



Healthy Habits

Keeping busy is a great way to reduce the urge to use. The amount of time you spent acquiring and using your substance of choice needs to be replaced with activities that promote your recovery and overall well-being.

Dopamine is a chemical messenger in your brain that has many functions, from rewarding sensations to increasing attention, motivation, and memory. While dopamine levels are typically well-regulated within the body's nervous system, those who struggle with SUD often find these chemicals out of whack for days, weeks, months, and even years into their recovery. Low dopamine levels are associated with feelings of unease or unhappiness, lack of motivation, and decreased enthusiasm or pleasure for activities once thought of as enjoyable. Fortunately, there are several ways people can raise their dopamine levels naturally. Try building some of these into your healthy routines.

Sleep: To be more specific, deep or REM sleep. When people stay awake throughout the night, dopamine levels in their brains begin to reduce dramatically; this is a challenge for many in early recovery as insomnia is frequently associated with withdrawal. For this reason, you must allocate enough time to your sleep routine, accounting for the time it may take to fall asleep. Seven to nine hours of sleep is recommended for an adult daily. Reducing noise or adding white noise, avoiding caffeine late in the day, and only using your bed for sex and sleep are good tips to gain and maintain a healthy sleeping schedule. Also, make sure to avoid naps during the day.

Eating: Reducing saturated fat, which can increase inflammation and lower dopamine production, is one step to help achieve an overall mind and body balance. Another is an increase in consuming foods that contain the amino acids tyrosine and phenylalanine, which studies have shown to increase dopamine levels; these amino acids can be found in protein-rich foods such as eggs, meat, dairy, legumes, and soy products. Finally, cooking yourself and the smells created by cooking positively correlates with dopamine production.

Exercise: While the thought of exercise may not be overwhelmingly exciting for many, it is no shock to anyone that it is good for you. More than the sense of accomplishment that accompanies finishing a run or workout, exercise promotes the release of dopamine, stimulates memory retention, helps to prevent Alzheimer's later in life, and improves overall mood. Because going from 0 - 60 with fitness training can result in injury, make sure you start with something you're comfortable with and can commit to doing. Exercise doesn't mean going to the gym or a 5-mile run every day. A game of basketball with friends, a brisk walk around the neighborhood, or a hike in the woods all work as effective exercise. Studies suggest that dopamine levels significantly increase with the length of time a person is active, so keep it up!

Mindfulness and Meditation: The rollercoaster of emotions, the anxiety, and the cravings people in recovery often face illustrates the importance of having control over one's mind.

Controlling breathing, taking a "step back," and learning to relax are critical recovery skills that will allow you to deal with triggers and may help in understanding underlying conditions that lead to SUD. Not surprisingly, meditation is linked to increases in dopamine production.

Listening to music, sunlight exposure, and intermittent fasting are other activities that enhance dopamine production and can be scheduled concurrently with some of the habits listed above or others that you plan during the day.

Other habits you can consider adding to your routine that promotes recovery could include:

attending support groups/12-step meetings
keeping a daily gratitude journal
scheduling sober activities with friends
helping a child with their homework
volunteering in the community
cleaning/organizing your room/desk/house/etc.