

## A Look at the Purposes of Substances and What Might Replace Them

**"Do not attempt to take away a person's main means of trying to cope with pain and suffering until you have another effective coping strategy in place."**

– Alan Marlatt, Ph.D.

**Substance use disorder treatment goal:** To assist individuals in living healthy, functional lives, in connection with others, such that substance use does not result in negative consequences for themselves, others, or society.

Ideally, a person with substance use disorder—popularly termed "addiction"—would be assisted with **tapering in** a combination of activities and practices that are approximations of what substances did for a person, while **tapering out** substances that have become problematic. The intention would be to seek and maintain a steady state of well-being. That process would take several steps:

1. Identify the **purpose and meaning of repeated use of substances for the individual**.  
Examples: enjoyment and pleasure; relief from emotional pain, physical pain, or despair; relief from the agitation of anxiety, the lethargy of depression, or the exhaustion of racing or disturbing thoughts; relief from memories of trauma; relief from grief and loss; relief from boredom and/or isolation; a sense of protection; a sense of belonging; a sense of love and comfort.
2. Identify one's **individual strengths, interests, and preferences**.
3. Over time—acknowledging that no one source, perhaps even combinations of sources, might ever equal the complete experience substances offered—identify possible **practices, activities, and conditions that might serve, approximately, the purposes of substances** based on one's strengths and preferences.
4. Experiment with a variety of practices, activities and conditions that might be helpful **to the individual**. Become aware of **feelings, thoughts, physical sensations, and attention** and use them as feedback to monitor stability.
5. **Adjust**. Keep, and possibly expand, what helps with steadiness. Jettison what doesn't. Maintain a list of future possibilities to try.

Unfortunately, most people in treatment are mandated to abstinence. What the substances did is no longer being done. This can throw—even slam—people into instability.

**Our job today, as quickly and efficiently as we can, is to try to figure out a few things that substances did for you, see a couple of your strengths, try to become aware of a preference or two, then create a short list of things that might possibly serve in the place of substances for you individually, and then figure out what we can do to make a few of those things happen.**

## 1 Purposes of substances

What do you think substances, and the use of substances, did for you? Please check all that apply and add others in your own words. Then rank order the top three, or more if you choose, by placing a "1" by the most important, a "2" by the next most important, etc.

√	Purpose of repeated use of substances	Rank Order
	Enjoyment, pleasure, reward	
	Relief from emotional pain	
	Relief from physical pain	
	Relief from existential despair, i.e. a helpless, hopeless feeling from not knowing if your life has meaning or if anything matters	
	Relief from strong feeling states: anger, frustration, sorrow, agitation	
	Relief from worry	
	Relief from social anxiety	
	Relief from anxiety	
	Relief from depression	
	Relief from racing or disturbing thoughts	
	Relief from bad memories: trauma, neglect, abuse, witnessing violations against others	
	Relief from grief and loss	
	Relief from boredom	
	Release from isolation and loneliness	
	Sense of absence or escape	
	Sense of protection	
	Sense of belonging, being a part of, fitting in, or being accepted	
	Sense of love and comfort	
	Other: _____	
	Other: _____	
	Other: _____	

What were the top three purposes served by substances and/or substance use for you?

1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

If you care to share, what insights do you gain from discovering this?

## 2 Strengths

People with substance use disorder often don't feel very good, or feel very good about themselves. Instead of thinking of ourselves as either good or bad, let's suspend judgment for a moment. Let's look inside ourselves with objectivity and compassion. If you see some traits you don't like, for now, simply shift your attention away from them and look at your strengths. If you're present now, even if you don't want to be, that's the strength of **discernment**. If you're doing this exercise right now, even if you don't really want to, that's the strength of discernment. You might be penalized by an authority or someone you care about if you don't

take a look at these things. Discernment includes the strength of telling the difference between what's helpful and what's not helpful.

**What other strengths do you have? Circle the ones that apply to you. Please add others.**

Courage	Creativity	Kindness	Generosity	Problem-solving
Determination	Perseverance	Honesty	Fairness	Leadership
Love of learning	Forgiveness	Humor	Teamwork	Appreciation of beauty
Empathy	Awareness			

**What are your top 3 strengths?**

1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

### 3 Interests and Preferences

**What are three activities that you like doing, or used to like doing?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Where are three places you like to be with people, or don't mind being with people?**

\_\_\_\_\_

### 4 Research findings

According to research, medications are the first line of treatment for longings, urges, and cravings that accompany deprivation from substances in people with substance use disorder. Research is inconclusive about self-care behaviors (SCBs) that can assist with abstinence. Some studies suggest that the practices listed below may be helpful. Please check the ones you think might be helpful to you.

√	<b>Potentially helpful self-care behaviors</b>
_____	Exercise
_____	Sleep hygiene: managing sleep time/wake time/length of sleep
_____	Managing caffeine intake and timing
_____	Managing nicotine intake and timing
_____	Managing quality, quantity, and timing of meals and snacks
_____	Engaging in focused breathing or breathing patterns
_____	Engaging the senses: see, hear, taste, touch, smell, motion
_____	Engaging in focused activities, such as cooking using a recipe, doing a repair, drawing, painting or coloring, playing a game, working a puzzle, journaling
_____	Engaging in social gatherings and activities that foster social connection

**Which of these self-care behaviors is your strongest?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Which one, with a very small change, might tie it for strongest?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What would that small change be?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What's next?**

**Earlier, you identified the top three purposes served by substances and/or substance use for you. What else might, even minimally, serve in their places?**

<b>Normal, human, understandable need</b>	<b>Other than a substance, what else might help meet this need?</b>
Enjoyment, pleasure, reward	
Relief from emotional pain	
Relief from physical pain	
Relief from existential despair	
Relief from strong feeling states	
Relief from worry	
Relief from social anxiety	
Relief from anxiety	
Relief from depression	
Relief from racing or disturbing thoughts	
Relief from bad memories	
Relief from grief and loss	
Relief from boredom	
Release from isolation and loneliness	
Sense of absence or escape	
Sense of protection	
Sense of belonging	
Sense of love and comfort	

Based on what you've discovered about what substances and substance use did for you, what your strengths and preferences are, and what research suggests is helpful to people who are trying to abstain, what are three things you think might be helpful for you to try this week?

1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

What is the smallest, gentlest step you might be able to take on your own to help make trying one of these things possible? Please complete the sentence:

A small step I might be able to take this week is

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**"It's my life. Don't you forget."**

– "Talk, Talk," The Music Machine

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