

# Changing Unhealthy Behaviors to Produce Positive Emotions

## **Objective**

To change unhealthy self-defeating behaviors into positive behaviors. To stimulate a cycle of positive behaviors and emotions.

## **You Should Know**

Your emotions can be both the cause and the effect of your thoughts and behaviors. When you experience overwhelming emotions, your thoughts and behaviors may become self-destructive. You may self-injure, overeat, abuse drugs or alcohol, lash out at other people, or become physically aggressive. Consequently, you may feel depressed, ashamed, or guilty – which, if unmanaged, can lead to additional self-destructive behaviors.

Did you know that you receive reinforcement or benefits for your thoughts and behaviors, even when they are self-destructive? That is why it might be difficult to break out of a cycle of harmful reactions, and the longer the negative behaviors continue, the more temporary the relief can become, and the more destructive the consequences of that behavior.

Consider Jane's situation. Jane's sister was seriously injured in a car accident. Jane was supposed to have been a passenger in the car, but she decided to stay home. Following the accident, Jane felt guilty about not getting hurt or being with her sister when it happened. She started drinking to cope with her painful emotions. In the short term, Jane got positive reinforcement from her actions - she was able to tune out her feelings of guilt and self-loathing. But in the long term, her actions had dangerous consequences because she became dependent on alcohol and was fired after missing too many days of work due to hangovers.

The good news is that the opposite about behaviors and emotions is also true. When you engage in healthy behaviors and self-affirming thoughts, your emotions become more positive and fulfilling. As you receive positive reinforcement for healthy choices, it becomes easier to repeat those behaviors or identify additional positive ones.

Consider Tom's situation. Tom's office announced a Steps Challenge to encourage staff to get active. Tom wanted to lose some weight but he disliked exercising at the gym. He joined the competition and started walking a few miles a day. Although he did not win the challenge, Tom still received positive benefits that reinforced his behavior. In the short term, he could walk up stairs without getting winded and he had more energy. He decided to continue his daily walking routine. Over the long term, he noticed his stress level was lower, he was sleeping better, and he was losing weight.

## What You Should Do

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

In order to begin increasing your healthy behaviors and emotions, you first need to identify harmful behaviors that impact your thoughts and feelings.

The unhealthy or self-destructive behaviors I engage in are:

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The temporary emotional benefits I receive from my unhealthy behaviors are:

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The long-term risks and consequences of my unhealthy behaviors are:

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Describe how harmful behaviors negatively affect your thoughts and feelings.

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The next step is to identify healthy behaviors to help you manage upsetting emotions during times of distress. Here are some suggestions.

- Calling a friend or visiting a supportive chat room.
- Working out or taking a walk.
- Journaling or writing poetry.
- Having a good cry.
- Screaming or yelling in a location where others won't hear you.
- Playing with a pet.
- Doing deep breathing exercises or meditating.

Describe other ways you can manage upsetting emotions.

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Have you ever experienced overwhelming emotions but chose behaviors that were helpful instead of harmful? What happened? What behaviors did you choose instead?

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Now, over the next week, keep track of situations that lead to unhealthy behaviors and distressing emotions. Using the chart below, identify the unhealthy behavior you chose (or wanted to use) to manage those emotions, and the short-term benefits you experienced. Then, write down a healthier alternative that you used (or could have used) instead to help manage your emotions and develop healthier ones.

<b>Situation</b>	<b>Emotions I experienced</b>	<b>Unhealthy or Destructive Behavior</b>	<b>Short-Term Benefits</b>	<b>What I Did/Could Have Done Instead</b>

## Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?

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