ends. Clinging to what feels good causes suffering. Resisting what feels bad causes suffering.

In addiction, you know this truth intimately. The high doesn't last. The relief is temporary. The acting out creates more suffering than it relieves. Life has been a cycle of chasing pleasure and avoiding pain, and neither strategy has worked.

SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: Suffering has a cause

The cause of suffering is *tanha*—craving, clinging, attachment. We want what we don't have. We cling to what we do have. We resist what's here. We try to make permanent what's inherently impermanent.

The three types of craving:

- Craving for sensory pleasure (*kama-tanha*)
- Craving for existence and becoming (*bhava-tanha*)
- Craving for non-existence and escape (*vibhava-tanha*)

In addiction, you see this clearly. The craving for the high. The craving to become someone different. The craving to escape your current reality. All three types fuel the Behavioral Cycle.

THIRD NOBLE TRUTH: Suffering can end

This is the good news. Suffering isn't an inevitable part of being human. It's caused by craving, and craving can be released. When craving ends, suffering ends. This is called *nirvana*—not a place, but a state of liberation from craving.

In recovery, you taste this when you experience moments of genuine peace—not because everything is perfect, but because you're not fighting reality. You're not craving to be somewhere else, someone else. You're here, and you're okay.

FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH: There is a path to the end of suffering

The Buddha outlined the Noble Eightfold Path—eight interconnected practices that lead to the end of suffering. This isn't a linear sequence. All eight aspects support each other and are developed together.

The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way Out of Suffering

The Eightfold Path is divided into three categories: Wisdom (*panna*), Ethics (*sila*), and Meditation (*samadhi*). Here's how each aspect relates to recovery:

WISDOM (Panna)

1. Right View (*Samma Ditthi*)

Understanding the Four Noble Truths. Seeing reality clearly, without delusion. Recognizing cause and effect—that your actions have consequences, that the cycle you're in isn't random.

In recovery: Seeing clearly that acting out creates suffering. Understanding the Behavioral Cycle. Recognizing your patterns without denial.

2. Right Intention (*Samma Sankappa*)

The intention to let go of craving, ill will, and harm. Cultivating intentions of renunciation, goodwill, and harmlessness.

In recovery: The daily decision to choose recovery over acting out. Setting the intention to break the cycle. Choosing not to harm yourself or others.

ETHICS (Sila)

3. Right Speech (*Samma Vaca*)

Speaking truthfully, avoiding lies, gossip, harsh words, and idle chatter. Using words to heal rather than harm.

In recovery: Honesty in meetings, with sponsors, with yourself. No more lying to cover up the behavior. Speaking your truth without attacking others.

4. Right Action (*Samma Kammanta*)

Acting ethically. Not killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, or causing harm.

In recovery: Breaking the acting-out behavior. Making amends for harm caused. Aligning actions with values.

5. Right Livelihood (*Samma Ajiva*)

Earning a living in ways that don't harm others. Avoiding occupations that involve exploitation, deception, or harm.

In recovery: Examining whether your work aligns with your values. Building a life based on integrity rather than just chasing money or status.

MEDITATION (*Samadhi*)

6. Right Effort (*Samma Vayama*)

Cultivating wholesome mental states and abandoning unwholesome ones. Preventing harmful thoughts from arising. Sustaining beneficial thoughts.

In recovery: Recognizing Build-Up thoughts and not entertaining them. Actively cultivating recovery-supportive thinking. Maintaining vigilance without exhaustion.

7. Right Mindfulness (*Samma Sati*)

Present-moment awareness of body, feelings, thoughts, and mental states. Observing experience without judgment or reactivity.

In recovery: Noticing urges without acting on them. Observing emotions without being overwhelmed. Staying present instead of escaping into fantasy.

8. Right Concentration (*Samma Samadhi*)

Developing focused, one-pointed attention through meditation. Training the mind to remain stable and clear.

In recovery: Building the capacity to sit with discomfort. Strengthening the mind through meditation practice. Creating space between urge and action.

The Eightfold Path isn't a checklist you complete. It's a way of life you practice daily. Each aspect supports the others. Together, they create a sustainable path out of suffering.

The Second Arrow: Why We Suffer More Than Necessary

One of the most powerful teachings in Buddhism is the parable of the Second Arrow, found in the Sallatha Sutta. It explains why we suffer so much more than life's inevitable pains require.

The Buddha said:

'When touched with a feeling of pain, an ordinary person sorrows, grieves, and laments. They feel two pains, physical and mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, following the first, were to shoot him with another arrow, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows.'

Here's what this means:

The First Arrow is the inevitable pain of life:

- Physical pain, illness, aging

- Loss, disappointment, failure
- Difficult emotions like sadness, fear, and anger
- Life's inherent impermanence and instability

These are unavoidable. They're part of being human. The Buddha didn't promise to eliminate the First Arrow. He promised to help you stop shooting yourself with the Second Arrow.

The Second Arrow is the suffering we create through our reaction to pain:

- 'Why is this happening to me?'
- 'This shouldn't be happening.'
- 'I can't handle this.'
- 'I'm being punished.'
- 'If only I were different...'
- 'This will never end.'

The Second Arrow is resistance, judgment, story-making, self-blame, and catastrophizing. It's everything your mind does with the pain—all the ways you fight reality instead of accepting it.

Example from everyday life:

First Arrow: You stub your toe. It hurts. That's pain.

Second Arrow: 'I'm so stupid! Why wasn't I watching where I was going? This always happens to me. My whole day is ruined now.'

The toe hurts the same either way. But the Second Arrow—your mental reaction—creates suffering on top of pain.

Example from addiction:

First Arrow: You feel an urge to act out. Urges are part of the brain's conditioning. They arise. That's discomfort.

Second Arrow: 'Oh no, I'm having an urge. I'm going to relapse. I'm weak. I can't do this. Recovery isn't working. I should be past this by now. What's wrong with me?'

The urge is just sensation and thought. The suffering comes from your reaction—the panic, the self-judgment, the catastrophizing.

Zen teaches you to experience the First Arrow without adding the Second. You can't control whether the First Arrow hits. You can control whether you shoot yourself with the Second.

Konseki's Story: Early in recovery, every urge felt like an emergency. I'd think, 'This is it. I'm going to fail. I can't handle this.' The urge itself was uncomfortable, sure. But the real suffering came from my reaction—the panic, the shame, the catastrophizing. My teacher said, 'The urge is the First Arrow. Your panic is the Second. Can you feel the difference?' I started practicing: When an urge arose, I'd note it—'Urge. Uncomfortable.' Then I'd watch my mind try to add the Second Arrow—'Oh no! This is terrible!' And I'd let that go. Just the urge. Just the sensation. No story. Over time, urges became like waves. They rose, peaked, and passed. Only when I fought them did they become overwhelming. The First Arrow I couldn't control. The Second Arrow? That was all me. And I could put down that bow.

Impermanence: The Truth That Sets You Free

One of Buddhism's core insights is *anicca*—impermanence. Everything changes. Nothing lasts. Nothing stays the same.

Your mind knows this intellectually, but you don't live like it's true. You act as if:

- This painful feeling will last forever
- This good situation will stay this way
- This urge will never pass
- This person will always be here
- You'll always be this person

None of it is true. Everything is in flux. Your body is changing every moment. Your thoughts constantly arise and dissolve. Your emotions move like the weather. The person you were five years ago isn't the person reading this now.

In addiction, impermanence is your enemy when you're chasing highs (they never last) and your salvation when you're sitting with discomfort (it always passes).

The key insight: If everything is impermanent, including your urges, cravings, and difficult emotions, then you don't have to act on them. You can wait them out.

An urge feels permanent when it arises—like it will never end, like you can't possibly tolerate it. But you've had thousands of urges in your life, and 100% of the ones you didn't act on eventually passed. Every single one.

Impermanence means:

- This urge will pass
- This craving will subside
- This difficult emotion will move through you
- You will not feel this way forever

You don't have to believe this. Just observe your experience. Watch an urge arise, peak, and dissolve. Watch anger come and go. Watch anxiety spike and settle. The evidence is in your own life.

Non-Attachment: Holding Life with an Open Hand

Non-attachment is one of the most misunderstood Buddhist concepts. It doesn't mean not caring. It doesn't mean detaching from life or relationships. It doesn't mean becoming cold or indifferent.

Non-attachment means not clinging. It means holding things lightly. It means appreciating without grasping, enjoying without demanding permanence, caring without controlling.

Think of it like holding water in your hand. If you cup your hand gently, the water stays. If you clench your fist to hold onto it, the water squeezes through your fingers, and you lose it. Non-attachment is the cupped hand, not the clenched fist.

In addition, attachment is everywhere:

- Attachment to the high
- Attachment to specific outcomes ('It has to go this way')
- Attachment to self-image ('I have to be seen as...')
- Attachment to control ('I need to manage this')
- Attachment to people ('They can't leave me')

The tighter you grip, the more you suffer. Attachment turns love into possession. It turns preference into demand. It turns desire into desperation.

Non-attachment in recovery looks like:

- Doing the work without demanding specific results
- Caring about outcomes without controlling them
- Loving people without needing them to complete you
- Wanting recovery without clinging to a specific timeline
- Having preferences without making them requirements

This doesn't mean you stop caring. It means you stop strangling what you care about with your need for it to be a certain way.

Tool Box: The Practice of Letting Go: When you notice yourself clinging—to an outcome, a person, a feeling, an idea—try this: Imagine holding it in your palm with an open hand. Not throwing it away. Not gripping it. Just holding it gently, allowing it to stay or go as it will. Say to yourself: 'I care about this. And I don't need to control it.' Notice how your body relaxes when you release the grip. Practice this daily with small things: how your day goes, how others respond to you, whether you feel good or bad. Non-attachment is a practice, not a philosophy. You learn it by doing it.

Sitting With Discomfort: The Core Practice

Zen meditation (*zazen*) is deceptively simple: Sit down. Be still. Pay attention. Don't move.

That's it. No *mantra*. No visualization. No special state you're trying to achieve. Just sitting. Just being.

And it's one of the hardest things you'll ever do.

Why? Because when you sit still, everything you've been running from catches up with you. The discomfort you've been escaping. The thoughts you've been avoiding. The emotions you've been numbing. All of it shows up when you stop moving.

This is the point.

Addiction is, fundamentally, an avoidance strategy. You act out to escape discomfort—boredom, anxiety, shame, loneliness, anger, emptiness. The behavior works temporarily. The discomfort goes away. But it always comes back, usually stronger.

Zen teaches the opposite approach: Face the discomfort. Sit with it. Don't escape it, don't fix it, don't make it mean something. Just be with it.

What you discover:

- Discomfort doesn't kill you. You can survive it.
- Emotions have a natural lifespan. They peak and then subside.
- Urges are just sensations and thoughts. They're not commands.
- You are not your thoughts. You're the awareness observing thoughts.
- Stillness has its own kind of relief—deeper than anything the behavior ever provided.

This is why meditation is central to recovery. It's training in tolerating discomfort. Every time you sit through the itch, the restlessness, the boredom, the urge to get up—you're strengthening the capacity to sit through urges to act out.

You're not meditating to feel peaceful. You're meditating to build the capacity to be with whatever arises. Peace is a side effect, not the goal.

Beginner's Mind: Seeing Freshly

Shoshin—beginner's mind—is the Zen practice of approaching each moment with openness, curiosity, and lack of preconception. It's seeing things as they are, not through the filter of what you think you already know.

In recovery, you think you know:

- 'I know how this meeting will go.'
- 'I know what my sponsor will say.'
- 'I know I can't trust anyone.'
- 'I know recovery doesn't work for people like me.'

Beginner's mind asks: Do you really know? Or are you bringing old assumptions into a new moment?

Beginner's mind means:

- Approaching each day in recovery as if it's your first
- Listening to people as if you've never heard them before
- Noticing your experience without assuming you know what it means
- Being open to the possibility that things could be different this time

The expert mind says, 'I know.' The beginner's mind says, 'I wonder.' The beginner's mind is fertile ground for change. The expert mind is closed off.

Metta: Loving-Kindness Practice

Metta is the practice of cultivating unconditional loving-kindness—for yourself, for loved ones, for neutral people, for difficult people, and eventually for all beings.

In addiction, you've likely developed a harsh inner voice. Self-hatred. Self-judgment. A constant narrative of 'I'm broken,' 'I'm bad,' 'I'm unworthy.'

Metta practice directly counters this. It's the intentional cultivation of goodwill toward yourself and others.

Basic *Metta* Practice:

Sit quietly. Bring to mind someone you love unconditionally (could be a child, a pet, a dear friend). Feel the warmth and care you have for them. Then silently repeat these phrases:

May you be safe.

May you be healthy.

May you be happy.

May you live with ease.

Feel the intention behind the words. You're not making something happen—you're offering goodwill.

Then, turn those phrases toward yourself:

May I be safe.

May I be healthy.

May I be happy.

May I live with ease.

This might feel awkward or false at first. That's normal. You're training the heart, just as *zen* trains the mind. Keep practicing.

Gradually, you extend *metta* to neutral people, difficult people, and eventually all beings. But start with yourself. You can't genuinely offer others what you withhold from yourself.

Konseki's Story: I hated myself for years. Self-compassion felt like weakness, like letting myself off the hook. My teacher said, 'You've tried hating yourself into change. How's that working?' It wasn't. So I tried *metta*. At first, saying 'May I be happy' felt like lying. But I kept practicing. Slowly, something shifted. Not that I suddenly loved myself. But the constant self-attack quieted. I started seeing myself as a human being struggling, rather than a defective person deserving punishment. That shift—from contempt to compassion—made recovery possible. I couldn't heal while hating myself. Metta taught me that being kind to myself wasn't a weakness. It was the strength I'd been looking for all along.

Zen and the Behavioral Cycle

Zen practices directly address each phase of the Behavioral Cycle:

BUILD-UP PHASE:

- Mindfulness catches the first signs of Build-Up before momentum builds
- Non-attachment helps you let go of fantasies and justifications
- Sitting with discomfort means you don't need to escape into the cycle
- Beginner's mind lets you see this moment freshly, not as predetermined

ACTING OUT PHASE:

- The space between stimulus and response (created through meditation) lets you pause before acting
- Impermanence reminds you the urge will pass if you don't act on it
- Right effort means actively choosing not to feed the craving

JUSTIFICATION PHASE:

- Right speech and right view mean seeing your behavior honestly, without rationalization

- The Second Arrow teaching helps you separate what happened (First Arrow) from the story you tell about it (Second Arrow)

PRETEND NORMAL PHASE:

- Mindfulness breaks through denial—you see what's actually happening
- Right action means making amends rather than hiding
- Beginner's mind helps you see this slip as information, not identity

Zen doesn't give you rules to follow. It gives you practices that develop the capacity to see clearly and choose wisely. The cycle breaks when you stop being its unconscious servant and become a conscious witness.

Being vs. Doing: The Fundamental Shift

Western culture is obsessed with doing. Productivity. Achievement. Constant motion. You're valued for what you accomplish, not for who you are.

Addiction is the ultimate 'doing' trap—you're always doing something to feel different, be different, escape who you are.

Zen offers a radical alternative: Just be.

Not doing nothing. Not laziness. But resting in simple presence without needing to accomplish, achieve, or become something other than what you are right now.

This is terrifying for people in early recovery. Without the constant motion of acting out or pursuing the high, you're left with yourself. And yourself is exactly what you've been running from.

But here's the paradox: Only when you stop running can you actually change. Change doesn't come from doing more. It comes from being present to what is, understanding it clearly, and letting it transform naturally.

You don't have to fix yourself. You're not broken. You're conditioned—trained by years of patterns, trauma, and habit. Zen practice deconditions you. Not through force, but through awareness. By being with yourself exactly as you are, the knots slowly untie themselves.

Integration: Zen, CBT, and 12-Steps

Zen doesn't replace CBT or the 12-Steps. It complements them:

CBT teaches you WHAT to think differently

Zen teaches you HOW to relate to thoughts differently

CBT says: Challenge that distorted thought

Zen says: Watch that thought arise and dissolve without believing it

12-Steps provides community, accountability, and a moral compass

Zen provides the inner stillness and self-awareness to actually live those principles

Together, they create a comprehensive path:

- CBT for the Mind
- Zen for the Spirit
- 12-Steps for the Community and Moral Framework
- Mindfulness (next chapter) for Daily Practice

You need all of them. Not because one isn't enough, but because recovery is multidimensional. You're healing your thinking, your relationship to yourself, your connection to others, and your daily way of life.

Starting a Zen Practice

You don't need a teacher, a *sangha* (community), or special equipment to start practicing Zen. You need:

- A place to sit
- A commitment to show up daily
- The willingness to be uncomfortable

Start with 5-10 minutes daily. Sit on a cushion or chair with your back straight. Set a timer. Breathe naturally. When your mind wanders (and it will), gently bring attention back to the breath. That's it.

Don't expect to feel peaceful or enlightened. Expect to feel restless, bored, and uncomfortable. That's the practice. You're building capacity to be present with whatever arises.

Over time, expand to 20-30 minutes. Find a local Zen center if possible. Connect with others practicing. Read books by Thich Nhat Hanh, Shunryu Suzuki, Pema Chödrön.

But most importantly: Sit. Every day. Even when you don't want to. Especially when you don't want to. The practice is the path.

Moving Forward

Zen offers something you may have never experienced: the possibility of being okay with yourself exactly as you are. Not after you fix everything. Not once you're 'better.' Right now. In this moment. Just this.

The hole inside you that you've been trying to fill? Zen suggests it was never there. What you've been experiencing is the suffering caused by believing there's something fundamentally wrong with you. That belief is the problem, not you.

When you sit in meditation, you're not trying to become someone better. You're learning to be present with who you are. And in that presence, transformation happens—not because you forced it, but because you stopped fighting yourself long enough to see clearly.

Recovery isn't about perfection. It's about presence. It's about showing up for your life, even the difficult parts, with awareness and compassion. Zen teaches you how.

You have everything you need already. You just need to stop running long enough to notice.

Sit down. Be still. Breathe. That's where freedom begins.

Ray's Story: A Christian Tries Meditation I'll be honest: when Konseki first told me to try sitting meditation, I thought he was nuts. I'm a Christian. I pray. I trust my faith. What did I need with sitting on a cushion staring at a wall? But I was desperate. And Konseki was a friend, so I tried. The first time I sat for ten minutes, I lasted maybe three. My back hurts. My nose itched. My brain ran through every grocery list, work problem, and old resentment I had stored up. I opened my eyes and said, "This isn't working." Konseki just smiled. He said, "Ray, you weren't doing it wrong. You were doing exactly what meditation does — showing you what's already in there." That stuck with me. So I kept trying. Five minutes a day at first. Sometimes I'd pray while sitting — Konseki said that was fine, that there's no rule about which words you put in your head. Slowly, the time stretched. And slowly, the racing thoughts stopped feeling like emergencies. They just felt like thoughts. What surprised me most: meditation didn't compete with my faith. If anything, it deepened it. I'd come out of a sit feeling closer to God, not further away. The stillness felt holy. The Bible says *be still, and know that I am God*. I always read that as a metaphor. After meditation, I started to think the writers meant it literally. So now I do both. I pray. I sit. They're not the same thing — but they're not enemies either. They're both ways of getting quiet enough to hear what matters.

CHAPTER 15 – The 12 Steps



The Moral Compass & Community

You can't think your way out of addiction alone. You can't meditate your way out alone. You need other people who understand. You need accountability. You need a moral framework. You need to be part of something bigger than yourself.

This is what the 12-Steps provide.

The 12-Step model, born in 1935 with Alcoholics Anonymous, has helped millions of people recover from addiction. It's not perfect. It's not the only way. But it works—not because the Steps are magic, but because they provide structure, community, and a path toward ethical living that addiction destroyed.

This chapter explores the 12-Steps through the lens of everything we've covered: CBT provides the Mind, Zen provides the Spirit, and the 12-Steps provide the Moral Compass and Community. Together, they create sustainable recovery.

The History and Purpose of the 12-Steps

In 1935, two men—Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith—met in Akron, Ohio. Both were alcoholics. Both had tried everything to stop drinking. Nothing worked. But when they talked to each other, something shifted. In helping each other stay sober, they found what they couldn't find alone: hope, accountability, and fellowship.

From that meeting, Alcoholics Anonymous was born. Bill Wilson later wrote the Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous), which outlined the 12 Steps—a spiritual program of recovery based on the principles that had kept him and Dr. Bob sober.

The 12-Steps were never meant to be the only way to recover. They were one group's experience of what worked. But the principles they outlined—surrender, honesty, accountability, amends, service—have proven universally valuable.

Since 1935, the 12-Step model has been adapted for:

- Narcotics Anonymous (NA)
- Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)
- Overeaters Anonymous (OA)
- Gamblers Anonymous (GA)
- Al-Anon (for families of alcoholics)
- And dozens of other fellowships

The Steps work for any compulsive behavior because they address the underlying spiritual and moral deficits that fuel all addictions.

Why a Moral Compass Matters

Addiction erodes your moral center. You lie. You manipulate. You betray people who trust you. You violate your own values repeatedly. Over time, you lose connection to any sense of right and wrong—not because you're a bad person, but because the addiction demands it.

The cognitive dissonance—knowing you're hurting people while continuing to act out—is unbearable. So you develop justifications, rationalizations, and a warped sense of ethics that permits the behavior.

Recovery requires rebuilding a moral compass:

- Distinguishing right from wrong again
- Living according to your values, not your impulses

- Taking responsibility for harm caused
- Making amends where possible
- Becoming trustworthy again

The 12-Steps provide a framework for this moral rebuilding. They don't impose morality from the outside. They help you reconnect with the ethical principles you already believe in but have been violating.

This is why the 12-Steps talk about 'character defects' and 'moral inventory.' Not to shame you, but to help you see clearly where your actions have diverged from your values—and to create a path back to integrity.

The Power of Community

Addiction is isolating. You hide. You lie. You present a false self to the world while the real you is living an unmanageable life. Over time, you believe you're the only one struggling this way. You're uniquely broken. Nobody would understand.

Then you walk into a 12-Step meeting.

Someone shares their story, and it's your story. Someone describes their shame, and it's your shame. Someone talks about the thoughts that drive their behavior, and you realize: I'm not alone. I'm not uniquely broken. Other people have this. Other people have recovered.

That realization—that you're not alone—is the beginning of healing.

The 12-Step fellowship provides:

- Identification: 'These people understand me.'
- Hope: 'If they recovered, maybe I can too.'
- Accountability: 'I committed to this group. I can't hide anymore.'
- Support: 'When I'm struggling, I can call someone.'
- Wisdom: 'People who've been through this can guide me.'

You can't recover in isolation. The same brain that got you into this mess can't think its way out alone. You need external perspectives, external support, and external accountability. The fellowship provides all three.

Ray's Story: I resisted meetings for months. I thought, 'I'm not like those people. I don't need a group. I can figure this out on my own.' But every time I tried solo recovery, I'd eventually relapse. Finally, desperate, I went to a meeting. I sat in the back, arms crossed, ready to judge. Then someone shared their story. It was my story. The shame, the secrecy, the double life, the failed attempts to stop—all of it. I thought I was the only one living this nightmare. I wasn't. That night, I began to believe recovery was possible. Not because I was strong, but because I wasn't alone anymore. The fellowship didn't fix me. But it gave me a place to stop pretending. And in that honesty, recovery began.

Higher Power: However You Define It

The 12-Steps reference 'God' and 'Higher Power' throughout. This causes some people to dismiss the program immediately: 'I'm not religious. This isn't for me.'

Here's the truth: The 12-Steps are spiritual, not religious. You don't have to believe in God as traditionally defined. You don't have to join a religion. You don't have to pray in any particular way.

What the Steps ask is that you believe in something larger than yourself. Something beyond your own will and control. Because your own will and control got you here. If you could have fixed this yourself, you would have already.

'Higher Power' can be:

- The God of your understanding (if you have faith)
- The power of the group/fellowship
- Nature / the universe
- Love, truth, or goodness as principles

- The best version of yourself
- GOD as Good Orderly Direction

The specific definition matters less than the recognition: I cannot do this alone. I need to surrender control to something beyond my ego and impulses.

For people who struggle with the 'God language,' many groups use 'Higher Power' or 'Power greater than ourselves.' Some atheists and agnostics find that the group itself—the collective wisdom and support—serves as their Higher Power.

The key principle is humility: Recognizing you don't have all the answers. Opening yourself to guidance, wisdom, and support beyond your own limited perspective. That's the spiritual core of the 12-Steps.

The 12 Steps Reimagined: Integrating CBT, Zen, and Ethics

The traditional 12-Steps were written in 1939. The language reflects that era—Christian, male-centered, sometimes archaic. But the principles underneath are timeless.

What follows is a reimagining of the 12-Steps that integrates CBT (Mind), Zen (Spirit), and ethical principles. This isn't replacing the original Steps—it's translating them into language and concepts that deepen understanding and application.

STEPS 1-3: Surrender & Letting Go

STEP 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Traditional interpretation: You can't control the addiction. You've tried. You've failed. Accept it.

CBT interpretation: This is challenging the cognitive distortion 'I can control this if I just try harder.' You can't. The evidence is overwhelming. Acceptance of powerlessness isn't defeat—it's seeing reality clearly (Right View).

Zen interpretation: Non-attachment to control. You've been clinging to the illusion that willpower alone can fix this. Let go of that illusion. Surrender is not weakness—it's recognizing what is.

Practical meaning: Stop trying to control the addiction through willpower alone. Admit you need help. This is the beginning of freedom, not the end of hope.

STEP 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Traditional interpretation: Belief in God (or Higher Power) who can heal you.

CBT interpretation: Recognizing that your own thinking got you here, and you need external input (therapy, fellowship, wisdom from others) to think differently. 'Insanity' is doing the same thing and expecting different results—cognitive rigidity.

Zen interpretation: Beginner's mind. Opening to the possibility that you don't know everything. That there's wisdom beyond your current understanding. Trusting the process even when you don't see the whole path.

Practical meaning: You don't have to fully believe yet. Just open yourself to the possibility that something beyond your current approach might work. Hope begins here.

STEP 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Traditional interpretation: Surrendering to God's will.

CBT interpretation: Letting go of the need to control outcomes. Accepting that you can control your actions but not the results. This reduces anxiety and perfectionism.

Zen interpretation: Non-attachment. Letting go. You do the work, but you let go of attachment to specific outcomes. This is the cupped hand (Chapter 14) rather than the clenched fist.

Practical meaning: Commit to the process. Show up. Do the work. Trust that if you follow the path, the path will lead somewhere good—even if you can't see how yet.

Konseki's Story: The Surrender Steps For me, Steps 1 through 3 — the Surrender Steps — were the hardest. I was telling myself my life wasn't unmanageable. I wasn't powerless over my compulsive behavior. In fact, the times when I was acting out felt like the times when I had the most power and control. That was the lie I told myself, and I actually believed it. I could never admit to anyone that I was lost and out of control. Being able to admit that I was powerless over my “drug” — and that I could not manage life by myself — was the first real step toward recovery. Seeing others in similar situations and hearing their stories gave me hope that I could learn to manage my life more healthily. And today, I am showing others the way to a more manageable life. What a blessing a community can be. It really does take a village.

Step 3 was impossible for me at first. "Turn my will over? To what? I don't even believe in God!" My sponsor said, "Then turn it over to the group. Or turn it over to the process. Just stop trying to control everything alone." That shift—from 'I have to figure this all out' to 'I'll follow the guidance of people who've walked this path'—changed everything. I didn't have to white-knuckle my way through anymore. I could ask for help. I could admit I didn't know. That surrender wasn't weakness. It was the strength I'd been lacking all along.

STEPS 4-5: Inventory & Truth-Telling

STEP 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Traditional interpretation: Write down all your wrongs, resentments, fears, and sexual conduct.

CBT interpretation: This is a structured thought record applied to your whole life. Identifying patterns, triggers, cognitive distortions, and core beliefs. Seeing clearly how your thinking has driven your behavior.

Zen interpretation: Bare attention. Looking at your life without judgment or denial. Seeing what is, not what you wish were true. This is the practice of not shooting yourself with the Second Arrow—just observing the First Arrow (what happened) without adding stories (Second Arrow).

Practical meaning: Write it all down. Who did you harm? What resentments do you carry? What fears drive you? What are you ashamed of? This isn't about self-torture. It's about seeing clearly. You can't change what you won't acknowledge.

STEP 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Traditional interpretation: Confess everything to your sponsor or clergy.

CBT interpretation: Verbalizing thoughts and behaviors to another person breaks the power of secrecy. Shame thrives in silence. Speaking your truth to someone who doesn't reject you begins to challenge the core belief 'I am unlovable/unacceptable.'

Zen interpretation: Being fully known. Dropping the mask. You've been hiding, performing, pretending. Now you show someone who you really are, including the parts you're ashamed of. This is radical honesty—Right Speech applied to yourself.

Practical meaning: Share your Step 4 inventory with someone you trust (a sponsor, therapist, or clergy). Say out loud the things you've been hiding. Their acceptance of you despite knowing your worst helps you begin accepting yourself.

STEPS 6-7: Willingness & Transformation

STEP 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Traditional interpretation: Becoming willing to let God change you.

CBT interpretation: Challenging the attachment to old patterns. Even destructive patterns are familiar—comfortable, in a sick way. Step 6 is about willingness to change, even when change feels threatening.

Zen interpretation: Non-attachment to your character defects. You've identified as 'angry person,' 'dishonest person,' 'selfish person' for so long that those labels feel like identity. Letting go of them means letting go of a false self you've clung to. This is scary and liberating.

Practical meaning: Become willing to change. Not just wishing you were different, but truly willing to do the uncomfortable work of becoming different. Willingness is the bridge between knowing and doing.

STEP 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Traditional interpretation: Pray for God to change you.

CBT interpretation: Recognizing you can't change alone through sheer willpower. You need support (therapy, fellowship, accountability). Asking for help is strength, not weakness.

Zen interpretation: Humility. Recognizing you're not the sole author of your transformation. Change happens through practice, support, and conditions you don't fully control. You do the work, but you don't force the outcome.

Practical meaning: Ask for help. From your Higher Power, from your sponsor, from your therapist, from the fellowship. Change requires humility—admitting you don't have all the answers.

STEPS 8-9: Amends & Living Ethics

STEP 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Traditional interpretation: Write down everyone you hurt.

CBT interpretation: Taking responsibility for harm caused without justification or minimization. Challenging cognitive distortions like

'They deserved it' or 'It wasn't that bad.' Seeing clearly the impact of your actions on others.

Zen interpretation: Ethics of interbeing. Recognizing that your actions ripple outward, affecting others. Harm caused doesn't disappear just because you want to move on. Right Action includes repairing what you've broken.

Practical meaning: List everyone you harmed through your addiction: partners, family, friends, coworkers, yourself. Become willing to make amends—not because you have to, but because it's the right thing to do.

STEP 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Traditional interpretation: Apologize and make things right.

CBT interpretation: Behavioral change. Amends aren't just words—they're changed actions. Your behavior demonstrates that you're different now.

Zen interpretation: Living Right Action. Making amends isn't about you feeling better. It's about taking responsibility for harm and, where possible, repairing it. Some amends mean leaving people alone. Some mean financial restitution. Some mean consistently showing up differently. Let go of attachment to being forgiven—amends are about what you owe, not what you'll get back.

Practical meaning: Make amends where appropriate. Sometimes this means an apology. Sometimes it means paying back money. Sometimes it means changing your behavior and never doing it again. And sometimes it means staying away because your presence causes more harm. Discern wisely with sponsor guidance.

Tool Box: The SAFE Formula: Patrick Carnes, a pioneer in sexual addiction treatment, developed the SAFE formula to understand what makes behavior addictive and unethical: S - Secret (you hide it), A - Abusive (to yourself or others), F - Feelings (used to avoid or escape emotions), E - Empty (leaves you feeling worse afterward). Use this

formula to assess behaviors. If it meets SAFE criteria, it's likely part of the addiction. Healthy behavior is the opposite: transparent, respectful, emotionally integrated, and fulfilling.

STEPS 10-12: Maintenance & Service

STEP 10: Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it!

Traditional interpretation: Daily check-in on your behavior.

CBT interpretation: Daily thought records. Catching cognitive distortions in real-time. Monitoring Build-Up thoughts before they gain momentum. Maintaining self-awareness.

Zen interpretation: Ongoing mindfulness practice. Noticing when you're off-center and self-correcting. This is Right Effort—continuous cultivation of wholesome states and abandonment of unwholesome ones.

Practical meaning: Each day, review your actions, thoughts, and motives. Where did you act out of alignment with your values? Where did you harm someone? Admit it quickly. Make it right. Don't let resentments, fears, or wrongs accumulate. Daily maintenance prevents relapse.

STEP 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Traditional interpretation: Daily prayer and meditation.

CBT interpretation: Daily mental hygiene. Taking time to reflect, plan, and check in with your values and goals. Preventing cognitive drift toward old patterns.

Zen interpretation: This IS Zen practice. Daily *zazen* (sitting meditation). Cultivating mindfulness, awareness, and presence. Connecting with something larger than your ego and impulses. Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness are maintained daily.

Practical meaning: Meditate daily. Pray (however you define that). Create space for reflection and stillness. This isn't optional—it's maintenance. Just like you shower daily to stay clean, you meditate daily to keep your mind clear.

STEP 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Traditional interpretation: Help other addicts. Live according to the principles.

CBT interpretation: Teaching solidifies learning. Helping others reinforces your own recovery. Sharing your experience creates accountability and purpose.

Zen interpretation: Service. *Bodhisattva* ideal—you recover not just for yourself, but to help others recover. Your suffering wasn't meaningless—it gave you wisdom you can now share. This is the ultimate Right Action.

Practical meaning: Sponsor others. Share your story in meetings. Help newcomers. Live by the principles in all areas of life—not just addiction, but also work, relationships, and parenting. The spiritual awakening isn't a one-time event—it's an ongoing transformation. Service keeps you connected to it.

Sponsorship: Why You Need a Guide

A sponsor is someone with more recovery time who guides you through the 12-Steps. They're not a therapist, not a best friend, not a guru. They're someone who's walked the path you're walking and can show you the way.

Why sponsorship works:

- Accountability: Someone you check in with regularly
- Guidance: Someone who's done the Steps and can guide you
- Perspective: Someone outside your head who can see your patterns

- Support: Someone you can call when struggling
- Honesty: Someone you can't bullshit because they've used all the same excuses

Getting a sponsor means admitting you need help. For people used to doing everything alone, this feels vulnerable. But recovery doesn't happen in isolation. A sponsor is one of the first places you practice asking for help, being honest, and accepting guidance.

The Serenity Prayer: Wisdom for Daily Living

The Serenity Prayer is recited at most 12-Step meetings. The short version everyone knows:

'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.'

But the full prayer continues:

'Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.'

The prayer captures the essence of recovery:

- Acceptance of what you cannot control
- Action on what you can control
- Wisdom to distinguish between the two
- Living one day at a time (not projecting into future catastrophes)
- Accepting hardship as part of growth
- Taking the world as it is, not as you wish it were

This is CBT, Zen, and 12-Step wisdom compressed into one prayer. It's a daily reminder of how to live in recovery.

Rigorous Honesty: The Non-Negotiable Foundation

The Big Book says, 'Rigorous honesty is essential to recovery.' Not occasional honesty. Not honesty when it's convenient. Rigorous—thorough, uncompromising, demanding honesty.

Addiction lives in secrets. Every lie, every omission, every half-truth feeds the disease. The moment you start hiding again, you're in Build-Up.

Rigorous honesty means:

- No more secrets
- Telling your sponsor when you're struggling, not after you've acted out
- Being honest in meetings about what's really going on
- Admitting when you're wrong, quickly
- Not hiding parts of your life from your partner, sponsor, or therapist
- Being honest with yourself about your motives and feelings

This is terrifying at first. You've hidden for so long. What if people reject you when they see the real you?

But here's what you discover: People in recovery don't reject you for honesty. They reject you for dishonesty. Authenticity creates connection. Hiding creates isolation. When you stop performing and start being real, you finally experience genuine acceptance.

Integration: 12-Steps, CBT, and Zen Working Together

The 12 Steps aren't separate from CBT or Zen. They're complementary:

CBT teaches you WHAT is happening in your mind

Zen teaches you HOW to be with what's happening

12-Steps teach you how to LIVE ethically in community

Example: You're in Build-Up

- CBT: Identify the automatic thoughts driving the Build-Up. Challenge them. Use a thought record.
- Zen: Sit with the discomfort. Observe the urge without acting on it. Notice impermanence—the urge will pass.
- 12-Steps: Call your sponsor. Go to a meeting. Be honest about what's happening. Ask for support. Pray/meditate.

All three work together. CBT gives you mental tools. Zen gives you spiritual tools. The 12-Steps give you community tools. You need all three.

Service: Giving Back What Was Freely Given

Step 12 emphasizes service: carrying the message to others. This isn't altruism for its own sake. Service is essential to maintaining your own recovery.

Why service works:

- It takes you out of self-obsession (addiction is fundamentally selfish—service is the antidote)
- It reminds you where you came from (talking to newcomers keeps your memory fresh)
- It gives meaning to your suffering (your experience becomes valuable to someone else)
- It creates a connection (service builds genuine relationships)
- It reinforces your recovery (teaching the principles keeps you practicing them)

Service can be:

- Sponsoring others
- Sharing your story in meetings
- Setting up chairs or making coffee at meetings
- Being available when someone calls for help

- Leading a meeting or Step study

The principle: You can't keep what you have unless you give it away. Recovery isn't something you achieve once and keep. It's something you maintain by helping others find it.

Ray's Story: I didn't want to sponsor anyone. I thought, 'I barely have my own recovery together. How can I help someone else?' My sponsor said, 'You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be a few steps ahead and willing to share what you've learned.' When I sponsored my first guy, something shifted. I started paying more attention to my own recovery because someone was watching. I started living the principles more consistently because I was teaching them. And weirdly, his questions made me think more deeply about concepts I thought I already understood. Sponsoring him strengthened my recovery more than anything else. Service isn't a nice extra. It's essential. When you're helping someone else stay sober, you stay sober.

Common Resistances and How to Work Through Them

'I don't like the God language.'

Find a secular meeting or reinterpret 'God' as 'Good Orderly Direction' or 'Group of Drunks/Addicts.' Focus on the principles, not the terminology.

'I don't want to go to meetings forever.'

You don't have to. Some people go daily for years. Some go weekly for life. Some taper off after building a strong recovery. But early on, consistent attendance at meetings is crucial.

'This feels like a cult.'

12-Step groups have no membership fees, no leaders, no hierarchy, and you can leave anytime. They don't control your life—they offer support. Try different meetings. Some feel cultish; others, genuine.

'I don't connect with anyone at meetings.'

Try different meetings. Not all groups are the same. Find one where you feel comfortable. It might take time.

'Making amends feels humiliating.'

Amends aren't about humiliation. They're about taking responsibility and repairing harm. Done right, they're empowering. Work with your sponsor to do them wisely.

'I'm not powerless—that feels like giving up.'

Powerless over the addiction doesn't mean powerless over recovery. You're powerless to control the addiction through willpower alone, but you're not powerless to get help, follow guidance, and change your life.

Moving Forward

The 12-Steps aren't magic. They're a framework for ethical living, community support, and spiritual growth. They work because they address the core deficits addiction creates: isolation, dishonesty, moral confusion, and lack of purpose.

Combined with CBT (Mind) and Zen (Spirit), the 12-Steps (Community & Moral Compass) create a comprehensive recovery path. You're not just stopping a behavior. You're rebuilding a life.

The Steps don't promise you'll never struggle again. They promise that if you work honestly for them, you'll have the tools, support, and a path forward. One day at a time. One Step at a time. Together.

You don't have to do this alone. That's the whole point.

CHAPTER 16 – Mindfulness & Daily Recovery



Living Recovery Daily

Recovery isn't an event. It's a practice. A daily practice. You've learned the theory: CBT shows you how thoughts drive behavior. Zen teaches you to sit with discomfort. The 12-Steps provide community and a moral compass. But none of it matters if you don't practice it daily.

This chapter is about integration—taking everything you've learned and weaving it into a sustainable daily life. Not white-knuckling your way through each day, but building a practice so solid that recovery becomes your new normal.

Mindfulness is the thread that ties it all together. It's present-moment awareness applied to every aspect of life. It's the practice that keeps you from sleepwalking back into the Behavioral Cycle. This is Living Recovery.

Konseki's Story: A Practice on Gratitude I remember years ago when my Zen mentor, Jeffrey, told me that I bitch and moan way too much about the outside world. He suggested that I try the ABC Gratitude Practice that he used in his Outreach Program. This consisted of going through the alphabet and assigning something that we were grateful for to each letter, as in: I am grateful for apples; I am grateful for my friend Billy; I am grateful for cars; and so on through the whole alphabet. X, Q, and Z can be tricky, but I do find that as I age, I am grateful for X-Rays. And I just love a good Quilt. And who

doesn't like Zebras? After doing this every day for a couple of weeks, I, and those around me, noticed that I didn't whine as much. I felt much more appreciative of life. Life became pleasurable again. Now, you don't need to go through the whole alphabet. You could start with a daily practice of naming five people, places, or things that you are grateful for. Increase it after a while, or sporadically throughout the day, and notice some things that you are grateful for. Trust me, your pity parties will subside, and life will become more enjoyable.

What Mindfulness Is (and Isn't)

Mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment, on purpose, without judgment.

That's it. Simple, but not easy.

What mindfulness IS:

- Awareness of what's happening right now—thoughts, feelings, sensations, surroundings
- Observing experience without trying to change it
- Noticing when your mind wanders and gently bringing it back
- Being present with whatever arises—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral
- A skill you develop through practice, like building a muscle

What mindfulness ISN'T:

- Stopping thoughts or making your mind blank
- Always feeling calm or peaceful
- Escaping reality or 'checking out.'
- A way to avoid difficult emotions
- Something you either 'get' or don't—it's a practice, not a talent

In recovery, mindfulness is your early warning system. It catches Build-Up thoughts before they gain momentum. It notices urges before they become overwhelming. It creates space between stimulus and response—the space where you can choose differently.

Without mindfulness, you're on autopilot. With mindfulness, you're awake. And when you're awake, you can't sleepwalk into relapse.

Formal vs. Informal Practice

There are two types of mindfulness practice:

Formal Practice

Dedicated time set aside for meditation or mindfulness exercises. Examples:

- Sitting meditation (*zazen*)
- Walking meditation
- Body scan
- Loving-kindness practice

Formal practice is like going to the gym. You set aside time, you focus, you build the capacity. This is where you develop the mindfulness muscle.

Informal Practice

Bringing mindfulness into everyday activities. Examples:

- Mindful eating (actually tasting your food)
- Mindful walking (feeling each step)
- Mindful listening (fully present in conversation)
- Mindful dishwashing, showering, driving, etc.

Informal practice is like using the muscles you built at the gym in daily life. This is where mindfulness becomes integrated—where it stops being a technique and becomes how you live.

You need both. Formal practice builds capacity. Informal practice applies it.

DETAILED MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

The following practices are the core tools of mindful recovery. Start with one or two. Build gradually. Consistency matters more than duration.

1. Sitting Meditation (*Zazen*)

This is the foundation practice. Everything else builds from here.

How to Practice:

1. Find a quiet place. Sit on a cushion or chair.

If on a cushion, sit cross-legged with hips slightly elevated. If on a chair, feet flat on the floor, back straight but not rigid.

2. Set your posture.

Spine upright, head balanced as if suspended from above. Hands resting on knees or folded in lap. Eyes half-closed, gaze soft, unfocused on the floor a few feet ahead.

3. Notice your breath.

Don't control it—just observe. Feel the breath entering and leaving. Notice where you feel it most: nostrils, chest, belly.

4. When your mind wanders (and it will), gently return attention to the breath.

No judgment. No frustration. Just notice you've wandered, and come back. This is the practice—the returning, not the staying focused.

5. Continue for your set time.

Start with 5-10 minutes daily. Build to 20-30 minutes over time.

What You'll Notice:

- Your mind wanders constantly. That's normal.
- You'll feel restless, bored, and uncomfortable. That's also normal.

- Some days feel 'good,' some feel 'bad.' Both are practices.
- Over weeks and months, you'll notice more space between thoughts. More capacity to be with discomfort. More awareness of patterns.

This practice is building your capacity to sit with urges, discomfort, and difficult emotions without needing to act.

2. Walking Meditation

If sitting feels too intense or you're restless, try walking meditation.

How to Practice:

- 1. Find a path 10-20 steps long (indoors or outdoors).**
- 2. Stand at one end. Feel your feet on the ground.**
- 3. Walk very slowly.**

Notice each component: Lifting the foot. Moving it forward. Placing it down. Shifting weight. Repeat with the other foot.

- 4. When you reach the end, pause. Turn slowly. Walk back.**
- 5. If your mind wanders, bring attention back to the sensations of walking.**

Walking meditation is particularly useful when you're agitated or have excess energy. It channels restlessness into practice.

3. Body Scan

The body scan builds awareness of physical sensations and helps you recognize where tension, emotion, and urges show up in your body.

How to Practice:

- 1. Lie down or sit comfortably.**
- 2. Close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths.**
- 3. Bring attention to your left foot.**

Notice any sensations—warmth, coolness, tingling, tension, numbness. Don't try to change anything. Just notice.

4. Slowly move attention up through your body:

- Left foot → left ankle → left calf → left knee → left thigh
- Right foot → right ankle → right calf → right knee → right thigh
- Pelvis → lower back → abdomen → chest
- Left hand → left arm → left shoulder
- Right hand → right arm → right shoulder
- Neck → jaw → face → scalp → top of head

5. When you finish, notice your body as a whole.

The body scan teaches you to recognize early signs of stress, urges, and emotional activation. Many people in addiction are disconnected from their bodies—this practice rebuilds that connection.

4. Mindful Eating

Most people eat on autopilot—scrolling, watching TV, barely tasting. Mindful eating brings full attention to the experience.

How to Practice:

- 1. Start with one meal or snack per day.**
- 2. Before eating, pause. Look at the food. Notice colors, shapes, and arrangement.**
- 3. Smell the food. Notice what arises—hunger, anticipation, associations.**
- 4. Take a small bite. Chew slowly.**

Notice texture, temperature, flavor. How do flavors change as you chew?

- 5. Swallow. Notice the sensation of swallowing.**

- 6. Pause before the next bite.**

Mindful eating teaches impulse control. It trains you to slow down, notice urges (for more food, different food, to rush), and choose consciously rather than react automatically.

5. RAIN Practice (Expanded)

RAIN is a four-step practice for working with difficult emotions, urges, and challenging moments. We introduced it in Chapter 12. Here's the expanded version.

R - Recognize

Notice what's happening. Name it: 'This is anxiety.' 'This is an urge.' 'This is shame.' Recognition breaks the trance of being lost in the experience.

A - Allow

Let it be here. Don't try to push it away, fix it, or make it different. 'This is here. I don't like it, but I can let it be here.' Allowing creates space.

I - Investigate

Get curious. Where do you feel it in your body? What thoughts accompany it? What does it need? Investigation brings you closer to the experience rather than defending against it.

N - Nurture (or Non-Identification)

Offer yourself compassion. 'This is hard. I'm struggling right now. What do I need?' Or recognize: 'This is a feeling, not me. I am not this urge. I am the awareness noticing the urge.'

RAIN is perfect for moments when you're triggered, in Build-Up, or overwhelmed. It's a way to be with difficulty without acting out.

Konseki's Story: Early recovery was waves of panic. I'd be sitting at work and suddenly be hit with an urge so strong I couldn't think. Before mindfulness, I'd either white-knuckle through it (which exhausted me) or act out (which restarted the cycle). RAIN changed

everything. When the urge hit, I'd pause: Recognize—'This is an urge.' Allow—'It's here. I don't have to like it.' Investigate—'Where do I feel it? Chest. Tight. Thoughts saying I need relief.' Nurture—'This is hard. But urges pass. I can ride this out.' The urge would still peak, but I wasn't fighting it anymore. I was with it. And within 10-15 minutes, it would start to subside. RAIN didn't make urges disappear. It taught me I could survive them. That's the skill that saved me.

6. Loving-Kindness Practice (*Metta*)

We covered *metta* in Chapter 14. Here's a full daily practice structure:

1. Start with someone easy (a loved one, a child, a pet).

Visualize them. Feel warmth toward them. Repeat silently:

'May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you live with ease.'

2. Turn those phrases toward yourself.

'May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I be happy. May I live with ease.'

(This will feel awkward at first. Keep practicing.)

3. Expand to a neutral person (someone you see but don't know well).

'May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you live with ease.'

4. Gradually expand to a difficult person.

Not your abuser. Not your worst enemy. Start with someone mildly irritating. Offer them the same phrases.

5. End with all beings.

'May all beings be safe. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be happy. May all beings live with ease.'

Metta counteracts the self-hatred and bitterness that fuel addiction. It's not feel-good fluff. It's retraining your heart.

Building a Daily Practice: Morning and Evening Routines

Recovery requires structure. Not rigidity—structure. A daily rhythm that keeps you grounded.

Morning Routine (15-30 minutes)

Start your day intentionally, not reactively.

1. Don't check your phone first thing.

Seriously. The first input of the day shapes your mental state. Don't let it be someone else's crisis, news, or social media.

2. Sit for 10-20 minutes.

Zazen, breath focus, body scan—whatever formal practice you've chosen.

3. Set an intention for the day.

Not goals. Intention. How do you want to show up today? Example: 'Today I'll practice patience.' 'Today I'll be honest.' 'Today I'll ask for help when I need it.'

4. Optional: Read recovery literature, pray, or journal.

5. Eat breakfast mindfully (at least the first few bites).

This routine grounds you before the day's chaos begins. It sets the tone. It reminds you who you're trying to be.

Evening Routine (10-15 minutes)

End your day with reflection and release.

1. Daily inventory (Step 10).

What went well today? Where did you act out of alignment with your values? What amends do you need to make tomorrow? What are you grateful for?

2. Sit briefly or do a body scan.

Release the tension of the day.

3. Read something recovery-related or spiritual.

4. Set your phone away from your bed.

Don't scroll before sleep. It activates the mind you're trying to settle.

The evening routine clears the 'attic of your mind' so you're not carrying unresolved resentments, fears, or guilt into tomorrow.

Ray's Story: I resisted routines. They felt restrictive. I wanted freedom. But 'freedom' without structure was just chaos—which always led back to acting out. My sponsor said, 'Try it for 30 days. If it doesn't help, stop.' I committed to 20 minutes of meditation every morning and 10 minutes of inventory every night. The first week was hell. I was restless. My mind screamed at me to just start the day already. But I stuck with it. By week three, something shifted. I started noticing Build-Up earlier in the day. I caught resentments before they festered. The routine wasn't restricting my freedom—it was creating it. Because I was no longer a slave to impulses. The structure gave me space to choose. And that space is where recovery lives.

Meditation Troubleshooting: Common Obstacles

Everyone struggles with meditation. Here's how to work with common challenges:

'My mind won't stop thinking.'

Good. It's not supposed to. The mind produces thoughts like the heart produces beats. The practice isn't stopping thoughts—it's noticing them and returning to the breath. Every time you notice and return, you're strengthening the mindfulness muscle.

'I fall asleep when I meditate.'

You're probably sleep-deprived. Meditate earlier in the day. Sit upright rather than lying down. Open your eyes slightly. If you're genuinely exhausted, sleep—don't force meditation.

'I get too restless to sit still.'

Try walking meditation. Or start with 5 minutes instead of 20. Movement practices (yoga, tai chi) can help build capacity for stillness.

'Nothing's happening. I don't feel different.'

Meditation isn't about feeling a certain way. It's training. You don't feel different after one gym session either. Keep showing up. Changes are subtle and cumulative.

'Meditation brings up painful emotions.'

That's the point. You've been avoiding those emotions through acting out. Now you're sitting with them. If it's overwhelming, work with a therapist. But mild discomfort is part of the process.

'I don't have time.'

You have time to act out. You have time to scroll social media. You have time to meditate. Start with 5 minutes. Anyone can find 5 minutes.

The obstacle is the practice. Whatever shows up in meditation—resistance, boredom, restlessness, discomfort—that's what you're learning to be with.

Relapse as Teacher: Learning from Slips

Relapse happens. Not to everyone, but to many. If it happens to you, it doesn't mean you've failed. It means you have information.

The key is how you respond.

The Abstinence Violation Effect (AVE)

AVE is the 'fuck-it' response after a slip: 'I already messed up, so I might as well keep going.' One slip becomes a full relapse because of how you think about the slip.

This is all-or-nothing thinking (a cognitive distortion). 'If I'm not perfectly sober, I'm a complete failure.' That thought drives you to act out more, not less.

Mindfulness breaks the AVE:

- Recognize: 'I slipped. That happened.'
- Don't catastrophize: 'This doesn't erase my progress. One slip isn't the same as full relapse.'
- Get curious: 'What led to this? What was I thinking? What was I feeling? What can I learn?'
- Reach out: 'I need to tell my sponsor, therapist, or someone I trust. No more secrets.'
- Recommit: 'I'm starting again right now. This moment. Not tomorrow—now.'

Relapse is a teacher if you let it be. It shows you where your practice is weak. Where are your awareness gaps? What triggers you didn't see coming.

What Relapse Teaches:

- You weren't practicing daily (formal or informal mindfulness)
- You stopped going to meetings / withdrew from the community
- You stopped being honest (with sponsor, therapist, partner, yourself)
- You entertained Build-Up thoughts without challenging them
- You got complacent ('I'm fine now. I don't need to be vigilant.')
- You experienced a major life stressor without increasing support

Every person who stays in recovery long-term learns from their slips. They adjust. They recommit to their Recovery (sometimes over and over again until it takes hold). They don't let one mistake end the story.

Creating Space: The Pause Between Stimulus and Response

Viktor Frankl wrote: *'Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.'*

Mindfulness creates that space.

Without mindfulness:

Trigger → Automatic reaction (urge → acting out)

With mindfulness:

Trigger → Awareness → Pause → Choice

The pause is where recovery happens. It's the moment you notice the urge without immediately obeying it. The moment you feel anger without lashing out. The moment you recognize Build-Up, without continuing down that path.

That space doesn't exist naturally. You build it through practice. Every time you sit in meditation and notice your mind wandering, you're practicing the pause. Every time you use RAIN with an urge, you're widening the space. Every time you catch a cognitive distortion, you're choosing awareness over autopilot.

The space grows with practice. Eventually, you have seconds, then minutes, then hours before reactivity kicks in. That's freedom.

Tool Box: Urge Surfing: When an urge arises, imagine it as a wave. Waves have a pattern: They rise, peak, and fall. Urges do the same. Most urges peak around 15-20 minutes if you don't act on them—then they start to subside. Urge surfing means riding the wave without acting. How: (1) Notice the urge arising. (2) Name it: 'Urge.' (3) Observe where you feel it in your body. (4) Breathe. Stay present. (5) Watch it peak. (6) Watch it begin to fall. You're not fighting the urge. You're riding it. The urge doesn't go away because you're strong—it goes away because urges are impermanent. They always pass. You just have to wait them out.

Long-Term Maintenance: Life Beyond White-Knuckling

Early recovery is hard. You're white-knuckling through urges, fighting your own brain, constantly vigilant. That's normal. That's the early stage.

But sustainable recovery doesn't stay that hard forever. Over time, with consistent practice, something shifts.

What changes:

- Urges become less frequent and less intense
- You catch Build-Up earlier—sometimes before it even starts
- Healthy behaviors start feeling natural, not forced
- You stop thinking about acting out as much
- Recovery stops being your whole identity and becomes your foundation

This doesn't mean you stop practicing. It means the practice becomes part of who you are. You're not 'doing recovery'—you're living a recovered life.

Long-term maintenance requires:

- Ongoing daily practice (meditation, inventory, connection)
- Staying connected to community (meetings, fellowship, sponsor)
- Vigilance without obsession (awareness, not paranoia)
- Adjusting practices as life changes (what worked in year one might need tweaking in year five)
- Helping others (service keeps you connected to recovery principles)

You don't graduate from recovery. But you do move from survival mode to sustainable living. From white-knuckling to genuine freedom.

Integration: Bringing It All Together

You now have four pillars:

CBT (Chapter 13): Mind

Tools to challenge distorted thinking, restructure beliefs, and change behavior through thought work.

Zen (Chapter 14): Spirit

Practices to sit with discomfort, let go of attachment, and find peace in impermanence.

12-Steps (Chapter 15): Community & Moral Compass

Fellowship, accountability, ethical living, and service.

Mindfulness (Chapter 16): Daily Practice

The thread that weaves it all together. Present-moment awareness applied to every aspect of life.

None of these works alone. Together, they create a comprehensive recovery path:

- When Build-Up thoughts arise: Use CBT to challenge them. Use Zen to sit with the discomfort. Call your sponsor (12-Steps). Use RAIN (Mindfulness).
- When an urge hits: Notice it (Mindfulness). Recognize impermanence (Zen). Challenge the thought 'I have to act' (CBT). Reach out to fellowship (12-Steps).
- When you're struggling: Do your morning practice (Mindfulness). Check your thinking (CBT). Go to a meeting (12-Steps). Meditate (Zen).

The practices reinforce each other. The more you use them, the more natural they become. Eventually, you're not consciously choosing tools—you're just living recovery.

Moving Forward: Recovery as Foundation, Not Identity

Early recovery is all-consuming. Your identity becomes 'person in recovery.' That's appropriate at first—you need that focus.

But in the long term, recovery is meant to be the foundation for your life, not your whole life.

You recover so you can live. Not so you can be 'in recovery' forever.

What this looks like:

- Recovery practices become routine, like brushing your teeth—essential but not the center of your day
- You build a life you don't need to escape from—work you care about, relationships that are genuine, hobbies that bring joy
- You define yourself by more than your past addiction—you're a person with interests, values, contributions
- You stay connected to recovery community but also have friends outside of it
- You help newcomers but also pursue your own goals and dreams

The goal isn't to be 'in recovery' for life. The goal is to recover—and then live.

Daily Practice: Your Lifeline

None of this works if you don't practice daily.

Not when you feel like it. Not when it's convenient. Daily.

Minimum daily practice:

- 10-20 minutes formal meditation (sitting, walking, body scan)
- Morning intention-setting
- Evening inventory (Step 10)
- One mindful activity (eating, walking, listening)
- Connection to community (meeting, call, text)

That's it. Less than an hour total. If you can't find an hour for the thing keeping you alive, you're not serious about recovery.

The practices in this chapter aren't suggestions. They're necessities. They're the difference between staying in recovery and drifting back into the cycle.

You've been given tools. Now you have to use them. Every day. Even when—especially when—you don't feel like it.

The Final Word

If you practice these principles daily—CBT, Zen, 12-Steps, Mindfulness—your life will change.

Not overnight. Not magically. But it will change.

You'll find yourself responding instead of reacting. Choosing instead of compulsing. Present instead of numb. Connected instead of isolated. Free instead of enslaved.

Recovery isn't about perfection. It's about practice. It's about showing up, day after day, doing the work, trusting the process.

The Fires Within™ you—the ones that have burned so destructively—can be transformed. Not extinguished. Transformed. Turned into warmth, light, energy for living.

But only through practice. Daily, consistent, humble practice.

You have everything you need. The tools are in your hands. The path is clear.

Now walk it.

Konseki's Story: The Final Word; Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past. I realize today that I cannot change the choices I have made in the past. But I can change with every new choice I make from now on. Therefore, because I make this commitment to not harm myself or others, I will connect with healthy, positive people seeking a better way of life. This can easily be accomplished by attending 12 Step Meetings related to your particular struggle. It can also be

accomplished by attending a Zen *Sangha* or a local Meditation and Mindfulness Group. If you cannot find one locally, look for an online group. The thing here is to remember that you do not have to struggle with your addictive and compulsive behaviors alone. There is power in numbers. So, step out of your comfort zone and give it a try. Everything you have read in this book has helped me tremendously to turn my life around. If even a practice or two out of this book works for you, then it will have been worth all the labor of love that went into putting this book together. May you be happy. May you be safe. May you be in good health and spirits. May you walk through life with ease. With a bow, Konseki

Ray's Story: Three Breaths Before I Speak. My wife noticed before I did. About six months into recovery, she said, “You’re listening differently.” I asked what she meant. She said, “When I’m telling you about my day, you’re not jumping in with solutions anymore. You’re just here.” That was mindfulness showing up in our marriage. I hadn’t been trying to do anything new. I’d just started a small daily practice — five minutes of sitting in the morning, three breaths before I spoke when I felt my chest tighten. That was it. But it was changing me in ways I couldn’t see and she could. Mindfulness in daily recovery isn’t about meditating for an hour every day. It’s about catching yourself. The moment you notice you’re about to react instead of respond. The moment you notice the urge starting to build. The moment you notice the old story playing. For me, the three-breath rule has been a lifesaver. Before I respond when my wife is upset. Before I reach for my phone when I’m bored. Before I send a text I might regret. Three breaths. That’s it. Not enough to change my life. But enough to change the next thirty seconds. And the next thirty seconds is where my recovery happens. Not in some grand resolution. Just in the small choice to pause, breathe, and respond from somewhere quieter than my reaction. Mindfulness isn’t a spiritual luxury. It’s the muscle that lets me stay in recovery one breath at a time

CHAPTER 17 – Final Thoughts from Konseki



My Name Is Konseki

I'd like to share a little more about myself that just didn't seem to fit in the main text. And I would like to share some of my favorite Zen stories and teachings that have guided me along my journey as well. So, here goes.

Hello. My name is Konseki and I'm an addict.

At a 12 Step meeting you all would reply, "Hi Konseki."

Thank you all for coming. I would like to share some of my story with you. It's a bit long, so bear with me.

I'm an Army brat! I was born in Taiwan into an Army family during the Eisenhower Presidency, so I've been around for a minute or two and have had a lot of life experience. I had three older brothers, 8, 10, and 12 years older than me. My father was a battalion commander in the Army as well as my Little League coach and my Cub Scout Den leader. My mom was a stay-at-home mother who took very good care of us. Before that, she was a 1st Lieutenant in the ANC (Army Nurses Corps) and had many stories of her own to tell.

For the first ten years of my life, I felt safe and loved—dinners around the table, family outings, holidays celebrated together, yearly trips to the big family reunion with all my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. All my basic needs were being met—in abundance. Yes, we moved around a lot. But I was too young to know any different.

This was my normal: moving every two years, starting a new school, and making new friends. It was exciting to me.

Then my world started to fall apart. My brothers moved out of the house to start their own lives. My father died when I was ten. A year and a half later, my oldest brother was killed in Vietnam. In the blink of an eye, at a very young age, I felt all alone in the world. Why was everyone I loved leaving me? What's wrong with me? I must be a bad kid.

My remaining brothers had given me the directive, "Stop crying! Be a man! You're in charge of the house now!" So, all my emotions got stuffed into the deepest parts of my soul, and my path into addiction and destructive behaviors began.

Let's back up a little. When I was eight, I was abused by an older family member. At the time, I remember thinking, "This feels awesome!" "Someone is paying attention to me." He told me that this was our "special relationship" and that I couldn't tell anyone or it would be taken away. I came out of this experience with the core belief that Sex = Love. And the secrecy that was involved was even more addictive.

Needless to say, at the age of ten, when my world started falling apart, my first "drug of choice" became sex. It was free. I could do it by myself—all I needed was a private place. And it made me feel good in the moment. I used it to escape from all the difficult emotions that I was feeling at the time: abandonment, grief and loss, loneliness, boredom, neglect, and a whole host of other emotions that I couldn't name at the time. All I knew was that I felt all alone.

Destructive behaviors, like anger, came out after we buried my dad. I was mad at the world and wanted to pick a fight with everyone. It was decided that I would be sent to a military academy for strong male guidance. At the beginning of my sixth-grade year, my mom dropped me off at the campus where I would live for the next five years, coming home only for holidays and summer vacation.

This was a strict, Christian, all-male, military boarding school with regimented schedules from dawn to lights out, uniform inspections, drill and ceremony practice, formations, and constant Chapel. I lived

in a Spartan dorm room with another boy. For an eleven-year-old boy coming from a popular northeastern shore town, it felt like I had landed on another planet—isolated, rule-bound, and emotionally intense.

I was only there for three months when I got the news that my oldest brother had been killed in Vietnam. For the second time in a year and a half, I was visiting Arlington National Cemetery to bury a loved one. Taps quickly became my most hated song, and I had to hear it every night at the academy when the lights went out.

I did well in school. I was usually on the Honor Roll or Dean's List. I excelled in sports. But when it came to discipline, I failed. Sex was constantly being conditioned as my go-to “feel-good.” By the age of twelve, I was learning the terms for new, difficult emotions: shame and confusion. I did the best I could with what I had to work with, but my life was continuing to become out of control with no off-ramp in sight.

Then, probably the most traumatic event of my life up to this point occurred: I was raped by one of my teachers. Afterward, I was too scared and ashamed to tell anyone. This latest trauma was the one that broke the camel's back. I became what they call in therapy, emotionally arrested. Though I continued to age chronologically, I was stuck emotionally at 15 years old. I lost all trust in adults and was very guarded and secretive with everything I did. By now, my cycle was in full swing.

I talked my mom into removing me from school. Going from the intense structure of military school to the free, relaxed setting of public school required a whole new set of adjustments. After getting into trouble with the military police over marijuana possession, it was decided that I would move across the country to live with my brother in California and finish my senior year out there. Once again, I was running from my problems without dealing with them.

I wasted no time getting onto the varsity sports teams and dating a cheerleader to appear normal. Somehow, I managed to finish high school. I had made the All-County Basketball Team and had aspirations of playing college ball. But with all the inner turmoil, I lacked the commitment needed to play for a major college. How

quickly I had gone from the big man on campus of high school life to a little fish in the ocean of the big adult world.

My brother got me a job working as a counselor in a group home for teenage boys dealing with trauma, delinquency, or family collapse. It was emotionally intense work, especially for someone who was an emotionally troubled teen as well. I was one of those boys. But old patterns set in, and I was asked to resign. Another reason to skip town.

During the following year, after attending a Gay Pride Parade, I discovered a different kind of normal life and found a boyfriend with whom I was very happy. For the first time in a long time, I was happy. But then tragedy hit me once again. My boyfriend was killed in a car accident. The vision of my future was gone in the blink of an eye. I slipped right back into the abyss of sex, drugs, and alcohol to relieve the pain. One night, I was thinking of driving off one of the cliffs of the San Diego shoreline—my answer to finding an exit ramp. Lucky for me, I fell asleep on the beach. The next morning, desperate, I joined the Army.

I was assigned to a base in Germany during the early 80s. But because all my issues were still boiling over on the inside, my compulsivity was still my drug of choice. It got so bad that I was referred to the base psychologist, and everything that was bottled up inside came spewing out. The recommendation was a General Discharge. And once again, I flew home to the safe, quiet environment of my mother's home.

I'm twenty-five at this time, and I have been on a 15-year whirlwind tour of addictive and compulsive behaviors. These years of destructive behaviors finally caught up with me, and I was arrested and brought to the county jail. In a way, it was the off-ramp I had been searching for. They told me there was a special treatment center to deal with behaviors like mine, and I was more than ready to sign on the dotted line.

The judge gave me a significant sentence at a state-run treatment center, where I would receive the therapy I needed. This was my introduction to CBT. I participated in intense group and individual therapy sessions. In 2000, I was released with a tool belt full of interventions and the intention to go out into the world and do good.

But as was my pattern, I made some very bad choices. I followed a friend to Mexico. It wasn't too long before I was forced to leave and return to my mother's home. I later found myself extradited to Mexico for crimes I had committed there. I spent a year and a half in a Mexican prison, eventually proving my innocence of the specific charges and returning home.

I wasn't home more than four months before the inevitable happened. I will never forget the look of confusion on my mom's face as they took me off in handcuffs. I had never felt such guilt. I was supposed to be there for her, taking care of her. It was the worst feeling I have ever experienced.

So, the year is 2012, and I find myself back at the residential treatment center once again. A year later, my mom passed away at the age of 92. Shame and guilt washed down on me like a ton of bricks. I took a good look in the mirror and thought to myself that something had to change.

I believe it was during an Emotional Regulation Module that I read a handout from a Buddhist publication. When I read about Zen, it was like finding the missing pieces to the puzzle I had been searching for my whole life. I was able to get an outside Zen *Sangha* to come into our facility and give us instruction, and I eventually took the Buddhist Precepts and received my Buddhist name, Konseki, which I was told translates to "Spirit Rock."

I had already been attending SA (Sexaholics Anonymous) meetings and was beginning to form the practice of Body, Mind, and Spirit, which encompasses the idea for this therapeutic approach I developed for myself. I had the body work from CBT on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. But I was missing the Zen Mind of meditation and mindfulness, and sitting with the world as it is. And the 12 Step Program of spirit, community, and sharing our struggles together. There really is strength in numbers. This has made all the difference.

I think a lot about the story of Angulimala, who is mentioned in the Foreword of this book. If he could turn his life around as he did, then there is hope for the rest of us. It just takes intention and a lot of effort. Life has become a lot easier to navigate. My highs are not as high, and my lows are definitely not as low. It's like riding on the kiddy

rollercoaster of life, and I am very content with that today. As they say, slow and steady wins the race. It is my hope you will find this same sense of ease in your life.

My name is Konseki, and I am an addict. Thank you for allowing me to share my story.

Group Members: Thank you for sharing.

Konseki's Favorite Zen Stories, Teachings, and Poems

The following stories and teachings have been my companions on the path. Each one has helped me see myself and the world a little more clearly. I share them here in the hope that they may do the same for you.

Crossing to the Other Shore

A traveler comes to a wide, dangerous river. The near shore represents suffering, confusion, fear, and the limitations of the ego. The far shore represents awakening, freedom, and living in alignment with the truth. The traveler builds a raft using branches, reeds, and whatever is available. With effort, he paddles across the river and reaches the other shore safely. Then the Buddha asks, "Should the traveler pick up the raft and carry it on his back?"

Of course not. The raft served its purpose. Now it must be left behind.

The story is a metaphor for the entire spiritual path. The Near Shore is the conditioned self—old habits, survival strategies, fear-based thinking, clinging to identity. The Raft is the teachings, practices, and tools—meditation, rituals, coping strategies, therapeutic techniques. These are means, not ends. The Far Shore is liberation—clarity, compassion, presence, freedom from compulsive patterns, living from values rather than fear. And the key insight: even the teachings must be released once they've done their job. Clinging to the raft becomes another form of bondage.

This is why Zen often says, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Not literally, but don’t cling to any external authority or fixed idea. You’re not going to find enlightenment, happiness, or peace externally. They will be found within.

The 100 Foot Pole

A monk climbs to the top of a 100-foot pole—a metaphor for reaching a high level of spiritual understanding, safety, or accomplishment. A Zen master then says, “Atop the 100-foot pole, one should step forward.” Or, in another version, “If you stay on top of the pole, you will perish. Step off, and the world opens before you.”

The *koan* points to a deep truth: you cannot cling to enlightenment, identity, or safety. Reaching the top of the pole represents mastery, insight, success, and a stable identity. But Zen says, if you cling to that, you’re stuck. Growth stops the moment you hold on. Real transformation requires letting go. Stepping off the pole is the leap into uncertainty, vulnerability, the unknown, life as it actually is. True wisdom is lived, not perched above life.

The Broken Teacup

A monk was asked by one of his students about the practice of non-attachment. The monk told his student, “Every morning I drink from my favorite teacup. I hold it in my hands and feel the warmth of the cup from the hot liquid it contains. I breathe in the aroma of my tea and enjoy my mornings in this way. But in my mind, the teacup is already broken.”

The moral is that nothing in this world is permanent. Teacups will break, ideas will change, relationships will end. The key to freedom from attachment while enjoying all that is in our world lies in the act of appreciation. When we appreciate what we have without clinging to it for fear of losing it, we can learn to let it go—with a greater sense of peace. The Buddha’s final words express this: “Impermanence is inescapable. Everything vanishes. Therefore, there is nothing more important than continuing the path with diligence.”

Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop

by *Konseki*

I've kind of felt that way my entire life, living day to day with anxiety, fear, or just general uneasiness with life—basically waiting for the next shoe to drop. It started when I was ten, and my father died. Up until then, I had been a happy-go-lucky kid. But then my brother was killed a year and a half later, and I started to develop this sense of doom, that something bad was just around the corner. This started to affect how I lived life in the present moment, and I would turn to addictive and compulsive behaviors to ease that tension. Years later, I realized what was happening and made a conscious choice to break free. Meditation and Mindfulness played a big role. Having a go-to quote when I start to feel this way helps. I go to the quote by Mark Twain: “I’m an old man. Throughout my life, I’ve had many problems. Most of them never happened.” This snaps me back into the present moment.

Be the Log: A Teaching from *Shantideva*

Shantideva, an Indian monk who lived around the year 700, gave us a six-line teaching in his *Way of the Bodhisattva* that has saved me more than once. The instruction is simple: when desire surges, when anger surges, when any impulse rises in the mind that wants to pull you somewhere harmful — don’t act on it. Don’t speak from it. Just stay where you are. *Be like a log of wood*, he said. A log doesn’t move. A log doesn’t reply. A log just is.

This is the practice we are doing every time we urge-surf, every time we sit through a craving without scratching it, every time we choose not to fire off the text that the wave of anger is composing in our head. **Be the log.** The wave passes around a log. The wave passes through a log. The log is still there when the wave has gone.

A senior monk and a junior monk are traveling together. They come to a river with a strong current where a young woman is also attempting to cross. Without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and continued on. Three hours passed in silence before the younger monk blurted out, “As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman—how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?”

The older monk replied, “Brother, I put her down on the other side of the river a long time ago. Why are you still carrying her?”

The junior monk represents the majority of us. Bound by destructive mental activity, he grasped the past and kept reliving it in his mind for hours. The senior monk symbolizes the proper way of dealing with the past. When the situation ended, he didn’t mentally carry it with him. If only we could let go of things that easily, right?

The Tiger and the Strawberry

A monk was walking through the forest when he saw a tiger. Running for his life, he came to the ledge of a steep cliff. Clinging to a vine, he climbed over the edge just as the tiger was about to pounce. Hanging over the side, with the hungry tiger above, he looked down to see another tiger below. Just then, a tiny mouse began to gnaw at the vine. At that moment, the monk noticed a patch of wild strawberries. Reaching out, he plucked one. It was plump and perfectly ripe. He popped it into his mouth, and it was perfectly delicious. The End.

When I first heard this story, I wondered what had happened to the monk. The man’s situation, with dangers coming from all angles, can also be seen as our reality. When it comes down to it, we control nothing. This should instill a profound sense of appreciation for the present moment. There is no staying off that cliff; there is no avoiding those tigers forever. The mouse of uncompromising time is chewing away at our lifeline moment by moment. The only choice is whether or not we will notice, eat, and enjoy the strawberry.

Six Pointers from *Tilopa*

There is an old Tibetan instruction — six pointers from the master *Tilopa*, who lived a thousand years ago — that I keep returning to when my mind is doing its work too hard. The instruction goes like this: *don’t dwell on what already happened. Don’t lean into what hasn’t happened yet. Don’t grip too tightly on the moment in front of you. Don’t pick it apart with analysis. Don’t push it to be different than it is. Rest as it is.*

Six small acts of letting go. They sound easy. They are not easy. The mind wants to do all six things constantly — replay the past, rehearse the future, hold the present in a tight fist, dissect every sensation, edit

reality into a better version. Recovery sometimes is just learning to let the mind do less of what it does. Not stop. Less.

A Teaching on Gratitude

In Buddhism, there is a simple truth: suffering begins when we focus on what we lack instead of what we already have. The mind can trap you in thoughts like: I don't have enough. I am not enough. My life should be different. But pause. Look around. Look within.

The Buddha taught that gratitude is not something we practice only when life is perfect—it is what makes life feel peaceful, even when it is not. Gratitude turns chaos into contentment, pain into understanding, life into blessing.

You are still here—and that means your story is still unfolding. You still have time to heal, to grow, to change, to love, to begin again. Sit quietly. Breathe deeply. Feel your chest rise and fall. That alone is a miracle. You don't need a different life to feel happy. You need a different perspective. Today, find one small thing to be grateful for—the warmth of sunlight, the stillness of morning, someone who cares about you. Peace doesn't come from adding more to life. Peace comes from noticing what's already here. Be present. Be grateful. You are blessed—more than you think.

“No fire is too fierce to be transformed.”

The Changing of the Guard

by Konseki (July 2017)

My mom passed away three years ago, shortly after my second incarceration. Like many people searching for spiritual answers, I was angry, lost, and confused. I had tried many spiritual avenues in the past, but I never really connected to any of them. When I first started reading about Zen Buddhism, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path resonated with me. It offered a plan to reduce my suffering, and all I had to do was give it a try. It wasn't asking for money. There was no guarantee of future happiness. Just a suggestion to try it and see if it works for you.

Three years later, I am still following the Path and learning more about myself and how my mind works than ever before. I remember when I first started attending a formal meditation group at our facility. In the beginning, it was torture — the usual stuff you hear: “This isn’t working!” “This is boring!” “I’m wasting my time!” The truth was that the last thing I wanted to do was sit still and go inside my mind to see what was there. That was too scary a place for me to venture into.

The gentleman leading the group kept talking about being the gatekeeper of your mind — the observer, the witness, whatever name you want to give this higher consciousness of awareness. “Be a guard at the palace gate of your mind,” he said, “alert to every thought, feeling, and intention that comes through that gate.” He also said to have fun with it. Your mind is your playground, and you can do whatever you want there. That was a scary thought in itself.

I tried it. I turned it into a game and visualized this gatekeeper as a CO—a corrections officer. First, I took a look at the old guard. You probably recognize him: the CO who sits around drinking coffee and eating donuts, talking on his cell phone, oblivious to what’s going on around him in his unit. I fired him. Then I hired the CO we all wish for — the one who listens, is fair and non-judgmental, is attentive, offers skillful advice, and tells us how things really are. And when all is said and done, he lets it go. On to the next issue at hand.

I can’t begin to express how this “changing of the guard” has transformed my life. By observing my mind, I am no longer trapped in it. Just the mindful observation — rather than *being* the thought, the emotion, the reaction — has simplified my life tremendously. My body is still in prison, but my mind is more at peace than it ever was when I was out in society acting out with my destructive behaviors. Crazy, huh?

If you haven’t tried this, I invite you to sit down and really look into the playground of your mind. Who’s in charge? Does your guard need changing? Become like a child again — no longer innocent, but wise. Wonder. Marvel. Discover. Reflect. And then let it all go. Move on. Rinse and repeat.

A lot of men in here say that when they get released, they're going to take time to smell the roses. I say, why wait? Zen master Dōgen said, "Life is fleeting! Don't waste a single moment of your precious life! Wake up now! And now! And now!"

With a bow,

Konseki

Life on 7' × 4': One Man's Journey Through the Pandemic

by Konseki (July 2020)

Sometime in March of 2020, the announcement came that all programs at our institution were shutting down due to a virus circulating, and that we had to "shelter in place" in our dormitories. We could no longer eat in the dining hall; meals were served on Styrofoam trays. Court and medical trips were put on hold. No more congregating in the Rec Room to play cards or socialize. The yard was canceled. Phones were restricted. Even showers and bathroom stalls were limited to a certain number of men. We were basically told to stay on our bunks until further notice. All at once, my bunk became my dining area, gym, meditation cushion, yoga mat, office, and entertainment center. The guards started wearing masks. Soon, they handed masks to all of us. Social distancing became the rule. The question was: how were we supposed to socially distance in a 60-man dorm where we were packed in like sardines?

"Breaking News" began popping up every ten minutes, and we started hearing about the staggering number of deaths in the NYC area. It was reported that at least a million people would die in the United States alone because of COVID-19.

Men in my dorm started getting sick and were pulled out and sent to the infirmary for isolation. We heard that some of them had passed away. We lost about fifteen men, and I lost a couple of friends from "the street." This was scary, to say the least. My monkey mind kicked into full throttle. Every time I got a sore throat, sneezed, or couldn't taste my food, I thought the worst: "This is it! I've got it! I'm going to die!" I dreaded phone calls home, fearing bad news.

I kept practicing meditation and mindfulness through all of it, and after a while it dawned on me that I could use “shelter in place” as a practice. That’s pretty much what we do anyway when we sit to meditate. We sit, we let thoughts come and go, we don’t judge, and we don’t react — or, at best, we respond with wisdom. We realize that the place of safety, refuge, and shelter is right where we are in this moment. In my case, on my 7’ × 4’ bunk.

In early April, a Zen mentor sent me a copy of the Three Tenets. By reading them every day, I found balance and harmony throughout the quarantine. The Three Tenets are Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Taking Action. With regular practice, they can become a way of living from the center at all times.

Not-Knowing is letting go of fixed ideas about yourself, others, and the universe. Difficult circumstances can make life feel suddenly unstable — but as the Buddha taught, things are always unstable. We just tend to live from a set of unquestioned beliefs that make us feel solid. How can we really know what’s going to happen next? We can’t, because the universe is constantly changing. In practicing Not-Knowing, we train ourselves to set aside fixed points of view, and that opens space to accommodate our own reactivity and other people’s perspectives.

Throughout my life, there have been many Not-Knowing moments: my father dying when I was ten, my brother getting killed in Vietnam when I was eleven, being abused by a teacher at military school when I was fifteen, being incarcerated at twenty-five, my mom passing when I was fifty-five — just to name a few. All of these rocked my world and took away my sense of safety. I’m sure you could share your own Not-Knowing moments. And that brings us to the next tenet.

Bearing Witness is the practice of seeing all aspects of a situation, including your own attachments and judgments. You can’t live solely in Not-Knowing, because life also asks you to face the conditions coming at you. When you bear witness, you open to whatever is arising and meet it just as it is. Buddhist meditation trains you to bear witness by strengthening your awareness of thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise and pass. As that awareness strengthens, you begin to see that you have a choice in how you respond.

It was interesting to watch my mind during quarantine — bearing witness to all the wild thoughts that kept popping up. A lot of them came from the news, which ranged from our president calling the virus a “hoax” to people throwing parties to see who would catch it first. And then there were the conversations in my dorm, from conspiracy theories to schemes to catch the virus and get an early release. It was enlightening to see how judgmental I was — how quickly I labeled these people as ignorant or stupid. The more I watched and listened, the more chaotic my mind became. I found refuge by returning to my breath, relaxing, and becoming present. It melted away the fears and worries. When we bear witness to Not-Knowing, we somehow find that we have the answers. We’ve always had them; we just didn’t know where to look.

Taking Action arises from Not-Knowing and Bearing Witness. It’s impossible to predict what action will be taken in any situation or when it will arise. The underlying intention is that the action be a caring one — serving everyone and everything, including yourself. Sometimes the action is as simple as continuing the practice of the first two tenets. By working through Not-Knowing and Bearing Witness, I was able to respond to those around me with less negativity. I could watch the fixed thoughts and judgments come and go, and create the space to respond with kindness and compassion. That’s pretty much what we need more of in times like these, isn’t it? We don’t find kindness and compassion by searching for them; we recognize the kindness and compassion already within us and allow them to emerge.

Training with the Tenets is a matter of taking a backward step, again and again — discerning your internal process while acknowledging what’s happening around you. It builds spiritual resilience and an ever-deepening sense of reality. As life unfolds around you, the Three Tenets are active inside you, always directing you back to the center.

May you be happy. May you be safe. May you be healthy. May you be at peace and at ease.

With a bow,

Konseki

APPENDIX 1 – List of Emotions

See definitions, usage examples, and games at the-fires-within.com/emotions.

Level 1 — Beginner (40 Emotions)

Core emotional vocabulary — the foundation of recovery awareness and the Behavioral Cycle

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Afraid	Angry	Annoyed	Anxious
Ashamed	Bored	Calm	Cheerful
Confused	Content	Curious	Depressed
Disappointed	Disgusted	Embarrassed	Excited
Frustrated	Grateful	Guilty	Happy
Hopeful	Hopeless	Hurt	Jealous
Joyful	Lonely	Loved	Mad
Nervous	Proud	Relaxed	Resentful
Sad	Scared	Surprised	Tired
Uncomfortable	Unhappy	Upset	Worried

Level 2 — Elementary (151 Emotions)

Expanding emotional vocabulary — interpersonal feelings, shame, and Build-Up precursors

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Abandoned	Accepting	Affectionate	Agitated
Alienated	Amused	Appalled	Appreciated
Apprehensive	Bitter	Blamed	Blissful
Brokenhearted	Cautious	Comforted	Compassionate
Confident	Contemptuous	Defeated	Defensive
Dejected	Delighted	Demoralized	Deprived

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Despair	Determined	Devastated	Diminished
Disgraced	Dismissed	Disrespected	Distressed
Dominated	Doubtful	Drained	Dread
Eager	Ecstatic	Elated	Empathetic
Energetic	Enthusiastic	Envious	Excluded
Exhausted	Exploited	Fatigued	Fearful
Feisty	Fondness	Foolish	Foreboding
Frantic	Friendly	Fulfilled	Furious
Generous	Glad	Gloomy	Grief
Grieving	Grumpy	Helpless	Hesitant
Horrified	Hostile	Humble	Humiliated
Ignored	Impatient	Inadequate	Incensed
Indifferent	Indignant	Inferior	Infuriated
Inhibited	Injured	Insecure	Insignificant
Inspired	Insulted	Irritated	Isolated
Judged	Livid	Longing	Malicious
Manipulated	Melancholy	Miserable	Misunderstood
Mocked	Moved	Neglected	Nostalgic
Numb	Offended	Optimistic	Ostracized
Outraged	Overlooked	Overwhelmed	Passionate
Peaceful	Persecuted	Playful	Powerless
Provoked	Regretful	Rejected	Relieved
Remorseful	Restless	Ridiculed	Scorned
Seething	Self-conscious	Sensitive	Shamed
Shy	Skeptical	Sorrowful	Spiteful
Stressed	Stubborn	Suffering	Suppressed
Suspicious	Sympathetic	Threatened	Tormented

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Traumatized	Unappreciated	Underestimated	Undervalued
Unheard	Unimportant	Unloved	Unwanted
Unworthy	Used	Vengeful	Victimized
Violated	Vulnerable	Worthless	Wounded
Wronged	Yearning	Zealous	

Level 3 — Intermediate (316 Emotions)

Complex emotional states — including primary Build-Up triggers and Behavioral Cycle warning signs

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Abashed	Abhorrent	Abject	Abominable
Absorbed	Aching	Acquiescent	Acrimomious
Acrimony	Adamant	Addled	Adoration
Adrift	Adulation	Affliction	Aggravated
Aggrieved	Aggrievement	Aghast	Agonized
Agony	Alacrity	Alarmed	Aloof
Altruism	Altruistic	Ambiguity	Ambivalent
Amenable	Amiable	Amicability	Amorous
Amorousness	Anguish	Animated	Animosity
Anticipation	Antipathy	Appeasement	Ardency
Ardent	Ardor	Arid	Arrogance
Arrogant	Asperity	Assertive	Astonished
Astounded	Astuteness	Attrition	Audacious
Audacity	Avarice	Averse	Aversion
Awe	Awed	Baleful	Bashful
Beatific	Beatitude	Befuddled	Begrudging
Belittled	Bellicose	Bemused	Benevolence
Benevolent	Bereft	Bewildered	Bewilderment

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Bleak	Bleakness	Blithe	Boisterous
Boisterousness	Bombastic	Brash	Brazen
Brazenness	Brooding	Browbeaten	Burdened
Callous	Cantankerous	Caprice	Capricious
Captivated	Captivation	Careless	Chagrined
Chastened	Cheerless	Chilled	Claustrophobic
Coerced	Complacent	Compulsive	Condescending
Conflicted	Constricted	Contempt	Contrition
Coping	Cordial	Cornered	Cowed
Craving	Crushed	Cynical	Daunted
Dazed	Deceived	Degraded	Delirious
Demeaned	Desolate	Despised	Destabilized
Detached	Diffident	Dignified	Disbelief
Disconcerted	Discontent	Disenchanted	Disheartened
Disillusioned	Dismayed	Disoriented	Dispirited
Displeasure	Disquieted	Dissociated	Distraught
Distrustful	Doleful	Downcast	Dubious
Duped	Earnest	Eerie	Effusive
Embittered	Emboldened	Encumbered	Enduring
Enlightened	Enlivened	Entrapped	Erratic
Estranged	Euphoric	Exasperated	Exhilarated
Exuberant	Faint	Fearless	Feeble
Ferocious	Fervent	Fervid	Fidgety
Flummoxed	Fond	Forlorn	Forsaken
Frenzied	Fretful	Frozen	Fuming
Glum	Gratified	Grievous	Guarded
Harrowed	Haunted	Heartbroken	Heartfelt

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Hollow	Humbled	Immobilized	Impotent
Incapacitated	Indecisive	Ineffective	Ingenuine
Insidious	Intense	Intimidated	Introspective
Invalidated	Irate	Irritable	Jaded
Jarred	Joyless	Jumpy	Keen
Languid	Lax	Leery	Lethargic
Listless	Lost	Low	Lucid
Lugubrious	Lustful	Malcontent	Manic
Marginalized	Meditative	Melancholic	Menacing
Mindful	Misguided	Moody	Morose
Mortified	Mournful	Muddled	Mystified
Nagged	Nihilistic	Open	Oppressed
Outcast	Overcome	Overjoyed	Overloaded
Overprotective	Panicked	Paranoid	Pathetic
Perplexed	Pessimistic	Petty	Piteous
Pitiful	Placid	Polarized	Preoccupied
Pressured	Prideful	Resigned	Revitalized
Righteous	Rigid	Rueful	Ruthless
Saddened	Sanctimonious	Sarcastic	Satirical
Scandalized	Scattered	Self-defeating	Self-deprecating
Self-destructive	Self-doubting	Self-loathing	Self-pitying
Servile	Shaken	Shattered	Silenced
Sinister	Slighted	Smoldering	Solemn
Somber	Spent	Stagnant	Startled
Stifled	Stimulated	Stoic	Subdued
Subjugated	Sullen	Sunken	Sycophantic
Taunted	Tearful	Tense	Terrified

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Timid	Torn	Toxic	Tranquil
Trapped	Trembling	Troubled	Turbulent
Twisted	Uncertain	Unfulfilled	Ungrounded
Uninspired	Unlovable	Unmotivated	Unnerved
Unraveled	Unsettled	Unstable	Unwilling
Useless	Vacuous	Volatile	Weary
Wistful	Withdrawn	Woeful	Wretched

Level 4 — Advanced (377 Emotions)

Deep nuance — clinical-level vocabulary for therapists, counselors, and advanced practitioners

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Abashment	Aberrant	Abjectness	Abnegative
Abrasiveness	Abysmal	Acerbic	Acerbity
Acquiescence	Acrimoniousness	Adversarial	Affability
Affirmation	Aggrandizing	Aggression	Agitation
Alarm	Alarmist	Alertness	Alienating
Aloofness	Antagonistic	Apathetic	Apologetic
Appreciative	Apprehensiveness	Argumentative	Armored
Artless	Asceticism	Aspersions	Aspiration
Astonishment	Baffled	Baiting	Balefulness
Banality	Bashfulness	Bellicosity	Beseeching
Besmirched	Biased	Bitterness	Blameful
Blighted	Blundering	Boastful	Bombast
Brashness	Breakable	Brittle	Broken
Bruised	Burning	Calculating	Callousness
Cantankerousness	Carelessness	Caustic	Chagrin
Cheerlessness	Clamoring	Claustrophobia	Clinging
Coercion	Coercive	Combative	Compelled

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Complacency	Compulsion	Compulsiveness	Condescension
Conflict	Confrontational	Constriction	Contemptible
Contentious	Cordiality	Corrosion	Corruption
Covetous	Cowardice	Culpability	Cunning
Cursed	Cynicism	Dauntlessness	Deadened
Debased	Debasement	Deceit	Deceitful
Defensiveness	Deflated	Dejectedness	Delirium
Deluded	Demanding	Demoralization	Denied
Dependent	Depravity	Derailed	Deranged
Desolation	Despairing	Detachment	Devotion
Diffidence	Dignity	Discarded	Disconcertment
Disheartenment	Disillusionment	Disorientation	Disowned
Disquiet	Dissatisfaction	Dissociation	Distortion
Distraughtness	Distrust	Divided	Dolefulness
Dolour	Dominance	Domineering	Doomed
Duplicity	Earnestness	Eccentricity	Elation
Embattled	Embitterment	Embroided	Empathy
Emptied	Encaged	Encumbrance	Ennui
Enslaved	Erraticism	Estrangement	Euphoria
Exasperation	Excoriation	Exhilaration	Exuberance
Famished	Fanaticism	Fatalism	Fatalistic
Fearlessness	Fermented	Feroceness	Ferocity
Fervidity	Fervor	Fixated	Fixation
Flaccidity	Flagrancy	Flightiness	Flooded
Forlornness	Fractured	Frenzy	Frustration
Fulmination	Furtiveness	Futility	Galvanization
Gaslit	Gloom	Goaded	Gratification
Greediness	Grievousness	Grimness	Groundless
Grudging	Guilt	Harboring	Harrowing

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Haughty	Haunting	Heartbreak	Heartlessness
Heedlessness	Helplessness	Hollowness	Hostility
Hubris	Humility	Hypersensitivity	Hysterical
Impatience	Impelled	Implacability	Impotence
Impulsive	Impulsiveness	Incoherence	Inconstancy
Indecisiveness	Indignation	Ineffectiveness	Inexorableness
Infatuation	Infirmity	Inflamed	Infuriation
Ingratitude	Inhibition	Insecurity	Insidiousness
Intensity	Intimidation	Intractableness	Intransigence
Introspection	Invalidation	Irascibility	Irresoluteness
Irresponsibility	Irritability	Jadedness	Jealousy
Jitteriness	Joylessness	Jumpiness	Keenness
Lachrymosity	Languidness	Languor	Lassitude
Laxity	Laxness	Leeriness	Lethargy
Listlessness	Lividity	Loathing	Loftiness
Loneliness	Lugubriousness	Lustfulness	Malevolence
Mania	Marginalization	Martyrdom	Masochism
Meanness	Melancholia	Menace	Mercilessness
Miserableness	Moodiness	Moroseness	Mortification
Mournfulness	Murkiness	Mystification	Narcissism
Nefariousness	Negativism	Nihilism	Numbness
Obduracy	Obstinacy	Obtuseness	Oppression
Overprotectiveness	Pandemonium	Paranoia	Passiveness
Passivity	Peevishness	Perplexity	Pessimism
Pettiness	Petulance	Pitifulness	Placidity
Plaintiveness	Polarization	Pomposity	Possessiveness
Preoccupation	Pressure	Pretentiousness	Pride
Priggishness	Profligacy	Pugnacity	Pushiness
Querulousness	Rage	Rancor	Rapacity

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Recklessness	Reclusiveness	Recrimination	Reflexive anger
Regret	Remorse	Repressiveness	Repugnance
Resentfulness	Resignation	Restlessness	Revulsion
Rigidity	Rigidness	Ruthlessness	Sadness
Sanctimoniousness	Sanctimony	Sarcasm	Savageness
Scorn	Self-condemnation	Self-contempt	Self-defeat
Self-destruction	Self-doubt	Self-pity	Selfishness
Servility	Shamelessness	Shrillness	Sinisterness
Slightedness	Slothfulness	Smugness	Solemnity
Somberness	Sorrowfulness	Spitefulness	Stagnation
Stoicism	Stridency	Subjugation	Submission
Sullenness	Surliness	Sycophancy	Tactlessness
Taunting	Tenacity	Tenseness	Terror
Timidity	Toxicity	Tranquility	Truculence
Turbulence	Unapologetic	Uncertainty	Unfulfillment
Ungroundedness	Unmotivation	Unnervement	Unsettledness
Unyieldingness	Vacuousness	Vengefulness	Venomousness
Viciousness	Vindictiveness	Volatility	Voraciousness
Wantonness	Weariness	Willfulness	Wistfulness
Wretchedness			

Level 5 — Master (463 Emotions)

Rare, literary, and clinical-academic emotions — the ultimate emotional fluency challenge

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Aberrance	Abience	Abjection	Abnegation
Aboulia	Absolution	Abyss	Acatalepsy
Acedia	Adumbration	Adynamia	Aesthesia
Affective blunting	Affectlessness	Afflatus	Agape

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Agathism	Aggrieved calm	Agnosia	Agonism
Agonizing calm	Agoraphobia	Akathisia	Akinesia
Akrasia	Alexithymia	Algolagnia	Alienated joy
Alienation	Alloesthesia	Allotriophagy	Altercation
Ambiguous loss	Ambiguousness	Amelancholy	Amelioration
Amity	Amnesia of joy	Amnesic grief	Amorphousness
Anaclitic	Anaclitism	Anaesthesia of feeling	Anagnorisis
Anagnorism	Analgesia	Analgia	Anamnesis
Anamorphosis	Anelectric	Anempathy	Anger of innocence
Anguished acceptance	Anguished peace	Anhedonia	Animus
Anodyne	Anomic despair	Anomic grief	Anomie
Anonymity grief	Anthropophobia	Anticipated grief	Anticipatory anxiety
Antinomianism	Antithetical joy	Apathy	Aphasia
Apophenia	Apostasy	Approbation	Arcadian contentment
Arcane sorrow	Aridity	Arrested development	Arrested grief
Arrhythmia of mood	Artifice	Asemantic grief	Ashamed anguish
Ashamed laughter	Aspirational grief	Asthenia	Ataraxia
Atavistic fear	Ataxia	Atemporal grief	Athymia
Atomic loneliness	Atonement	Atrocity fatigue	Atrophied hope
Attenuated grief	Attunement	Autognosis	Automatism
Avolition	Aweful	Awestruck grief	Bare life
Basilisk stare	Bathos	Bathophobia	Beatific suffering
Beatification	Becalmed grief	Bedevilment	Begrudged joy
Beguilement	Beholden shame	Beleaguered hope	Beleaguerment

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Benignity	Betrayal trauma	Bewilderment	Bifurcated self
Biliousness	Bitter nostalgia	Blighted hope	Bliss
Blockaded joy	Bloodlust	Bravado	Bruised ego
Brutishness	Burdened lightness	Cadence of loss	Camaraderie
Captiousness	Castigation	Catastrophic relief	Catharsis
Caustic wit	Cavalier attitude	Celerity	Ceraunophilia
Chronic emptiness	Circumscribed grief	Clemency	Clinical grief
Coerced compliance	Cognizance	Cohesion	Cold emptiness
Collective trauma	Collusion	Commiseration	Compassion collapse
Compassion fatigue	Complicated grief	Compulsive mourning	Compunctious
Conceit	Conciliation	Conditioned shame	Confabulation
Confounded grief	Confoundedness	Congruence	Consternation
Contemptibleness	Contentedness	Contriteness	Convalescence
Corporeality	Corrupted joy	Craving oblivion	Crestfallen
Crystallized grief	Culpable grief	Dark elation	Darkness
Dead calm	Death wish	Debilitation	Declension
Decrepitude	Deep longing	Deferred grief	Defiance
Deflated hope	Deflation	Dehumanization	Deliriousness
Delusion	Denied grief	Depth of sorrow	Derangement
Derived shame	Desensitization	Diffuse anger	Diffuse anxiety
Diffuse dread	Diffuse grief	Disaffection	Discombobulation
Discomfiture	Disenfranchised grief	Disfavor	Displaced anger
Displaced grief	Displaced shame	Dissonance	Dissonant joy
Distillation of pain	Dolce far niente	Dolor	Dormant grief

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Dual grief	Duende	Dysphoria	Dysthymia
Earned shame	Ebullience	Echoed trauma	Echolalia
Edginess	Ego dissolution	Elegy	Embitteredness
Embodied fear	Embodied grief	Embodied shame	Emotional blunting
Emotional dysregulation	Emotional flooding	Emotional hijacking	Emotional incontinence
Emotional paralysis	Emotional residue	Emotional vertigo	Empathic distress
Empathic resonance	Encapsulated grief	Endured suffering	Ennui profonde
Epiphanic joy	Equanimity	Ethereal sadness	Euphoric dysphoria
Evangelical fervor	Exaltation	Execration	Exhausted grief
Exhaustion of hope	Existential angst	Existential dread	Existential emptiness
Existential fatigue	Existential loss	Existential shame	Existential vertigo
Expectancy	Extended mourning	Externalized shame	Faintheartedness
Fear of feeling	Fear of hope	Feigned contentment	Festering resentment
Fidelity	Fierce love	Fragmented self	Frisson
Frozen grief	Fugue	Generativity	Ghost pain
Gnosis	Grandiosity	Grief intolerance	Grief numbness
Grief paralysis	Grief waves	Grief weight	Grounding
Guile	Guilt trip	Hallowing	Helpless rage
Hidden grief	Hidden shame	Hollow victory	Homesickness
Hopeless love	Horror vacui	Humiliated fury	Hypocrisy
Idealization	Ignominy	Impassivity	Implosion
Impunity	Inanity	Incongruence	Indoctrination

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Ineffability	Infantilization	Inherited trauma	Insidious resentment
Integrated grief	Interconnectedness	Interrupted grief	Intoxication
Invisible grief	Invulnerability	Isolated grief	Jolt of recognition
Kenopsia	Languishment	Latent rage	Layered grief
Learned helplessness	Levity	Liberation	Liminality
Lingering grief	Locked grief	Lonesome	Longing for oblivion
Loss of agency	Loss of self	Lucidity	Malaise
Malignant shame	Manipulative love	Memento mori	Meta-emotion
Mindlessness	Misalignment	Moral distress	Moral injury
Moral outrage	Mourning	Muted joy	Nagging doubt
Nascent hope	Neurotic guilt	Nocebo effect	Nostalgia for pain
Numbing	Objectification	Obsessive longing	Oppressive calm
Overcorrection	Overextension	Pangs of conscience	Passive aggression
Passive despair	Pathological grief	Pathos	Penitence
Persistent shame	Pervasive dread	Phantom grief	Pining
Pity	Placation	Preemptive grief	Pretense
Primal fear	Profound joy	Profound sadness	Projection
Prolonged grief	Psychic numbing	Psychic pain	Purposelessness
Quiet anguish	Quiet defiance	Quiet despair	Quiet joy
Rage blackout	Rapture	Ravaging guilt	Raw grief
Reactive attachment	Reactive depression	Recursive grief	Redemptive suffering
Relentless sadness	Remorseful hope	Renunciation	Repressed anger
Repression	Resentful compliance	Resilience	Righteous indignation

EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION	EMOTION
Ritualistic grief	Romanticized pain	Rueful acceptance	Rupture
Sacred grief	Schadenfreude	Scrupulosity	Sehnsucht
Self-abnegation	Self-annihilation	Self-flagellation	Self-immolation
Self-recrimination	Self-reproach	Self-sabotage	Senescence
Serenity	Shame spiral	Shame storm	Simmering rage
Soul fatigue	Spiritual desolation	Spiritual dryness	Stagnant grief
Stigmatized shame	Stoic grief	Sublimation	Superego punishment
Suppressed joy	Surrender	Sustained anguish	Sweet sadness
Tenderness	Thanatos	The void	Torment
Toxic positivity	Tragic hope	Transcendence	Transformative pain
Transient joy	Transmuted anger	Unacknowledged grief	Unassuaged grief
Uncontained anger	Undefined sadness	Unearned guilt	Unexpressed anger
Unfocused anxiety	Ungrieved loss	Unhealed wound	Uninhibited joy
Unnamed dread	Unprocessed grief	Unresolved grief	Unspoken despair
Unspoken fear	Untethered joy	Vainglory	Vanity
Veiled aggression	Veiled despair	Vigil	Visceral fear
Vitriolic rage	Vulnerability	Warfare within	Weight of shame
Wild grief	Willful blindness	Withering shame	Wonder
Wounded pride	Yielding sorrow	Zeal without peace	

About This Library

The Fires Within Master Emotion Library is the most comprehensive emotion taxonomy developed for addiction recovery and behavioral health. With 1,348 globally verified, non-duplicated emotions across five proficiency levels, this system provides the clinical vocabulary needed to identify, name, and navigate the emotional Build-Up phase of the Behavioral Cycle before destructive behavior occurs.

Every emotion in this library is unique — no word appears more than once across all five levels. This verified taxonomy has been globally deduplicated and represents the authoritative edition of The Fires Within Emotion Library.

Co-authored by Ray and Konseki · The Fires Within

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APPENDIX 2 – Additional Resources

This appendix provides resources, tools, and support organizations to assist you in your recovery journey. These resources complement the practices and principles discussed throughout *The Fires Within™*.

OUR WEBSITES & ONLINE RESOURCES

The Fires Within™ Official Website

the-fires-within.com

Official website with resources, updates, and materials related to this book.

Emotional Awareness Flip Cards

Available at: the-fires-within.com

Physical and digital flip cards designed for teaching children (and adults) to identify, name, and express emotions. Ideal for parents, teachers, therapists, and group facilitators. Cards include emotion names, definitions, facial expressions, and body sensations.

Interactive Emotional Awareness Games

the-fires-within.com/games

Free online games for learning emotional awareness:

- Emotion identification games
- Feeling faces matching
- Emotion-to-definition challenges
- Pleasant vs. unpleasant sorting
- Drag-and-drop emotion categories

Suitable for children, teens, adults, families, classrooms, and therapy groups.

Coming Soon: The Guido Behavior Agent

the-fires-within.com

Guido is your personal AI-powered recovery companion. Through intelligent check-ins—both random and scheduled—Guido monitors your emotional state, detects cycle patterns in real time, and provides immediate feedback and intervention suggestions before destructive behaviors occur. Using voice or text input, Guido learns your unique triggers and patterns, issuing encouragement when you're on track and Red Flag warnings when elevated risk is detected. Daily summary reports track your emotional arc, cycle stage progression, and recovery milestones. Available on smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, and desktops.

CRISIS & IMMEDIATE SUPPORT

If you are in crisis, reach out immediately. These services are available 24/7:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

988 (call or text)

Free, confidential support for people in distress or crisis.

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741

Free 24/7 crisis support via text message.

SAMHSA National Helpline

1-800-662-4357

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral and information service.

12-STEP PROGRAMS

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

aa.org

Worldwide fellowship for people recovering from alcohol addiction.

Narcotics Anonymous (NA)

na.org

Recovery program for people struggling with drug addiction.

Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)

saa-recovery.org

12-Step fellowship for people recovering from sexual addiction.

Sexaholics Anonymous (SA)

sa.org

Fellowship for those who want to stop sexually self-destructive behavior.

Overeaters Anonymous (OA)

oa.org

Recovery from compulsive eating and food-related issues.

Gamblers Anonymous (GA)

gamblersanonymous.org

Fellowship for compulsive gamblers.

Al-Anon / Alateen

al-anon.org

Support for families and friends of alcoholics.

FINDING PROFESSIONAL HELP EMDR International Association (EMDRIA)

emdria.org

Find certified EMDR therapists specializing in trauma treatment.

Psychology Today Therapist Finder

psychologytoday.com/us/therapists

Search for therapists by location, specialty, insurance, and treatment approach.

SAMHSA Treatment Locator

findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Find mental health and substance abuse treatment facilities.

National Association of Cognitive Behavioral Therapists

nacbt.org

Directory of CBT-trained therapists.

MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS RESOURCES

Insight Timer

insighttimer.com

Free guided meditations, talks, and music.

Headspace

headspace.com

Meditation and mindfulness app (subscription-based).

Calm

calm.com

Meditation, sleep stories, breathing exercises.

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center

marc.ucla.edu

Free guided meditations and mindfulness resources.

APPENDIX 3 – Reasons for Change Worksheet

This is the most important worksheet in the book.

Not because it's the most clinically sophisticated, or the most complex, or the most novel. It's the simplest. It's important because the reasons you write down here are the anchor every other tool in this book reaches for when you're in the middle of a Build-Up and your old mind is loud.

Use it this way: fill it out before you start Chapter 1. Then come back to it. Mark it up. Add rows. Strike through reasons that no longer fit and add new ones that do. Date your additions so you can see how your own thinking has changed. There are no wrong answers, and there is no “finished” version. This worksheet is a living document. It grows with you.

If you ever wonder *why* you started this work — turn here.

The Worksheet – Reasons for Change

Reason	Why It Matters to Me	What I Will Gain	What I Will Lose If I Don't

--	--	--	--

Date filled in: _____ *Date(s) last reviewed:* _____

Come back to this page often. The reasons you write here are the ones you'll forget first when the cycle returns.

RECOMMENDED READING

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- ***Feeling Good*** by David Burns
- ***Mind Over Mood*** by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky
- ***The Cognitive Behavioral Workbook for Depression*** by William Knaus

Trauma & EMDR

- ***The Body Keeps the Score*** by Bessel van der Kolk
- ***Getting Past Your Past*** by Francine Shapiro
- ***Waking the Tiger*** by Peter Levine

Inner Child Work

- ***Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child*** by John Bradshaw
- ***Self-Therapy*** by Jay Earley (Internal Family Systems)

Zen , Buddhism & Mindfulness

- ***Wherever You Go, There You Are*** by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- ***The Miracle of Mindfulness*** by Thich Nhat Hanh
- ***Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*** by Shunryu Suzuki
- ***Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*** by Thich Nhat Hanh
- ***The Way of the Bodhisattva*** by Shantideva
- ***Reconciliation: Healing the Inner Child*** by Thich Nhat Hanh
- ***Seeking Sanity: How to Cultivate Peace, Happiness, and Wellbeing in a World Gone Wild*** by Joseph DeNicholas

12-Step & Recovery

- ***Alcoholics Anonymous*** (The Big Book)

- ***Out of the Shadows*** by Patrick Carnes
- ***In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*** by Gabor Maté

Shame & Vulnerability

- ***The Gifts of Imperfection*** by Brené Brown
- ***Healing the Shame That Binds You*** by John Bradshaw

APPS & DIGITAL TOOLS

Recovery Support Apps

- I Am Sober - Track sobriety, connect with community
- Nomo - Sobriety clocks and accountability
- Sober Grid - Social network for recovery
- Meeting Guide (AA) - Find local AA meetings

Mood & Emotion Tracking

- Daylio - Mood tracking without writing
- Moodpath - Depression & anxiety screening
- How We Feel - Emotion tracking backed by science

Breathing & Relaxation

- Breathwrk - Guided breathing exercises
- Prana Breath - Customizable breathing patterns
- Breethe - Meditation and sleep

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

SMART Recovery

smartrecovery.org

Science-based alternative to 12-Step programs.

Refuge Recovery

refugerecovery.org

Buddhist-based addiction recovery program.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-7233 or thehotline.org

24/7 confidential support for victims of domestic violence.

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)

1-800-656-4673 or rainn.org

Sexual assault hotline and resources.

UPDATING THIS RESOURCE LIST

Resources, websites, and contact information change over time. For the most current version of this resource list, visit:

the-fires-within.com/resources

If you find a broken link or have a resource to suggest, please contact us through the website.

REFERENCES

The following scientific research and scholarly works support the concepts and techniques presented in *The Fires Within*. References are organized by topic area corresponding to major chapters in the book.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Chapter 13 presents CBT principles, cognitive distortions, and therapeutic techniques based on the following foundational and contemporary research:

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- Burns, D. D. (1980). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
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- Knaus, W. J. (2012). *The cognitive behavioral workbook for depression: A step-by-step program* (2nd ed.). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Leahy, R. L. (2017). *Cognitive therapy techniques: A practitioner's guide* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Zen & Buddhist Teachings

Chapter 14 draws upon traditional Buddhist texts and contemporary Zen teachers to present mindfulness, acceptance, and spiritual practices for recovery:

- Bodhi*, B. (Trans.). (2000). *The connected discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications. [Contains the Sallatha Sutta (Second Arrow teaching), SN 36.6]
- Chödrön, P. (1997). *When things fall apart: Heart advice for difficult times*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Chödrön, P. (2001). *The places that scare you: A guide to fearlessness in difficult times*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Goldstein, J., & Kornfield, J. (1987). *Seeking the heart of wisdom: The path of insight meditation*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
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- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.
- Rahula, W. (1974). *What the Buddha taught* (2nd ed.). New York: Grove Press.
- Suzuki, S. (1970). *Zen mind, beginner's mind*. New York: Weatherhill.

12-Step Programs & Recovery Community

Chapter 15 presents the 12-Step model with integration of CBT and Zen principles, drawing from foundational texts and contemporary research on fellowship-based recovery:

- Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous: The story of how many thousands of men and women have recovered from alcoholism* (4th ed.). New York: Author. [The Big Book]
- Carnes, P. (2001). *Out of the shadows: Understanding sexual addiction* (3rd ed.). Center City, MN: Hazelden.
- Carnes, P. (2015). *Facing the shadow: Starting sexual and relationship recovery* (2nd ed.). Carefree, AZ: Gentle Path Press.

- Kelly, J. F., & Yeterian, J. D. (2011). The role of mutual-help groups in extending the framework of treatment. *Alcohol Research & Health*, 33(4), 350-355.
- Kurtz, E. (1979). *Not-God: A history of Alcoholics Anonymous*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.
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Vagus Nerve, Deep Breathing & Physiological Relaxation

Chapter 12 discusses the vagus nerve, diaphragmatic breathing, and the physiological mechanisms of relaxation, supported by the following neuroscience and clinical research:

- Fincham, G. W., Strauss, C., Montero-Marin, J., & Cavanagh, K. (2023). Effect of breathwork on stress and mental health: A meta-analysis of randomized-controlled trials. *Scientific Reports*, 13, 432. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-27247-y>
- Gerritsen, R. J. S., & Band, G. P. H. (2018). Breath of life: The respiratory vagal stimulation model of contemplative activity. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 12, 397. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00397>
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- Koopman, F. A., et al. (2016). Vagus nerve stimulation inhibits cytokine production and attenuates disease severity in rheumatoid arthritis.

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- Russo, M. A., Santarelli, D. M., & O'Rourke, D. (2017). The physiological effects of slow breathing in the healthy human. *Breathe*, 13(4), 298-309. <https://doi.org/10.1183/20734735.009817>

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Trauma & EMDR

Chapter 9 discusses trauma processing and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) as referenced in the book's discussion of inner child work and healing:

- Levine, P. A. (1997). *Waking the tiger: Healing trauma*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Shapiro, F. (2012). *Getting past your past: Take control of your life with self-help techniques from EMDR therapy*. New York: Rodale Books.
- van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York: Viking.

Inner Child Work & Shame

Chapters 9 and 10 address inner child healing, shame, and self-compassion, drawing from the following therapeutic approaches:

- Bradshaw, J. (1988). *Healing the shame that binds you*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications.
- Bradshaw, J. (1990). *Homecoming: Reclaiming and championing your inner child*. New York: Bantam Books.

Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.

Earley, J. (2009). *Self-therapy: A step-by-step guide to creating wholeness and healing your inner child using IFS, a new, cutting-edge psychotherapy*. Larkspur, CA: Pattern System Books.

Additional Resources

For updated references, additional research citations, and supplementary reading recommendations, visit:

the-fires-within.com/references

This online resource is regularly updated to reflect new research on addiction treatment, cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness practices, and recovery approaches.

DISCLAIMERS

MEDICAL AND PROFESSIONAL DISCLAIMER

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This book references the 12-Step model and various 12-Step fellowships. The authors are not affiliated with or endorsed by Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, or any other 12-Step organization. The 12-Step principles discussed are the authors' interpretations and applications based on their personal recovery experience.

ANONYMITY NOTICE

The authors write under pen names to protect their own anonymity and that of others in recovery. All stories and examples in this book have been modified to protect the identity and privacy of individuals.

GLOSSARY

Acting Out – The phase of the addiction cycle where compulsive behavior is carried out, often as a response to emotional buildup.

Addiction – A chronic, relapsing condition where a person continues a compulsive behavior despite harmful consequences. Can involve substances or behaviors.

Aggressive Communication – A communication style that asserts one's needs by overpowering, blaming, or controlling others. Demands rather than asks; ignores others' rights and feelings.

All-or-Nothing Thinking – A cognitive distortion where situations are seen in extremes — perfect or failure, all-good or all-bad — with no middle ground.

Amends – A key concept in 12-Step recovery involving the acknowledgment and repair of harm caused to others.

Assertive Communication – A balanced communication style that expresses one's needs, feelings, and limits clearly and respectfully — without aggression or passivity. The healthiest of the four styles.

Behavioral Cycle – The four-phase pattern at the heart of this book: Build-Up → Acting Out → Justification → Pretend Normal, then back to Build-Up. Recovery means breaking the cycle before Acting Out.

Bodhisattva – In Buddhism, a being who postpones their own enlightenment to help others awaken; an ideal of compassionate action.

Boundaries – Limits we set around our time, energy, body, and emotions to protect our well-being and define healthy relationships.

Build-Up – The initial phase of the Behavioral/addiction cycle is characterized by accumulating stress, resentment, and unresolved emotions.

Catastrophizing – A cognitive distortion of jumping to the worst-case outcome, or treating a small setback as a complete disaster.

CBT (Cognitive Behavior Therapy) – A therapeutic approach focused on identifying and changing distorted thought patterns that drive destructive behaviors.

Cognitive Dissonance – The mental discomfort of holding two conflicting beliefs, values, or behaviors at the same time. Often drives the Justification phase of the Behavioral Cycle.

Cognitive Distortion – Inaccurate or biased ways of thinking that fuel painful emotions and unhelpful behaviors. CBT works by identifying and reframing them.

Compulsive Behavior – Repetitive actions a person feels driven to perform despite knowing they cause harm — a hallmark of the Acting Out phase.

Dharma – In Buddhism, the teachings of the Buddha; the truth or law that governs the universe.

Dissociation – A psychological detachment from one's thoughts, feelings, surroundings, or sense of identity, often as a response to overwhelming stress or trauma.

Dukkha – A core Buddhist concept usually translated as “suffering” or “unsatisfactoriness” — the fundamental unease that drives the search for awakening.

Eightfold Path – The Buddhist path to ending suffering, comprising right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

Fellowship – In 12-Step recovery, the community of people in recovery who support each other's sobriety and growth.

Four Noble Truths – The foundational teaching of Buddhism: (1) suffering exists, (2) suffering has a cause, (3) suffering can end, (4) the Eightfold Path is the way.

Higher Power – In 12-Step recovery, a force greater than yourself — God, nature, the group, or any source of meaning — that supports surrender and growth.

Inner Child – The psychological concept of a childlike aspect within the subconscious, often carrying unresolved trauma from early life.

Intervention – In recovery, an intentional action — by oneself, a Guardian Ring member, or a professional — that interrupts the Behavioral Cycle before Acting Out. The core practice this book teaches.

Justification – The phase of the addiction cycle where the individual rationalizes or minimizes their acting-out behavior.

Mantra – A word, phrase, or sound repeated as a focus for meditation or as an affirmation.

Metta – A Buddhist meditation practice of loving-kindness, sending wishes of well-being to oneself and others.

Mindfulness – The practice of maintaining non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the present moment.

Passive-Aggressive Communication – Expressing anger or resentment indirectly — through silence, sarcasm, sabotage, or “forgotten” responsibilities — rather than openly. A common pattern in compulsive behavior.

People-Pleasing – A pattern of prioritizing others' approval over one's own needs and values, often rooted in fear of rejection.

Pretend Normal – The phase of the addiction cycle where the individual puts on a mask of normalcy to hide their compulsive behaviors.

PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) – A condition where the nervous system remains stuck in trauma-response patterns long after a traumatic event.

Radical Acceptance – Fully accepting reality as it is in this moment, rather than fighting it. Different from approval — you can accept what is while still working to change it.

Relapse – A full return to compulsive behavior after a period of recovery; the cycle completes itself.

Sangha – A Buddhist community of practitioners who support each other on the path of practice.

Self-Compassion – Treating yourself with the same kindness you'd offer a struggling friend; an antidote to self-criticism and shame.

Shame – A painful feeling of being fundamentally unworthy or “bad” — distinct from guilt, which is a feeling of being bad about a specific action.

Slip – A short, often single-occurrence return to compulsive behavior that doesn't progress to a full relapse — a wake-up signal.

Somatic – Relating to the body; somatic experiencing is a therapeutic approach that addresses trauma stored in the body.

Spiritual Awakening – A profound shift in awareness or values that often emerges through Step Work, the recognized goal of the Twelfth Step.

Sponsor – An experienced member of a 12-Step fellowship who guides a newer member through the steps of recovery.

Surrender – Letting go of the illusion of control; in 12-Step recovery, the foundational act of admitting powerlessness over one's behavior.

Trauma – Lasting emotional, physical, and physiological effects of an overwhelming event or pattern of events; can be acute (single event) or complex (repeated).

Trigger – An internal or external stimulus that activates emotional responses and may initiate the addiction cycle.

Victim Empathy – The capacity to understand and feel the impact of one's harmful behaviors on others; a key component of accountability in recovery.

White-Knuckling – Sustaining sobriety through sheer willpower and resistance, without addressing the underlying emotions or behavior patterns. Effortful and unstable.

Zazen – Seated Zen meditation; the central practice of Zen Buddhism involving stillness, breath awareness, and direct observation of the mind.

Zen – A school of Mahayana Buddhism emphasizing meditation, direct experience, and insight into one's true nature.

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TBD

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From Ray:

Every time I say to my wife, “I have an idea”, she holds her breath and says, “Now what?” Well, this book was one of those “Now What’s?”, and she was with me all the way. She always inspired me and made me feel loved, even though some of our traveled roads were quite bumpy. She took many long trips to my therapy center every weekend for seven years. That’s all-in love: for better or worse. I love you and thank you for loving me. I thank my twin brother and his family for loving and supporting me in my darkest years; my older brother for supporting me in my recovery. I thank my therapists and group members for their hard-to-hear, often unwelcome advice, which helped me become a new person, to see my true self, and to find freedom from unhealthy behaviors. I want to thank my mother and father, long deceased, for raising me, the best they could. Family support is so important to me in recovery. I love you all.

I especially want to thank Konseki for his friendship in the foxhole, when shame and grief were attacking me daily. His friendship helped me bear the unbearable. He was always there to talk to, to comfort me, to support me, to listen without judgment. Our friendship will never end.

And to my strong Christian faith in Jesus, who kept me strong going through the worst time in my life. He gave me strength when I was weak, forgiveness when I was guilty, and hope when I was hopeless.

From Konseki:

Many folks have helped me along the way; too many to fully acknowledge. But, I'll try...

To all the therapists who have worked with me throughout the years: Thank you. Your feedback shows up throughout these pages.

To all the men and women who sat through various group sessions with me: the fruits of our labor are painted throughout as well.

To my Zen teachers - the volunteers who showed up from the Heart Circle *Sangha* (especially Joan, Mark, Linda, & Carl); the late Jeffrey S. from the SFZC; Sondra and Phap Lan from the BAUS; and Gary A. from the Ratna Peace Initiative, who continues to walk my Path with me today - thank you all for your wisdom and guiding me in the right direction. It has been an interesting journey to say the least.

To all the people who have been caught in the wake of my addictive and compulsive behaviors: I am truly sorry. My vow to you all is to continue through the rest of my life, leaving as small a harmful footprint as I possibly can.

To my brothers, Rich and Jim: we were raised right. I just made some very poor choices along the way, and I apologize for all the pain and suffering I caused you all, especially to our mom (may she rest in peace). My biggest regret is letting my destructive behaviors get in the way when she needed me the most. Hopefully, she is smiling down on the person I have evolved into today.

To my dear friends, Fred L., Patti B, Billy R, Dan K., Frank V., Mike M., Gary G., Kenny B., Mark M., and Tim I.: thank you for being there and supporting me through thick and thin.

And to my dear friend Ray and his wonderful wife: Thank you for encouraging me to write my story down to share with those out there still struggling with addictive and compulsive behaviors, in hopes that it might help them to make better choices. And thank you for introducing me to Claude. What a workhorse it has turned out to be. This book would have taken years to make without it.

To all of you, I send a Zen Buddhist meditation: May you be happy. May you be safe. May you be in good health and spirits. May you walk through life with ease.

With a bow,

Konseki

Together:

This book is for adult men and women. Children must seek advice from their parents, a trusted family member, a school, or a professional therapist, to not make this journey alone.

We acknowledge the thousands who came before us—those who built the fellowships, developed the therapies, practiced the teachings, gave us the unwelcome but necessary advice in groups, and proved that recovery is possible. We stand on their shoulders.

To everyone who reads this book: Thank you for trusting us with your time and healing. We wrote this for you. May it serve you well.

And finally: To those still suffering in isolation, believing they are alone. You are not. We were once you. There is hope. There is a path. There is freedom.

This book was written with the assistance of Claude, an AI assistant created by Anthropic. Claude served as a collaborative writing partner—helping us organize, structure, and articulate years of recovery experience and wisdom. The insights, experiences, and teachings in these pages are authentically ours. Claude helped us present them in ways that best serve you, our readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ray

My mother and father divorced when my brothers and I were very young, but I knew they loved us children dearly! My dad and I loved building and fixing things growing up, which I still do today. I graduated from high school and college and worked in several high-tech industries. I served two years in the US Army in Africa, an amazing experience I cherish today. I was promoted to many high-level technical positions while always seeking others' approval to build my self-worth. I married an amazing wife while in my 20s and had wonderful children. Later in life, my needs were not being met, and I felt lonely and rejected, so I looked to others to meet them. That's where I went wrong. Looking back, I'm thankful I was arrested and received seven years of intense therapy that saved and changed my life. I won't be hurting the people I love anymore. I hope our book helps you learn about your emotions and how to express them in a healthy, safe way; and to recognize your Cognitive Behavioral Cycles (CBC), especially the buildup stage; so you can stop any hurtful behaviors before it's too late, so you can live a happy, safe, and loving life. No more victims, including yourself. You can make it happen. Why not start now?

I wish you the very best,

Ray

Konseki

Konseki has spent 30+ years involved with CBT to correct his addictive and destructive patterns, many of those years spent in a residential treatment center with intense group and individual therapy. He has been involved with the 12 Step Program, specifically SA, for 20+ years. And he has been studying and sharing his knowledge of Zen Buddhism for 15+ years. During that time, he has facilitated various support groups, including: Meditation and Mindfulness; Grief and Loss; Relapse Prevention; Victim Empathy; a 12 Step SLAA (Sex

and Love Addicts Anonymous) Group; and a Zen Buddhist Study Group. Over the years, he has developed a three-pronged approach to his recovery (CBT, Zen, 12 Step, and Mindfulness) that has helped him build a successful recovery lifestyle. This book started out as a letter to himself, of all he's been through and how he rose above it. Now that it is being shared, it is his hope that it will resonate with you as well and lead you to a path of freedom from addictive and compulsive behaviors. As the Buddha used to tell his students, "Check it out! See if it works for you. If not, move on to seek your answers elsewhere."

Together

Ray and Konseki met through recovery fellowships and discovered a shared vision: to create a comprehensive guide that integrates the best of cognitive therapy, Zen practice, 12-Step wisdom, and mindfulness into a practical path for lasting recovery. *The Fires Within* is the result of their collaboration—a book that honors traditional approaches while offering contemporary tools for breaking the cycle of addiction.

They continue to work in recovery communities, practice meditation daily, and refine their understanding of what creates sustainable change. This book is their offering to anyone seeking freedom from compulsive behavior for men or women.

Connect with *The Fires Within*:

Website: the-fires-within.com

Resources: the-fires-within.com/resources

Games: the-fires-within.com/games

Email: info@the-fires-within.com

Do you ever feel like there are two of you?
The one who shows up at work, at church, at the dinner
table, and the one nobody sees,
the one running the script underneath.

Build-Up. Acting Out. Justification. Pretend Normal. Repeat.

The Fires Within names that script out loud—
then weaves *Cognitive Behavioral*
Therapy to see what drives the cycle.
Zen practice to be with the discomfort instad of fleeing it.
The Twelve Steps to walk the road with people
who've walked it before you.
Written by two men who lived inside
the cycle for decades
and finally found the way out.

A field guide for anyone tired of being two people.

