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1-Page Summary

In *Dopamine Nation*, Stanford University psychiatrist and addiction treatment expert Anna Lembke argues that addiction is just an extreme form of a universal problem: **the compulsive pursuit of neurochemical rewards at the expense of your own happiness**. In other words, the treatments that work for severe addictions can work for *everyday overindulgence* as well.

Most people have issues controlling their consumption of pleasurable things—such as junk food, pornography, social media, or binging on their favorite YouTube channels. Lembke draws on contemporary neuroscience and the stories of her patients to take a close look at the reasons for overindulgence and provide clear directives on taking back control of your behavior. This guide will introduce you to her main ideas while connecting them to outside psychological findings that explain the brain chemistry at work. We also supplement her strategies with targeted solutions from behavioral experts to improve your chances of overcoming your indulgent behaviors, once and for all.

Our guide will take you through the core ideas of *Dopamine Nation* in four parts.

- **Part #1: Why People Are Driven to Overindulge** covers how industrial societies create the perfect conditions for overindulgence.
- **Part #2: How Your Brain Chemistry Encourages Overindulgence** explains the basics of how your chemical reward system keeps you overindulging.
- **Part #3: Working With Your Brain To Overcome Overindulgence** covers Lembke's strategies to restore your brain's chemical balance.
- **Part #4: Overcoming Emotional Obstacles** discusses the emotional reasons why people fall into patterns of overindulgence and how to address these issues.

What Counts as an Addiction?

Lembke argues that the **treatments helpful to severe addicts will shed light on how you can control your everyday compulsive behaviors**. However, it's worth considering that psychologists are not in complete agreement with each other about what should be considered an addiction, and may therefore disagree with Lembke, asserting that **we must draw sharper distinctions between various forms of overindulgence**.

Some argue that the term "addiction" has become overused in everyday speech. They contend that thinking of everything as an addiction muddies the waters about specific treatments for specific issues. These psychologists advocate **a narrower definition of addiction: a neurological dependency on outside chemicals not normally found in the brain**. Under this rubric, cocaine can be an addiction, but sex cannot.

To stay true to Lembke's argument, we've added commentary throughout this guide to connect treatment suggestions that may be specific to addiction (like joining a support group) with advice to address milder forms of overindulgence (like talking with a supportive group of friends).

Part #1: Why We Are Driven to Overindulge

Lembke begins by explaining that overindulgence is a widespread and growing issue. She attributes this growth to the interaction of three distinct factors. In this section, we'll take a look at each factor and then explain how they work together to create a cycle of overindulgence.

1. Human brains evolved to thrive in scarcity. Your brain is designed to solve the problem of scarce resources. In our early hunter-gatherer days, food and other resources were hard to find, and those who had the strongest motivation to seek it out would have an advantage. Because obtaining pleasurable goods—such as food—results in the release of a neurochemical reward, your brain has evolved a very strong motivation to continue pursuing pleasurable goods.

(Shortform note: To understand why our brains are primed for pursuit of pleasure, it helps to recognize that **desire is a much stronger motivator than possession**. In Robert Greene's *The Laws of Human Nature*, he argues that having something will only provide a brief experience of satisfaction before desire will motivate you to pursue something else. This means your mind's evolved motivation for neurochemical rewards is perfectly tuned to *repetitively* seek out a reward.)

2. Industrialization provides abundance. People in industrialized nations now experience an abundance of food, entertainment, narcotics, and other pleasure-inducing goods. The intense motivation to seek neurochemical rewards that served your ancestors so well now

leads to overconsumption—your **brain still behaves as if you could run out of these pleasurable goods at any moment**, and encourages excessive pursuit.

3. Leisure time provides opportunities for overconsumption. In industrial societies, survival requires less daily effort: You no longer have to gather food all day or move every time there's a drought. The consequent increase in leisure time creates opportunities for compulsive consumption—when you don't have to spend your time on basic survival, you can redirect that time to pleasurable activities. Hunter-gatherers didn't have time to play video games all day, but people in industrial societies often do.

Does Abundance Create Indulgence?

Lembke contends that the overabundance found in industrial societies creates opportunities to compulsively overindulge. In other words, she says, greater supply leads to greater demand. However, some would disagree with this formulation. The economist John Maynard Keynes rejected the idea that supply could create demand. He argued that if people desired things simply because they were abundant, then businesses could make money by producing anything they wanted—there would always be a market for their products. He contended that businesses are only profitable when they produce supply in response to the consumer demand that already exists.

That said, Lembke's position has strong advocates as well. David T. Courtwright (*The Age of Addiction*) argues that demand for addictive goods such as alcohol and cigarettes doesn't follow the demand-before-supply model perfectly. **Companies that sell addictive goods have an incentive to try to get customers "hooked" on their products by making these products easily available.** The greater the supply, the easier it is to get a “first dose” into the hands of prospective consumers.

For example, when alcohol companies sponsor sporting events, concerts, and festivals, their goal is to make their brand of alcohol abundant and easily accessible so that people will try it—and eventually, become addicted. He argues that through these strategies, businesses are able to leverage the abundant supply of their addictive goods to **create future demand** for their products.

Result: Perfect Conditions for Overindulgence

These three factors work together to create a dangerous cycle of overindulgence: **Your brain is fine-tuned to keep consuming pleasurable goods—and now you have an abundance of these goods *and* plenty of time to consume them.** Lembke asserts that rising overconsumption is behind a well-documented decrease in happiness among industrialized nations, and she highlights the rise in addiction-related deaths in all age groups between 1990 and 2017.

Even if the odds are stacked against you, **it's still possible to overcome your patterns of overindulgence**. However, you'll have to tackle the cycle in both its dimensions: neurochemical and emotional. Throughout the rest of this guide, we'll explore both angles—for each, we'll first discuss the obstacles to changing your habits, then walk through Lembke's solutions.

When Does Free Time Make People Unhappy?

Lembke draws a clear link between excess leisure time and overindulgence. She also suggests this may be a cause for rising unhappiness in industrialized nations. However, psychological research shows that **leisure time by itself doesn't necessarily decrease human flourishing**. Understanding how much free time to have and how to use your free time well may prevent you from falling into overindulgence.

Studies have revealed a kind of “goldilocks zone” of free time that increases happiness. **Fewer than two hours of free time per day makes people less happy—but so does more than five hours**. Between two and five hours seems like the optimal range. That said, using excess free time wisely can mitigate its ill effects. Filling your excess free time with meaningful hobbies or socializing can make you much happier than activities that feel hollow, repetitive, or lonely, such as the repetitive consumption of abundantly pleasurable goods like social media or junk food.

Part #2: How Your Brain Chemistry Encourages Overindulgence

Now that we've explored how your evolutionary and social circumstances set you up for overindulgence, let's take a closer look at the role your brain's natural chemistry plays. Lembke writes that **the balance of chemicals in your brain can either present enormous obstacles to overcoming overindulgence—or be part of the solution**. Understanding your brain's natural tendencies will help you change your behavior by working *with* your brain instead of *against* it.

In this section, we'll first take a look at the chemical largely responsible for cyclical overindulgence: *dopamine*. Then, we'll examine how pain and pleasure interact neurologically to drive the cycle of overconsumption.

What Is Dopamine and How Does It Drive Overindulgence?

Contrary to popular misconception, dopamine isn't the “happy chemical” that releases when you *receive* something pleasurable—it's the chemical that motivates you to *seek out* pleasure. Studies have shown this chemical is largely responsible for overindulgence because it drives you to continually seek out pleasurable activities. Some of the highest dopamine-driven activities include gambling, shopping, sex, and using cocaine or

methamphetamines. However, Lembke points out that “high-dopamine activities” are not the same for everyone—the high-dopamine activity that motivates you to indulge compulsively may be something “milder” like sugar, video games, or social media.

Are Some Activities Designed to Be Addictive?

Understanding that dopamine is the chemical that drives our pleasure-seeking sheds light on how **many of the activities people engage with every day are designed to manipulate their brains and keep them in a state of overindulgence**. Game designers in particular have realized that your brain releases dopamine when you feel you are close to obtaining a reward. Therefore, they’ve developed proven strategies to make you feel close to winning—and therefore engaged in—their games. Let’s explore three of the most common tactics:

1. Dangling a large unobtainable reward. If you are constantly reminded that you have a chance to hit the jackpot, you will remain in a state of dopamine arousal. For example, carnival games often display one big prize, like a giant stuffed animal, that’s almost impossible to win.

2. The "near miss" effect. Players are likely to experience a rush of dopamine if they feel they *almost* got a reward, and might get it on their next try. For example, a slot machine requiring you to match three characters will create a "near miss" effect if you match two of them, making it feel like you were closer to winning than you really were.

3. Unpredictable rewards. Studies have found games that reward players unpredictably are more addictive than games with predictable rewards. Unpredictable rewards mean that there’s always a possibility that you could win big on the next play. Gambling is the most obvious example, but consider that popular video games like *World of Warcraft* use this too. If monsters drop loot randomly, then the next monster you defeat could always be the one that drops a rare item.

How Pain and Pleasure Drive Overconsumption

People engage in high-dopamine activities because they lead to pleasure—and in turn, this pleasure keeps you locked in a cyclical loop of overindulgence. In this section, we’ll explore how pleasure—and pain—play a part in this cycle.

Neuroscientists have discovered that **pain and pleasure are processed in the same parts of the brain**. When you’re feeling pain, you won’t feel pleasure and vice versa. Lembke encourages you to imagine **this system as a seesaw that tilts in either the direction of pleasure or pain**.

When you engage in your high-dopamine activities, you "press down" on the pleasure side of the seesaw. This not only causes pleasure, but it also "lifts up" the pain side, alleviating your pain. Unfortunately, using pleasure to alleviate pain comes with a catch. Lembke explains that the brain has a natural tendency to **balance out the seesaw, seeking what neuroscientists call "homeostasis."** If you press constantly on the pleasure side by overindulging in pleasurable things, the brain will naturally heap more "weight" on the pain side of the seesaw to keep your system in balance.

(Shortform note: Biology demonstrates why your body has such a powerful drive for homeostasis. Studies have found that all living things strive for homeostasis, even at the cellular level because **your cells and organs function best when they are in a predictable environment.** If your brain swings unpredictably between pleasure or pain—thereby frequently changing the environment—it will have to devote energy to adjusting to the environment and optimizing function. Your brain avoids having to expend this additional energy by counterbalancing environmental changes—remaining in a neutral, predictable state.)

How the Pain/Pleasure Balance Makes It Hard to Stop Indulging

The excess "pain weight" that counterbalances pleasure can lock you into a cycle of overindulgence because of two factors that work together.

1. **You build up a tolerance to pleasure.** Each repeated experience of pleasure will have less of an impact because it *must push against more weight* on the pain side. This is why your fifth trip to the casino won't feel as good as your first.
2. **You can set your default balance to pain.** As you build up "pain weight" over time, it will keep weighing down the pain side of your seesaw, even when you aren't doing anything pleasurable. Therefore your default state—when you're not doing anything painful or pleasurable—will be *feeling bad instead of feeling neutral*.

These two factors have a cyclical effect: You feel pain when you stop consuming because of the extra weight placed on the pain side. This pain creates an incentive to consume again and go back to feeling okay. However, each act of consumption will have less effect than the one before, enticing you to indulge more than before. This, in turn, keeps adding weight to the pain side, digging you deeper and deeper into a negative feedback loop.

How Pain and Pleasure Motivate Us

Rather than using the seesaw metaphor, some researchers argue that what's actually happening with pain and pleasure is that **they are each taking turns directing your motivational circuits**. The motivational circuits are the pathways your behavior-motivating chemicals follow toward various goals, informed by inputs from different parts of your brain. Understanding how pleasure and pain influence these circuits can shed further light on why overindulgent behaviors feel cyclical as if you're caught in a loop.

Pain and pleasure are both responses evolved to motivate your behavior. However, your pain and pleasure motivations are **meant to trigger behavior in *distinctly different* situations, because they motivate such different behaviors**. Pleasure motivates you to move *toward* helpful things (finishing a delicious meal). Pain motivates you to move *away from* harmful things (taking your hand off of a hot stove).

However, once you start using pleasure as a strategy to alleviate pain, **you will have both influencing your motivational circuit in the same situation**. Now that avoiding pain and obtaining pleasure are the same activity, these two sources of motivation can take turns propelling you toward the same behavior over and over.

Part #3: Working With Your Brain to Overcome Overindulgence

By understanding your brain's natural motivations for overindulgence, you can then understand how to circumvent those motivations and break the cycle. In this section, we'll explore Lembke's two tools for resetting your balance: abstinence from pleasure and therapeutic pain.

Solution #1: Abstain From Pleasure

Lembke's first strategy for restoring balance is to **abstain from your high-dopamine activities for two to four weeks**. Remember that repeated indulgence in pleasurable activities induces the brain to balance your seesaw by adding "pain weight." By abstaining from pleasurable activities—therefore not adding "pleasure weight"—**you let your brain recalibrate and take the pain weight off**.

However, as Lembke notes, this solution is far from perfect. **Abstaining from pleasure requires a lot of self-discipline**. The early stages are often accompanied by painful feelings of withdrawal—you'll have to voluntarily endure this pain without giving into the temptation of relieving it. Once you get through the withdrawal period, you'll no longer feel the need to indulge.

(Shortform note: Another reason abstaining from pleasure is challenging is because it forces you to work against your *habits*. In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg provides clarity on what makes habits so hard to break. He writes that your brain uses habits to save energy: Once a repeated action becomes automatic, you no longer have to think about it or make a decision. This frees up energy for other activities. When you try to break habits—good or bad—your brain will resist your attempts because it naturally wants to avoid having to expend more energy on decision-making.)

What Is Dopamine Fasting?

The practice of abstaining from pleasure to reset your pain-pleasure balance is **widely referred to in popular culture as a "dopamine fast."** Lembke uses the term herself throughout *Dopamine Nation*. However, this term has drawn a lot of criticism—here we'll explore three of the most common criticisms.

1. Dopamine is essential for your body's natural functioning, so you can't actually "fast" from it. Dopamine plays an important role in digestion, kidney function, blood pressure regulation, lactation, and even color sensitivity. While you can decrease the amount of dopamine released in your brain, you can never get to zero—nor should you want to.

2. Some critics contend that dopamine fasting is simply a buzzy rebranding of common sense wisdom that has been around for centuries. Many religious traditions include periods of abstinence such as weekly Sabbath days or longer fasts like Ramadan and Lent. However, defenders of dopamine fasting would point out that if people have been using this strategy for self-improvement across centuries and cultures, that only provides evidence of its value.

3. It's led to some weird behavior. There are accounts of people avoiding eye contact, conversations, busy streets, and even the smell of food—all to avoid the release of dopamine in their brains. This seems to arise from people believing they need to avoid all activities that could release dopamine. However, Lembke is clear that you mainly need to avoid the activities you engage in *compulsively*, such as scrolling through social media or eating chips. Unless you struggle with compulsively making eye contact or smelling food, these aren't things you need to avoid.

Strategies for Abstaining From Pleasure

Since abstaining from pleasure requires a lot of self-control, Lembke recommends **developing a strategy to improve your chances of success**. She divides possible strategies into three general categories: spatial, temporal, and associational restrictions.

1) Spatial restrictions: Make it **physically harder to engage in your high-dopamine activity**. By creating more of a physical distance or barrier between yourself and your object of indulgence, you give yourself more of an opportunity to think twice and interrupt

thoughtless or automatic habits of consumption. For example, this could take the form of throwing out your junk food or deleting a social media app.

2) Temporal restrictions: Reduce overindulgence by **setting time limits on when, how often, and for how long** you can indulge. This will increase your awareness of how much you are indulging and prevent you from losing track of time and consumption. For example, you could set a timer while playing a video game or only have a cocktail on Friday nights.

3) Associational restrictions: Avoid activities that you associate with indulging. Sometimes an activity will remind you of your high-dopamine activity and trigger a craving. By avoiding activities that trigger cravings, you will decrease your frequency of cravings, improving your odds of success. For example, someone who compulsively gambles may feel a craving triggered by playing any card game, even ones without betting.

Strengthening Your Willpower

Lembke points out that each of these strategies requires *willpower* to follow through with your abstinence. Even if there is distance between you and your high-dopamine activity, you still need to make the choice to respect that distance. You need discipline to adhere to strict time limits, as you may be tempted to do an activity "just a little longer." Finally, even if you avoid most reminders of your temptation, you won't be able to eliminate all reminders.

Fortunately, there are practical steps you can take to increase your willpower, and with it, your chances of successfully resetting your homeostatic balance through abstinence. In *The Willpower Instinct*, Kelly McGonigal writes that your **bodily health—specifically your heart rate variability, or how much time passes between each of your heartbeats—plays an important role in improving willpower**. Generally, she explains, those with a high heart rate variability have a greater sense of willpower. Two ways that you can increase your heart rate variability—and thus your willpower—over time are *exercise* and *relaxing activities* like meditating or sitting in a sauna. Consider incorporating exercise and relaxation habits into your abstinence strategy to improve your willpower and chances of following through.

Solution #2: Use Therapeutic Pain

Lembke's second strategy for restoring a neutral homeostasis is to **intentionally press on the "pain" side of the seesaw**. Because your brain strives for equilibrium, feeling pain will cause your brain to take weight away from the pain side. This will undo the effects of your high tolerance for pleasure, leaving you with a neutrally balanced seesaw and a "normal" default state, instead of a painful default state that compels you to seek pleasure for equilibrium. Lembke recommends finding a safe way to experience physical pain, like regularly taking ice water baths or cold showers.

However, she warns, pressing on the pain lever can itself become an addiction. If you experience pain too much or too often, your brain will homeostatically balance its seesaw in the other direction—adding weight to the pleasure side and making you feel *good* in response to pain. (This is the reason many endurance athletes feel a high after completing a triathlon.) Be careful not to simply substitute one pattern of indulgence for another.

The Difference Between Chronic and Acute Pain

At first, it may seem counterintuitive that pain is beneficial to your well-being. However, pain researchers shed further light on the benefits of pain by dividing it into two categories: acute and chronic. You experience **acute pain in direct response to your environment**—for example, the pain you feel if you put your hand in cold water. Your receptivity to acute pain is essential to your health, as it compels you to avoid damage to your body. Conversely, **chronic pain is something you experience over long spans of time in response to something internal**, such as a back injury. Chronic pain does not provide a clear health benefit and often interferes with your life.

Using this distinction, we see that Lembke's strategy is to **treat chronic pain with acute pain**: The "pain weight" on your seesaw is internal and long-term (chronic), whereas the ice water bath is external and short-term (acute). Each experience of acute pain causes your brain to rebalance itself through homeostasis. This takes weight off the pain side so that a chronic experience of "pain weight" is no longer your default.

The Difference Between Therapeutic Pain and Self Harm

Lembke writes that self-administered pain can reset your seesaw and change your habits of overindulgence. However, there's **a sharp distinction to be drawn between experiencing pain in ways that are safe and ways that are harmful.**

Though often hidden and stigmatized, between 13 and 23% of teenagers have practiced some form of self-harm such as cutting, burning, or puncturing their skin. This is often done to alleviate emotional pain or express self-hatred. **Self-harm can also be addictive as it can create pleasurable feelings.**

While some people find that self-harm creates some of the same neurological responses as therapeutic pain, there is a huge difference in the *risk*. Taking an ice-cold shower isn't going to put you in the hospital. On the other hand, self-harm-related injuries are one of the most common reasons teenagers go to the emergency room.

Part #4: Overcoming Emotional Obstacles

As you recall, overindulgence is driven by both neurochemical and emotional factors. In the previous section, we explored the neurochemical factors. In this final section, we'll explore four of the most common *emotional* obstacles to breaking out of the overindulgence cycle, as well as Lembke's solutions for overcoming each.

Obstacle #1: Prioritizing Long-Term Rewards

Lembke's first obstacle to overcoming overindulgence is the difficulty of **choosing long-term rewards over short-term ones**. Most people prefer the short-term rewards of indulgence because they are easier to obtain and they feel good right away—only feeling bad in the long run. On the other hand, stopping your overindulgence and going through withdrawal feels terrible in the short run, and only feels good after about two to four weeks.

Lembke goes on to clarify why we're primed to ignore positive long-term effects for short-term gains. She explains that the pursuit of long-term and short-term rewards is **handled by separate parts of the brain**. Pursuing short-term rewards relies on emotional parts of the brain such as the amygdala. Pursuing long-term rewards requires effort by the *prefrontal cortex*, the part of the brain involved in logic, conceptual thinking, and long-term planning. In other words, you can chase what is in front of you by acting on emotional impulse, but prioritizing a delayed reward requires thinking logically about your goals.

While prioritizing long-term rewards may be hard for most people, **those who compulsively overindulge are placed at a particular disadvantage because overindulging rewires their brains over time**. Researchers have found that people who compulsively overindulge have lower-than-average connectivity between the reward pathways and the prefrontal cortex. (Shortform note: Recall, reward pathways are the channels your motivational chemicals, such as dopamine, take through your brain toward the various goals your brain sets for them.) This means that the prefrontal cortex is less likely to interject with a logical argument when you pursue a short-term reward at the expense of a long-term one.

Why Is It So Hard to Prioritize Long-Term Rewards?

In *Predictably Irrational*, Dan Ariely explains why **prioritizing long-term rewards over short-term ones is a struggle for most people**. He draws a distinction between “cool-state decisions” and “warm-state decisions.” You’re in a cool state when you feel calm and collected and in a warm state while experiencing intense emotions. It’s relatively easy to pursue long-term rewards and make rational decisions when you’re in a cool state. However, when you’re in a warm state—such as when your brain is flooded with dopamine—it’s difficult to ignore your emotions or act rationally. He writes that most people are very poor at predicting how they will react in a warm state—they expect they’ll be able to stick to their cool-state decisions even when emotionally aroused.

He suggests that the solution to overcoming this gap isn’t a pledge to make better decisions but to *prevent* yourself from having to make decisions in a warm state at all. For example, Lembke’s suggestion to create physical distance from your desired indulgence helps to make the decision not to indulge *for* you.

How Does Your Behavior Change Your Brain?

Lembke’s discussion of connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and the brain’s reward pathways **is related to the science of neuroplasticity**.

Neuroplasticity is your brain’s capacity to create new connections, learn, and change itself. Neuroscientists have learned this process happens continually based on how you use your brain. **Your neurons grow and form connections in the areas of your brain you use the most, while they shrink and lose connections in the parts of your brain you use the least.** For example, a musical instrument becomes easier to play the more you practice. But stop practicing for long enough and it becomes hard again. This is because the act of practicing uses your neurons involved in playing music, and they grow and shrink in response.

How does this relate to the pursuit of short- and long-term rewards? If you always pursue the short-term emotional reward right in front of you, it strengthens the connection between the emotional parts of your brain and the reward pathways. Meanwhile, because you aren’t using your prefrontal cortex to think about long-term goals, the lack of activity causes those neurons to shrink and become disconnected from the reward pathways. Therefore you’re less likely to pursue long-term goals because your brain hasn’t built up a strong connection between prefrontal cortex and reward pathway required to do so.

The Solution: Restore Connectivity With the Prefrontal Cortex

Lembke's solution is to reinforce the connection between your prefrontal cortex and your brain's reward pathways through *deliberate use of your prefrontal cortex*. She advises you to **make an effort to think about your future**. Lembke found that just thinking about what you want your life to look like 10 years down the road activates your prefrontal cortex, helping you gain perspective and find motivation to change your behavior.

Strategies for Prioritizing Long-Term Rewards

Lembke's solution to the challenge of prioritizing long-term rewards is to practice using your prefrontal cortex so that you gradually develop a stronger capacity for long-term thinking. However, this solution **only yields results after a significant time investment**. Dan Ariely (*Predictably Irrational*) offers some practical solutions for prioritizing long-term rewards that you can start applying immediately.

- **Make pre-commitments.** When building habits, commit to things that are hard to back out of. If you're committing to abstaining from pleasure, you can create accountability by doing it with a friend.
- **Minimize distractions.** Create an environment that limits your access to distractions. If your attention is constantly being pulled in new directions, it's easier to lose focus and fall back into automatic behaviors.
- **Reward yourself.** You can reinforce the behaviors that are most important to you by tying them to a reward. If you're cutting back on social media, set a weekly goal and treat yourself with a meal out if you achieve it

Obstacle #2: Recognizing and Accepting Your Patterns of Behavior

Lembke names **difficulty in accurately recognizing and accepting your patterns of behavior** as the second emotional obstacle. Often, it's hard to see how your behaviors fit together in a *pattern*. This once again has to do with the eroded link between the reward pathways and the logic center of the brain.

Recall that when you repeatedly pursue short-term and emotionally driven rewards, you decrease the connectivity between your reward pathways and your prefrontal cortex—the part of your brain responsible for long-term planning. The prefrontal cortex also narrates your experiences in real time and keeps you aware of your behaviors, which plays an essential role in self-awareness. The less internal running commentary you have on your daily actions, **the less aware you are of your behavior**.

Furthermore, even if you *are* aware of your behavior and recognize the extent of your patterns of overindulgence, **it can be difficult to accept that you have a problem**. Most people don't want to see themselves as lacking self-control and maintain their positive self-image by minimizing, ignoring, or discounting their patterns of behavior.

How Bad Is Your Cycle of Overindulgence?

Lembke writes that the difficulty in recognizing your patterns of behavior lies largely with a lack of self-awareness or unwillingness to acknowledge the pattern. A good place to start gaining clarity about your behavior or acknowledging the existence of a pattern may be comparing your behavior to standards used by psychologists to diagnose addiction. Psychologists see addiction as a process with three sequential stages. As you read, consider whether any of these sound familiar.

- **Misuse:** Someone misuses a pleasurable activity when they are using it to alleviate or distract from emotional or physical pain. Pay close attention to *why* you are indulging in your high-dopamine activity. For example, are you having an alcoholic drink to have fun with your friends or because you had a hard day at work?
- **Abuse:** This stage is characterized by heavier overindulgence to maintain the pain alleviation effects. You may be at this stage if you notice that you've built up a tolerance to your pleasurable activity. Are you engaging in the activity for longer periods than you used to, or ingesting higher doses of a substance?
- **Addiction:** A repetitive cycle of abuse becomes a full-blown addiction once someone begins putting great effort into accessing their pleasurable activity. They also begin to suffer the consequences of their overindulgence in their relationships, mental health, and financial well-being. To understand if you've reached this stage, ask yourself two questions. **How did you respond the last time you weren't able to access your pleasurable activity? Secondly, what has pursuing this activity cost you (financially, emotionally, and socially)?**

The Solution: Tell the Truth

Lembke argues that to recognize and accept your patterns of behavior, you must make a practice of telling the truth. By this, she means **committing to honesty—even when it feels painful, uncomfortable, or shameful**. This practice offers four distinct benefits in changing your patterns of overindulgence.

1. Recognition. By honestly calling your behavior to your attention, it will be easier to see your patterns of compulsive consumption as they really are. The more you commit to acknowledging each instance of indulgence, the more you will perceive that they are part of a pattern and not just isolated incidents.

(Shortform note: Lembke writes that practicing greater honesty highlights behavioral patterns, but this may not be enough: Recognizing *patterns* of behavior may also require a strong memory or record of your ongoing behaviors. In *The Bullet Journal Method*, Ryder

Carroll asserts that **keeping a log of your daily activities will help you better remember your behaviors, their frequency, and their context—creating new opportunities for self-reflection when your own memory may fall short.**)

2. Strengthening the mind. By honestly acknowledging your behavior, you will gradually reforge the linkage between your prefrontal cortex and your reward pathways. As your brain gets used to paying more attention to your decisions, it will naturally rewire itself to make this practice easier. This increased connectivity will then allow you to be more mindful and make better decisions when facing an opportunity to indulge.

(Shortform note: Lembke writes that you can strengthen your prefrontal cortex by practice—the more you use it, the stronger it gets. But this may not be the only way. **Neuroscience has shown you can also strengthen your prefrontal cortex through mindfulness activities** that don't necessarily require you to honestly assess yourself. In *The Willpower Instinct*, Kelly McGonigal writes that a daily mindfulness practice like meditation increases blood flow to the prefrontal cortex. Additionally, people who meditate regularly have been shown to have more gray matter in their prefrontal cortex. When trying to break your pattern of overindulgence, consider making mindfulness a part of your daily routine.)

3. Accountability. Honesty gives you a greater ability to take responsibility for your actions. By admitting when your decisions lead to overindulgence, you can find opportunities to interrupt the cycle. Lembke writes that an honest account of your own behavior is the first step toward taking control of your decisions.

4. Agency. The final benefit of truth-telling is an improved sense of agency. As you recognize your own role in your overindulgence, you will see that you have the power to change it. People who see themselves as the ones making decisions and leading their own lives often have greater faith in their capacity to change.

Lembke writes that **one of the most important ways to strengthen your agency is to be aware of how you tell your life story**. People who tell stories that focus only on what has happened to them, while overlooking their own decisions, may have a limited sense of their own capabilities. On the other hand, people who tell life stories that emphasize their own choices tend to see themselves as having more control over their future choices. This gives them a greater ability to **exercise that control and change their habits of overindulgence**.

A Better Way to Tell Your Life Story

Lembke writes that telling your life story honestly and with a focus on your own agency will provide a sense of empowerment and accountability to overcome your patterns of indulgence. **But how can you go about changing the way you tell your life story?** Psychologists offer three tips.

- **Avoid binary or absolute language.** Phrases like, "There was nothing I could do," or, "It's impossible to fix this" create a story where you are powerless. This language not only frames you as having less agency, but it also undermines your accountability for your own actions by rendering the situation as something out of your hands.
- **Use simple and direct language to approach difficult subjects.** You don't need to approach your most sensitive topics with strong judgments and opinions. Simple and direct language will make it easier to lower the emotional barriers to acknowledging painful or difficult truths. For example, instead of saying, "I made the stupid decision to try a cigarette when I was younger and idiotic," simply say, "I decided to try a cigarette when I was 20."
- **Think about the life story you would *like* to have.** Reflecting on your greater narrative arc can help inspire you to tell a new story. Is it a story of growth, resilience, and healing? Or is it a story of frustration and despair?

Obstacle #3: Isolation

Lembke identifies isolation from others as a third emotional obstacle to overcoming overindulgence. She explains that **your overindulgent behaviors may leave you cut off from family and friends for two main reasons:** 1) shame about your overindulgence and 2) choosing dopamine over your relationships.

1) Shame: When you compulsively overindulge, you may feel ashamed of your behavior, which can lead you to conceal it from others. **The more time you spend hiding from other people, the less time you will spend connecting with them.** Furthermore, maintaining the façade that you don't have a struggle with overindulgence may make it harder to be open and fully yourself around others. This will erode your ability to connect, leaving your relationships less rewarding.

Shame also creates an obstacle to overcoming overindulgence because it can prevent you from reaching out for help since doing so would require disclosure. When shame becomes an obstacle to connection, you may find yourself struggling to break out of your behavior patterns alone.

2) Choosing dopamine over relationships: The second reason compulsive overindulgence alienates you has to do with the lifestyle it requires. **Lembke writes the more time and energy you invest in pursuing high-dopamine rewards, the less time and energy you have to invest in relationships.**

(Shortform note: While Lembke focuses on the ways overindulgence can leave you more isolated from others, there is also strong evidence that emotional isolation may be the root cause of your overindulgence in the first place. People who grew up without secure and nurturing relationships with their parents are far more likely to struggle to build strong relationships later in life. This leaves them far more vulnerable to turning towards overindulgence as a substitute for intimacy.)

Furthermore, Lembke argues, **isolation can deepen the cycle of overindulgence**. Recall that the neurological relationship between pleasure and pain creates a cycle by adding weight to the “pain side” of the seesaw. **Isolation feeds into this cycle because loneliness is painful** and therefore creates new incentives to indulge. The lonelier you feel, the greater reason you have to indulge and feel better in the short run. This will likely leave you more isolated and feeling worse again, deepening the cycle of indulgence.

(Shortform note: Lembke writes that loneliness is emotionally painful and thus creates a further incentive for overindulgence. However, this might **understate the case**. Health researchers have found that chronic loneliness not only causes emotional pain but can also result in physical pain and severe damage to your bodily health. Chronic loneliness increases your risk for high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, and cognitive decline. It also worsens the symptoms and length of illness when you are sick. By increasing your physical pain alongside your emotional pain, loneliness adds even more weight to the “pain side” of the seesaw.)

The Negative Beliefs Underpinning Shame

Lembke writes that shame may isolate you and make it harder to change your behavior. Others have pointed out that **your shame may be the result of negative beliefs about yourself that you must first overcome**. In *The Power of Vulnerability*, Brené Brown writes that people struggle to break down barriers of shame when they believe they are uniquely undeserving of love. She writes this is the result of two underlying false assumptions.

- **The source of shame is unrelatable.** If you think no one else has gone through your experiences, then it raises the stakes of sharing them. It's a very small risk to reveal a weakness or fault that is commonly shared, whereas it's a large risk to reveal a weakness or fault that makes you stand out from others.
- **The source of shame negates self-worth.** If you are convinced your value as a person is conditional on being successful, moral, or respectable, then anything that goes against those qualities can leave you feeling worthless and irredeemable.

When it comes to patterns of overindulgence, both of these beliefs are false. Recall that compulsive overindulgence is a widespread problem that many people struggle with, and no one's value as a human is diminished by it. If you struggle with either of these underlying beliefs, **recognizing their falsehood can make it easier to overcome the shame** that may isolate you in a pattern of indulgence.

Solution #1: Form Relationships Through Authentic Sharing

Lembke encourages breaking out of isolation by authentically sharing with others. Recall that you must be honest with *yourself* to restore your sense of accountability, agency, and self-awareness. **You must also be honest with others to form closer connections**. By being yourself with others, you create opportunities to bond while overcoming the shame and isolation of overindulgence.

Lembke writes that forming closer relationships through authentic sharing can help you overcome overindulgence in three distinct ways.

- When you have higher-quality relationships, you will feel less of a need to pursue dopamine-heavy rewards to cope with loneliness.
- Discussing your behavior with others can help you find solutions. Your friends and family may offer input and advice to help you change your patterns of behavior.
- By articulating your patterns of overindulgence to others, you may develop a more honest and realistic assessment of your habits.

Is Authentic Sharing *Enough*?

Many psychologists agree with Lembke's assertion that close relationships can play a vital role in alleviating loneliness, gaining advice, and developing a more honest assessment of behavior. But some argue that **while authentic sharing may be necessary for rebuilding relationships, it may not be enough**. If your patterns of indulgence have seriously damaged your relationships, you may need to utilize other forms of relationship repair, like conflict resolution or relationship counseling, to rebuild.

This is especially important to understand, because psychologists have found that relationships can be a major source of stress in life, and therefore an obstacle to overcoming indulgence. The added stress of a relationship characterized by broken trust or frequent arguments can provide strong incentives to fall back into overindulgence. Furthermore, traditional treatment programs often overlook relationship stress because addressing these issues can appear like **deferring responsibility and blame**. Therefore, it is important to remain aware of the health of your relationships and to seek remedies as needed.

Solution #2: Find a Supportive Community

Lembke notes that your willingness to share is only part of the solution—you also need a **listener who accepts you, no matter what you share**. Finding the right listener is vital: Some people may be put off by your disclosures, and sharing with someone who rejects you will only deepen your feelings of shame and discourage future disclosures.

If the people around you don't accept you *and* your struggles, **you may need to seek out new relationships**. Fortunately, there are support groups specifically designed to help those who compulsively overindulge, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. These communities are full of people who share your struggle—and therefore won't judge you and will have tried and true advice for changing your patterns of behavior. These communities also provide accountability, because you will be expected to share if you find yourself falling back into patterns of overindulgence.

How to Minimize the Impact of Rejection

Lembke stresses that rejection can deepen your pain and leave you feeling isolated. However, **you can minimize the pain of rejection if you can respond to it in a healthy, resilient way.** If rejection doesn't hurt you, it won't discourage future disclosure or cause further isolation. In *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, Mark Manson writes that handling rejection is an essential social skill. The better people are at hearing and saying no, the stronger their relationships will become because they will feel less need for superficial acceptance. Psychologists recommend three steps for handling rejection.

1. Acknowledge your pain and let yourself grieve. Feeling rejected hurts. Recognize your feelings and let yourself process.

2. Don't put the blame on yourself. If you're rejected, it's easy to assume it's because there's something wrong with you. There are many reasons someone might reject you—many of them having more to do with *them* than with *you*.

3. Take this as an opportunity to practice resiliency. If you frame your experience as an *opportunity* to practice processing and recovering from rejection, you may see it in a more positive light and therefore be more accepting of it.

Should Everyone Attend Support Groups?

On the surface, Lembke's advice about support groups may not seem applicable to everyone. However, recall that Lembke's thesis throughout this book is that **the solutions that help addicts have important things to teach everyone about controlling milder forms of overindulgence**. Here, we'll talk about some of the benefits support groups provide, and how you might find these benefits through your "everyday" relationships.

1. Non-judgmental listening: One of the core benefits of support groups is that you can feel heard without feeling judged. Try talking to your friends and family about your attempts to overcome overindulgence. See if any of them really make you feel heard.

2. Accountability: Support groups keep you accountable. Having to admit to others when you falter creates a strong incentive to change your habits. Try creating accountability by making an agreement with someone you trust that you'll disclose when you fall short of changing your habits.

3. Advice: Support groups allow you to benefit from the wisdom of people who have already made a lot of progress in changing their habits. Try seeking out someone in your social circle or online community who has already overcome a similar form of overindulgence.

4. Encouragement: Lastly, support groups provide motivating encouragement and positive reinforcement for your success. As you talk to friends and family, see if you can find someone who is rooting for you to change your patterns of overindulgence—spending more time with them will help keep you motivated.

Obstacle #4: Escapism

Lembke's final obstacle to overcoming overindulgence is escapism. People often find their own lives boring, and so they turn to **overindulgence to make their lives more interesting and forget feelings of dissatisfaction**. Lembke's solution is to discover something new and enriching in your life—something you may have previously overlooked. She explains that when breaking habits of overindulgence, it helps to find a new hobby or outlet for your passions that will help you take more interest in your own life.

How to Have a More Satisfying Life

Lembke writes that people often fall into patterns of overindulgence because they find their lives unsatisfying and boring. Here we'll discuss the root causes of boredom and the four activities psychologists recommend to get more satisfaction out of life.

Many writers have attempted to create a definition of boredom. In *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, Raph Koster describes boredom as the opposite of learning. You are bored when you aren't receiving new information to reinforce new habits or ways of being. Brené Brown (*Atlas of the Heart*) describes boredom as wanting to do something fulfilling but not being able to—a sense of being cut off from purpose. Finally, in *Atomic Habits*, James Clear defines boredom as the state when you are no longer challenged or excited by the things you're doing.

To find more satisfaction in life, you'll want to **seek challenges, learn continuously, and do something you consider meaningful and important**. Psychologists recommend four specific courses of action you can take to align your life with these factors and find enrichment.

1. Volunteer. Find opportunities in your community to help people out. Many find it fulfilling to know that they are helping others, and this could provide you with a sense of meaning and purpose you were missing.

2. Start a new project. Taking on a long-term project could provide a sense of challenge that may have been missing. You might take on the challenge of remodeling your kitchen, or set a goal to read one book every week.

3. Learn something new. You can stimulate your mind and challenge yourself by making an effort to learn. Try learning a new language, taking a cooking class, or reading a book on something you know little about.

4. Express yourself. Seek out a way to challenge yourself while gaining a sense of meaning and purpose as you share your feelings and story with others. Try finding a creative outlet like music, visual art, or creative writing.

Guided Tour