

Wild North Recovery Toolkit

A neuroscience-based and compassion-centered guide for healing from porn addiction.

This toolkit combines the most powerful insights from **neuroscience, behavioral psychology, spiritual teachings, and evidence-based recovery practices**, along with direct action steps you can integrate daily.

It distills wisdom from some of the world's greatest thinkers, clinicians, and teachers and explores methods that addicts have used to successfully meet their goals.

Each section is a tool you can use in your recovery process. Use one, or use all. Dig deeper into the tools you find effective for you. This toolkit is intended to bridge understanding (how your brain and emotions work) with practice (what you can do right now), so you can rewire your nervous system, reconnect with purpose, and rediscover what it means to live fully.

"Any behaviour in which a person finds temporary relief or pleasure and therefore craves, but suffers negative consequences, and yet has difficulty giving up." — **Gabor Maté's Definition of Addiction**

While this toolkit focuses on **porn addiction**, you can substitute any addiction you may be facing in its place—**sex, gambling, or substance use**. All addictions originate from the same source: an **inner void**.

Chemical addictions may alter the brain more drastically over the long term, but **behavioral addictions are also chemical**. You're not addicted to the behaviour itself—you're addicted to the **dopamine and endorphin reactions** in your brain. Over time, these behavioural patterns change your brain chemistry and wiring just as substance addictions do.

1. Understanding the Brain on Porn

Craving and Comfort: The Two Systems That Shape Addiction

(Subsection of 1. Understanding the Brain on Porn)

To get over addiction- it helps to know what you're up against biologically and to understand why your addiction seems to have a hold on you.

Porn rewires your brain's reward system. Each time you watch, your brain releases **dopamine** (motivation and craving) and **endorphins** (pleasure and relief). These chemicals evolved to reward connection and intimacy—but with porn, the stimulation is **unnaturally strong and endless**. Over time, the brain adapts.

How the Brain Adapts

System	What Happens	How It Feels
Dopamine	Receptors become less sensitive, so you need more stimulation to feel excitement.	Boredom, procrastination, low motivation, flat pleasure.
Opioid	Natural opioids drop; pain and stress systems become overactive.	Anxiety, irritability, emotional numbness, craving for relief.

Effects on the Brain's Dopamine System

Dopamine is the brain's **motivation and craving chemical**—it drives us to pursue rewards, not just enjoy them. When you anticipate or seek out pleasure, dopamine surges, giving that restless, “just one more” feeling. It's what fuels both creativity and compulsion.

When dopamine receptors become **less sensitive** (a process called *downregulation*), your brain stops responding as strongly to normal levels of stimulation.

Activities that once felt rewarding—social connection, touch, music, or creativity—now register as dull.

To reach the same level of excitement or relief, the brain drives you to seek **more intensity**—more novelty, longer sessions, or more extreme content.

This mirrors substance addiction: the pleasure system becomes **tolerant**, pushing you to chase the high that used to come easily.

Over time, craving takes center stage. Dopamine keeps you chasing, while true satisfaction (regulated by endorphins) falls behind. This creates the loop of wanting more but enjoying less.

The more you engage, the less it satisfies—and the stronger the compulsion becomes.

Recovery reverses this by allowing receptor sensitivity to rebuild through rest, connection, and healthy stimulation.

Effects on the Brain's Opioid System

Endorphins are part of the brain's **endogenous opioid system**—our natural pain-relief and comfort network. They're the body's version of morphine, binding to opioid receptors that reduce pain and increase pleasure. When balanced, this system helps you feel calm, safe, and connected through natural rewards like touch, laughter, exercise, and intimacy.

Chronic overstimulation, however, desensitizes these receptors. The brain then struggles to generate pleasure or relief without intense external input, creating the emotional flatness common in addiction.

Recovery allows these receptors to **re-sensitize**, restoring the ability to feel genuine comfort and connection.

Impaired Decision-Making Circuits

When addiction takes hold, the brain's **orbitofrontal cortex (OFC)**—the center for impulse control and decision-making—can start to label the addictive behavior as a short-term positive. In other words, the brain begins to view the addiction as something beneficial, despite its long-term harm. The OFC becomes caught in a cycle where immediate relief is prioritized over future well-being, reinforcing compulsive behavior.

The watchman is aiding the thieves

The thieves being the dopamine and opioid systems, and the watchman being the flawed decision-making circuits stemming from the OFC.

The Compulsion Loop

Overstimulation → Dopamine Flood → Receptor Downregulation → Tolerance → Craving
→ Repetition → Recovery (through Rest & Connection)

This loop shows how porn hijacks the natural balance between desire and satisfaction. Healing happens when you interrupt the cycle long enough for your brain to remember what real pleasure feels like.

The Reset Plan: Rebuilding Dopamine & Endorphins

Practice	Why It Works
Exercise & Movement	Triggers natural endorphins and reduces stress hormones.
Novelty & Challenge	Rebuilds dopamine motivation through healthy goals.
Connection & Touch	Restores endorphin and oxytocin flow through real closeness.
Meditation & Breathwork	Calms the nervous system and strengthens self-awareness.
Purpose & Creation	Aligns dopamine with meaning, not escape.

Your brain is protecting you and can relearn safety and natural highs through recovery.

2. Identifying & Reducing Triggers

Triggers are learned associations between cues and reward. They aren't random — they're your brain's way of anticipating relief. By redesigning your environment, you reduce those cues and make healthy choices easier.

Activity: 3 Circles

Draw 3 circles. An inner circle, one around that (middle circle), and an outer circle. It should look like a target.

At the inner circle, list your most potent triggers. For the middle circle, list weaker triggers. For the outer circle, list what makes you feel safe and protected from addiction and triggers (people, places, activities).

Prompt:

What in your environment, or state of mind, triggers your addictive behaviour?

Be specific (ex: Driving down Rogers Ave, past the sex shop on my way to work).

Type	Examples	Signal
Emotional	Stress, loneliness, shame	Need for comfort or safety
Situational	Late nights, being alone	Habitual escape time
Digital	Social media, certain sites	Expected dopamine hit
Sensory	Lighting, fatigue, alcohol, boredom	Familiar escape cue

3. Parts Work (Internal Family Systems)

So long as we resent the parts of ourselves that engages in an undesirable behaviour, healing will be impossible. We will get stuck in a shame cycle and go nowhere.

All parts of ourselves are trying to help us. The part of you that keeps craving porn is trying to give you a sense of pleasure, escape, or stress relief. In **Internal Family Systems (IFS)**, addiction is seen not as the problem, but as a protective strategy used by a part of you to manage pain. Healing begins when you turn toward that part with curiosity and compassion rather than hatred.

Ask yourself:

- What is this part of me trying to protect?
- How old is this part of me?
- When did this become a strategy for my escape?
- How can I approach this part of me with curiosity, rather than judgement?
- How can I also honour the part of me that is judging my behaviours (your inner critic)?

It is hard to vilify the addictive parts of ourselves. On the surface they are destroying our relationships, our potential, and our lives. But if we seek to understand them, we will see they are misguided in their attempts to bring us relief, connection, and joy. Rather than push our addictive parts out, we need to bring them in, own them, hear them, feel them, understand them, and help them mature and build new strategies to help us with their goals of connection and peace.

Activity: Research the "8 C's of Self".

Questions: What is the Self? How do you know when the Self is steering your ship?

4. Applying the 12 Steps

You don't need to join a 12-Step group to learn from its wisdom. Its essence is honesty, surrender, accountability, and connection.

The 12 Steps (Simplified and Interpreted)

Step	Principle	Interpretation
1	Honesty	Admit that your current way isn't working; face the truth without shame.
2	Hope	Believe that healing is possible through connection, courage, and honesty.
3	Surrender	Let go of control; accept help from others and something greater than ego.
4	Self-Inventory	Look inward; identify resentments, fears, and patterns that block growth.
5	Confession	Share your truth with another human being; bring secrets into the light.
6	Readiness	Become willing to let go of the behaviors that cause suffering.
7	Humility	Ask for help in removing what no longer serves you.
8	Making Amends	Identify those you've harmed and prepare to restore integrity.
9	Repair & Reconciliation	Make amends wherever possible with honesty and respect.
10	Daily Practice	Continue self-reflection and take responsibility for mistakes quickly.
11	Spiritual Connection	Cultivate inner stillness, prayer, or meditation for guidance.
12	Service	Help others who struggle; healing deepens when shared.

5. Radical Honesty

Addiction thrives in secrecy; truth dissolves it.

"The kind of lying that is most deadly is withholding, or keeping back information from someone we think would be affected by it. Psychological illness of the severest kind is the result of this kind of lying. Psychological healing is possible only with the freedom that comes from not hiding anymore" -**Brad Blanton in Radical Honesty**

Why It Works

Telling the truth activates the **prefrontal cortex** (awareness and choice) and quiets the **amygdala** (fear). This restores calm, clarity, and courage.

Practicing Radical Honesty

1. **Name what's real.** Label your thoughts and cravings without editing.
2. **Stop Moralizing:** Judgement about right and wrong will dig you deeper into despair and conceal truth.
3. **Speak it somewhere safe.** Therapy, men's groups, trusted friends.
4. **Feel the release.** Truth telling temporarily can increase suffering, but it is a long-term release.
5. **Repeat often.** Truth becomes strength through practice.

Every time you tell the truth, you honour yourself and the person you are speaking to. A relationship with low truth telling will be disconnected.

6. The Five R's: A Strategy for Shifting Cravings

The **Five R's** provide a structured way to respond to cravings with awareness and agency. This is pulled straight from "In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts" by Gabor Maté.

1. Re-Label

Identify the urge for what it is: *a thought or sensation, not a command.*

"This is a craving, not a need."

2. Re-Attribute

Remind yourself where it comes from—a temporary brain state, not your identity.

"This is my brain firing old circuits, not who I am."

3. Re-Focus

Shift attention to something grounding, physical, or meaningful for at least 15 minutes.

Walk, stretch, journal, breathe, call someone.

4. Re-Value

Challenge the old belief that the behavior gives pleasure or relief. See it as it really is—a short-term escape that costs long-term peace.

"This isn't comfort—it's avoidance. Real peace comes from connection."

5. Re-Create

Replace the moment with a healthy ritual: creativity, connection, nature, music, or service. Every new choice rewires your reward system.

Each R is a muscle. Practiced often, they form a reflex toward freedom.

7. Setting Your Goal: From Abstinence to Sobriety

Healing requires direction — not perfection. Your recovery path begins with setting a **clear and realistic goal** that fits your stage of growth and readiness. There's no single right answer; what matters is **your honesty** about where you are and where you want to go.

Goal Options

1. Intentional Use

For those in the earliest stages, the goal may be to **maintain current frequency** while becoming more **conscious and intentional** about each choice to watch porn. *Pause before each use and ask, "What am I seeking right now?" Track how it feels before and after. Awareness itself begins to weaken compulsion.*

2. Lesser Use

For those beginning the journey, the goal may be to **reduce use** and track patterns honestly. *Specify a clear, measurable boundary — for example, "I will limit use to once per week" or "I will not engage with porn after 10 p.m." Use this phase to learn about your triggers, not to shame yourself. Awareness is progress.*

3. Temporary Abstinence

Set a goal for a duration of time you want to abstain from watching porn (potentially masturbating as well).

Total Abstinence

Abstinence means **complete avoidance of the behavior or substance** — no porn. *Abstinence helps the brain reset dopamine and opioid receptor sensitivity. It's a period of rewiring and self-observation — learning who you are without the chemical loop.*

Total Sobriety

Sobriety goes deeper than abstinence. It's not just about what you avoid, but **who you become** when you no longer need to escape. Sobriety is a commitment to living with **presence, integrity, and self-trust**. As **Abraham Maslow** wrote, **"I think of the self-actualizing man not as an ordinary man with something added but rather as the ordinary man free of the crippling addictions that block self-actualization."**

Abstinence vs. Sobriety (Symbolism of Pinocchio)

Gabor Maté often references the story of *Pinocchio* to illustrate the movement from addiction to wholeness. Abstinence is like the wooden puppet — rigid, restrained, controlled by strings of fear and willpower. Sobriety, however, is when *Pinocchio becomes a real boy* — alive, connected, capable of love and choice.

Addiction is when the strings of pain and craving pull your actions. Sobriety is when you cut those strings and move with your own will.

Sobriety means reclaiming your freedom from the illusion that you need anything outside yourself to feel whole.

8. Discipline

Once you have decided on your goals, it's time to tap into **discipline**. The deeper you are into an addiction, the more it feels like you don't have a choice—but discipline is the bridge between intention and change. It's going to take strength, courage, consistency, and endurance to pull yourself out of any addiction—remember, you are not powerless.

Here, we ask you to reflect on the parts of your life that already require discipline, and how that same capacity can serve your recovery. You already know how to endure hard things.

- Write down times in your life when you demonstrated discipline or endurance: working out, training in martial arts, committing to a sports team, showing up for your job on time, finishing a project, or supporting someone you care about.
- Notice what qualities helped you persevere—focus, patience, resilience—and see how you can apply them now.
- Overcoming Withdrawal: When you quit a behavioral addiction, you may feel anxiety, irritability, brain fog, low mood, and strong cravings as your dopamine and endorphin systems reset. These symptoms typically peak within the first 1–3 weeks and gradually ease over 4–8 weeks as your brain restores natural balance and sensitivity to pleasure.

9. Aiming Higher

To aim higher means choosing a life that honors your potential rather than shrinking from it. It's not about never falling, but about walking toward something that's worth the pain.

A higher aim invites you to:

- **Actualize your potential** — to grow beyond survival into creativity, love, and purpose.
- **Connect deeply with others** — building authentic relationships that nourish both truth and joy.
- **Engage in spiritual practice** — whatever connects you to something greater than your ego's needs.

Even when you fall short of your highest aim, you'll land far ahead of where you started. To aim for a life of wholeness, presence, and contribution is to live in alignment with the best parts of your nature.

This is your one life. Aim for depth, aim for truth, aim for connection and let the journey itself be the reward.

10. Actionables

Reflection Journal Prompts

What truth am I avoiding right now?

When I feel bored, what is really happening beneath the surface?

What would it feel like to sit with boredom instead of escaping it?

How might boredom transform into peace, relaxation, or focus if I stopped running from it?

With all that's going on in my life, why is it so hard to sit with it- or to sit and do nothing?

What environment makes it hardest to stay present?

What are some systems I can implement to keep myself accountable to my goals?

How do I need to change my environment or lifestyle to reduce triggers?

What could my life look like beyond this addiction?

If I take away my addiction, what would I like to fill the void it leaves with?

Who is in my support system? Who can I call or rely on to support me in my journey towards sobriety?

What are times in my life I've demonstrated discipline and consistency?

Am I ready to leave this behaviour behind or is it still somehow

What will I have to endure to achieve abstinence or sobriety?

Challenges - Daily Challenges (Pick one or more to combat craving)

- **Sit and do nothing for at least 30 minutes.** Notice the cravings that come up. Log your emotions — agitation, restlessness, peace, boredom. Observe them without judgment.
- **Seek out a reconnecting activity.** Have coffee with a friend, go on a solo date to a show, art gallery, or concert.
- **Self-care practice.** Sit in a sauna, stretch/ do yoga, seek out an ice bath facility, take a cold shower, or intentionally read a chapter of a psychology, spiritual, or history book.
- **Abstinence Challenge.** Set a timer and see how long you can abstain. Mark down how long your abstinence lasts. If you engage in pornography (or other sexual behaviours you're abstaining from), start over and try to beat your high score.

Resources

Primary Resources for This Toolkit

- *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* — **Gabor Maté**
- *Radical Honesty* — **Brad Blanton**
- *Man's Search for Meaning* — **Viktor Frankl**
- *Conversations with God* — **Neale Donald Walsch**
- *Maslow's Idea of Self-Actualization* — **Abraham Maslow**
- *No Bad Parts* — **Richard Schwartz**
- **Leo Gura** — Actualized.org podcasts "[Overcoming Addiction](#)" & "[Subtle Addictions](#)"