

# Applied Development

Become the Expert on You

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Marc Storr has a professional and academic background in Counselling, Personal Development, Applied Psychology, Research, and social care.

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## How to quit drugs successfully - the bare bones

Drugs evoke many emotions in many people and terms such as addiction, withdrawal, and prescription don't help matters.

But...here's the reality. All you're doing when you change your drug use is changing your behaviour. In this sense, it is fundamentally no different to changing any behaviour such as getting more exercise, improving your diet or getting up early. It takes time and effort to quit anything and only takes a little longer and requires a little more effort to quit a drug because of their unique reinforcing properties (see another post about more on reinforcement).

Luckily enough, a few simple techniques and strategies can help to make the change process a little easier – but only as long as you use them.

### **1. Destroy your habitual thinking and behaving.**

Habitual thinking and behaving play a major part in drug use. You need to build new pathways in your mind to help avoid your now natural 'chain' of thoughts and behaviours that has come to characterise your drug habit. I describe them as natural because, as with any habit, you will be so used to doing them that they will have become second nature and you will need to put in very little effort to smoke/drink/get high because you don't really need to think about it much.

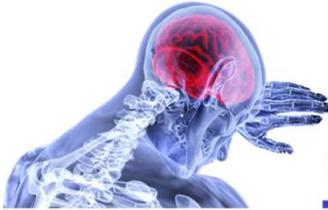
You will have triggers everywhere that remind you of your drug of choice, it will be easy to access your drug because you'll have all the stuff you need, and your drug use will be seamlessly integrated into your life. To counter this, you need to get rid of the triggers, make it hard for you to do your drug of choice, and break up the habitual behaviour; in short, dump everything that reminds of your drug, and when you think about your drug, think about something else.

Sounds simple enough doesn't it? However, on a practical level your body and mind will be screaming at you to continue thinking about drugs and taking drugs because this is how we work. Don't blame your body and mind though, its only doing it's job that its evolved to do over the last few million years and, believe it or not, its only trying to keep you safe.

However, be aware that this safety process will work against you if you don't take control of it. Thankfully, it doesn't take a lot of planning to take control - just blind perseverance and pig ignorance.

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So lets begin....

## **1a. Destroy your direct triggers.**

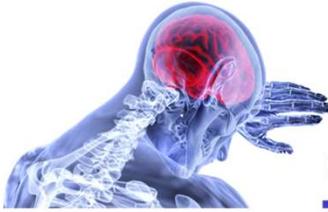
Get rid of everything that reminds you your drug of choice. First and foremost, this means getting rid of your drug. If you're quitting completely, don't have any drug in the house at any time. If you're cutting down, only have small daily amounts at any one time and stash them somewhere awkward - preferably outside your home. If you smoke, keep your tobacco in a box on a high shelf in the garage. If you drink, keep your beer in the shed behind the trampoline. If you inject, put your brown in the loft. Continually move your stash around to different places to prevent building up just another habitual behaviour.

Secondly, get rid of your paraphernalia. If you smoke, get rid of your papers/ashtrays/lighters/filter tips. If you drink, get rid of your wine rack/beer fridge/corkscrew/insulated mug. If you inject, get rid of your works. If you are cutting down, start afresh every time you choose to use your drug. So, every time you want a smoke, you have to buy some papers and a lighter. If you want to drink, always drink from a glass and put it into a different glass every time. If you inject, use a fresh needle and supplies every time.

## **1b. Destroy your indirect triggers.**

Move your home around so that it is different. You know the feeling - when you rearrange your living room, it feels kinda new doesn't it; Its interesting for a while and you may even do different things like change where you usually sit or read. Our drug use is linked to our environment so if we change our environment, it helps to change our drug use. Therefore, our response to new environments is something you can use to help change your old memories of your drug use. Remember, your memories are also triggers, so make it harder for you to get to them or for them to pop up.

Try doing different tasks in different rooms. If you usually use your laptop in a certain chair, use another chair. If you usually have meals in your living room, have them in your dining room. Also employ different routines. If you usually have your breakfast first, then shower...change it and have a shower first, then your breakfast. If you usually have your first smoke of the day with your coffee in the same chair before your breakfast...change it and have your breakfast first, then coffee and then smoke. If you continue to use your drug of choice, change your patterns of use almost every time you smoke. One day you may smoke after your coffee, the next day smoke before your coffee. One day you have your first smoke at 09:30, the next day have it at 09:45 and keep it going. In general, when it comes to using drugs, the longer you delay your first smoke/drink/hit, the better. If you are cutting down gradually, every day you use your drug, use it a little later - even 10 mins later is better than nothing and you'll be surprised at how quickly this adds up.



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## **1c. Destroy the pleasure associated with your drug use.**

Most drug use is kept in place by something called positive reinforcement. This means that most people take drugs, or go back to drugs after a break, because of the pleasure they provide. Really, its not difficult to accept this point is it - nobody takes drugs to feel bad. However, in reality, there's not a lot we can do about the chemical pleasure associated with the effect that our drug of choice has on our body. However, we can make the **act** of drug use less pleasurable.

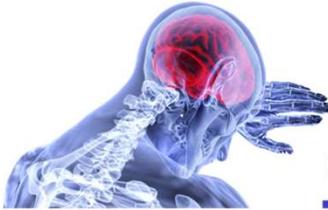
So, if we usually have a nice cosy smoke in the comfort of our favourite chair in our living room watching our favourite TV show whilst sipping a hot chocolate...change it. You can still have the favourite chair and the TV show if you like, but have your smoke outside in your garden or yard. If you usually smoke with colleagues at work in the same area after lunch, smoke alone when they are not there. If you usually have a drink (or three) after work in the same bar, have a different drink in a different bar. If you usually drink your wine after your evening meal, drink it with your evening meal. However, bear in mind the point above about how its better to change your routines completely. It will be far more effective to smoke 2 hours after lunch in a different place than just avoiding your colleagues. Likewise, going to a coffee house for a glass of wine after you've been home and showered is far better than just changing the drink you normally have but having it in the same place.

## **1d. Destroy the habitual thinking associate with your drug use.**

Thoughts are like chains - each thought is linked to other thoughts and we strengthen the chain by always linking one thought to another by thinking the same way – remember your times table?. With drug use, we may think of having a smoke, and then we see ourselves having a smoke, and then think about how nice it is to smoke, and then make up reasons why having a smoke now is good. If we catch this process before it gets moving, we can weaken the chain by linking the initial thought to something else that is unconnected and that doesn't make sense – it should be a behaviour and the more random the behaviour is the better.

To do this effectively, we need to explore our thinking by examining how we usually end up doing our drugs. For some, it might be a time issue - most smokers operate around a basic routine for smoking, having a smoke roughly every 1 1/2 hrs. For others, it may be a thought that just flashes into their mind - mmm, a cold beer.

Either way, the same principle is applied. Once we know what the initial thought that normally triggers our habitual is, we can begin to redirect it by doing something different when we have the initial thought.



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Make the new behaviour you are linking to your initial thought slightly awkward because this will act as a kind of punishment for thinking the thought in the first place – I find that doing household chores is useful for this one. Again, blind perseverance and blind ignorance is all that is needed from this bit.

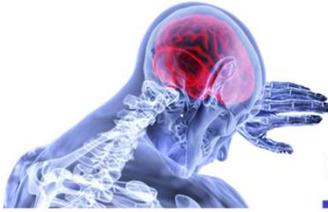
For example, if you are sitting there and the image of a cigarette with tantalising smoke drifting from its tip enters your mind, get up and clean the window. If you walk past a bar and see a poster showing a freshly poured cold beer, go into a bank and ask for some information on home insurance. If you are thinking of rolling up a huge joint and getting hammered, take the laundry upstairs and put it away. Can you see the key here? Whatever the drug-related thought is, behave in a way that has nothing to do with the thought. Think about it, if a window opened when we used the door handle one day but when we used the same door handle the next day the TV came on, we'd eventually stop using the door handle.

In this sense, your chain of thinking becomes weakened because you're going from thought 1 to thought 275 one day, and from thought 1 to thought 13982 the next day. Over time, this makes it less likely that you will naturally go from thought 1 to thought 2 to thought 3 because your memory of this pathway gets weakened by you bouncing around in your thinking so much. In addition, it starts to become a little pointless to even have the initial thought because it doesn't lead anywhere productive anymore. Bear mind, to start off with, you will find yourself having to continually do something different because you will be so used to thinking the initial thought that you will continually think it for some time - therefore, you will continually need to block the thought chain by doing something different. Therefore, have a ready repertoire of random behaviours you can do and make them quick because you will have to do them several times a day to start off with.

## Bringing it together...

At this point, an analogy for the whole process about may help to bring it together in your mind. Drug use is a bit like using the same forest path for several years. Over time, the path becomes so well worn that it stands out a mile and we become so used to using it that we know it like the back of our hands. In fact, we know it so well that we could tell wherever we are on the path simply by looking at the surrounding forest or maybe even smelling surrounding flowers if we were blindfolded.

The only thing that keeps us using this particular path is that we are used to it and it is easy to use – the path we have chosen offers a well established direct route through the forest and we don't really want to change it.



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However, there's a problem. The path that we use has been beaten so much that we're destroying the forest slowly but surely. The path is getting wider and wider and the ground is getting more and more damaged and nothing will be able to grow back if we don't stop using it. To avoid this, what we need to do is stop using our current path and give it some time to recover and grow back.

We need to find another path but we're a little scared about doing this because it means doing something different and new. In addition, we'll have to put some effort in to making another path which means it will initially take longer to get through the forest.

This is similar to most drug use. Our behaviour is the path (well established and expected), but we need to change our behaviour because our tolerance has increased (we're damaging the forest by using it more and more) and there's a chance that real problems are going to occur if we don't reel our drug use in (the forest will be permanently damaged and won't go back to the way it used to be). However, changing our behaviour is going to take time (finding an alternative route), effort (using strategies to help us) and we don't know how it will pan out (because we don't know what change will be like and whether we'll be able to do it).

Of course, like changing any other behaviour, if we do something different for long enough, we'll get used to the new way of doing things (we'll establish another path) and our memory of how good our old behaviour was will fade along with the cravings to do it (the old path will grow over and will get more and more difficult to use). Before long, there will be no old path, just a new way of getting through the forest.

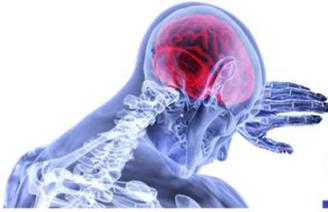
In terms of changing our path, the strategies mentioned above would take the following form:

### ***Destroy your direct triggers***

Fence off the path - make the fenced off area 5 times wider than the path so you can't see the old path that well anymore. Place obstacles in the way of the old path so it makes it difficult to use it even if you were tempted. Also, give yourself enough time to make and use the new path - it is going to take a little longer to use initially so if you don't leave yourself with enough time to make the walk, all you will do is simply supply yourself with reasons why you need to use the old path.

### ***Destroy your indirect triggers***

Change your daily routines. Get up earlier...have your coffee before your breakfast instead of the other way around...wear different shoes....anything that is different to what you normally do to break up your old pattern of behaviour.



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Enter the forest at a different point to where you usually enter. Keep this fresh and change it around until you find a way of walking through the forest that you can use to develop a new path. Once you've found your new way, do it over and over again until it becomes a part of your new daily routine. Here, routine is good. Don't chop and change your routine – keep it the same every day to help to establish it as the preferred way of getting through the forest.

### ***Destroy your pleasure associated with your old path***

If its going to take 3 weeks to build a new path because trees need to be felled or foliage removed, you are still going to need to use the old path – this is like cutting down your drug use gradually. However, you can make this cutting down process awkward by wearing tight-fitting shoes, or by only walking on the old path in the rain. Over time, and as long as you only walk on the new path in good shoes and dry weather, you will look forward to the time when you don't need to use the old path anymore.

### ***Destroy your habitual thinking associated with using the old path.***

When you start to think about the old path, do something random immediately. Before you even get to the point where you are debating whether or not to use the old path, you need to be DOING something different like Hoovering the carpet, cleaning a window or reorganising a cupboard. Remember to keep the random behaviour simple and short because you may have do it several times an hour during the initial stages.

### **A final note on relapse prevention...**

What about changing your perceptions about your drug use - you know, reminding yourself how bad it is and telling yourself that you're a drug addict, etc? For the first three months, forget it! This type of work is really a part of relapse prevention and offers further work on the positive reinforcement aspects of your drug use. It is designed to restructure the position that your drug use holds in your mind and 'even up the balance' between how good it was and how bad it could be.

However, if you do this during the initial stages of changing your behaviour, all you will do is constantly remind yourself about your drug and keep your drug use in your mind. Even with the best will in the world, you will struggle to successfully change your behaviour if all you are doing is thinking about your drug use. At this stage, what you really need to do is forget about your drug use and do something different for at least 3-6 months and the longer the better really.

However, once you get to a place where you can think about your drug use and would like to have a smoke/drink/hit but its not the end of the world if you don't have it, THEN you're in relapse prevention territory. Relapse prevention is an essential part of successful behaviour change and does need to be done, but there's a place for everything and everything has its place.