

Inside the pattern.

A clear way to understand what keeps repeating - and why it's not random

If something in your life keeps repeating, it's worth actually looking at it. Not just deciding to stop, or telling yourself you'll get it under control. Because by the time you're focused on the behaviour itself, you're already late in the sequence.

People arrive at this realisation from different places. Sometimes it's the body sending signals that something isn't sustainable. Sometimes it's the cost becoming visible - in relationships, in clarity, in self-trust. Or the recognition that what felt like a free choice isn't quite as optional as it seemed.

The entry point can be different. The structure underneath tends to be the same.

The structure

Most repeating patterns run the same loop:

Tension → Behaviour → Relief → Reinforcement → Baseline Shift → back to Tension

Simple, but not trivial. Because once this loop settles in, it starts running largely on its own.

1 - Foreground tension

Something sits there. A restlessness. Pressure. Boredom. A vague sense that something's off, or that something's missing. That's enough. The system wants to do something about it.

This foreground tension - the immediate, felt discomfort that sits at the top of the loop - is information. But when it's not processed, it doesn't go away. It builds. And the more the loop has run, the faster and more intensely it tends to build.

2 - Behaviour

At some point, you do something. Not randomly - because it works.

These choices aren't accidental. Upbringing, environment, genetics, they all shape what's available to you, what feels normal, what feels forbidden.

And in that moment, whatever you reach for makes sense. You take something, distract yourself, push through, switch off, or enjoy.

It changes how you feel.

UseYourAddiction is a coaching and educational initiative that transforms how compulsive or 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 real choice.

3 - Relief

Something shifts. The foreground tension drops, things feel manageable again – or alive. Even briefly. Even if there might be consequences later. The relief is real. That's why this isn't simply about good or bad choices. But they are still your choices, which means they're also your responsibility.

4 - Reinforcement

Your system learns fast, especially under pressure. Whatever reduced the discomfort gets remembered. The brain doesn't distinguish between relief that's good for you and relief that isn't. It just learns what works, and files it as the solution.

So the next time the foreground tension builds, the system already knows where to go. The behaviour becomes the default response. Not because you consciously decided that, but because the system did. The more often this happens, the more automatic it becomes. Less deliberate. Less optional. More just what you do.

And because the pattern has been reinforced enough times, it increasingly runs below the threshold of conscious awareness – activated by familiar cues before the reflective mind has fully caught up.

5 - Baseline shift

This is where it gets harder to see – and harder to reverse.

Each time the behaviour provides relief, the brain adjusts its expectations. What used to feel like enough starts to feel flat. What used to feel normal starts to feel like not quite enough. The system recalibrates around the behaviour as the new reference point for what okay feels like.

Which means that when the behaviour stops – even briefly – the system doesn't return to neutral. It drops below it. Below what it now expects. And that gap is felt as foreground tension. The pull. The urge. The sense that something is missing even when nothing has changed externally.

This is why the foreground tension that returns after relief feels more intense than the tension that preceded it. It's not the same tension coming back. It's a tension generated by the loop itself – by the baseline having shifted, by the system now expecting something it isn't getting.

And this is what makes the loop increasingly self-sustaining. The behaviour that was supposed to provide relief ends up creating a new source of foreground tension every time it's used. The more the loop runs, the more the baseline shifts. The more the baseline shifts, the stronger the pull becomes. The stronger the pull, the harder it is to not act on it.

From the inside, it still feels like a free choice. But what's actually happening is the loop tightening around itself – running faster, pulling harder, requiring less conscious involvement each time.

That's not preference anymore. That's a pattern with momentum.

And there's something else worth noting: the baseline shift doesn't only affect the immediate foreground tension around the behaviour. Over time, it starts to affect how the whole system feels. Energy, mood, clarity, the ability to feel genuine pleasure or motivation from ordinary things – all of these gradually narrow as the system becomes more organised around the behaviour as its primary source of relief.

This recalibration also has a useful side. When the behaviour stops, the foreground tension gradually weakens as the conditioned pathways become less active. And as that immediate pull loses its dominance, what was running underneath becomes more directly accessible. The background tension that the behaviour was managing is still there – but with less foreground noise in the way, it becomes easier to feel and work with directly.

For most people, this is one of the clearest views they get of what was actually driving the pattern. Stopping isn't always essential, but for most people it's the fastest route to seeing what's actually there underneath.

How to recognise this - as honestly as you can

Not through theory. Through your own experience.

What foreground tension is there before you engage with the behaviour, and where do you feel it?

Has this become more frequent, or more automatic, over time?

Does the pull feel stronger than it used to – or does it arrive sooner after the last time?

Can you genuinely choose not to? Or does it feel like something that's already in motion?

Is there something your body has been signalling that you've been explaining rather than listening to?

The key question

At some point it's worth asking:

Am I choosing this?

Or am I following something that's already in motion?

That's a real distinction. Seeing the loop clearly won't dissolve it immediately. But it does shift your position, from being inside the pattern to being able to see it. And that's where things can start to move.

This loop doesn't exist on its own

If you only address the behaviour, you might change it for a while. But the foreground tension tends to return – sometimes in a different form – because what's driving it hasn't been touched.

The pattern isn't just what you do. It's how you think, how you interpret, and how you relate to yourself and to others. And that makes it easy to miss what's right in front of you – because the same lens is doing the looking.

What creates the background tension – and why it keeps feeding the loop – is the next level of understanding.

Behind the Pattern goes there directly. It's worth reading once the inner loop is clear.

This is not about forcing yourself to quit

It's about understanding what creates the need for it. Because when that becomes clearer, the loop starts to loosen. The compulsiveness softens. And something else becomes available: real choice, and change that actually holds.

At a certain point, going deeper becomes relational. Being asked the questions you don't ask yourself. Seeing what you normally skip past. Staying with what you tend to move away from.

Why that's structurally necessary – and not just helpful – is covered in Why You Can't Think Your Way Out of This.