

4-Steps to Break out of Cycles

The following four steps have been well-researched to help people manage strong feelings, thoughts, and urges. Adapted from Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz's four-step process for managing Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) thoughts and urges, these steps require establishing a regular practice time. To make these steps habitual and readily available when needed, practice them during neutral emotional states.

Choose a cue to trigger your practice, like seeing the colour yellow, walking through a doorway, sitting down, or specific times of day like waking up, showering, or going to bed.

Step 1: Relabel:

This first step involves identifying the thought, urge, or feeling for what it really is: one part of your experience. Instead of getting caught up in the content of the thought, you learn to recognize it as a step in a cycle/process of other steps (thoughts lead to feelings which lead to sensations which lead to actions which lead to thoughts, etc.).

Try and label each part of your experience that you notice. For instance, if you have a thought about work, try saying to yourself in your head or out loud, "I am having a thought about work". It's not necessary to label in too much detail - in fact the less detail the better.

The thought is not a fact, it is a thought. This relabeling helps you see the difference between your experience of a thought/feeling/action/sensation and your true desires for how you want to feel/think/act. It's about recognizing the reality of the situation and not being tricked by the unpleasant feelings caused by the symptoms. While relabeling won't make the thoughts disappear immediately, it prepares you to change your behavioral responses.

Strategies to Relabel:

- Say out loud or in your head “*I am having* the thought/feeling/urge” Example: “I am having a feeling of anger.”
- Say “*I am noticing that I am having* a thought/feeling/urge ...” Example: “I am noticing that I am having a thought about work.”
- Say “*A part of me* is thinking/feeling ...” Example: “A part of me is feeling angry and thinking about stomping on the ground.”
- Try singing the thought (in your head or out loud) to the tune of Happy Birthday. For instance, if the thought is “I am failing” then try singing *I am failing* to the tune of Happy Birthday.
- Say the thought 50 times in a row. Say it until you get bored of saying it. Say it with different voices (e.g., a cartoon character voice, a deep voice, a high-pitched voice).

Step 2: Regulate:

This step focuses on regulating, or decreasing, the intensity of the thought/feeling/urge/sensation. There are numerous strategies that can help with this. If you already know of one that you like that works for you, try and stick with that. The most important thing is to keep this simple and easy to remember. Repeat as many times as needed to feel a drop in the intensity of your current experience. Below are some examples of strategies to use.

Strategies to Regulate:

- Breathe-in through your nose to the count of 4, hold your breath to the count of 7, and exhale through your mouth (pursed lips) to the count of 8. Repeat at least 3 times.
- Put cold water under your eyes, above your cheeks, for 30 seconds. You may splash water from the sink, place a cold metal water bottle in this area, or use a cold cloth.
- Count down from 100 by minus 7. For example, $100-7=93$, $93-7=86$. Continue until you get to zero.
- Say out loud or in your head, in first person, the name and colour of 5 objects that you can see right now. Then 4 things you can physically feel on the outside



of your body. Then 3 things you can hear. Then 2 things you can smell. Then 1 thing you can taste. For example, “I see a red water bottle; I see a blue container...”

Step 3: Refocus:

When the thoughts/feelings/urges arise, instead of taking them at face value or acting on them, refocus your attention onto another behaviour that is wholesome, productive, or enjoyable, for at least a few minutes. This is an active step where you consciously "shift gears."

The "fifteen-minute rule" is often suggested as a guideline: delay your response to the urge for at least fifteen minutes by engaging in a different activity. This is not passive waiting; it's a time to actively Relabel and Regulate, as needed, while engaging in another activity. By consistently refocusing, you are teaching yourself a new habit and rewiring your brain. You are working around the thoughts rather than trying to directly fight them. Over time, the less attention you pay to these experiences the weaker the brain circuits associated with them become and the more control and agency you gain in your life.

Strategies to Refocus:

- Create a list of things you can use to refocus your attention on. It could be thinking about something you enjoy doing. Thinking of a past positive memory/experience. It could be something you can do that you regularly have access to - like reading, walking, talking to someone, organizing your desk, etc.
- Try and think of one thing that you can refocus that you can use as a “go-to” wherever you are. So, ideally an image of a safe place, previous vacation, someone you love, or something you like to think about.

Step 4: Reassess:

Lastly, check-in with yourself. How are you feeling now? Is the thought still taking hold of you? Are you still struggling to regulate the urge to do something you will later regret? If so, redo these steps, starting with Step 1 - Relabel.

Strategies to Reassess:

- If the intensity of your thought was a 10/10 before, what is it now? Is it still above 5/10? If so, redo the steps above.
- Do you need a more engaging regulation strategy to help decrease the intensity? If so, perhaps call/message a friend/loved one. Go outside for a moment and look around you with your feet on the ground. Try a more active strategy - something that requires your full attention (standing on one leg, standing on your tip-toes, do a squat or other movement).

Conclusion

The steps above are not a magic pill. They require regular practice. It is easier said than done to master these steps and to be able to complete them all the time. The hardest part of using these steps will likely be remembering to use them regularly. Using the tip at the very beginning of this document will become very important if you struggle to develop a habit of using these steps.

May you commit yourself to taking care of your needs in a more valued way.