

ADHD and Compulsive Behaviour

Understanding urges, loops and the first pause

Educational information for adults | Adult ADHD | Compassionate and non-judgemental

Many adults know that a behaviour is causing problems, but still feel pulled back to it.

They may promise themselves they will stop drinking, stop scrolling, stop gambling, stop spending, stop binge eating, stop using substances, stop overworking or stop chasing the next intense thing.

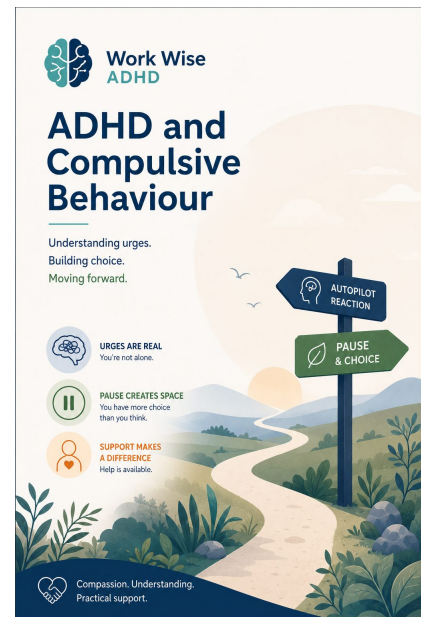
They may mean it completely in the moment. Then the urge comes back, the behaviour happens again, and shame often follows.

“Why do I keep doing this when I know it is hurting me?”

The answer is not simple. It is not about weakness, laziness or a lack of willpower.

For some adults, compulsive behaviours are linked to the way ADHD affects regulation. This may include attention, emotion, motivation, impulse control, stress, boredom, reward and the ability to pause before acting.

This leaflet is designed to help adults understand those patterns more clearly.



Adult ADHD and compulsive behaviour: key facts

Increased vulnerability	Often overlapping	Often missed	Not destiny
Adults with ADHD may be more vulnerable to substance misuse and some compulsive behaviour patterns.	Around one in five to one in four people in substance misuse treatment may also meet criteria for ADHD.	ADHD can remain unidentified in addiction and recovery settings.	ADHD does not cause addiction. These figures are broad risk indicators, not predictions.

Figures vary between studies and populations. They should be understood as broad indicators of increased risk, not as predictions for any individual person.

ADHD does not cause addiction, but it can increase vulnerability

ADHD does not mean someone will develop an addiction. ADHD does not mean someone lacks self-control. ADHD does not excuse harmful behaviour.

But ADHD can make some adults more vulnerable to getting stuck in compulsive patterns.

Research suggests that ADHD is often found alongside substance use disorders in adults. Studies have estimated that around one in five to one in four people seeking treatment for substance misuse may also meet criteria for ADHD, although figures vary by population and diagnostic method.

These figures do not mean ADHD causes addiction. They do show that the overlap matters.

The missing question is often, “What is this behaviour doing for me?”

When someone is struggling with a compulsive behaviour, the focus is often on stopping. Stopping may be necessary, especially when a behaviour is causing harm.

But stopping becomes much harder if someone does not understand what the behaviour was doing for them in the first place.

“What need is this behaviour trying to meet?”

The behaviour may be serving a purpose. Understanding that purpose does not make the behaviour safe. It does not remove responsibility. But it does create a starting point for change.

Alcohol may quiet racing thoughts. Nicotine may feel like it improves focus. Gambling may create stimulation. Shopping may provide quick reward. Social media may offer connection, novelty or escape. Food may provide comfort. Work may provide achievement, identity or control. Risk-taking may create intensity when life feels flat.

ADHD is about regulation, not just attention

ADHD is often described as a difficulty with attention. That is only part of the picture.

For many adults, ADHD affects the ability to regulate focus, emotions, motivation, energy, time, impulses, stress, boredom, sleep, frustration and delayed rewards.

When the brain feels under-stimulated, overwhelmed, restless or emotionally flooded, it naturally looks for something that changes the state quickly.

Dopamine and reward, explained carefully

Dopamine is involved in motivation, reward, learning and the brain's ability to notice what feels important.

It is often said that ADHD is caused by “low dopamine.” That is too simple.

ADHD involves differences in the brain systems that support motivation, reward, attention and impulse control. Dopamine is one part of that picture.

What is a compulsive behaviour?

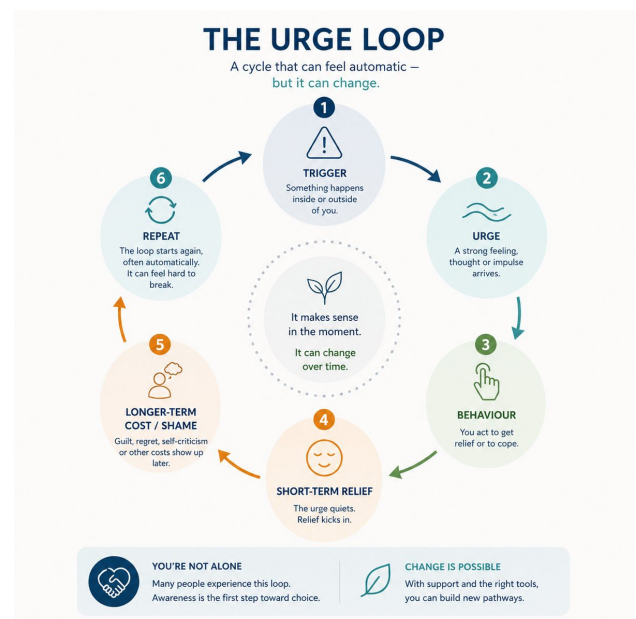
A compulsive behaviour is not just something someone enjoys. It is a behaviour that starts to feel difficult to control, even when it creates consequences.

It may involve substances, such as alcohol, nicotine or drugs. It may also involve behaviours, such as gambling, gaming, shopping, social media, binge eating, pornography, risky sex, overworking, compulsive exercise or risk-taking.

Is this behaviour becoming difficult to control, causing harm, or taking me further away from the life I want?

Work Wise Insight

Many adults with ADHD do not have a motivation problem. They have a regulation problem. Understanding the loop gives people something more useful than shame: a place to intervene.



The ADHD urge loop

Many compulsive behaviours follow a loop. The behaviour may look different from person to person, but the pattern is often similar.

Something happens. The brain starts searching for a fast solution. The person reaches for the quickest available way to change how they feel.

For a while, it may work. The person may feel calmer, more confident, more focussed, more alive, more numb or more in control.

The cost may arrive later. It may be financial, emotional, physical, relational or professional. After the behaviour, shame often appears. Shame increases distress, and distress can become the next trigger.

Change begins with the pause

The first aim is not to fix everything immediately. The first aim is to slow the loop down.

Trigger, urge, pause, choice

The pause matters because it teaches the brain that an urge is not an instruction. An urge is a signal. It can be noticed. It can be named. It can be delayed. It can be understood.

A simple way to start: name the urge

When an urge appears, try saying: "This is an urge."

Not: "I am failing." Not: "I am weak." Not: "I am broken."

Not: "I have no control."

That small shift creates distance between the person and the behaviour.

The five question pause

1. What just happened?
2. What am I feeling?
3. What am I trying to change?
4. What reward is my brain asking for?
5. What will this cost me later?

If tracking in the moment is too hard

Many people cannot track an urge while it is happening. That is normal. Looking back still counts.

What happened before it? What did I feel? What did I want the behaviour to give me? What did it give me in the short-term? What did it cost me later?

This is not about self-criticism. It is about collecting clues.

Reducing shame does not remove responsibility

Understanding is not the same as excusing. A person can take responsibility for behaviour while also recognising the factors that made the behaviour more likely.

Shame says: "I am bad." Understanding says: "There is a pattern here, and patterns can be changed."

Recovery is not just removal. It is replacement.

Many people are told what to stop. But if a behaviour has been helping someone regulate, removing it can leave a gap.

"How can I meet the same need in a safer way?"

This is where recovery becomes more than stopping. It becomes building.

Safer ways to meet the need

If the need is relief: warm shower, breathing exercise, weighted blanket, calm music, rest, grounding, talking to someone safe.

If the need is stimulation: fast walk, short workout, music, cold water on hands or face, timed challenge, novel task, creative activity.

If the need is connection: message a safe person, attend a support group, body doubling, voice note, community space, recovery meeting.

If the need is control: write a three step plan, tidy one small area, review spending limits, plan tomorrow's first task, use an accountability tool.

If the need is achievement: complete a five minute task, track one urge, make one appointment, cook one meal, prepare one question for a professional.

"There are other ways to change how I feel."

When professional support is needed

Self-awareness is valuable, but it is not always enough.

- A substance or behaviour feels hard to control
- It is escalating or causing harm
- It is affecting work, health, relationships or finances

- It is linked to withdrawal symptoms
- It is being used to cope with trauma, distress or suicidal thoughts
- It feels unsafe to stop alone

Important warning

Do not suddenly stop heavy alcohol use, benzodiazepines or some other substances without medical advice. Withdrawal can be dangerous. If there is immediate danger, seek emergency help.

A note about ADHD medication and addiction

Some adults worry that a history of addiction means they can never receive ADHD medication. The reality is more individual.

Substance use, addiction risk, stability, medication choice, safeguarding, physical health and prescribing governance all matter.

This decision should always be made with an appropriately qualified clinician. This leaflet does not provide medication advice.

Looking ahead: future Titrio behaviour-tracking tools

Work Wise ADHD and Titrio Focus may explore future tools that help adults notice patterns in urges, triggers and compulsive behaviours without judgement.

This would be separate from medication advice, addiction treatment or crisis support. The purpose would not be to diagnose addiction, replace treatment or tell someone what to do.

A helpful future tool would not simply ask: "Did you do the behaviour?"

It would ask: "What was happening before the urge?"

- Triggers
- Urges
- Emotional state
- Sleep
- Stress
- Cravings
- Behaviour
- Short-term reward

- Longer-term cost
- Safer alternatives tried
- What helped create a pause



Moving forward

Many adults with ADHD have spent years blaming themselves for patterns they did not understand.

Understanding ADHD does not erase the past. It does not remove consequences. It does not make change easy. But it can change the question.

“What is happening in this loop, what need am I trying to meet, and what support would help me choose differently?”

Try this this week

The aim is not perfection. The aim is awareness. Awareness creates the pause. The pause creates the possibility of choice.

- What happened before it?
- What did I feel?
- What did I want the behaviour to give me?
- What did it give me in the short-term?
- What did it cost me later?
- What could help me pause next time?

Where to get support

Work Wise ADHD is UK-based. If you are worried about alcohol, drugs, gambling, compulsive behaviour, withdrawal, relapse risk or safety, please seek support from an appropriate professional or support service.

- UK support: Speak to your GP, NHS 111 or a local drug and alcohol service. If there is immediate danger, call 999.
- Gambling support: The National Gambling Helpline, run by GamCare, provides free support on 0808 8020 133.

- Emotional crisis support: If you feel at risk of harming yourself or someone else, seek urgent support. In the UK, call 999 if there is immediate danger, or contact NHS 111 for urgent advice.
- US support: Call or text 988 for crisis support. SAMHSA National Helpline: 1 800 662 HELP.

Evidence note

This leaflet draws on research showing an association between adult ADHD and increased vulnerability to substance misuse disorders. Studies have estimated that ADHD is present in around one in five to one in four adults in substance use disorder treatment settings, although figures vary by population, setting, substance type and diagnostic method. This resource is educational and should not be used to predict risk for any individual person.

- van Emmerik-van Oortmerssen et al. 2012, Drug and Alcohol Dependence.
- Crunelle et al. 2018, International Consensus Statement on Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment of Substance Use Disorder Patients with Comorbid ADHD.
- NHS alcohol support guidance.
- NHS gambling support guidance.
- GamCare National Gambling Helpline.

Important information

This leaflet is for general educational information only.

It is not medical advice, addiction treatment, diagnosis, therapy, prescribing advice, medication decision support, relapse prevention planning, crisis support or emergency care.

If you are concerned about alcohol, drugs, gambling, compulsive behaviour, withdrawal, relapse risk or your safety, please seek support from a qualified healthcare professional, your GP, NHS 111, a local drug and alcohol service, a gambling support service, or emergency services if there is immediate risk.

Work Wise ADHD

Understanding adult ADHD. Reducing shame.
Supporting informed choices.

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