

Exercise: The Dopamine Loop Awareness Tool

This exercise is designed to track common tech habits and uncover the emotional rewards driving them. It also encourages experimenting with alternatives that are not just distractions. By mapping out the loop between emotional discomfort, device use, and outcome, you can gain greater awareness of your behaviors and consider alternatives that not only support emotional regulation but provide opportunities for expression and growth.

| Behavior | Trigger | Anticipated Reward | Anticipated Reward | Alternate Activity |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| e.g., Checking Instagram at night | Boredom | Connection, entertainment | Mild distraction, felt lonely | Reading, journaling |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Step 2: Try This Instead

Below are ideas you can try that fits your need in the moment:

When You're Seeking Relaxation:

- Take a walk outside (even just 5 minutes)
- Listen to music while stretching or doing deep breathing
- Sit in silence without a device
- Sip tea while doing nothing, let your wander (see chapter 7), no multitasking

When You Need Expression or Emotional Release:

- Voice record how you're feeling instead of texting or scrolling
- Draw, scribble, doodle, or write a letter you don't send
- Dance or move to music alone
- Free-write 5 lines in a journal (no pressure to be profound)

When You Want Stimulation or Growth:

- Learn one new word or phrase in another language
- Try a new recipe or tweak an old one
- Watch a short how-to video and try it hands-on
- Practice a skill you've been curious about (e.g., sketching, knitting, guitar)
- Read or listen to something that challenges your thinking

Reflection:

- What are you typically seeking when you reach for your phone, connection, relief, escape, stimulation?

- Does the behavior actually satisfy that need, or does it leave you feeling the same or worse?

- What small change could better meet your emotional or relational needs without relying on digital stimulation?

Optional Therapist Prompt (for clinical work):

- Identify one moment in your day where you could swap a compulsive behavior for a more intentional one.
- Track how it feels, not just whether it's productive, but whether it offers real emotional stimulation or contributes to personal growth.