



Module 1: Reframing Obsession

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Tags	

Core Research & Readings

- **Unit 1:** Community Guidelines & Confidentiality, How to support each other online
- **Unit 2:** Understanding Grief as Transformation - Why letting go is necessary, power of naming what was lost, alumni examples
- **Unit 4:** Discussion on obsession (good, bad, weird examples)
- **Unit 6:** Harmonious vs. Obsessive Passion (Vallerand) - Difference between flexible passion and rigid obsession
- **Unit 7:** How to Redirect Obsessive Energy - Practical frameworks, warning signs vs productive drive

Research Citations

- Hari, J. (2015). *Chasing the Scream*
- Hari, J. (2018). *Lost Connections*
- Maté, G. (2008). *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*
- Lewis, M. (2015). *The Biology of Desire*
- Vallerand, R. J. (2015). *The Psychology of Passion*
- Vallerand, R. J., et al. (2003). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(4), 756-767.

Unit 1: Community Guidelines & Confidentiality

Learning Objectives

- Establish a safe, confidential container for vulnerable work
- Understand how to support peers in online recovery spaces
- Practice boundaries that protect individual and collective healing

Lesson Content

Creating Sacred Space Online

When we gather to do transformational work around obsession, addiction, and loss, we're entering territory that requires deep trust. This program asks you to examine the parts of yourself you may have kept hidden, the patterns you're not proud of, the grief you haven't fully faced.

Core Community Agreements:

1. **Confidentiality is non-negotiable.** What is shared in this space stays in this space. No screenshots, no sharing stories, no "my friend said..." Use discretion even in your own journal entries if others might read them.
2. **We speak from "I" statements.** Share your own experience rather than giving advice or diagnosing others. "When I felt obsessive, I noticed..." rather than "You should..."
3. **We hold space without fixing.** As Johann Hari notes in *Lost Connections*, one of our deepest needs is to be heard and witnessed. Sometimes the most powerful support is simply saying "I hear you" rather than trying to solve someone's problem.
4. **We honor different paths.** Some of us are in 12-step programs, some aren't. Some use medication, some don't. Some are religious, some aren't. All paths deserve respect.
5. **We recognize triggers and take responsibility.** If something shared is activating for you, it's okay to step away, mute, or reach out for support. It's not okay to police what others share about their own experience.

How to Support Each Other Online:

- **Witness without judgment:** "Thank you for sharing that" carries enormous power

- **Ask before advising:** "Would you like thoughts on that, or do you just need to be heard?"
- **Celebrate progress, not perfection:** Recovery isn't linear
- **Check assumptions:** Online, we can't see facial expressions or hear tone. When in doubt, ask for clarification
- **Remember the person behind the post:** Everyone here is doing brave work

Reflection Questions:

- What makes you feel safe enough to be vulnerable?
 - When have you felt truly heard without being fixed?
 - What boundaries do you need to protect your own recovery while supporting others?
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Unit 2: Understanding Grief as Transformation

Learning Objectives

- Recognize obsession as a response to unprocessed loss
- Identify what has been lost beneath the compulsive behavior
- Understand grief as a necessary portal to change

Lesson Content

Why Letting Go is Necessary

Here's an uncomfortable truth: to release obsession, we must grieve what the obsession gave us. This sounds counterintuitive. Why would we grieve something that caused harm?

Because obsession, at its core, is a relationship. And ending any relationship—even a destructive one—requires grief.

Dr. Gabor Maté writes in *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*: "The question is never 'Why the addiction?' but 'Why the pain?'" To extend this: the question beneath that is often "What was lost that made the pain unbearable?"

The Hidden Losses Beneath Obsession:

When we examine obsessive patterns, we often find layers of loss:

- **Loss of safety** (childhood trauma, unpredictability, abandonment)
- **Loss of connection** (isolation, rejection, betrayal)
- **Loss of purpose** (dreams deferred, potential unrealized)
- **Loss of identity** (who we were before the obsession took over)
- **Loss of time** (years consumed by the pattern)
- **Loss of trust** (in ourselves, in others, in life itself)

As Marc Lewis explains in *The Biology of Desire*, addiction and obsession create neural pathways that become highways in the brain. These patterns served a purpose: they helped us cope, escape, or survive. Letting them go means finding new ways to meet those needs—and grieving the familiar comfort of the old ways, even when they hurt us.

The Power of Naming What Was Lost

Johann Hari's research in *Lost Connections* identifies nine causes of depression and anxiety, most rooted in disconnection. When we name our losses specifically, we begin to understand what our obsession was trying to fill:

- "I lost my sense of belonging when my family rejected me"
- "I lost my belief that I deserved good things"
- "I lost the ability to feel anything without external stimulation"
- "I lost years of my life to this pattern"

Naming creates clarity. Clarity creates choice.

Grief as the Bridge to Transformation

Transformation doesn't mean the loss disappears. It means we integrate it, learn from it, and allow it to reshape us. The grief process helps us:

1. **Acknowledge** what was (even if it was dysfunctional, it was ours)
2. **Feel** the emotions we may have been avoiding
3. **Release** the fantasy that things could have been different
4. **Reclaim** the energy we've been spending on the obsession

5. **Rebuild** on more authentic ground

Alumni Examples:

"I had to grieve the version of myself who believed I needed to be perfect to be loved. My obsession with work was my way of earning worth. Letting go meant facing the terror that I might be enough just as I am." — Program Graduate

"I grieved the 15 years I lost to obsessing over someone who would never love me back. But in that grief, I found compassion for the lonely teenager I was when it started. She was just trying to feel less alone." — Program Graduate

Reflection Questions:

- What has your obsession given you (comfort, distraction, identity, purpose)?
 - What losses sit beneath your obsessive pattern?
 - What are you afraid will happen if you let it go?
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Unit 4: Discussion on Obsession

Learning Objectives

- Normalize the spectrum of obsessive experience
- Distinguish between healthy passion and harmful obsession
- Build vocabulary for naming our own patterns

Lesson Content

Good, Bad, and Weird: The Obsession Spectrum

Let's be honest: obsession is a loaded word. It carries shame, pathology, judgment. But obsession exists on a spectrum, and not all obsessive energy is destructive.

"Good" Obsessions (Harmonious Passion):

- The artist who loses track of time in their work and emerges energized
- The parent who is deeply devoted to their child's wellbeing without losing themselves

- The activist who channels focus toward justice while maintaining boundaries
- The athlete in flow state, completely absorbed but not self-destructive

These feel chosen, flexible, and life-giving. They enhance identity rather than consuming it.

"Bad" Obsessions (Obsessive Passion/Compulsion):

- The relationship you can't leave despite repeated harm
- The substance you need to feel normal
- The achievement you'll sacrifice your health to reach
- The person whose approval determines your worth
- The thought loop you can't escape that drains your energy

These feel compulsive, rigid, and life-draining. They narrow identity rather than expanding it.

"Weird" Obsessions (The Gray Area):

- Spending hours researching a random topic (is it curiosity or avoidance?)
- Rewatching the same show repeatedly (is it comfort or numbing?)
- Checking your ex's social media (is it processing or picking at a wound?)
- Organizing and reorganizing your space (is it self-care or control?)

These exist in the in-between. Context matters. Intent matters. Impact matters.

The Critical Question:

As Vallerand's research shows (which we'll explore deeply in Unit 6), the distinction often comes down to: *Does this pattern enhance my life or control it?*

Warning Signs of Harmful Obsession:

Drawing from Maté, Hari, and Lewis, here are red flags:

- **Narrowing:** Your world gets smaller, not larger
- **Secrecy:** You hide the behavior because you know something's off
- **Consequences:** You keep doing it despite negative outcomes
- **Rigidity:** You can't imagine life without it

- **Identity fusion:** You can't separate who you are from what you do/use/pursue
- **Displacement:** The obsession replaces genuine connection and meaning
- **Escalation:** You need more and more to get the same effect

Opening the Conversation:

This unit is designed to be discussed in community. Some prompts:

- What's something you've been obsessed with that felt life-giving?
- What's an obsession you're recovering from or still struggling with?
- Where do you see yourself on the spectrum?
- What patterns do you recognize in yourself or your family?

Remember: The goal isn't to shame obsession, but to understand it. As Marc Lewis writes, obsession made sense given the circumstances. Our job now is to update the circumstances—and our responses to them.

Reflection Questions:

- What patterns in your life feel obsessive?
 - How do you distinguish between passionate engagement and compulsive behavior?
 - What would change if you stopped labeling yourself as "broken" and started seeing obsession as an adaptation?
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Unit 6: Harmonious vs. Obsessive Passion

Learning Objectives

- Understand Vallerand's Dualistic Model of Passion
- Identify markers of harmonious vs. obsessive passion in your own life
- Learn why flexible passion leads to wellbeing while rigid obsession leads to suffering

Lesson Content

The Dualistic Model of Passion

Dr. Robert Vallerand's research, published in *The Psychology of Passion* and the seminal 2003 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* article, revolutionized our understanding of passion by identifying two fundamentally different types:

Harmonious Passion:

- **Autonomous internalization:** The activity is freely chosen and aligned with personal values
- **Flexible engagement:** The person can disengage when needed without distress
- **Identity integration:** The activity is part of who they are, but not all of who they are
- **Positive affect:** Engagement brings joy, flow, and vitality
- **Healthy outcomes:** Enhances wellbeing, relationships, and performance

Obsessive Passion:

- **Controlled internalization:** The activity is driven by external pressures, ego, or uncontrollable urges
- **Rigid engagement:** The person feels compelled to engage, even at personal cost
- **Identity consumption:** The activity defines them completely
- **Conflicted affect:** Engagement brings temporary relief but also guilt, shame, or anxiety
- **Negative outcomes:** Damages wellbeing, relationships, and sustainable performance

The Research Findings:

Vallerand and colleagues found that:

1. Harmonious passion predicts:

- Greater life satisfaction
- Better physical health
- Stronger relationships

- Sustained motivation
- Psychological wellbeing

2. **Obsessive passion predicts:**

- Anxiety and rumination
- Burnout and exhaustion
- Relationship conflict
- Rigid perseverance (continuing despite harm)
- Lower wellbeing

The Key Distinction: Autonomy vs. Control

The critical difference isn't *how much* you care about something, but *how* you relate to it:

- **Harmonious:** "I love this and choose to prioritize it" → Flexibility, integration, joy
- **Obsessive:** "I need this to feel okay/worthy/complete" → Rigidity, desperation, suffering

How This Connects to Addiction Literature:

Vallerand's model beautifully complements the work of Hari, Maté, and Lewis:

- **Hari's *Lost Connections*:** Obsessive passion often emerges from disconnection. When we lack secure bonds, purpose, and meaning, we attach obsessively to substitutes.
- **Maté's *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*:** Obsessive passion develops when early attachment wounds create a void. The obsession becomes a stand-in for the secure connection we never received.
- **Lewis's *The Biology of Desire*:** The brain doesn't distinguish between "good" and "bad" obsessions initially. But obsessive passion creates the same narrowing of attention, urgent motivation, and craving that characterize addiction.

Identifying Your Pattern:

Consider something you're passionate about. Ask yourself:

Harmonious Passion Markers:

- Can I walk away from this when other priorities emerge?
- Does engaging with this energize me for other parts of life?
- Do I feel whole and integrated when I'm involved in this?
- Can I talk about this without defensiveness?
- Does this coexist peacefully with my relationships and responsibilities?

Obsessive Passion Markers:

- Do I feel anxious or irritable when I can't engage with this?
- Does this activity interfere with sleep, relationships, or health?
- Do I feel guilty or ashamed about how much time/energy I give this?
- Have I lied or been secretive about my involvement?
- Would I feel lost or empty without this?

The Path Forward:

The goal isn't to eliminate passion—it's to transform obsessive passion into harmonious passion. This requires:

1. **Examining the need beneath the obsession:** What is this really giving you?
2. **Building autonomy:** Reconnecting with genuine choice rather than compulsion
3. **Diversifying identity:** Expanding who you are beyond any single pursuit
4. **Addressing underlying disconnection:** Rebuilding the bonds obsession tried to replace

Reflection Questions:

- Where do you see harmonious passion in your life?
 - Where do you see obsessive passion?
 - What would it feel like to engage with your passion flexibly rather than compulsively?
 - What needs to heal for obsession to become healthy passion?
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Unit 7: How to Redirect Obsessive Energy

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish between warning signs and productive drive
- Learn practical frameworks for redirecting obsessive energy
- Develop personalized strategies for transformation

Lesson Content

Understanding the Energy Beneath Obsession

Here's the paradox: obsessive energy isn't inherently bad. It's powerful, focused, intense. The problem isn't the energy itself—it's where it's directed and how rigidly it's held.

As Marc Lewis explains in *The Biology of Desire*, the neural pathways of obsession represent profound learning and motivation. The brain has become exceptionally good at pursuing a particular goal. The work of recovery isn't to eliminate that capacity—it's to rewire it toward life-giving ends.

Warning Signs vs. Productive Drive

Warning Signs (Obsessive Passion):

- Feeling out of control, driven by urgency you can't explain
- Neglecting basic needs (sleep, food, connection) to pursue the focus
- Experiencing diminishing returns (more effort, less satisfaction)
- Feeling shame, secrecy, or defensiveness about the behavior
- Unable to stop even when you want to
- Using the activity to avoid emotions or situations
- Relationships suffering due to the preoccupation
- Physical or mental health declining

Productive Drive (Harmonious Passion):

- Feeling energized and purposeful in your engagement

- Maintaining basic self-care while pursuing your focus
- Experiencing flow and satisfaction from the process
- Feeling proud and transparent about your involvement
- Able to step away when needed without distress
- Using the activity to express values and connect with meaning
- Relationships enhanced by your enthusiasm
- Physical and mental health stable or improving

Framework 1: The Redirect, Don't Suppress Approach

Based on Lewis's neuroplasticity research, attempting to simply stop an obsession often backfires. Instead:

1. **Acknowledge the energy:** "I notice I have intense focus and drive"
2. **Identify the need:** "This obsession has been trying to help me feel [safe/worthy/connected/in control]"
3. **Honor the capacity:** "I have remarkable ability to commit and focus"
4. **Choose consciously:** "I can direct this energy toward [new target aligned with values]"

Example: Someone obsessed with a ex-partner's social media might redirect that investigative energy toward research for a passion project, the focus toward a creative pursuit, the longing toward building new friendships.

Framework 2: The RAIN Practice (adapted from Tara Brach, integrated with Maté's compassion approach)

When obsessive urges arise:

- **Recognize:** "I'm having the obsessive thought/urge again"
- **Allow:** "I can let this be here without acting on it"
- **Investigate:** "What's beneath this? What do I really need?"
- **Nurture:** "I can meet this need in a healthier way"

This practice builds the neural pathway of pause—the space between impulse and action where choice lives.

Framework 3: Building a Life Worth Showing Up For (Hari's antidote to disconnection)

Johann Hari's research in *Lost Connections* reveals that obsession flourishes in a vacuum of meaning. The most powerful intervention is building a life where obsession becomes less appealing because reality is genuinely satisfying:

- **Connection to people:** Who do you want to show up for?
- **Connection to meaningful work:** What contribution matters to you?
- **Connection to values:** What do you stand for beyond the obsession?
- **Connection to the present:** What's available right now that obsession makes you miss?

Framework 4: The Values Redirection Tool

1. **List your core values** (authenticity, creativity, service, growth, etc.)
2. **Examine your obsession:** Which values does it seem to serve? Which does it violate?
3. **Identify alternative actions:** What would serve those values more authentically?

Example:

- Obsession: Constantly checking work email at night
- Value it serves: Achievement, security
- Value it violates: Presence, relationships, rest
- Alternative: Designated work hours, tracking accomplishments, financial planning for security

Framework 5: The Energy Inventory

Track for one week:

- **What drains you:** Activities that leave you depleted, anxious, or empty
- **What sustains you:** Activities that leave you stable, calm, and content
- **What energizes you:** Activities that leave you inspired, connected, and alive

Gradually decrease drain activities, increase sustain and energize activities.
Notice if obsessive patterns live primarily in the drain column.

Practical Redirection Strategies:

1. **Physical redirection:** When obsessive thoughts arise, move your body (walk, dance, exercise)
2. **Creative redirection:** Channel the intensity into art, writing, music, building something
3. **Social redirection:** Reach out to someone real instead of obsessing about someone unavailable
4. **Service redirection:** Help someone else; get out of your own head
5. **Learning redirection:** Study something genuinely interesting that expands your world

The Vallerand Integration:

Returning to Unit 6, the goal is shifting from controlled to autonomous motivation:

- **Controlled:** "I must do this or I'll feel terrible"
- **Autonomous:** "I choose this because it aligns with who I want to be"

This shift requires:

- **Self-compassion** (Maté: treating yourself as you would someone you love)
- **Connection** (Hari: rebuilding bonds obsession has replaced)
- **Neuroplasticity** (Lewis: creating new pathways through repeated practice)
- **Meaning-making** (Vallerand: integrating passion flexibly into broader identity)

Your Personal Redirection Plan:

1. **Name your obsession honestly**
2. **Identify what it's been trying to give you**
3. **Choose one framework above that resonates**
4. **Commit to one small redirection practice this week**
5. **Track what happens** (thoughts, feelings, urges, successes)

6. Adjust and continue

Remember:

Transformation isn't linear. You'll have days where the old patterns pull hard. This is normal. The work is building the muscle of conscious choice, one repetition at a time. As Lewis writes, "The brain that learned obsession can learn something new."

Reflection Questions:

- What would you do with your energy if you weren't spending it on obsession?
 - Which framework speaks to where you are right now?
 - What's one small way you could redirect today?
 - Who can support you in this work?
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Module Integration & Next Steps

Bringing It All Together

This module has taken you through:

1. Creating safety for transformational work
2. Understanding obsession as grief and adaptation
3. Normalizing the spectrum of obsessive experience
4. Distinguishing harmonious from obsessive passion
5. Learning to redirect energy consciously

The Core Message:

Your obsession made sense. It served a purpose. And now, with awareness, support, and practice, you can choose differently. Not because the old way was "bad," but because you deserve a life where your immense capacity for focus and passion serves your wholeness rather than fragmenting it.

As You Move Forward:

- Return to these lessons when you need them

- Share your insights with the community
- Practice self-compassion when you struggle
- Celebrate small shifts
- Remember: you are not your obsession, but you can reclaim its energy

Your obsession was a relationship. Grief ends it. Choice begins what comes next.