



**BENTLEY UNIVERSITY**

Cannabis Support and Recovery

## **Changing may be hard...and you can achieve it.**

Changing a Cannabis habit is sometimes not easy – and it’s often harder the longer a habit has been around. Happily, the Counseling Center is here to help.

We highly recommend pairing your commitment to change with the professional support needed to keep you focused and accountable. Seeking Mental Health support will also empower you to manage any underlying or resulting emotional or practical issues which might arise as you seek recovery.

**Contact us at the Bentley University Counseling Center – call us at 781-891-2274 or scheduling online at:**

**<https://www.bentley.edu/university-life/student-health/counseling-center>**

This guide includes tools and strategies recommended for and developed by users who have a more advanced habit, and who may consider themselves addicted to Cannabis. Even if you do not consider your habit advanced, or yourself to be addicted, it is likely you can benefit from learning and using these same tools.

## Cannabis Change Plan:

**-Acknowledge to yourself if your habit is unhealthy.** Then, **commit yourself to changing it.** Knowing that change may be hard and uncomfortable, you can decide to change anyways.

**-Discover Motivation by Connecting with your Values** – *What aspects of life are important to you? Have you been living in a manner consistent with this? How has Cannabis interfered?*

Use the **Valued Living Questionnaire** at the end of this document to help you identify your personal values & imagine what your best-life-worth-living looks like.

**-Create a ‘Change Plan’** – review all aspects of your habit that you find unhealthy - and which interfere with your pursuit of your personal values - and decide what your specific change goals are. Use this format: **S.M.A.R.T. – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely.**

**-Will I use again?** Given an honest reflection on your history, is it likely that you can continue use in a healthy form which works FOR you, rather than AGAINST you? If this seems unlikely, consider accepting that Cannabis might not be for you, now or ever. If the thought of not using again is scary or threatening, it is likely you aren’t currently in a place to maintain a healthy habit.

**-‘Cold Turkey’ vs. Tapering** – Quitting completely, all at once, can be difficult as it may yield intense withdrawal symptoms (anxiety, struggle with sleep, etc.), however reducing use slowly over time can also be risky, as there are more opportunities to fall back into old habits when motivation is low. Experiment with both methods if needed to find what works better for you.

**-Expect Difficulty** – Anticipate the situations & triggers to which you are personally vulnerable and develop a specific plan for those moments.

*Are there particular feelings, events, people, places, or situations that lead you to crave cannabis? How can you prepare yourself for these moments?*

**-Familiarize Yourself with the ‘Cognitive Errors’ of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:** These errors and corrective strategies are included at the end of this document. Dedicate time to observing your thoughts while sober, recognizing which errors are common in your thinking & how your vulnerability manifests, and work to combat habitual unhelpful self-talk through countering such errors with more helpful, balanced, or accurate interpretations of your environment.

**Identify Supports** – In moments of vulnerability, you'll need to reach out to trusted friends, perhaps someone in recovery, family, or professionals who can help you persevere, rededicate to your change plan, and find strength to resist urges. Figure out who you can reach out to and consider engaging with them now to recruit them into your change plan.

*Who do I know that understands what I am going through, and that I can rely on to support me in moments of struggle? Who do I trust to be there for me when I need them?*

**Create Accountability** – Inform those you care about that you intend to change your habit, the reasons why, and your change plan. Invite them to observe you change and challenge you if you falter. This disclosure creates interpersonal accountability, protecting you from backtracking in moments of vulnerability.

**Create Distance from Opportunity** – Protect yourself from slipping back into use by making it harder for yourself to give in to urges in vulnerable moments. For example:

- Throw away your stash and smoking tools. If you aren't ready to completely discard them, give them to someone you trust, or put them somewhere far away, where it is difficult to quickly retrieve them. Try burying them under a pile of heavy things, for example, to ensure that it takes at least some time to access.
- Discard contact information of dealers or sources of Cannabis. Step away from relationships with people who source your supply.
- Purchase a 'Timed Lock Safe' to store items you want to make sure you cannot access until a specific time or day.

**Set a 'Change Date'** – look at the calendar and decide on a day when conditions are favorable for you to implement your change plan, prepare yourself as much as possible, and gather the any needed resources to put yourself in the best position possible.

**Have a Gameplan for a 'Burning Desire'** – Set a plan for what to do when cravings are the most strong – often people will find a way to simply pass the time, tolerating the urge and allowing the craving to pass. Imagine what might work for you in those moments - try prayer, reaching out to others, engaging in an activity, exercising, whatever you can think of.

**Remember Change is a Process, not an Event** – Practice self-compassion & move forward despite setbacks, knowing there will be ups and downs.

## General Tips & Strategies

**Take Responsibility** – Understand that no matter how you got here, your life is your own, and you must be the person to own and make this change. Nobody else can save you from your habit, and nobody else is to blame for your habit.

**Focus on the Benefits** – Keep in mind the pros of changing your habit – gaining time, money, energy, restoring your drive and ambition towards your meaningful life goals and interests, a sense of control over your life and the confidence that brings, clarity of mind and the ability to focus and understand complex topics and thoughts, enhanced positive emotional experiences and fortified resilience.

**Remember the Drawbacks** – Depression, anxiety, stunted emotional maturity, brain fog and difficulties with memory & concentration, low motivation, low energy and chronic fatigue, financial costs, health and dietary problems, procrastination, and importantly, opportunity cost of the lost time and resources which would have gone towards something else healthy and productive for you.

**Keep a Growth Mindset** – A lost battle is NOT a lost war – if you slip up, get right as soon as you are able, and learn what you can from the experience. Progress continues even after a bad day.

**Defend against the First Hit** – Remember, for many, it's the first hit of Cannabis that's the gateway to the rest of our struggle. Stop it where it starts.

**Keep the #1 Problem in the #1 Slot** – While in the early phases of a difficult change, it can be distracting to juggle a multitude of competing priorities. Do your best to keep focus on your change plan, don't get distracted by minor goals.

**Keep Coming** – When you find something helpful, such as a self-help book, therapy or support group, stay engaged with it, or, if something recommended to you hasn't been helpful yet, keep at it.

**Keep it Simple** – To stop using, no matter what happens, just don't use. Your addiction will try to convince you that things are more complicated to justify use.

**Think of it as an ‘allergy’** – If you ate a piece of fruit, and suddenly lost your ability to think clearly, lost money, lost time and friends, lost control and suffered mental health problems as a result, would you ever eat that piece of fruit again? Perhaps think of Cannabis in this same fashion – others may use cannabis and not have these effects, however you simply be ‘allergic.’

**Don’t Touch the Stove** – Children learn from a young age, that burns! Don’t touch it! How many times do you need to touch the stove before you learn that it hurts?

**Find a Replacement Activity** – Find something enjoyable to do during times you previously would use. Reconnect with old hobbies, or try something new, knowing that it may take awhile for it to feel as intrinsically enjoyable as cannabis, or for you to rekindle your prior enjoyment.

**Don’t Chase the ‘Bonus Points’** – In early recovery, happiness can be elusive as many emotions and problems may be bubbling to the surface. Don’t expect yourself to find happiness quickly – the goal, for now, is just to stay sober. Expect to be in survival mode for the time being, satisfaction will come in time.

**Don’t listen to ‘Habit Mind’** – In response to your change, your habit will try and protect itself – listen for it whispering things like, ‘It’s not a big deal,’ ‘it’s only one,’ or ‘you can stop again later.’ ‘Habit Mind’ will always attempt to disrupt you!

**Play The Tape All the Way to the End** – When tempted, make sure you think through to the longer-term effects of using. Your addiction will focus on the next hour of your life being fun or pleasurable, while the hours after that might not be so enjoyable. Make sure you envision the FULL reality of your using experience.

**Life Situations & ‘Sober Problems’** – If you have been struggling with addiction, remember that sobriety, while initially difficult, opens your life up to new kinds of positive problems. Using prevented you from discovering ‘good’ problems of this nature, such as what job to take, how to manage your relationship, etc. Remember that ‘sober problems’ are a joy to experience compared to ‘addicted problems,’ such as poverty, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and low quality of life.

**Distract Yourself** – When urges hit, have a short list of immediately available, distracting activities ready for you to engage with while the urges pass. Perhaps draw, dance, workout, call a friend or family member, etc, as soon as you realize an urge is approaching.

**Try Meditation** – Mindfulness can help you to identify feelings and sensations which are influencing you, and build your ability to tolerate these experiences without resorting to using cannabis. Check out the Bentley 'Student Health Resources' webpage, or do a YouTube search.

**Expect Emotions** – As you change, it's likely you will experience some unexpected emotions, previously numbed by your use. This may be uncomfortable. Allow yourself to feel your emotions and dedicate yourself to integrating and working through unpleasantness helpfully without resorting back to smoking again.

**Focus on Sleep Hygiene** – If you have been using to fall asleep, you may struggle to fall asleep normally. You may have vivid dreams when you do. Research 'Sleep Hygiene' and dedicate yourself to instilling new healthy habits, such as keeping a regular sleep/wake time, avoiding screens, and establishing a relaxing nighttime routine without cannabis.

**Regulate your Eating** – Chronic smoking often disrupts normal appetite routines – often users will binge eat while high, leaving them without hunger when sober. Sometimes users experience low appetite overall when smoking.

**Exercise Regularly** – Regular exercise provides many of the same chemical benefits as Cannabis and serves as an excellent coping skill for those in early recovery. When you experience cravings, try hitting the gym or doing some calisthenics.

**Seek Professional Care** – Recovery is hard, and you can take advantage of every tool available to you to succeed. Contact the Counseling Center or off-campus Mental Health Care providers to assist you in your journey. More intensive specialized care programs, such as rehab centers, are also available.

**It Doesn't Matter if you're in Jail or at Yale** – Addiction doesn't care who you are, where you come from or what you've done. It can affect us all.

**Your Addiction is Doing Pushups in the Background** – Sometimes in early recovery, it can feel easy, as if your addiction is easily conquered. In times like these, we are vulnerable to surprise when it suddenly becomes hard.

**Seek your Higher Power** – Prayer can be a powerful tool. Looking to a power greater than yourself, asking for help, and admitting you cannot do it alone, when combined with other skills, is a time-proven strategy on the path to recovery.

**Stay Sober on the Trouble Which Got You Here** – Learn your lesson from your last attempt at a using lifestyle... no need to go collect more trouble to remember.

**Life on Life's Terms** – Foster your willingness to experience life as it is, rather than attempting to change or reject it through the emotional manipulation of Cannabis.

**Try an AA or MA meeting** – Some find it very useful to access a community of other users managing their habits. There are both in-person and online meetings available – check out <https://marijuana-anonymous.org/> for a list. Faith in a higher power is **not required**, nor is it required to 'Work the Steps' (12 Step Method) although may be encouraged. You can attend without speaking or even turning your camera on if online.

**Consider 'Working the Steps'** – There's a reason AA & MA (Alcoholics & Marijuana Anonymous) are so popular – it's because the method presented truly works, with decades of evidence to back that up. Check out MA's 12 Steps to Recovery, presented at the end of this document.

**Try a SMART Recovery or Recovery Dharma Meeting** – If MA isn't for you, there are other options out there. SMART recovery employs CBT techniques (like the unhelpful thinking styles included at the end of this document) which Recovery Dharma is Buddhist and mindfulness meditation based. For more information on these, check out 'Local Recovery Support Groups' on the Cannabis Conversation web-page.

**A Return to Recovery is not Promised** – Unfortunately, relapses are not guaranteed to be temporary. Remember that you cannot be sure of a return to recovery should you lose track.

**Consider Helping Others** – Assisting others find or maintain recovery, as well as generally volunteering your time and effort for any cause, is a way to keep yourself focused on your own values and goals and support your own recovery. Consider joining a recovery or other good-works community to keep yourself on track.

**Help others by Joining Bentley's Recovery Community –**

To get involved and find opportunities to assist others in recovery, make yourself known by reaching out to Alex Lemiszki, Psychologist at the Bentley Counseling Center. Email to: [alemiszki@bentley.edu](mailto:alemiszki@bentley.edu).



## Unhelpful Thinking Styles

### All or nothing thinking



Sometimes called 'black and white thinking'

*If I'm not perfect I have failed*

*Either I do it right or not at all*

### Over-generalizing

*"everything is always rubbish"*  
*"nothing good ever happens"*

Seeing a pattern based upon a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw

### Mental filter



Only paying attention to certain types of evidence

*Noticing our failures but not seeing our successes*

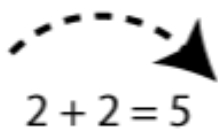
### Disqualifying the positive



Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another

*That doesn't count*

### Jumping to conclusions



There are two key types of jumping to conclusions:

- **Mind reading** (imagining we know what others are thinking)
- **Fortune telling** (predicting the future)

### Magnification (catastrophizing) & minimization



Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophizing), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important

### Emotional reasoning



Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true

*I feel embarrassed so I must be an idiot*

# should must

Using critical words like 'should', 'must', or 'ought' can make us feel guilty, or like we have already failed

If we apply 'shoulds' to other people the result is often frustration

### Labelling



Assigning labels to ourselves or other people

*I'm a loser*  
*I'm completely useless*  
*They're such an idiot*

### Personalization

# "this is my fault"

Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault

Conversely, blaming other people for something that was your fault

## TEN WAYS TO UNTWIST YOUR THINKING

1.	<b>Identify the Distortion</b>	Write down your negative thoughts so you can see which of the ten cognitive distortions you're involved in. This will make it easier to think about the problem in a more positive and realistic way.
2.	<b>Examine the Evidence</b>	Instead of assuming that your negative thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. For example, if you feel that you never do anything right, you could list several things you have done successfully.
3.	<b>The Double-Standard Method</b>	Instead of putting yourself down in a harsh, condemning way, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you would talk to a friend with a similar problem.
4.	<b>The Experimental Technique</b>	Do an experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. For example, if, during the episode of panic, you become terrified that you're about to die of a heart attack, you could jog or run up and down several flights of stairs. This will prove that your heart is healthy and strong.
5.	<b>Thinking in Shades of Grey</b>	Although this method might sound drab, the effects can be illuminating. Instead of thinking about your problems in all-or-nothing extremes, evaluate things on a range of 0 to 100. When things don't work out as well as you hoped, think about the experience as a partial success rather than a complete failure. See what you can learn from the situation.
6.	<b>The Survey Method</b>	Ask people questions to find out if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you believe that public speaking anxiety is abnormal and shameful, ask several friends if they ever felt nervous before they gave a talk.
7.	<b>Define Terms</b>	When you label yourself "inferior" or "a fool" or "a loser," ask, "What is the definition of a 'fool'?" You will feel better when you see that there is no such thing as a "fool" or a "loser."
8.	<b>The Semantic Method</b>	Simply substitute language that is less colorful and emotionally loaded. This method is helpful for "should statements." Instead of telling yourself "I shouldn't have made that mistake," you can say, "It would be better if I hadn't made that mistake."
9.	<b>Re-attribution</b>	Instead of automatically assuming that you are "bad" and blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that may have contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem instead of using up all your energy blaming yourself and feeling guilty.
10.	<b>Cost-Benefit Analysis</b>	List the advantages and disadvantages of a feeling (like getting angry when your plane is late), a negative thought (like "No matter how hard I try, I always screw up"), or a behavior pattern (like overeating and lying around in bed when you're depressed). You can also use the Cost-Benefit Analysis to modify a self-defeating belief such as, "I must always try to be perfect."

## **Valued Living Questionnaire**

Listed in the central column below are areas of life that are valued by some people. Values are not the same as goals. Values are directions we keep moving in, whereas goals are what we want to achieve along the way. A value is like heading North; a goal is like the river or mountain or valley we aim to cross whilst travelling in that direction. Goals can be achieved or 'crossed off', whereas values are an ongoing process. For example, if you want to be a loving, caring, supportive partner, that is a value – an ongoing process. Please consider the columns on each side and ask yourself these two questions: *How **important** is this area of my life? How much time do I **consistently** devote to this area of my life?*

<b>Importance:</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>Consistency</b> Over the past month:
Not at all		Not at all consistent
Extremely Important		Extremely Consistent
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Family	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Romantic Love & Sex	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Friends / Social Life	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Work	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Education / Training	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Recreation, Fun & Creative Expression	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Spirituality / faith	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Citizenship / Community	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Physical self-care (diet, exercise, sleep)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	ADD YOUR OWN:	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

If consistency is low, write down **WHY** and **WHAT** is getting in your way?

Deep down inside, what is important to you? What do you want your life to stand for? What sort of qualities do you want to cultivate as a person? How do you want to be in your relationships with others? **Values** are our heart's deepest desires for the way we want to interact with and relate to the world, other people, and ourselves. They are leading principles that can guide us and motivate us as we live.

**Values** are not the same as **goals**. Values are directions we keep moving in, whereas goals are what we want to achieve along the way. A value is like heading North; a goal is like the river or mountain or valley we aim to cross whilst travelling in that direction. Goals can be achieved or 'crossed off', whereas values are an ongoing process. For example, if you want to be a loving, caring, supportive partner, that is a value – an ongoing process.

If you stop being loving, caring and supportive, then you are no longer a loving, caring, supportive partner; you are no longer living by that value. In contrast, if you want to get married, that's a goal - it can be 'crossed off' or achieved. Once you're married, you're married – even if you start treating your partner very badly. If you want a better job, that's a goal. Once you've got it - goal achieved. But if you want to fully apply yourself at work, that's a value – an ongoing process.

The following are areas of life that are valued by some people. Not everyone has the same values, and this is not a test to see whether you have the "correct" values. Think about each area in terms of general life directions, rather than in terms of specific goals. There may be certain areas that you don't value much; you may skip them if you wish. There may be areas that overlap – e.g. if you value hiking in the mountains, that may come under both physical health and recreation. ***It is important that you write down what you would value if there were nothing in your way.*** What's important? What do you care about? And what you would like to work towards?

**Family relations.** What sort of brother/sister, son/daughter, uncle/auntie do you want to be? What personal qualities would you like to bring to those relationships? What sort of relationships would you like to build? How would you interact with others if you were the ideal you in these relationships?

**Intimate relations.** What sort of partner would you like to be in an intimate relationship? What personal qualities would you like to develop? What sort of relationship would you like to build? How would you interact with your partner if you were the 'ideal you' in this relationship?

**Care Giving.** What sort of caregiver would you like to be? What sort of qualities would you like to have? What sort of relationships would you like to build with those you care for? How would you behave if you were the 'ideal you'.

**Friendships/social life.** What sort of qualities would you like to bring to your friendships? If you could be the best friend possible, how would you behave towards your friends? What sort of friendships would you like to build?

**Career/employment.** What do you value in your work? What would make it more meaningful? What kind of worker would you like to be? If you were living up to your own ideal standards, what personal qualities would you like to bring to your work?

What sort of work relations would you like to build?

**Education/personal growth and development.** What do you value about learning, education, training, or personal growth? What new skills would you like to learn?

What knowledge would you like to gain? What further education appeals to you? What sort of student would you like to be? What personal qualities would you like to apply?

**Recreation/fun/leisure.** What sorts of hobbies, sports, or leisure activities do you enjoy? How do you relax and unwind? How do you have fun? What sorts of activities would you like to do?

**Spirituality.** Whatever spirituality means to you is fine. It may be as simple as communing with nature, or as formal as participation in an organized religious group. What is important to you in this area of life?

**Citizenship/ environment/ community life.** How would you like to contribute to your community or environment, e.g. through volunteering, or recycling, or supporting a group/ charity/ political party?

**Health/physical well-being.** What are your values related to maintaining your physical well-being? How do you want to look after your health, with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol, etc.? Why is this important?

**Mental Health /Wellbeing.** How do you want to look after your mental health? What might you contribute to better mental health (being able to say no, being free to unwind, finding time to attend to relaxation or practicing self-help skills or confronting a new and novel situation).

Many people want to change but are not prepared for discomfort. However, all change brings some degree of distress and uncertainty. You can't get a job without the hassle of an interview. You can't learn to ride a bike without the fear of falling off. You can't give up alcohol without the craving for alcohol. You can't bare a child without the pain of childbirth. You can't present a piece of work without the fear of being criticized and it being rejected. All change is challenging. Staying the same is often thought of as comfortable. However, if your life is comfortable then why attend therapy? If you are not prepared to accept this and willing to face the fearful challenges in order to follow your Valued life directions then nothing will change.

**“YOU DO THE SAME STUFF – YOU GET THE SAME STUFF!”**

# An Understanding of the Twelve Steps of MA

**Step ONE** - We admitted we were powerless over marijuana, that our lives had become unmanageable; practicing the principle of HONESTY.

**Step TWO** - We came to believe that a Power\* greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity; practicing the principle of HOPE.

**Step THREE** - We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God\*, as we understood God; practicing the principle of FAITH.

**Step FOUR** - We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves; practicing the principle of COURAGE.

**Step FIVE** - We admitted to God\*, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs; practicing the principle of INTEGRITY.

**Step SIX** - We were entirely ready to have God\* remove all these defects of character; practicing the principle of WILLINGNESS.

**Step SEVEN** - We humbly asked God\* to remove our shortcomings; practicing the principle of HUMILITY.

**Step EIGHT** - We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all; practicing the principles of LOVE and FORGIVENESS.

**Step NINE** - We made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others; practicing the principle of JUSTICE.

**Step TEN** - We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it; practicing the principle of PERSEVERANCE.

**Step ELEVEN** - we sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God\*, as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out; practicing the principle of SPIRITUAL AWARENESS.

**Step TWELVE** - Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to marijuana addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs; practicing the principle of SERVICE.

\*Note on Belief in a Higher Power\* - Belief in a Higher Power, or God, although it is foundational to the 12 Step model, is not required to attend or benefit from MA meetings. Indeed, 'working the steps' itself is not required or necessary to attend or benefit from MA meetings. Many regular members who have achieved sobriety do not work the steps, or maintain belief in a Higher Power or God, instead choosing to place trust in the recovery community itself as the 'higher power,' rather than a divine consciousness. They have hope that the recovery community itself can help them, have faith that by listening to other addicts in they recovery they too can be helped, practiced integrity by admitting the nature of their wrongs to the recovery community itself, became willing to change, etc.