

HOW YOUR BRAIN GETS HIJACKED

Why unhealthy patterns can feel automatic -
and how to practice a better next choice.



"Under strain, choice can become harder. It does not become impossible."

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HIJACKED DOES NOT MEAN BROKEN

Your Brain Is Learning From Repetition

When a behavior begins to feel automatic, it is easy to label yourself as lazy, weak, undisciplined, or broken. Those labels create shame, but they do not explain the pattern.

Your brain is designed to recognize patterns, conserve effort, respond to danger, and repeat actions that bring relief or reward. That design makes daily life possible. It can also make an unhelpful response easier to repeat when the same situation, action, and immediate payoff happen again and again.

In this guide, hijacked is a metaphor. It describes the feeling of being pulled toward a familiar response before your long-term goals have fully entered the conversation. Your brain has not been stolen from you. It may be tired, stressed, conditioned, emotionally overwhelmed, or reacting to a powerful trigger. You can practice a different response, and repetition can help strengthen it.

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE?

Time, place, thought, person, or event

WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE?

Emotion, hunger, fatigue, pain, or loneliness

WHAT DID YOU DO?

Describe the action without judgment

WHAT CHANGED RIGHT AWAY?

Relief, comfort, escape, stimulation, or connection

WHAT DID IT COST LATER?

Sleep, energy, mood, health, money, or relationships

THE INTERRUPTION POINT

You may not control the first thought, feeling, urge, or trigger. You can practice creating a pause before the next response. Curiosity helps you find where that pause can begin.

ONE PATTERN I WANT TO UNDERSTAND MORE CLEARLY:



WHAT STRENGTHENS AUTOMATIC PATTERNS?

Six Common Forces That Can Make a Familiar Pattern Louder

INSUFFICIENT SLEEP

Sleep supports attention, memory, emotional regulation, and decision-making. When sleep is short or disrupted, reactions can feel louder and deliberate choices can become harder. [1,2]

CHRONIC OR INTENSE STRESS

Stress can narrow attention and interfere with planning and working memory. Under strain, the familiar response may feel like the easiest response. [3]

REPEATED TRIGGERS + REWARDS

A time, place, feeling, person, or object can become linked with a behavior. When the action brings comfort, stimulation, escape, or relief, repetition can strengthen the pattern. [4,5]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Choices that are visible, convenient, available, or socially reinforced are easier to repeat. Changing the context can interrupt an established pattern. [4,5]

ADDICTIVE SUBSTANCES

Alcohol, nicotine, and other addictive drugs can affect reward, stress, learning, judgment, and self-control systems. Needing support is not a moral failure. [6,7,8]

EMOTIONAL PAIN

Grief, loneliness, rejection, fear, shame, and overwhelm may increase the pull toward immediate relief. Some coping responses can provide short-term relief while carrying a later cost. [16]

IMPORTANT SCOPE NOTE

Not every repeated behavior is simply a habit. Addiction, compulsions, eating disorders, trauma responses, self-harm, and behaviors connected to a medical or mental-health condition may require specialized care in addition to the tools in this guide.

THE TAKEAWAY

Your first response may arrive automatically. A different next response can be noticed, chosen, practiced, and strengthened.



MAP THE PATTERN BEFORE YOU FIGHT IT

A Behavior Usually Makes More Sense When You See the Full Sequence

The goal is not to excuse the behavior. The goal is to understand the immediate effect the pattern may be providing, what it costs later, and where a different choice can enter.

1. WHAT HAPPENED IMMEDIATELY BEFORE?

Time, place, person, thought, event, notification, conflict, or body sensation.

2. WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE?

Emotion, hunger, fatigue, pain, loneliness, boredom, stress, or overwhelm.

3. WHAT DID YOU DO?

Describe the action without exaggeration or judgment.

4. WHAT CHANGED RIGHT AWAY?

Relief, comfort, stimulation, escape, connection, numbness, or a sense of control.

5. WHAT HAPPENED LATER?

Changes in sleep, energy, mood, pain, regret, money, health, or relationships.

6. WHAT COULD MEET THE SAME NEED AT A LOWER COST?

Choose something small, honest, helpful, and possible.



THE BE WELL FELLOWS RESET METHOD

You Do Not Need to Solve Your Whole Life in the Moment of a Trigger

You need a sequence that creates enough space for one better next step. Practice it before the hard moment so it is easier to remember during the hard moment.

RECOGNIZE WHAT IS HAPPENING**R**

Name what is happening without turning it into a verdict about who you are. "I am overwhelmed and reaching for relief" is more useful than "I always ruin everything."

EVALUATE WHAT YOU NEED**E**

Check sleep, nourishment, hydration, pain, movement, loneliness, overstimulation, and emotional strain. These conditions may increase strain or make the moment harder.

SELECT ONE SMALL HELPFUL ACTION**S**

Make the helpful action small enough to begin now: drink water, step outside, take five slow breaths if focused breathing feels comfortable, prepare one meal, walk for five minutes, or text one trusted person.

EDIT THE ENVIRONMENT**E**

Make the old pattern harder to reach and prepare the helpful choice before you need it. Move the trigger, silence a notification, prepare the alternative, change the route when appropriate, or create a boundary.

TELL SOMEONE + TRACK IT**T**

Support can reduce isolation, and tracking turns a vague struggle into useful information. Record what happened, what you chose, the result, and what you learned. Choose a safe and appropriate person or professional.

THE SMALLEST HELPFUL ACTION I CAN TAKE WHEN THE PATTERN BEGINS:

RESTORE THE FOUNDATIONS

Better Conditions Make Better Choices More Available

These basics do not erase grief, trauma, illness, addiction, or hardship. They give your brain and body more support for the work ahead. Rate each area from 1 (needs attention) to 5 (strong foundation).

SLEEP

Ages 18-60: 7 or more hours | 61-64: 7-9 hours | 65+: 7-8 hours. Also consider sleep quality, consistency, and whether you wake feeling restored. [1]

MY RATING

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5**NOURISHMENT**

Enough energy, protein, fiber, and nutrient-rich foods for your individual needs.

MY RATING

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5**HYDRATION**

Enough fluid for your health, activity, climate, medications, and medical needs.

MY RATING

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5**MOVEMENT**

Aerobic activity, strength-building, and balance work as appropriate for your ability, health, and current condition. [9]

MY RATING

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5**DAYLIGHT + RHYTHM**

Daytime light helps support circadian timing. A reasonably consistent sleep and wake schedule may also help stabilize your sleep-wake rhythm. [10,11]

MY RATING

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5**CONNECTION + CARE**

Support from friends, family, coaches, therapists, physicians, support groups, or a trusted community.

MY RATING

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5**TURN THE AUDIT INTO ACTION**

Circle one area rated 1 or 2. Choose one realistic action that could improve it this week. You do not need to rebuild every foundation at once.

A single episode of physical activity can reduce anxiety and improve sleep quality; regular activity adds longer-term benefits. [12]



DESIGN YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Willpower Is Useful. Preparation Keeps Working When Willpower Is Tired.

MAKE THE OLD PATTERN HARDER TO REACH

- Move the trigger out of sight
- For a nonurgent impulse, experiment with a brief pause
- Log out or remove saved payment information
- Change the route or setting temporarily when appropriate
- Create a clear personal boundary
- Remove the notification
- Do not keep the trigger within easy reach

PREPARE THE HELPFUL CHOICE BEFORE YOU NEED IT

- Prepare tomorrow tonight
- Put water, shoes, or nourishing food where you will see them
- Schedule the action
- Choose a two-minute starting version
- Ask someone to join you or check in
- Place reminders where the decision happens
- Make the desired action the easiest available option

USE ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES THOUGHTFULLY

These ideas are intended for ordinary habits and nonurgent behavior patterns. When a pattern involves anxiety, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, disordered eating, trauma, medication, or a prescribed treatment plan, changing or avoiding triggers should be discussed with an appropriate professional.

ONE TRIGGER I CAN REMOVE, MOVE, OR MAKE LESS CONVENIENT:

ONE HELPFUL ACTION I CAN PREPARE IN ADVANCE:

ONE SAFE PERSON OR PROFESSIONAL I CAN CONTACT:

MEDICATION AND WITHDRAWAL SAFETY

Do not abruptly stop prolonged heavy alcohol use or benzodiazepines without medical guidance. Some other prescribed sedative medicines can also cause dangerous withdrawal. Ask the prescribing clinician or another qualified healthcare professional how to stop safely. [13,14]



YOUR SEVEN-DAY EXPERIMENT

Choose One Pattern. Gather Evidence, Not a Verdict.

Use short notes. The goal is not perfection. The goal is to learn what strengthens the pattern and what helps you interrupt it.

DAY 1

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE / WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

BETTER NEXT RESPONSE

RESULT / LESSON

DAY 2

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE / WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

BETTER NEXT RESPONSE

RESULT / LESSON

DAY 3

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE / WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

BETTER NEXT RESPONSE

RESULT / LESSON



CONTINUE THE SEVEN-DAY EXPERIMENT

Notice Patterns Without Judging Yourself

DAY 4

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE / WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

BETTER NEXT RESPONSE

RESULT / LESSON

DAY 5

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE / WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

BETTER NEXT RESPONSE

RESULT / LESSON

DAY 6

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE / WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

BETTER NEXT RESPONSE

RESULT / LESSON



COMPLETE THE EXPERIMENT

Day Seven Deserves the Same Attention as Every Other Day

DAY 7

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE / WHAT WAS HAPPENING INSIDE

WHAT I WANTED TO DO

BETTER NEXT RESPONSE

RESULT / LESSON

THE SITUATION OR INTERNAL STATE I NOTICED MOST OFTEN:

THE REPLACEMENT RESPONSE THAT HELPED MOST:

THE NEXT ADJUSTMENT I WILL MAKE:

A LAPSE IS INFORMATION

Study what happened without turning it into shame. Ask what was different about the situation, what support was missing, and what you can prepare before the next hard moment.

ASKING FOR HELP IS AN ACTION

Coaching can support education, awareness, routines, accountability, and behavior change. It does not diagnose or treat medical conditions, mental illness, addiction, sleep disorders, or eating disorders.



KNOW WHEN THE NEXT STEP IS PROFESSIONAL CARE

This Guide Is a Starting Point, Not a Substitute for Treatment

SEEK MEDICAL OR MENTAL-HEALTH EVALUATION WHEN:

- A behavior change is sudden, severe, or affecting safety, work, finances, eating, sleep, or relationships.
- You have confusion, fainting, chest pain, severe withdrawal symptoms, a medication reaction, or another urgent physical symptom.
- Sleep problems persist, you are excessively sleepy, or someone reports loud snoring, gasping, or pauses in breathing.
- The pattern involves addiction, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, an eating disorder, OCD, trauma, or another condition needing specialized care.

IMMEDIATE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

In the United States, call or text 988 or use the 988 Lifeline chat for free, confidential support 24/7. If you are in immediate danger or experiencing a medical emergency, call 911. Outside the United States, contact your local crisis service or emergency number. [15]

**CHOOSE THE RIGHT KIND OF SUPPORT**

- Wellness coaching: education, awareness, routines, accountability, and sustainable behavior change.
- Medical care: symptoms, diagnoses, medications, withdrawal risk, sleep disorders, and physical health concerns.
- Mental-health care: depression, anxiety, trauma, OCD, eating disorders, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and other clinical concerns.
- Substance-use treatment: assessment, withdrawal planning, evidence-based treatment, and recovery support.

A SIMPLE NEXT-STEP PLAN

1. Name what is happening. 2. Decide whether the situation is urgent. 3. Choose the appropriate person or professional. 4. Tell them clearly what you are experiencing and what help you need. 5. If the first person cannot help, keep reaching until you find the right support.

Asking for help is not giving up. It is choosing the next right action.

SOURCES USED IN THIS GUIDE

Evidence + Resources

The citations below support the guide's central statements about sleep, stress, habits, addiction, physical activity, circadian timing, withdrawal safety, and crisis support. Titles and links are clickable in the digital PDF.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Created by Melissa Welfel, Wellness Coach | BCS, CES, CNC, CPT, CWC, VCS. The Be Well Fellows RESET Method is an educational behavior-change framework. This guide may be shared by linking to the original Be Well Fellows download page. It may not be altered, reproduced for sale, or presented as another person's work.



Every action is a vote. What are you voting for today?

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