

A Step-by-Step Programme for Addiction

A compassionate 12-step pathway for substance and behavioural addictions

This programme is designed to help you understand an addictive or compulsive pattern, reduce harm and begin building more choice. It can be used with substance misuse, gaming, gambling, shopping, social media and other compulsive behaviours. You do not need to complete every step perfectly. Work through it at a pace that feels manageable.

Step 1 — Notice What Is Happening

Begin without judgement. Write down the behaviour or substance, when it happens, how long or how much, and what tends to happen immediately beforehand. The aim is not to prove that you are 'addicted'; it is to see the pattern clearly.

Reflection: What am I noticing that makes me want something to change?

Step 2 — Understand What It Does for You

Addictive patterns usually serve a purpose in the short term. They may soothe anxiety, create stimulation, numb emotional pain, provide escape, reduce loneliness or offer a sense of control. Understanding the need beneath the behaviour gives you more options for meeting that need.

Reflection: What feeling or situation am I trying to change when I reach for this?

Step 3 — Look at the Cost

Gently consider the impact on sleep, physical health, mood, relationships, work or study, money, self-care and self-respect. Include both immediate consequences and the things you may gradually be missing out on.

Reflection: What is this pattern giving me — and what is it taking away?

Step 4 — Make Safety the Priority

Some addictions involve immediate medical, financial or safeguarding risks. Avoid dangerous combinations of substances, do not drive while impaired, and seek professional advice before suddenly stopping alcohol, benzodiazepines or other substances where withdrawal may be dangerous. Put practical barriers around gambling, spending or other high-risk behaviours where needed.

Reflection: What could I change today to make the situation safer?

Step 5 — Identify Your Triggers

Triggers may be external — people, places, apps, money, time of day — or internal, such as rejection, boredom, anger, shame, exhaustion or sensory overload. A trigger is information, not failure.

Reflection: Which three situations most often lead into the behaviour?

Step 6 — Create a Pause

The goal is to widen the gap between urge and action. Try delaying for ten minutes, changing rooms, contacting somebody, drinking water, eating if needed, going outside, breathing slowly, or putting distance between yourself and access. An urge can be strong without having to become an instruction.

Reflection: What can I put between the urge and the action?

Step 7 — Build Replacement Supports

Removing a coping mechanism without replacing its function can leave a large gap. Build alternatives for regulation, stimulation, connection, achievement, comfort and rest. The replacement does not need to feel as powerful immediately; it needs to be available and repeatable.

Reflection: What else could meet even 10% of the need this behaviour currently meets?

Step 8 — Change the Environment

Make the unwanted behaviour less automatic and supportive choices easier. Remove saved payment details, use app limits or blocking tools, change routes, reduce access, avoid high-risk situations for a while, plan evenings, or ask a trusted person to help with practical safeguards.

Reflection: What can I change around me so I do not have to rely on willpower alone?

Step 9 — Bring in Other People

Addiction often grows in secrecy and isolation. Choose somebody safe and tell them what would genuinely help. Professional support may include a GP, therapist, specialist addiction service, financial support, peer support or another appropriate service.

Reflection: Who can know the truth about what I am dealing with?

Step 10 — Plan for Difficult Days

Recovery is rarely a perfectly straight line. Write a plan for cravings, slips and high-risk days before they happen. Include who to contact, where to go, what access to remove, what helps you regulate, and what would tell you that you need urgent professional help.

Reflection: What is my plan for the day when motivation is low and the urge is high?

Step 11 — Learn From a Slip, Don't Turn It Into a Collapse

A lapse does not erase progress. Once safe, look at what happened before it, what was missing from the plan and what could be changed next time. Shame often feeds the same cycle you are trying to leave.

Reflection: If this happens again, what information can I take from it rather than attacking myself?

Step 12 — Build a Life That Recovery Can Live In

Long-term change is about more than stopping a behaviour. Rebuild sleep, nutrition, meaningful activity, relationships, enjoyment, boundaries, identity and future plans. Recovery becomes more sustainable when life contains things worth being present for.

Reflection: What would I like to have more room for as this addiction takes up less space?

My Recovery Plan

Use this page to turn the programme into something personal and practical.

My strongest triggers	
What the addiction gives me in the short term	
What it is costing me	
My three safer alternatives	
People I can contact	
Changes I can make to my environment	
My plan for a high-risk day	
One reason I want change	

Important safety information

This programme is educational and is not a substitute for individual medical or psychological care. Physical dependence on alcohol, benzodiazepines and some other substances can make sudden withdrawal dangerous. Seek medical or specialist advice if dependence may be present. For collapse, seizure, severe breathing difficulty, chest pain, unconsciousness, suspected overdose or immediate danger, call 999 in the UK.

Progress can begin with one honest observation and one safer next step.