

I thought I was being clever – I thought I’d formed a new portmanteau from the words Habit and Attitude which resonated strongly with the process of addiction and recovery; let me explain. I once did some deep work on ‘habits’ through the lens of addiction and recovery – I’d certainly formed terrible habits while using and, in fact, my entire process of using had become a habit. From triggers to strong emotions and negative thinking, to the rituals of using followed by deep despair and hopelessness, my entire process of reacting to life’s twists and turns had become a deeply habituated process. This recognition led to the creation of my definition of addiction: *a habit that’s become so powerful the person can’t stop despite desperately wanting to, and despite severely escalating consequences.*

This rings true for my recovery as well – I engaged in a process of recovery where I slowly but surely replaced harmful and unwanted habits with positive, life-affirming habits. This included changing my relationship to the triggers, and actively replacing negative emotions and thoughts with positive, self-care-based ones. This led to my definition of recovery as: *the active practice of healthy and life-affirming behaviors which transform thinking over time.* That’s consistent with the popular recovery adage, ‘you don’t think your way to right living, you live your way to right thinking’. Given the context, it’s worth including my definition of sobriety as well: *Sobriety is the absence of harmful and unwanted acting out behaviors; doesn’t by itself transform thought.* For those with deeply-habituated addictions - those who have become powerless to stop on their own, sobriety is a necessary first step on the road to recovery. That said, sobriety is not the final goal or destination; the opposite of addiction is not sobriety and, contrary to [what Johann Hari preaches](#), the opposite of addiction is recovery. My 1-page of definitions is shown in Figure-1 below.

ESSENTIAL RECOVERY DEFINITIONS



- **Addiction** is a habit that’s become so powerful the person can’t stop despite desperately wanting to, and despite severely escalating consequences.
- **Sobriety** is the absence of harmful and unwanted acting out behaviors; *doesn’t by itself transform thought.*
- **Recovery** is the active practice of healthy and life-affirming behaviors; *transforms thinking over time.*
- **Freedom** is the complete elimination of the overwhelming obsession and compulsion which drive the addict to use despite not wanting to. When the obsessive thought and compulsive drive are gone, *the addict is truly free.*

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Figure 1: Essential Recovery Definitions

That’s the Habit piece of the portmanteau. I’ve also been studying the role of Attitudes in addiction and recovery; there’s so much attention paid to thoughts and feelings (emotions), but I’ve always found it difficult (if not impossible) to control those. Thoughts and feelings are fleeting and situationally dependent. While I don’t control what thoughts pop into my head, I do have a say in how long they stay, and what happens next. Same with feelings or strong emotions; I have little control over their emergence, but I do have a say in how I respond and what happens next. There’s a construct in psychology called the Cognitive Triangle (CT) which represents a feedback loop of thoughts, feelings and behaviors. As I studied how the CT works for interventions like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), I had a strong sense something was missing. When I circled back to the topic of addiction and recovery and the role of thoughts and feelings, I again felt something was missing. Figure-2 shows the traditional CT model.



Figure 2: Traditional Cognitive Triangle

The CT implies thoughts and feelings lead directly to behavior. Maybe, in some discrete situations, but certainly not always, and the construct which acts as a buffer between our thoughts and feelings and our behaviors is our attitude. Attitude is the more stable and enduring composite expression of our thoughts

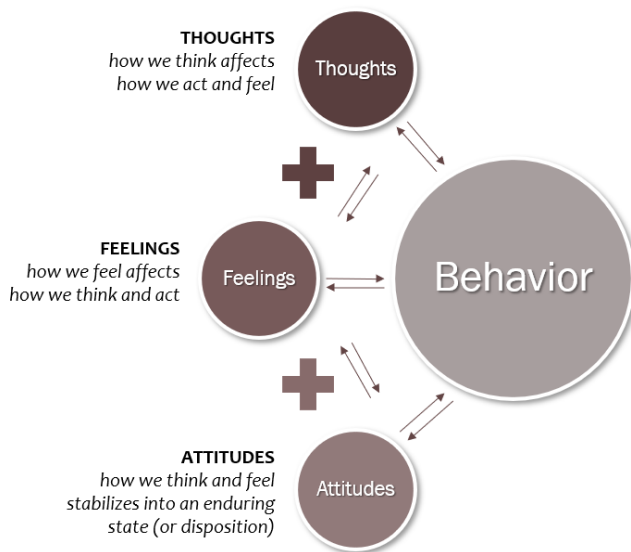


Figure 3: Modified Cognitive Feedback Model

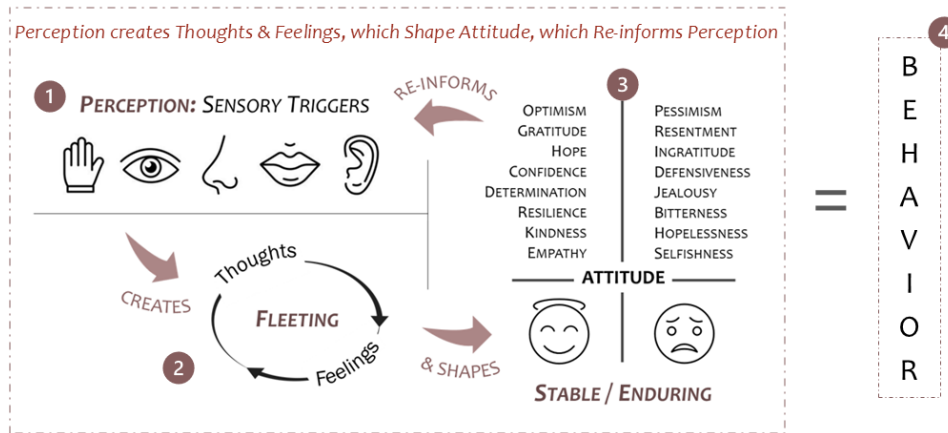
and feelings, and we have some control over which ones persist. A two-year-old’s behavior will reflect accurately their thoughts and feelings, but even small amounts of emotional maturity and emotional intelligence will create space for processing before behavior manifests. The greater the emotional maturity and intelligence, the more tempered and moderated the behavior. Add emotional sobriety to the mix and you have someone who consciously and deliberately manages their attitude with precision. I talk about emotional maturity, intelligence and sobriety in a presentation titled [Growing Up Emotionally](#). The point is, while we have less

control over thoughts and emotions, we have more control over our disposition; we can actively manage our attitudes and not be at the mercy of our fleeting and unreliable thoughts and feelings. Figure-3 shows my re-worked Cognitive Feedback Model indicating that, while it’s still a feedback loop, it’s the combination of Thoughts + Feelings + Attitudes which lead to Behavior.

Which of the three has the greatest enduring effect on our behavior? Our fleeting thoughts and feelings? Again, maybe in a two-year-old, but it's the more stable and enduring attitude or disposition which most readily informs and influences behavior. *Note: I looked at the distinction between attitude and disposition and found the difference negligible enough to allow the terms to be used synonymously in this paper.* Figure-4 below shows how the combinatorial effects of the feedback loop of Thoughts and Feelings (2) and Attitude (3) manifest as Behavior (4). I'll address the role of Perceptions (1) in a separate paper.

ESSENTIAL RECOVERY DEFINITIONS

Triggers → Thoughts ↔ Emotions → Attitudes → Behaviors



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Figure 4: Combinatorial Feedback Loop Leading to Behavior

Look closely at the attributes of both a positive and negative attitude in Figure-4. Can you see that we may have the option to choose a healthier, more positive and stable disposition? When life throws the inevitable curve ball, it's easy to engage in rumination and allow negative emotions to wash over us. That's normal, and we all experience periods of low mood or even periods where we suffer emotional pain. But, we don't have to get stuck there – it's possible to experience life's lows and, at the same time, actively manage our disposition by practicing gratitude, cultivating hope, buoying our confidence, and maintaining optimism in the face of hardship. We can, to some extent, self-generate positivity, and some people are better at doing that than others. However, if we struggle to break free of the grips of negativity, we can take additional steps by moving outside of ourselves – get out of our own heads by engaging in a physical activity, spending time immersed in a supportive community, or volunteering acts of service to those with a need we can meet. I've always liked the recovery adage, "if you can't live, and you can't die, make coffee", and early in my recovery I spent a lot of time making and serving coffee in meetings.

If what I'm saying is true, then we can prosper through hardship to the extent we believe we have agency to shift or alter our perspective on what's transpiring in the present moment. More importantly, habituating this process of attitude adjustment when we experience a negative spiral creates a reflexive pattern we can come to depend on over time. We've created, for lack of a more clever word, a *habitude* – a habituated practice of turning negative thoughts and feelings into a healthier, more useful emotional state from which we can process whatever situation or event is creating the negativity. The best part? Habits can be stubborn, and practicing having a positive attitude will make drifting into a negative attitude feel awkward, unnatural, and less automatic – spiraling into a negative disposition won't be our default response. Attitude has weight – far more bulk and mass than our thoughts and feelings which come and go in the moment. Figure-5 is an attempt to illustrate this using an iceberg – does this make sense?

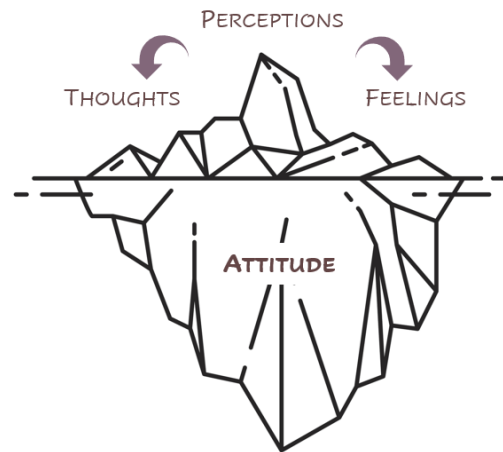


Figure 5: Thoughts & Feelings vs. Attitude

Practice makes perfect, and it's best to practice critical skills when we have time and before we need them. What practices can we adopt to strengthen our habitudes? Below are three (3) tangible things we can do to redirect a negative spiral into a more positive attitude.

1. **Practice Gratitude using Mindfulness:** set 3 alarms on your phone, morning afternoon and evening. On each alarm, stop and engage in a 60-second mindfulness exercise focused on gratitude. Find an object about 20 feet away and fix your gaze on it; the object is unimportant, but is useful to refocus our attention when our thoughts drift. Think about one thing for which you are grateful and list three specific reasons why. Try and spend a full 60-seconds focused on your gratitude and reasons. It will be hard at first, but become easier over time.

Review: do this every day for 30-days, and you'll find you gravitate towards this practice without first hearing an alarm. Make note of how you're feeling when the alarm goes off – what is your disposition and what are you feeling? Are you caught in a negative spiral or ruminating on something negative? I'm often surprised to find how much I grind on negative thoughts and emotions, but also how easy it is to reset and restart.

2. **Practice Box Breathing to change your physiological state:** Box breathing is a simple breathing technique that brings profound benefits; even the U.S. Navy SEALs use it in high-stress situations. Also known as 'square breathing' or 'four-square breathing', this controlled breathing practice is based on [pranayama](#), an [Ayurvedic](#) form of breathwork that originated in India.

Box breathing is known for improving physiological responses, helping to calm the mind and restore focus. Here's how to box breath in four steps.

- i. **Find a spot** where you can sit or lie comfortably in a relatively quiet environment. Close your eyes, or do the object gaze described in #1 above. Inhale for four seconds; breathe in deeply, filling your lungs, counting to four slowly. Imagine you're drawing energy into your body.
- ii. **Hold that breath** - hold that breath in for another four seconds. It might feel odd or awkward at first, but it'll feel more natural with practice.
- iii. **Exhale slowly** - exhale for four seconds, releasing the air steadily. Imagine all your stresses and worries leaving your body as you breathe.
- iv. **Wait quietly** and patiently - hold your exhalation for another four seconds. This pause signals to your body that another 'box' or cycle is about to begin.

Review: *practices such as box breathing work wonders in high-stress situations, calming your autonomic nervous system by activating the parasympathetic system responsible for relaxation. Calming your mind and body in this way may be challenging at first but, with practice, you'll learn to quiet your thoughts and focus on the calming effects you're receiving throughout your whole body. Do this with your eyes closed to eliminate visual distractions.* Give this one 30 days to *begin* to feel comfortable with the practice, but don't stop there – keep going!

3. **Practice Panoramic Vision (also called Optic Flow)**: negativity can increase stress, and stress activates the sympathetic nervous system which can affect your vision. In a process called focal vision, the pupils dilate, the field of vision narrows, and your visual system goes into the equivalent of portrait mode on a smartphone. Your eyeballs rotate ever-so-slightly toward your nose and you see closer-up objects in sharper relief while things in the background become blurrier (Wapner, 2024). Like with Box Breathing, the key here is to activate the parasympathetic nervous system; here's a simple visual exercise you can do to relax your focus. First, if your field of vision narrows with stress, counter the effect by widening your vision – deliberately look farther to the horizon and scan your eyes back and forth, focusing intently on far-away objects, from the far-left to the far-right. Pay attention to what you're seeing and on the longer length of your gaze, and be mindful to describe what you're seeing in calm and gentle language.

Review: *the goal here is to slow your thoughts by widening your vision while paying attention to what you're seeing far away. Describing what you see using calm language pulls your focus away from the stressor and towards something not stressful.* Incorporating Box Breathing will compound the restorative effect, and you can add Box Breathing with your eyes open for this practice. As with the previous two, give this one 30-days to begin to experience benefits.

Our thoughts and feelings come and go and are situationally dependent; we have little control over them in the moment. That said, they tend to stabilize into a more enduring mental and emotional state we call disposition or attitude, and it's easy to allow a frequented attitude to become our default way of being - for it to become a habit. We absolutely have the ability to step back and look at our disposition and name the specific traits and attributes, whether positive or negative, and decide if we wish to keep those or change them out for something different. If you're caught in a negative spiral and it's stabilized into a persistent negative attitude, stop and interrupt the process by practicing intentional gratitude, slowing and controlling your breathing to invoke a sense of calm, and deliberately widening your vision to pull yourself out of focal stress. As for being clever with a unique portmanteau, a quick search revealed *Habitude* is already a word and fairly widely used. Thanks for reading - as always, if you need help getting started or working through obstacles, call me and I'll help!

Best to you – Steve B.

Wapner, J. (2024, February 20). Vision and breathing may be the secrets to surviving 2020. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/vision-and-breathing-may-be-the-secrets-to-surviving-2020/>