

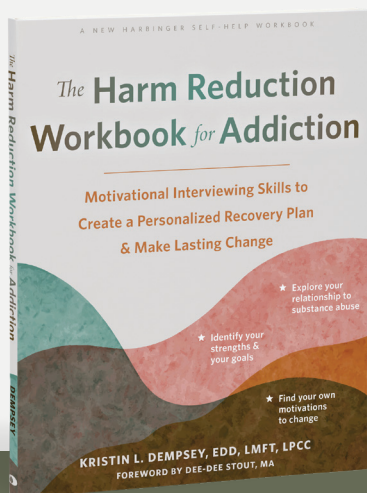
CLINICIANS CLUB



newharbingerpublications

A New Take *on* New Year's Resolutions *for* the Sober Curious

Help Your Clients Explore Their New Year's
Resolutions with Harm Reduction &
Motivational Interviewing



KRISTIN L. DEMPSEY, EDD, LMFT,
author of *The Harm Reduction Workbook for Addiction*

The Difference Between Describing and Judging

Exploring Your Substance Use with Harm Reduction and Motivational Interviewing

If you are opening yourself up to consider change, you might find that it is hard to not judge yourself as you think about changing your relationship to substances. You might find yourself saying that you “should quit,” as using the substance feels dangerous or harmful. You might be aware that your own judgmental thoughts mirror a friend or family member’s concern or frustration. Perhaps you think, *I am getting too old for this* or *I am a bad parent because I am a poor role model for my kids*.

Judging ourselves is problematic. It can result in paralyzing shame, regret, anxiety, or other unhelpful emotions about yourself. When you have such negative emotions, it can become easier to avoid or push aside change because you might feel as if you are not worth making a change or doing anything differently. Self-defeating messages, such as “Why bother?” or “I am just a messed-up person and there is no way I can change,” might derail any motivation you have to try something new. One approach to this challenging issue is learning how to step away from self-judgment and move toward self-acceptance.

Moving from nonacceptance to acceptance can seem like a daunting task. Telling yourself “Just accept it” usually doesn’t work. After all, we tell ourselves to “just do” things all the time, and these are not usually helpful demands. The trick to moving from nonacceptance or judging yourself to acceptance is found in your ability to notice and replace judgmental words with descriptions of what you are noticing. The judgment links to your view of the situation, which might be distorted. The description links to reality.

Try noticing your own judgmental statements about your substance use and replace them with descriptions about yourself instead. This exercise is an opportunity to practice suspending judgment and moving toward accepting reality. It can help you move past defeating thoughts and move toward change and growth.

As you fill in the following columns, ask yourself: *How can I start noticing instead of judging myself?* The first row is an example of a judgment. Use the additional rows to add your own self-judgments, and the final row to notice the impact of describing versus judging. Here is an example.

My own judgment: I should smoke less weed. I am a loser.

How this judgment makes me feel and think	What do I notice when I shift from judging to describing?	How holding onto this judgment makes me feel and think	What might I do or think differently when I notice instead of judge?
Hopeless. Why try?	I NOTICE that when I smoke throughout the day, I do not complete all the chores I was hoping to finish.	Annoyed with myself.	Maybe I can shift to doing chores before smoking and see if I can do it.

My own judgment: _____

How this judgment makes me feel and think	What do I notice when I shift from judging to describing?	How holding onto this judgment makes me feel and think	What might I do or think differently when I notice instead of judge?

When you have completed this table to your satisfaction, go back and review the places where you shifted from judging to noticing. Check the final column and review how you are rethinking your relationship with your substance use. Having completed this exercise, collect your thoughts on ways your point of view changed.

What you noticed about describing and not judging: _____

Accepting ourselves for who we are and what we have done does not mean we are happy with our history. It means we are not spending energy on thinking over and over about our possible shame and regret. We are just facing reality. The difference can be important to being willing to explore thoughts about change.

A New Take on New Year's Resolutions for the Sober Curious

Help Your Clients Explore Their New Year's Resolutions with Harm Reduction and Motivational Interviewing

When it is a new year, your clients—or you—might be among many people considering their relationship to alcohol or drugs. A new year's resolution often includes committing to stop substance use, whether quitting smoking or cutting back on alcohol. Yet this makes the new year, full of promise as a time of renewal and excitement over new beginnings and growth, fraught with the pressure to change. It can be a predictable setup for feeling bad about ourselves. We are so conditioned to expect failure that the resolution is a punchline for many early January cartoons and memes. My favorite, usually posted between January 2nd and 3rd, is: *Blew it. Looks like next year will be my year.*

The new year's resolution is appealing for a reason: setting an intention to change can help us organize toward a change target that is meaningful to us. Setting this goal has been practiced over centuries, beginning with Babylonian farmers in 2000 BC. The resolutions have changed over time, depending on individual and community needs. In America's early history, resolutions were based on increasing spiritual goodness, improving work ethic, or denying personal pleasures. Current resolutions are based increasingly on perceived self-improvement, such as eating healthier, quitting smoking, and exercising more (Geiger and Duncan 2022). If the annual resolution has been a force of improvement and progress for thousands of years, how has it become so problematic and even painful? And why do we still do it?

People appear to want to change and grow, and the new year remains symbolic of a new direction. But we set new year's resolutions about activities in which we either succeed or fail. You lose weight or you do not. You exercise every other day, or you don't. This win-or-lose framing for progress is a setup for disappointment because change often occurs in fits and starts. Let's face it, we cannot predict exactly how we will change, nor anticipate all the potholes and detours along our path. When we don't fully or perfectly succeed, we have to manage the disappointment and discouragement that often comes with imperfection. For many of us, this means giving up. Better luck next year.

What if we did not have this win-or-fail setup? If the new year's resolution was not some goal that would lead to an outcome, such as giving up all sweets or going to the bed early every night, we could instead become curious about exploring change. What if exploring our behaviors *is the change*?

A specific goal or outcome may or may not be achieved, and it may or may not be helpful. In *The Harm Reduction Workbook for Addiction*, exercises allow readers to step back from attaching to an outcome. Instead, they are invited to engage in explorations that can result in learning and small changes to build on over time. When a relationship to substance use is the focus of exploration, they do not have to think of themselves as having an “addiction” to explore their substance use. This allows clients to be “sober curious” or check out having a “dry January” without being concerned about whether they can do it or not. All learning is a form of change. The more someone learns, the more they can alter behaviors and attitudes gradually over time. In this way, your client can build lasting and meaningful change and potentially reduce harm that might occur as the result of substance use.

Everyone can be curious. Consider inviting your clients to begin a new year’s resolution to explore their substance use. The exercises that follow encourage learning about themselves and ways they might move forward into the new year and beyond.

My Substance Exploration Resolution

This year, I resolve to be curious about: _____

Good Things and Not-So-Good Things

You have a history. Any behavior that you are doing with regularity probably helped you manage your life at some point. Maybe now it is not helping you. Knowing the good things about your relationship with substances can help you acknowledge how a substance might have been your friend. Seeing the not-so-good things can help you ask whether or not you might want to consider it time to move on. Complete the following exercise to learn more about how substances have functioned for you and impacted you over time.

My substance or behavior	How has using this helped me in life?	What have the drawbacks been?	Is it still worth it? Describe why or why not.
I use cannabis edibles about twice a day.	I like feeling more relaxed and less anxious.	When I don't take them, I become really agitated.	I do not know yet. I think I would like to try not using for a few days to see if I can do it.

As you completed this exercise, you likely noticed that you have reasons for—and reasons against—changing your relationship with substances. When you are able to see both good reasons for continuing to use and good reasons for stopping use, you might feel more stuck. This stuckness is a natural part of ambivalence, or feeling two ways about something. Ambivalence is a normal part of being human and it is an important part of change (Miller and Rollnick 2023). It is best resolved by your continued curiosity. The more you explore your thoughts and feelings about a topic, the more likely you will start to see a pathway toward where you want to go. So, let’s think about some other areas of life that are important to explore as you consider your relationship to substances.

Does My Substance Use Still Fit Who I Am?

It helps to understand the role substances have played in your life, whether to control nerves, beat boredom, or talk with people, for example. As we go through life and have different experiences, it is quite possible that we experience substances differently not just physically, but also emotionally. This exercise can help you think through what you care about, and explore whether substances help you engage in these values or not.

Psychologist Russ Harris identified our most common values. There are many more, so please add your own. As you read through these values, consider which are very important (VI), important (I), or not important (NI), and indicate the importance of each value in most aspects of your life.

1. ____ *Accepting*: open to, allowing of, or at peace with myself, others, life, my feelings, etc.
2. ____ *Adventurous*: willing to create or pursue novel, risky, or exciting experiences.
3. ____ *Assertive*: calmly, fairly, and respectfully standing up for my rights and asking for what I want.
4. ____ *Authentic*: being genuine, real, and true to myself.
5. ____ *Caring/self-caring*: actively taking care of myself, others, the environment, etc.
6. ____ *Compassionate/self-compassionate*: responding kindly to myself or others in pain.
7. ____ *Cooperative*: willing to assist and work with others.
8. ____ *Courageous*: being brave or bold; persisting in the face of fear, threat, or risk.
9. ____ *Creative*: being imaginative, inventive, or innovative.
10. ____ *Curious*: being open-minded and interested; willing to explore and discover.
11. ____ *Encouraging*: supporting, inspiring, and rewarding behavior I approve of.
12. ____ *Expressive*: conveying my thoughts and feelings through what I say and do.
13. ____ *Focused*: focused on and engaged in what I am doing.
14. ____ *Fair/just*: acting with fairness and justice—toward myself and others.
15. ____ *Flexible*: willing and able to adjust and adapt to changing circumstances.
16. ____ *Friendly*: warm, open, caring, and agreeable toward others.
17. ____ *Forgiving*: letting go of resentments and grudges toward myself or others.
18. ____ *Grateful*: being appreciative for what I have received.
19. ____ *Helpful*: giving, helping, contributing, assisting, or sharing.
20. ____ *Honest*: being honest, truthful, and sincere—with myself and others.
21. ____ *Independent*: choosing for myself how I live and what I do.
22. ____ *Industrious*: being diligent, hardworking, dedicated.
23. ____ *Kind*: being considerate, helpful, or caring—to myself or others.
24. ____ *Loving*: showing love, affection, or great care—to myself or others.

25. ____ *Mindful/present*: fully present and engaging in whatever I'm doing.
26. ____ *Open*: revealing myself, letting people know my thoughts and feelings.
27. ____ *Orderly*: being neat and organized.
28. ____ *Persistent/committed*: willing to continue, despite problems or difficulties.
29. ____ *Playful*: being humorous, fun-loving, light-hearted.
30. ____ *Protective*: looking after the safety and security of myself or others.
31. ____ *Respectful/self-respectful*: treating myself or others with care and consideration.
32. ____ *Responsible*: being trustworthy, reliable, and accountable for my actions.
33. ____ *Skillful*: doing things well, utilizing my knowledge, experience, and training.
34. ____ *Supportive*: being helpful, encouraging, and available—to myself or others.
35. ____ *Trustworthy*: being loyal, honest, faithful, sincere, responsible, and reliable.
36. ____ *Trusting*: willing to believe in the honesty, sincerity, reliability, or competence of another.
37. ____ *Other*: _____
38. ____ *Other*: _____
39. ____ *Other*: _____

Once you are done writing in your codes (VI, I, NI), look at all those that you consider VI, or very important. Are there three to five that are especially important to who you are and how you want to behave in the world?

Write your top three to five values here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Were you surprised by the values you chose? Why or why not?

Sometimes we are surprised by our values simply because we have been living without much awareness of them. On the other hand, we might not be surprised by our values because they are always functioning in the background of what we do—we just need to be made aware of them.

How to Work with Your Chosen Values

Now that you have a sense of your values, select three to five of your most important values, and consider thinking through the following issues. To complete this exercise, read through each of the value life domains. Take a minute to consider which of these life domains are the most important to you, then think of how you currently live or would like to live within your values. Enter each value life domain in the first column. In the second column, write how living by this value helps you be the person you want to be in life. In the third column, give a specific example of how this value supports making choices that help you be the person you want to be. In the final column, write how making life choices using this value might help you avoid making choices you regret.

Here are the life domains that your values fall into:

- **Relationships:** Connections you have to others who are important to you, such as family, friends, colleagues, or community members.
- **Occupation/academic:** The work you do that can give you meaning and vitality. This value can also connect you to what helps inspire your curiosity and desire to learn.
- **Spirituality:** Your faith or belief in something bigger than yourself. A power or force that gives you hope. It may or may not include religion.
- **Leisure:** The activities or non-activities that help you relax or provide joy, wonder, challenge, or growth. Leisure helps you rest and restore from other life responsibilities.
- **Financial:** Your connection to material wealth and other economic resources.
- **Health:** Your physical, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual well-being.

My value and life domain	How does living by this value help me be who I want to be?	Example of how this value helps me make choices that help me be who I want to be	How might my value help me avoid choices that I might regret?
<i>Value:</i> Loving <i>Life domain:</i> Relationships, specifically parenting	I won't be as mean to my kids.	I will think through the different ways to discipline my kids.	I will think about how what I say might hurt someone's feelings.

My value and life domain	How does living by this value help me be who I want to be?	Example of how this value helps me make choices that help me be who I want to be	How might my value help me avoid choices that I might regret?

In almost any situation, working with values can help provide much needed clarity when you find yourself stuck and not sure what to do next. For the next exercise, we will consider values in relationship to substance use.

How Values Relate to My Substance Use

For this values exercise, choose your values based on your relationship to substances. Using the following prompt (Harris 2021), write down the three to five values that come to mind. You can always refer back to the list of values.

In regard to substance use, I want to be...

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Notice what comes up. Are there any differences or similarities in your values that you chose for the other areas of your life? You might notice you have some core values that show up in most areas of your life. Those values will be especially important in helping you move forward regarding your decisions around using substances. You might also notice some differences in values, and you might wonder why you have different values when considering substance use. Completing this values table can help you sort out how substance use helps, or does not help, you live in line with your values.

My value in relationship to substance use	How does living by this value impact my substance use?	How does this value help me make choices that support who I want to be?	How might this value help me avoid choices that I might regret?
Integrity	I don't want to be using coke so much that I lose control and start ripping off friends.	I might be inclined to not use it in some intense party situations where I might lose control if I use too much.	I can remind myself to be upfront and honest when considering whether it's a good idea for me to use on any given night.

My value in relationship to substance use	How does living by this value impact my substance use?	How does this value help me make choices that support who I want to be?	How might this value help me avoid choices that I might regret?

Sorting through your values helps you sort out ways to move forward toward exploring new options in your life. If a choice is not consistent with your values, it would be wise to explore your decision in more detail, as the changes we make that are not consistent with who we are or what we care about can cause regret.

Even knowing our values, you might find it hard to step forward if you are giving yourself messages that are not helpful. Specifically, judgmental messages that promote stigma—toward yourself, others, or substances—can get in the way of your willingness to make a move toward change. The next exercise will give you a chance to notice and possibly disarm some of your more judgmental questions in favor of having a more curious and open approach to yourself.

Getting Curious About How Your Thinking Keeps You Stuck

If change were so easy, it would have happened already. What is so difficult about the win-or-lose approach to resolutions, or change in general, is that if we do not behave in a certain way, we feel bad. Much of this feeling of awfulness is fueled by our own expectations about ourselves. These expectations might be part of what is getting in the way of making a change. Try this exercise to see how shifting from judging your behavior to describing and noticing behavior can shift your attitude toward yourself and the possibility of change. Identify a judgment you have and then complete the following three columns.

My own judgment	How this judgment makes me feel and think	How I might shift from judging to noticing	How noticing what's happening makes me feel and think
I should be smoking less weed. I am loser.	Hopeless. Why try? I am annoyed with myself.	I notice that when I smoke throughout the day, I do not complete all the chores I was hoping to finish.	I feel curious about what might happen if I finish my chores before smoking.

Review the final column and consider how you are now relating to your behavior. Then answer these questions.

What, if anything, has shifted in your understanding of your relationship to substances?

If you did experience a shift in your attitude, how might it change your behavior (if at all)?

Moving Forward into the New Year

Now that you have thought about how substances function in your life, how they fit or do not fit with your values, and how you might be judging yourself regarding your substance use, take a moment to consider how these exercises might help shape your next step. Check any of the following options that you might want to consider as next moves in your substance use exploration.

- ☐ Read and learn more about substances.
- ☐ Experiment with cutting back on the substances I am using.
- ☐ Continue to practice noticing instead of judging, becoming more aware of all that I see, hear, touch, taste, and smell throughout the day. Am I really engaged in the present?
- ☐ Talk with someone I trust about the answers to the above exercises.
- ☐ Attend a support group or learn more about the resources available to support me.
- ☐ Notice how I am feeling when I am using and notice times when I am not using.

Nice work. By following up on any of these options for next steps, you are moving toward being curious about your substance use. Exploring each of these areas provide an opportunity to learn more about yourself, with the promise of increased clarity and potential for new opportunities.

If you have found this exploration useful, check out all the exercises in *The Harm Reduction Workbook for Addiction*. In addition to the exercises here, the book features a detailed exploration of your attitudes, values, strengths, and supports while helping you find ways to reflect on what you need, find support, and create a personal action plan for yourself.

What If You Had More Than Two Choices?

Exploring Your Substance Use with Harm Reduction and Motivational Interviewing

A central theme of exploring your substance use with a harm reduction approach is the willingness to be open to letting go of common beliefs about substance use and change. It is common to think about substance use as being a “problem” or “not a problem.” As a result, you might think the only options when exploring your use is to quit because it is a problem—or not quit because it is not a problem. This either/or thinking can lead to feeling stuck because our lives are not that neat. Often, the most important things we learn about ourselves can be explored in the messiness of feeling two (or more) ways about changing a behavior. For instance, you can both want to not use a substance because of hangovers (withdrawal) and very much enjoy using a substance because it is an enjoyable way to socialize. Having a combination of such feelings is tough if you think the only options are to quit or not quit. The following exercise offers you an opportunity to see what else might be possible if you have more than these two choices.

Imagine you are on a continuum, with *quitting a substance* and *not quitting a substance* being on either end of that continuum.

I quit!

I don't quit!

Look at the line and notice *all the space in the middle*, between “I quit” and “I don't quit.” For a moment, imagine what kind of other behaviors might be between the two statements. Write down as many as you like here. You do not need to be committed to any of these behaviors right now. Examples include: *I can cut down one drink a day* and *I can have one cigarette before 8 a.m. instead of three cigarettes before 8 a.m.* List some behaviors here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Look at your list. You might notice that you can write down a vast number of options between the two ends. You might even want to step away and consider this list tomorrow to write some more.

When you feel you have listed all the most meaningful options between these two behaviors, circle one to three options that you might consider as a starting point in your own journey of exploration. You are not committing to anything at this time, you are just thinking about what might be possible for you.

List your options here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

As you look at your options, choose one option. Consider it for a moment. What might it take for you to be more open or willing to consider exploring this behavior? Write about it here:

The Harm Reduction Workbook for Addiction is a guide to further explore what might come from your thoughtfulness about your answer. Even if you do not take another step right now, your willingness to start exploring the possibilities of change and growth is a type of movement toward what might be—and is quite likely the start of something new.

References

Geiger, P. and S. Duncan. 2022. *Farmers' Almanac 2023*. Lewiston, ME: Almanac Publishing.

Harris, R. 2021. "Forty Common Values: A Checklist." https://overcoming.co.uk/_data/site/148/product/533/40valueschecklist-2021.pdf.

Miller, W. R., and S. Rollnick. 2023. *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change and Grow*. 4th ed. New York: Guilford Press.

About the Author

Kristin L. Dempsey, EdD, LMFT, LPCC, is a psychotherapist, counselor educator, and trainer. For thirty years, she has supported individuals with exploring their own relationships to substances. She is a member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT), and has been privileged to provide motivational interviewing (MI) training to thousands of people in behavioral health, primary care, public health, school, corrections, and human services organizations.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is distributed with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering psychological, financial, legal, or other professional services. The medical information in this book is provided as an educational resource only, and is not intended to be used or relied upon for any diagnostic or treatment purposes. The interventions in this book should not be used as a substitute for conventional medical therapy.

© 2023 Kristin L. Dempsey / New Harbinger Publications. First published November 2023.

For more information, please contact:

New Harbinger Publications
5720 Shattuck Avenue
Oakland, CA 94609
www.newharbinger.com

CLINICIANS CLUB



new**harbinger**publications