



The Definition of Insanity

This exercise explores the concept of repetitive patterns and cycles in our lives, particularly in the context of substance use and mental health but also in other life areas as well wherever this may apply. There's a quote unofficially attributed to Albert Einstein often referred to as "the definition of insanity" which you likely have heard before. That saying is:



We recognize that mental health and substance use as well as many other life challenges are intricate and unique to everyone. This quote, while catchy, doesn't capture the full complexity of what many of us go through. Our goal here is not to label or stigmatize but to understand the patterns and cycles in our lives and, more importantly, how breaking free from them can be a powerful part of personal growth and recovery.

Discussion: As a group, discuss how this definition of insanity, "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" might apply in the following life areas. Give some general examples, or if it applies, **give an example from your own life or experience.** (Examples provided in each box to help start)

Substance Use/Addiction – Ex: Repeating negative substance use behaviors with repeated consequences	Relationships – Ex: Repeating negative patterns of relationship behaviors and choices	Money – Ex: Always in bad shape financially due to poor financial decisions
Procrastination – Ex: Waiting and waiting repeatedly and then missing out on opportunities	Work/Career – Ex: Taking jobs that just aren't a good fit that repeatedly cause stress	Health – Ex: Maintaining habits that just aren't healthy that cause undesired health issues (Diet, sleep, etc.)
Associations – Ex: Repeating patterns of involvement with people who are negative influences.	Mental Health – Ex: Repeating unhealthy thinking patterns that trigger negative feelings and emotions or mood swings	Communication – Ex: Saying things or getting into conversations we later regret and not learning lesson (e.g. Gossip)
Boundaries – Ex: Repeatedly failing to say "no" or set boundaries with others and getting into undesirable situations later	Values/Morals – Ex: Making choices that we feel are wrong and then feeling guilty afterward (Lying, stealing, fighting, etc.)	Habits – There are many such as gambling, impulsivity (acting without thinking), isolating, internet scrolling, etc.
OTHER – Are there any other life areas or examples you can think of where this definition of insanity may apply?		



Some Reasons Behind Why People Repeat Negative Behaviors

Lack of Insight or Self Awareness – Sometimes a person may repeat a pattern of negative behaviors because of a failure to recognize a need to change, (aka “denial”). It is important to self-reflect and practice self-honesty to evaluate if certain behaviors are causing problems or limiting progress in our lives. We may even believe that something is pleasurable or even good for us, but this may be a wrong conclusion if this behavior is tied to consequences and negative outcomes. Often, excuse-making may come into play (rationalizing, justifying, minimizing, etc.) which can sustain negative behaviors and block self-awareness.

Group Discussion:

- Have you even had an experience where you repeated a negative behavior in your life, but you failed to recognize it?
- If so, what kinds of excuses did you make to yourself and others that kept the behavior going?
- What helped you to finally gain insight and self-awareness of your need to make changes?

Lack of motivation- Sometimes we may be fully aware of the need to change a behavior that we know is not good for us, but we just are not ready or motivated enough to do anything about it yet.

Group Discussion:

- Have you ever known in your heart that you needed to change something but struggled to build the motivation to make the changes (A good example is smoking. Most people who smoke cigarettes are aware that smoking is not good for them, but they may not be ready to quit yet)
- What kinds of things help build internal motivation to make positive changes and stick with it?

Lack of external motivation and support – There may be insight and an internal desire to stop a behavior, but it can be really difficult (if not impossible) to do it alone. Support and sources of external motivation can be essential in starting and maintaining positive lifestyle changes.

Group Discussion:

- What kinds of support and external motivators have helped you? (For example, support groups, friends, family, counselors, peer recovery coaches, etc.)
- How can you increase external motivation and support in your life to help with positive changes?

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Going forward – Choose a specific behavior that you want to change as the focus for the rest of this exercise. Look back at the categories from the opening exercise for ideas if you need to. (Substance Use, Relationships, Money, etc.). Then as a group complete the following sentences below:

- *One behavior that I want to work on changing (for the better) is....*
- **Insight** – *Right now I am aware that I need to change this because...*
- **Internal Motivation** – *I am motivated to make this change because...*
- **External Motivation** – *People who will help me to make this change are...*



Stop the Insanity!

Some guidelines, recommendations, and coping skills for breaking the cycle of repetitive negative behaviors:

Practice pausing – Before using any of the skills listed below, it is crucial to learn to pause, stop and think before acting. Just a few seconds of thinking can be the difference maker when it comes to avoiding moving forward with negative behavior. Of course, the longer the pause, the better the chances of a positive outcome.

Pause, take a deep breath, and think!

Don't wait until it's too late! – With most negative habits and behaviors there comes a point when stopping becomes extremely difficult and consequences just don't seem to matter anymore because the desire is just too strong. (For example, a person on a diet probably may say no to a piece of cake much easier before entering the kitchen as compared to the moment when there is a plate of cake right in front of them. It's easier to say no earlier in the process.) So, with this idea in mind, practice taking action earlier in the process rather than waiting until it may be too difficult.

Empower your imagination with feelings from the future – With practice, we can train our minds to really think ahead and imagine the outcome of negative behaviors before they happen. This involves actively imagining what it feels like later after our negative behavior is over (for example feelings of guilt, regret, disappointment, discouragement, stress, anxiety, etc.) *Imagine those feelings BEFORE we really experience them.*

Learn to stop telling and believing the self-lies – “Just this once”, “I'll get on track tomorrow” – Thoughts like these can be lies we tell ourselves as an excuse to give in to an urge. For example, a common story for people who return to smoking after a period of quitting happens when they listen to the thought “I'll just smoke this one and that's it”– For many people that one cigarette is all it takes to end up being a smoker again.

Mindful Thinking of Progress – A powerful coping skill is positive visualization of our all the gains we have made. What has been good about the changes you are making? Envision successful outcomes and positive experiences which can be a deterrent to moving forward with negative behavior. Use your brain and imagination to create a positive mental escape from stressors.

Put external motivators to use – Are there people who can help you? Call them. Schedule progress check-ins with your support system and people who care. If you are facing consequences such as legal charges or getting asked to leave home, or health concerns, use these for motivation.

One way to summarize the skills above is the three D's: Delay, Detract, Deter:

3D's – Delay, Detract, Deter - "Delay, Detract, Deter" are a set of coping skills designed to interrupt and prevent repetitive patterns of behavior. By incorporating "Delay, Detract, Deter" into daily practice, we can build a structured approach to breaking free from repetitive patterns. These coping skills empower us to introduce intentional pauses, shift their focus, and create deterrents, promoting mindfulness and the increased potential for positive change.

Delay - Wait before engaging in a habitual behavior or response.

- **Implementation:** When faced with the urge to engage in a repetitive pattern, consciously delay the action. This allows time for reflection and a break in the automatic response cycle.
- **Example:** Suppose someone is trying to break the habit of impulsively checking their phone every few minutes. Instead of immediately reaching for the phone, they could implement a delay by setting a rule to wait for at least five minutes before checking it. During this delay, they might take a few deep breaths and consider whether checking the phone is a truly necessary and mindful action.\



Detract - Shift focus away from the habitual behavior or thought pattern.

- **Implementation:** Engage in an alternative, healthier activity or thought process. This could involve redirecting attention to a positive interest, engaging in a brief positive mental exercise, or physically moving to a different environment.
- **Example:** Imagine an individual who tends to engage in negative self-talk during moments of stress. To detract from this pattern, they could keep a small sketchbook or journal nearby. When negative thoughts arise, they can redirect their focus by doodling or jotting down positive affirmations. Engaging in this creative distraction shifts their attention away from the negative thought pattern.

Deter - Create a deterrent or obstacle to discourage the continuation of the repetitive pattern.

- **Implementation:** Introduce barriers or strategies that make it more challenging to engage in the undesired behavior. This could involve setting up physical or mental roadblocks to disrupt the habitual cycle and encourage a more intentional and considered response.
- **Example:** Consider someone trying to deter the habit of mindlessly snacking on unhealthy foods. To create a deterrent, they might rearrange their kitchen so that healthier snacks are easily accessible, while less desirable options are placed in harder-to-reach places. Adding this physical obstacle makes it more inconvenient to engage in the habitual behavior, encouraging a more thoughtful choice.

Close out questions

What are some goals you can set to break negative patterns in your life and establish new positive ones?

What skills and strategies are you going to use from this discussion today to help make positive changes and achieve your goals?

