

LivingIntegrated®

FOUR TASKS FOR GETTING YOUR LIFE BACK

TASK ONE: LEARN WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR HEAD

You are here—on the LivingIntegrated website, and particularly having downloaded this free set of four insights and tasks—because you are recognizing you have a problem. Maybe it's pornography. Maybe it's porn and masturbation. Maybe it's not porn but some other sexual activity.

The thing is, it's become a habit and the habit is beginning to bother you in some way.

The first thing I want you to understand is that recognizing you've got some behaviors that bother you and wanting help to change those behaviors is **heroic**. I mean that. Lots of people just pass on the whisper in their heads that says something is not right and they ought to make changes.



That you are not ignoring the whispers in your soul, but rather stepping out and taking action is heroic.

Change is not easy. And especially when sex (in whatever way we experience it) is becoming a habitual pattern. So to take this on and follow through is genuinely courageous. Good for you.

Equally important is for you to know that **you are not alone**. Throughout human history we have always struggled with sexuality. But, largely due to radical developments in technology, more people are having trouble handling sex. They're stumbling into self-reinforcing behaviors that are becoming habitual. You are not alone. There are many of us struggling now.

Finally, please please believe me that there is no shame in having problems with sexuality. You may experience guilt and even negative consequences over some of your behaviors. That's life. But shame—the idea that there's something really wrong with you—is a lie. You are normal.

A BIT ABOUT OUR BRAINS AND THE HABITS THEY CREATE

Our brains are fascinating things. One of the things they do is create shortcuts. That's how, without our intentionalizing it, our brains create habits.

A problem, challenge or opportunity comes up and we look for solutions. Should we find a way to handle that problem, challenge or opportunity in a way that also has satisfaction or a reward, our brains remember. And the next time that problem, challenge, opportunity or set of circumstances comes up the brain may remember how we got to satisfaction or reward.

Do this enough and the brain develops a subconscious fast track to solution/reward. A habit. And every time we engage in the habit (and achieve the reward) we reinforce the habit.

Don't get me wrong. Habitual thinking can be very good. You probably didn't have to think about how to tie your shoes this morning or which way to brush your teeth. Your brain has a well-grooved habit that allows you to save your thinking energy for other things.

But back to rewards. When we're engaging in repetitive acts which have a reward, we need to be vigilant about the types of behavior that cause rewards. Because if it's a negative behavior (depending on our own value systems and/or the consequences) repeating a habit creates the same swift shortcut as riding a bike or driving a car.

One more thing about rewards to shortcuts. They can lead to desire. Cravings. We want more.

The part of our brain that develops and retains shortcuts doesn't evaluate them based on our value system. And it doesn't remove them if they result in negative consequences. Positive or negative, repetition and reward creates shortcuts and then it's up to us to deal with them.

Soon, the slightest (undetected to our conscious mind) cue can cause us to feel a need or strong desire to engage in the solution behavior. This is craving.

SO HOW DO WE BREAK OUR HABITS?

Easier said than done. The best current understanding is that we never really get rid of our habits. When we think of breaking a habit, what we're really doing is *weakening* them and *replacing* them with better habits.

We retrain our brains, figuring out healthier ways to handle the cues in our lives and rewarding ourselves in ways we can feel good about.

Cue. Activity. Reward.

Cues we cannot help. They come unannounced and unsought.
More about them in a minute.

Activity is the behavior that is causing you some trouble.
This is what you're wanting to change.

The rewards are the reinforcements and you want to keep them.
You just don't want them rewarding undesirable behavior.

The cues in our lives keep coming around. These are the familiar landscapes of our lives, and mostly we simply don't notice them. Like any situation where we've lived a long time, we stop noticing things that someone visiting our neighborhood might notice right away. Fresh eyes always see things we've learned to ignore.

We have to reacquire fresh eyes to register our cues. Restlessness. Boredom. A certain time of day. Stress. Some pattern we've stumbled into. Certain conversations. Pop-up memories. All these and more become our cues that we want stimulation that will make us feel better.

So, what are your cues? This takes time and reflection and paying attention to figure out. One strategy that many have found helpful is to practice observing your thoughts, feelings and actions. And then describing your thoughts, feelings and actions to yourself—out loud or writing them down.

It is not easy. But it is important.

The routine you engage in is probably what is causing you some distress right now.

For instance, a friend of mine is in a stressful job. When he notices that his stress level is particularly high, distracting him or causing him to fear failure, the cue he experiences—in a flash by the way—is wanting to escape. He doesn't think "I want to escape" as much as he feels a restlessness, or a panicky feeling. Dread. Overwhelmed.

And his brain registers the cue. His routine has been to take a break, look at porn, masturbate. The reward is escaping and the pleasurable feelings around the stimulation and reward.

He catalogued his cues and then looked for a stimulating activity that is not porn (or sex) related to substitute. Something that delivers relief or stimulation but doesn't result in guilt and shame.

And he has done this repeatedly. Over and over. Regularly. You get the idea.

He hasn't lost his vulnerability to the wonder of sex. But he has replaced his problematic behavior with something that is no less effective and at the same time much more beneficial to him.

Is this easy? Absolutely not!

But it's doable. You can do this. And you want to do this.

It is the way to a life you can feel good about. You have to resolve to break this pattern now. If you don't, it will progress.

DO SOME RESEARCH ON HOW YOUR BRAIN WORKS _____

A helpful online video that demonstrates what we're talking about is "The Road to Brighton." Paula Hall developed this brilliant illustration of the brain and addiction.

Now, hopefully, you are not an addict (yet). But watch this four to five minute video for a good understanding of how the brain develops habits, which are self-reinforcing.

<http://visibleministries.com/road-to-brighton/>

SUMMARY ACTION STEPS

- Watch the companion video for Task One: <https://youtu.be/R6jVAw4DI-E>
- Reflect and record what cues lead you to the behaviors you'd like to change
- Watch the video "The Road to Brighton"
- Develop a list of rewarding routines you can substitute for your problematic behaviors

A BIBLE TEXT FOR THINKING ABOUT OUR SEXUAL HABITS

“All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be enslaved by anything. ‘food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food’—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.”

1 Corinthians 6:12-14

PRAYER

Prayer is a conversation with your Father in Heaven over matters that concern you and him.

There are many ways to pray for the breaking and building of habits. It is preferable for you to discover or develop your own. But here is a suggested prayer for you to get you started in this important, ongoing conversation.

*My Father, I know my body and my soul belong to You.
Help me to grow in that understanding, and to learn more and
more that your purposes for me are good, healthy and holy.
Help me to grow as your child and learn more and more to live
my life in ways that are good and healthy and respectful of you.
Help me to break those habits which are harmful to me and
build in me behaviors which are life-giving.*

Amen.

