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Helping people build lives worth protecting.

The Pull Toward More

A short group reflection on dopamine, wanting, and the ways we change how we feel

Dopamine is not simply the brain's pleasure chemical.

It is heavily involved in motivation, anticipation, learning, and the pull toward things the brain has learned may matter.

Pleasure, Wanting, and Learning

PLEASURE

"This feels good."

The actual enjoyment or satisfaction I experience.

WANTING

"I want to get that."

The motivational pull toward something I expect will change my state.

LEARNING

"Remember how we got there."

The brain learns the cues and actions that predict a reward.

Wanting and liking can separate. I can feel a strong pull toward something even when the actual experience is no longer especially satisfying.

Everyone Has Something They Reach For

This is not only about addiction. Most of us have learned ways to quickly change how we feel. The behavior may be healthy, neutral, or costly depending on how we use it.

- Bored -> phone or scrolling
- Anxious -> work, planning, checking, or staying busy
- Inadequate -> achievement, praise, productivity, or comparison
- Stressed -> food, shopping, television, or exercise
- Lonely -> social media, reassurance, attention, or connection
- Activated -> arguing, venting, using, gaming, or distraction

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Sometimes we are not chasing feeling good. We are chasing feeling different.

A useful question: What has my brain learned is worth chasing when I want my internal state to change?

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Reflection: what do I reach for when I want to change how I feel?

My Automatic Go-To's

Check anything you sometimes use for relief, stimulation, validation, escape, comfort, or simply a change of state.

- ☐ Phone / social media
- ☐ Shopping
- ☐ Reassurance / attention
- ☐ Alcohol / drugs
- ☐ Food
- ☐ Exercise
- ☐ Gaming
- ☐ Arguing / venting
- ☐ Work / achievement
- ☐ TV / streaming
- ☐ Sex / pornography
- ☐ Staying busy

Follow One Pattern

1. What am I usually feeling right before I reach for it?

Bored, anxious, lonely, restless, inadequate, angry, overwhelmed, something else?

_____

2. What am I expecting it to give me?

Relief, stimulation, validation, escape, connection, comfort, control, numbness, something else?

_____

3. How strong is the wanting before I do it?

Rate the pull: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

_____

4. How satisfying is the actual experience afterward?

Rate the liking: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

_____

The bigger question

When does something I enjoy become something I automatically reach for whenever I do not want to feel the way I feel?