

Behind the pattern.

Why the tension exists and why the pattern keeps returning

There's a layer beneath the behaviour

If you've read [Inside the Pattern](#), you've seen the inner loop clearly. How tension builds, how behaviour follows, how relief locks the cycle in place, how reinforcement makes it more automatic, and how the baseline shift means the tension that returns after relief is stronger than the tension that preceded it.

That's the inner loop. And seeing it clearly is genuinely important – not just as an intellectual exercise, but as a practical shift. When the inner loop is understood, something changes. The urgency around the behaviour reduces. You move out of automatic mode and understand why the standard white-knuckling approach won't work for long.

But the inner loop doesn't explain everything. It explains how the pattern sustains itself. It doesn't fully explain how it got started – or why this particular system found this particular exit. Without seeing that, there's a real risk of swapping one behaviour for another because the full structure underneath hasn't been seen.

The loop keeps running, just with different content. That's what this piece is about.

The question that seeing the pattern opens

At the end of *Inside the Pattern*, something was hinted at. The baseline shift doesn't only affect the immediate tension around the behaviour.

Over time, something accumulates in the background – beyond the urge, beyond the immediate deficit – that the inner loop feeds into but doesn't fully explain.

That accumulation is background tension. And understanding where it comes from changes everything about what addressing the pattern actually requires.

Two kinds of tension

Foreground tension is the immediate, felt tension at the top of the inner loop – the urge, the pull, the deficit created by the baseline shift.

It's generated primarily by the inner loop itself through repeated use and reinforcement.

The more the loop runs, the more intense the foreground tension becomes, and the faster it returns after relief.

UseYourAddiction is a coaching and educational initiative that transforms how compulsive and addictive behaviour is understood and worked with.

It started from a simple observation: this issue touches almost everyone, yet the standard approaches don't resonate with a large group of intelligent, functioning people. Not because they resist change, but because these frameworks don't fit who they essentially are.

UYA focuses on something else: not the behaviour, but what's actually driving it. When that becomes clear, more than change becomes possible; reconnection with what actually matters, and the return of genuine choice.

Background tension is older and quieter. It's the accumulated pressure from unprocessed experience – from a way of living organised around thinking and control rather than feeling and processing. It doesn't announce itself clearly. It feels like just how things are. Like normal. Like life. The body often registers it before the mind does – through fatigue, poor recovery, a persistent flatness that doesn't quite have an explanation.

Background tension created the conditions that made the behaviour an inevitable choice. The system was already under pressure, already struggling to process what it was feeling, already organised around thinking and control. When it encountered something that provided reliable relief – of course it reached for it. The behaviour made complete sense given the system it arrived into.

Because foreground tension tends to dominate attention – arriving fast, pulling hard – the background tension behind it is often invisible while the pattern is running. The immediate pull crowds out everything else. When the behaviour stops and the foreground tension gradually weakens, what was always there underneath becomes more directly felt. That's one reason stopping, while not always essential, tends to make the deeper work more visible and more accessible. It's not a requirement – but for most people it's the clearest route to seeing what's actually been driving the pattern.

Both loops drive each other. Neither is simply the cause of the other.

How the system got organised

Background tension builds gradually through a particular way of living that most people never consciously chose. It just became how things worked. Over time, many people move toward more thinking, more control, more structure, more external orientation – and away from direct feeling, internal awareness, and unfiltered experience. This isn't a mistake. It's often necessary. It's how people perform, function, build a life, meet expectations. From the outside, it works. But internally, something shifts.

Thinking starts doing more than it's designed to do. It starts interpreting instead of experiencing. Managing instead of feeling. Explaining instead of noticing. Slowly, you begin relating to life more through thought than through direct experience.

And here's what that costs: the ability to process what's actually happening inside starts to narrow. Not dramatically. Gradually. In a way that's easy to miss precisely because the rest of life keeps functioning. Research shows that when cognitive processing consistently overrides somatic signals, people lose access to early warning information. You stop catching things early. The signals have to get louder before they register. Which is often exactly when people arrive at one of the moments on this site.

The over-reliance on thinking and control that generates background tension operates in many ways like a pattern itself. It provides a kind of relief from the discomfort of uncertainty, of feeling, of not knowing. It reinforces itself over time. It becomes more automatic. Recognising this is part of seeing the full picture.

What happens to what isn't processed

Not everything can be thought through. Emotions, stress, internal conflict, pressure, experiences that don't fit the current narrative – if they aren't processed, they don't disappear. They stay in the system. Not as clear thoughts. As background tension. A low-level unease, a restlessness that's hard to locate.

You don't always know what it is. But you feel it. And because it builds gradually, it starts to feel normal. It becomes part of the background of daily life – until something pushes back.

The bigger loop

Once the inner loop is running, it doesn't just draw from the background tension. It feeds back into it.

Every cycle erodes something.

Self-trust – from repeated broken agreements with yourself. From saying you won't and then doing it anyway. From the gap between intention and action widening over time.

Self-image – from the distance between who you are and how you're living growing slowly wider. From the sense that something is running that you didn't fully choose.

The relationship with internal experience – as the consequences of the inner loop require more thinking, more control, more management to keep things together. The very thing that created the background tension in the first place gets reinforced by the inner loop running.

These feed back into the background tension. Which the inner loop then needs to manage more frequently. Which runs the inner loop more. Which worsens the background tension further.

Both loops drive each other. Neither is simply the cause of the other.

Why this matters

It explains something most people recognise:

"I stopped, but it came back."

"I replaced it, but something else took its place."

"I understand it, but I still do it."

That's not failure. That's what happens when only one loop is addressed while the other keeps running. And it explains two patterns of substitution that are worth distinguishing – because they look different but follow the same logic.

The first is substitution within the inner loop – replacing one substance or behaviour with another that serves the same immediate function. Same mechanism, different input. The baseline shift and reinforcement operate identically with the new behaviour. Someone might genuinely believe they've addressed the problem because the original behaviour is gone, while the loop is running just as efficiently with something new.

The second is subtler and often looks like real change from the outside. The original behaviour stops. Something different takes its place – perhaps healthier, perhaps more socially acceptable, perhaps something that attracts genuine admiration.

But the background tension that created the need for the behaviour in the first place is still intact. The system has found a new outlet that serves the same underlying function. Different behaviour, different context, different appearance. Same structural role; still filling the same gap.

The second kind is harder to see precisely because it looks like progress. And why understanding the bigger loop is what makes the difference between these two outcomes.

How to recognise the bigger loop

This layer is more subtle than the behaviour. But very real.

You're mostly in your head – analysing, explaining, thinking ahead, reviewing – even when nothing is actually wrong. Feeling is secondary: you know what you think more clearly than what you feel, or you move past feelings quickly before they fully land.

You override signals: tired but continue, tense but push through, something feels off but you find a reason it's fine. You manage rather than process – optimising, structuring, adjusting – but rarely staying with what's actually there. And space is limited: there's always input, always something happening, very little room where nothing is required of you.

That's precisely where processing would normally occur.

This is not a flaw

It's an adaptation. To modern environments, to pressure, to opportunity, to expectation. In many ways it's what allowed you to function and get where you are. But adaptations have costs. And this one's cost tends to show up in exactly the kind of patterns you're looking at now.

When the system pushes back

At some point, enough accumulates that something gives. It shows up differently for different people – in the body, in relationships, in a growing sense of internal conflict, in the friction between outer functioning and inner experience. Sometimes it's a slow erosion. Sometimes it's a moment where it becomes undeniable.

However it shows up, it's the same thing: the system signalling that something in how you've been living, coping, or regulating yourself is no longer sustainable. Not a breakdown. Information that finally got loud enough to hear.

Why behaviour alone won't solve it

If you only work on stopping, controlling, or replacing the behaviour, you're working at the level of foreground tension – the immediate urge generated by the inner loop.

But the background tension that created the conditions is still there. And the inner loop consequences keep feeding back into it.

The system will keep looking for another way to regulate, because the need is still there. Sometimes the same behaviour returns. Sometimes something different takes its place.

Either way, the structure continues.

Which is why willpower-based approaches have such poor long-term outcomes, and why simply stopping without understanding what's underneath tends to produce substitution rather than resolution.

What actually changes things

Not forcing less behaviour. But changing the relationship to what creates the background tension in the first place, while also understanding the inner loop's momentum clearly enough to work with it directly.

That means noticing earlier, before the foreground tension is fully formed. Allowing instead of immediately overriding. Experiencing instead of explaining. Creating space instead of filling it.

Not as techniques to apply. As a different way of relating to yourself – to what's actually happening inside, moment to moment.

This is where contemporary trauma-informed approaches, somatic work, and mindfulness-based recovery all point – from different directions – toward the same thing: the capacity to be with your own experience without immediately managing it is what creates the conditions for something to actually shift.

A note on choice – and what becomes possible

There's a belief that runs deep in how addiction is typically talked about: once addicted, always addicted. That the best you can hope for is management, vigilance, abstinence maintained through ongoing effort. For some people and some substances, there are real neurological and physiological factors that deserve to be taken seriously. But as a universal law? The evidence doesn't support it.

When both loops are genuinely addressed – when the background tension is processed and the inner loop's momentum is understood and worked with – something shifts in the relationship to the behaviour itself.

The compulsiveness loosens. The pull weakens. And for many people, the behaviour becomes what it perhaps never fully was before: an actual choice.

Not a white-knuckled choice maintained through willpower.
A real one, made from clarity rather than craving.

And here's what's interesting: most people, once they reach that place, don't particularly want to go back. Not because they've been convinced it's bad for them. But because it simply doesn't add much anymore.

The thing it was doing – the regulation, the relief, the escape from background tension – isn't needed in the same way. And without that function, the behaviour loses most of its appeal.

This doesn't mean everyone will or should make the same choice.
It means the choice becomes real. Which is exactly the point.

And something else becomes available

When both loops start to shift – when background tension is being processed and the inner loop is losing its momentum – something becomes available that goes beyond the pattern dissolving. The energy that was tied up in both loops starts to move differently. Not dramatically, not all at once.

People notice it.

Feelings that were being bypassed start to come through more cleanly. Ordinary experience becomes more present – not heightened, just more directly felt. Relationships have more room in them. There's less distance between what's happening and the experience of it.

What emerges isn't a fixed state or a destination. It's more like capacity. The capacity to feel without immediately managing it. To be in a situation without needing to regulate away from it. To want things – and to know what you actually want, rather than what the pattern wanted.

For many people this doesn't feel like recovery in the traditional sense. It feels like arriving somewhere more real. Not back to before – but forward to something that was always possible but unavailable while the loops were running.

That's what's actually on offer here. Not just less compulsion. More life.

Why this is difficult alone

The pattern includes how you think, how you interpret, what you notice and what you skip past. Which means you're inside the system you're trying to understand. Your dominant way of seeing is doing the looking – and it has blind spots by definition.

And here's the specific paradox for the kind of person likely reading this: the more capable you are mentally, the more effectively the thinking-and-control system can explain the pattern, understand it, even articulate it clearly – while continuing to run it.

Intelligence and logic, applied from inside the same system that created the problem, tend to produce very convincing accounts of what's happening without actually moving it. This is not a personal failing. It's structural. And it's why, at some point, going further becomes relational.

The full case for why – and what relational coaching for compulsive patterns actually does – is in [Why You Can't Think Your Way Out of This](#).

Closing

The behaviour is not the beginning. And it's not the real problem. It's a response.

When you start to see both loops clearly, something changes.

The behaviour makes more sense.

The tension – foreground and background – becomes more visible.

The pattern becomes something you can actually work with. Not by force, but by understanding.

And from understanding, real choice becomes possible.