

5. Cycles and Habits

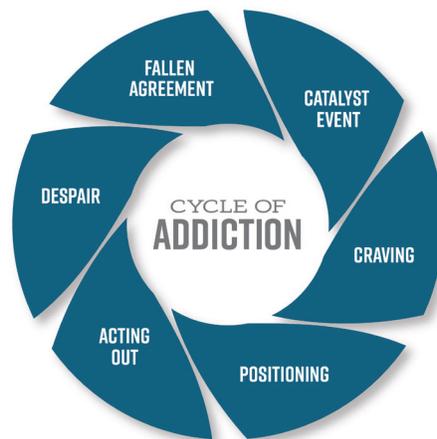
Cody Buriff

“It’s 11:30pm. I just watched porn and masturbated after four weeks of sobriety. How the heck did I get here? I thought I was doing so well, and tonight I just broke under the pressure. I couldn’t stop myself. God, what is wrong with me? And how am I going to tell the guys? This is so embarrassing”

If you’ve ever had a similar experience, you aren’t alone. In the battle for freedom, most go through periods of sobriety with at least one (and often several) moments of relapse. Today, let’s look at three cyclical elements of the path we are on together.

The Addiction Cycle

Let’s explore what a habitual user of porn goes through.



**This version of the Addiction Cycle is modified from Patrick Carnes' Addiction Cycle.*

Fallen Agreement

We’ve talked about how, at our core, we have made agreements with the Enemy about ourselves and God. These may include (but are not limited to) thoughts like “I am a failure, I’ll never get it right,” “I am alone, and always will be,” or “God doesn’t really love me, he just tolerates me.”

Catalyst Event

A catalyst event could be a hard conversation with a parent or employer, seeing a magazine in the grocery store, or a tempting social media post. A catalyst could also be a particular location and/or time of day—anything that is a reminder, or sends you into an emotional state in which you start craving porn (or another substance).

Craving

In this stage, you have started feeling the tension build, and the need to release it through porn use (or another substance) grows. This can be conscious, but is often happening on the subconscious level, particularly when in response to an emotional trigger regarding a fallen agreement at your core.

Positioning

As the craving builds, you start planning and scheming to position yourself to get the release (or high) you need. Maybe you call off work, skip class, or cancel an appointment with a friend. Maybe you make sure you have a nice chunk of time where you can be alone in your room with your laptop this evening. Or maybe you just slip off to the bathroom for a few minutes of “alone time” with your smartphone. You may not have to do anything but type a few words and click, if you are already positioned. The crazy thing is, you may not even be aware that you are doing this.

Acting Out

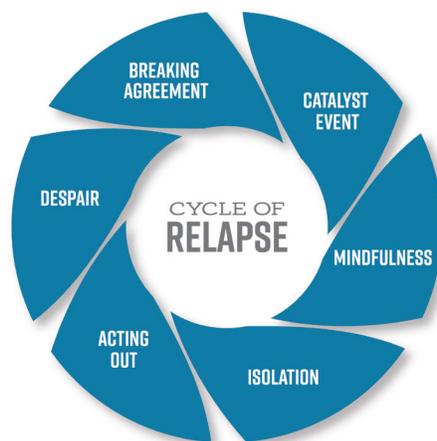
The actual time between a Catalyst Event and Acting out could be seconds or days. But ultimately you get your fix.

Despair

After acting out, you’ll feel a sense of emptiness or despair. This is mostly due to the fix wearing off, and not giving you the satisfaction or sense of fulfillment that you were looking for. While porn may have felt good for a few minutes, the aftertaste is bitter and flat. You may feel a sense of shame, or worthlessness, or an intensification of the original pain that was at the origin of your path to acting out. You thought it would be the kiss of life, but instead it was the kiss of death.

The Relapse Cycle

I found the Relapse Cycle comforting when I first saw it. I think it was because prior to that I thought there was only freedom and slavery, and not room to be in process. If you are reading this, you are probably in this cycle. The reality is that the path from “Addiction” and “Freedom” is generally not an overnight miracle, but can take years of Spirit-filled hard work.



**This version of the Relapse Cycle is modified from the Relapse Shadow Cycle by Pure Hope.*

Breaking Agreements

You are aware that your habitual sin is a problem, and maybe aware of some of the root causes of the problem. You are making efforts toward renewing your mind and trusting Christ. You’ve engaged in the spiritual warfare necessary to break the agreements, and are in the process of healing and growth. But the core beliefs you have aren’t fully redeemed, and your brain isn’t yet fully re-wired.

Catalyst Event

You think you are doing well, and then you suddenly can't get that magazine cover out of your head. Or that social media post is super tempting. You have a difficult interaction with a roommate or coworker, and suddenly your insecurity is screaming for medication. You hate porn, but right now it just sounds so good.

Mindfulness

You are aware that you are triggered, craving a fix, and on a path towards acting out. You may be ignoring that reality, or making concerted efforts to get off the path, but either way you know deep down.

Isolation

If you were engaging with a strong community—willing to be vulnerable and reach out for help—you would be more empowered to jump out of the tornado and find freedom. But you aren't, and no one is really getting into your life or asking questions. No one is helping you experience, or at least hear, the gospel. Those kind of people either aren't around or you refuse to get over your pride and insecurity, so you continue to hide. Because of this, the craving grows and you continue down the path, and ultimately position yourself for a fix.

Acting Out

You will likely experience periods, sometimes significant periods, of sobriety. You are doing battle, and often by the power of sheer will, you are not acting out. But you aren't free, and ultimately return to your vomit in a moment of weakness and isolation.

Despair

This despair is similar to the despair in the Addiction Cycle, but different in that it may drive you into further isolation, or drive you towards community. The embarrassment and shame you feel is appropriate, but what you do with it determines whether you continue in the cycle or move into a cycle of freedom.

The Freedom Cycle



Redeemed Agreements

Your core beliefs are now *mostly* aligned with what God says is true (though this won't fully happen until heaven!). You have a healthy and confident view of God and self, and are able to confidently rebuke the accusatory voice that might whisper those old lies. Your brain is rewired (realize that a shadow of your old thought patterns still exists), and you no longer find yourself wanting porn.

Catalyst Event

You get a speeding ticket. You get passed up for a big opportunity. You do surprisingly poorly on an assignment. You see a sexualized advertisement. A friend is ignoring your text messages.

Mindfulness

You are aware that an old bruise has been bumped, and are able to capture your thoughts quickly and direct them towards renewing your mind and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Community

You are in an encouraging and safe community where your vulnerability is met with reminders of the grace and truth of the gospel. You can be you, share openly, and know that your security is not threatened. You may occasionally get burned (people are broken, after all) but your core is centered on the rock of Christ, and these people are your tribe.

Freedom

You don't ever look at porn, or even get close to it. This is not sobriety—it's so much better. You aren't "white-knuckling" it. You don't even crave porn. It no longer controls you. You are healed, whole, and free.

Celebrate

Because you aren't acting out, you are not in despair. Your soul is at rest, and you are living a life of low pressure because your identity is wrapped up in Truth. You are enjoying God, and celebrating His goodness!

We are talking about the cycles because it can be very helpful to gain an awareness of a process we are in, while we are in it, in order to make healthy choices. And in particular, it can be helpful to identify the triggers, or Catalyst Events, that often put us on an unhealthy cycle.

Additionally, we need to understand how to combat the power of habit in our lives if we are going to try to change those habits. It is unrealistic to just stop a habit cold-turkey (outside of the miraculous). We have to replace an unhealthy routine with a new, healthy routine. Our minds need to be renewed with true thinking.

Lets think about some healthy disciplines that we use to replace the habitual sin in our lives.

Develop good habits

Friendships: Have an intentional meal with a few different (same gender) friends weekly, where you can be intentionally honest and vulnerable. Schedule time with those people doing some of these other disciplines:

Acts of Service: Go serve at a homeless shelter, or mentor a child at the local school. Wash your housemates' dishes every night. Find an ongoing act of service that takes you out of your comfort zone regularly.

Spiritual: Fast from food for 24 consecutive hours once per week, or from tv, movies, and video games a few days a week. Schedule time in the Word and do 15 minutes of journaling every day.

Physical: Lift weights, or go for a jog 3-4 times per week. Start canoeing or biking. Join a local sports team. Cut sugar out of your diet for a couple of weeks, or think through some other healthy eating habits you could start. Set some physical goals and work towards them.

Hobbies: Whittling, drawing, reading, writing, woodworking, shooting, baking, knitting, fishing, etc. Spend a bit of time each week developing a healthy hobby.

Another tactic that we can steal from the special forces and all-star caliber athletes that can help us practically, is visualization. Now generally visualization is not what we want to be doing. But in this case visualization can be super helpful.

In Romans 6, Paul encourages us to *“consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”* Practically speaking, try this: While not in an environment or moment of temptation, consider the moment of choosing whether or not to act out. First decide on what action steps and decisions you would like to make in those moments, and then close your eyes and put yourself in the moment of decision. Imagine the battle you are entrenched in, and then focus on what you want yourself to do in that moment and the decision you want to make, and visualize yourself taking those actions. Do this several times and see how it impacts you the next time you are in the moment of decision.

The cycles of Addiction, Recovery and Freedom help us understand what is really going on, and pin-point where we might be in a cycle so that we can course-correct. Healthy disciplines can help fill the void of sinful habits and point us to Jesus in a holistic way. Talk through the questions together and discuss what might be helpful take aways for you to apply in your life, and how you might apply them.

Questions

- How have you experienced the Addiction Cycle in the past?
- How does the Relapse Cycle affect you? How have you experienced it?
- What excites you about the Freedom Cycle? Do you have hope for this?
- Which of the disciplines sound appealing to you? How do you think applying some of these might benefit you?
- Have you ever tried visualization? When do you think you could try it? (Maybe try it together now?)
- What was the biggest take away for you from this week's content?