

Chasing the Ghost

A Personal Recovery Narrative

Experience, Strength & Hope · The Recovery Files

A revealing exploration of anticipation in addiction—how the planning, secrecy, and anticipation of drinking often produced stronger neurochemical rewards than the drinking itself.

THINKING PATTERNS · ANTICIPATION PATTERNS · ADVANCED

It took me seventeen years of dedicated drinking to realize I was chasing a ghost. Not the metaphorical kind—I mean literally pursuing something that no longer existed, except in the increasingly unreliable museum of my memory.

The Setup

Thursday afternoons were sacred. My weekly pilgrimage to the liquor store was choreographed with the precision of a NASA launch sequence. I'd leave work exactly 37 minutes early (not enough to raise suspicions, just enough to beat the rush). The anticipation would start building around 2 PM, like a slow-rising tide. By 4:23 PM, when I'd pull into the parking lot of "Fine Wine & Spirits," my heart would be doing a drum solo that would make Neil Peart jealous.

My therapist calls this "anticipatory dopamine release." I call it "the best part of my week."

There's a cruel irony to addiction that nobody tells you about in rehab: eventually, the planning becomes more rewarding than the actual drinking. The secretive little dance of it all—calculating exactly how much to buy so the cashier won't remember you when you return two days later, the strategic placement of bottles in the recycling bin beneath other garbage, the elaborate symphony of mouthwash and cologne before greeting my wife—all of it created a neurochemical carnival in my brain that the actual alcohol couldn't match.

"The anticipation exceeds the act." My recovery group facilitator said this once, and I nearly fell out of my folding chair. Someone had finally named the ghost I'd been chasing.

The Reality Check

My last real drink was on March 17th. I say "real" because it was the last one I took with any genuine belief it would deliver what I thought I wanted.

I'd been planning it for days—a proper send-off to my drinking career. I'd purchased a bottle of 18-year-old scotch that cost more than my first car. The whole ritual was meticulously arranged: the special glass (never used before), the specific chair by the window, the carefully selected playlist, the exact amount of ice (two cubes, never more).

I poured the amber liquid over the ice, watching it swirl like some mystical potion. The anticipation was electric. My hands were actually trembling. This, I thought, would be the drinking experience I'd been chasing all along.

Spoiler alert: it wasn't.

The first sip was... fine. The second was less interesting. By the third, I was already mentally calculating how much more I'd need to drink to feel what I expected to feel. The gap between the anticipated experience and the actual one was so vast it was almost laughable. Almost.

That was when I finally understood what "diminished effects reality" meant. No matter how expensive the bottle, how perfect the setting, the actual experience of drinking had become a sad echo of what my brain remembered from years before.

The Parking Lot Epiphany

Seventy-four days into sobriety, I found myself sitting in my car outside that same liquor store. I hadn't planned to go there—at least that's what I told myself. Yet somehow, after a particularly brutal day at work, my car had performed some sort of autopilot magic and delivered me right to the promised land.

I sat there for nineteen minutes (I timed it), experiencing what I can only describe as a contact high. Just being in proximity to the possibility of drinking created a surge of anticipation that was, embarrassingly, more pleasurable than any actual drinking experience I'd had in years.

That's when it hit me: I wasn't addicted to alcohol. I was addicted to anticipating alcohol.

The rush of planning the secret purchase, the thrill of the forbidden, the elaborate mental justifications—these were the real drugs. The actual drinking had become

merely the excuse for all the neurochemical foreplay.

In recovery circles, they call this "euphoric recall." I call it "my brain's elaborate fiction department working overtime."

The Brain Rewiring Project

Early recovery is basically one long, awkward first date with your own brain. You're getting reacquainted with a neural network that's been rewired to respond more powerfully to planning to drink than to drinking itself.

My first recovery meeting was in a church basement, because of course it was. Recovery programs love church basements like squirrels love nuts. I walked in with all the enthusiasm of someone getting a root canal, convinced I was fundamentally different from "those people."

The meeting leader—a former investment banker with the driest sense of humor I've ever encountered—looked at me and said, "Welcome to the neurochemical reset button club. We all thought we were special too."

Six months in, I started noticing something strange. I was developing the same anticipatory excitement about my recovery meetings that I once had about drinking. The Wednesday night meeting became my new Thursday liquor store run. I'd find myself thinking about it hours in advance, planning my route, feeling a little lift in my mood as the time approached.

My brain, that adaptable little organ, had found a new anticipation fix. My sponsor tells me this is healthy neuroadaptation. I tell him it feels like I've traded one addiction for another, just with significantly better health outcomes and no hangovers.

The Fantasy-Reality Disconnect

The hardest part of early recovery isn't the physical cravings—those fade faster than you'd expect. It's dismantling the elaborate fantasy infrastructure you've built around drinking.

In my drinking fantasy, I was Ernest Hemingway with an iPhone—profound, creative, socially magnetic. In reality, I was more like a slightly belligerent Wikipedia entry with boundary issues.

Recovery meant confronting this disconnect daily. It meant acknowledging that what I remembered about drinking was increasingly divorced from what actually happened when I drank.

My recovery journal from those early days reads like a detective investigating his own delusions:

"Expectation: A sophisticated evening unwinding with a fine scotch, having profound insights. Reality: Passing out watching cat videos on YouTube with a half-eaten bag of Doritos on my chest."

"Expectation: Becoming the life of the party, charming everyone with my wit. Reality: Telling the same story three times to increasingly uncomfortable colleagues."

"Expectation: A romantic nightcap with my wife leading to connection. Reality: Falling asleep mid-sentence while she looked at me with a mixture of disappointment and resignation."

The Secrecy High

One of the most embarrassing revelations of early recovery was admitting how much I enjoyed the secretive aspects of my drinking. There was a perverse thrill in successfully hiding bottles, in maintaining the appearance of normalcy while privately unraveling.

I once hid a bottle of vodka inside a hollowed-out copy of "War and Peace." I thought this was both ironic and ingenious. My wife found it three days later, which explained why she stared at me for an uncomfortably long time before saying, "Really? Tolstoy?"

Recovery meant giving up not just the drinking but the elaborate covert operations that surrounded it. It meant living without the neurochemical rewards of successful deception. At my six-month recovery milestone, I realized I hadn't lied about anything significant in 180 days, which was simultaneously an achievement and a startling commentary on my previous lifestyle.

The Reward System Renovation

They say your brain needs about a year to recalibrate after you stop drinking. That's a year of neurochemical renovation work, with your reward system under constant construction.

During this renovation, everyday pleasures feel as bland as unseasoned tofu. Food, sex, conversation, sunsets—all the things that normally trigger the brain's reward system—temporarily lose their luster. Your neurochemical pathways are sulking, arms crossed, refusing to get excited about anything that doesn't involve ethanol.

Four months in, I found myself standing in my kitchen at 3 AM, eating ice cream directly from the container with a serving spoon, hoping to stimulate some vestigial

pleasure response in my reward system. It was pathetic, but still healthier than my old 3 AM activities.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the normal pleasures of life begin to return. Six months in, I found myself genuinely laughing at a movie—not the performative laughter I'd been faking to appear normal, but actual, spontaneous amusement.

Eight months in, music started to sound different—richer, more textured. Ten months in, food began tasting like food again instead of like nutritional obligation.

The brain, it turns out, is remarkably adaptable. It just needs time to understand that the anticipatory high of drinking is never coming back, and to reorient itself toward sustainable sources of reward.

The Anticipation Redirection Project

My recovery counselor suggested I needed to find healthy forms of anticipation to replace the neurochemical roller coaster of planning to drink. "Your brain loves anticipation," she said. "It just needs better things to anticipate."

This advice led to what I now call my "Anticipation Redirection Project."

I started planning elaborate hiking trips with the same attention to detail I once devoted to hiding bottles. I'd spend hours researching trails, studying maps, preparing equipment—creating a slow-building anticipatory pleasure that culminated in actually doing the thing I was looking forward to, rather than being disappointed by it.

I approached cooking the same way, treating recipe preparation with the reverence formerly reserved for cocktail mixing. The planning, the gathering of ingredients, the methodical execution—all created healthy anticipatory pleasure that actually delivered on its promise.

Twelve months into sobriety, I realized I had developed a new relationship with anticipation. I was no longer chasing the ghost of a drinking experience that no longer existed. Instead, I was building anticipation toward experiences that actually delivered—sometimes exceeding—what I expected.

The Gap Between Planning and Reality

The strangest part of recovery has been recognizing how rarely I actually enjoyed drinking. What I enjoyed was thinking about drinking, planning to drink, anticipating drinking. The actual consumption was often a letdown, which paradoxically led to drinking more, trying to chase the high I had already experienced in anticipation.

This pattern extended beyond alcohol. I noticed it in other areas of my life—the vacation that was more enjoyable in planning than execution, the purchase that was more exciting before I owned it, the social event that was more anticipated than experienced.

Recovery has meant learning to notice this gap between expectation and reality, not just with alcohol but with everything. It's meant developing what my sponsor calls "expectation management skills" and what I call "not setting myself up for disappointment."

The Ongoing Project

Recovery isn't a destination; it's a continuous recalibration. My brain still occasionally sends me postcards from the past, highlighting only the glossy, filtered memories of drinking while conveniently omitting the consequences.

These days, I can recognize these postcards for what they are—selective memory mixed with neurochemical nostalgia. I can acknowledge them without booking a return trip to a place that no longer exists.

Eighteen months sober, I drove past my old liquor store without that familiar surge of anticipation. It was just another storefront. The ghost I had been chasing for so many years had finally faded, replaced by anticipation for things that actually deliver on their promise.

The anticipation no longer exceeds the act. Sometimes, remarkably, the act now exceeds the anticipation. And that, perhaps, is the most unexpected gift of recovery—rediscovering genuine surprise and pleasure in a world no longer filtered through the distorted lens of addiction.

THE MATCHED SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Anticipation Effect Assessment

Part 1: Recognizing Anticipation-Based Patterns

Anticipation Triggers

1. I experience a noticeable mood shift or excitement when thinking about obtaining alcohol, even before any consumption.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
2. The thought of visiting familiar purchase locations (liquor stores, bars) creates a stronger emotional response than the memory of actual drinking.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
3. I find myself mentally rehearsing drinking scenarios with a sense of anticipation.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
4. The ritual aspects of preparing to drink (opening bottles, mixing drinks, etc.) have provided a distinct form of satisfaction separate from intoxication.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
5. I notice physiological responses (increased heart rate, mood elevation) when taking steps toward potential drinking, even before consumption.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Secrecy and Excitement

6. Planning secretive drinking activities has produced its own form of excitement or 'rush.'
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
7. Successfully hiding evidence of drinking has sometimes felt more thrilling than the drinking itself.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
8. The mental planning required to arrange drinking opportunities has provided a form of satisfaction independent of consumption.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
9. I've experienced a sense of cleverness or accomplishment from concealing drinking-related activities.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
10. The release of tension I feel when beginning the process of obtaining alcohol has often exceeded the relief from actual drinking.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Diminished Effects Reality

11. The actual effects of drinking have become increasingly disappointing compared to what I anticipated.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

12. I've noticed that alcohol's physical effects no longer match my pre-drinking expectations.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
13. I've needed increasing amounts of alcohol to chase effects that still don't match what I anticipate.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
14. I've experienced a sense of letdown after drinking, realizing the experience didn't deliver what I was seeking.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
15. The contrast between what I expect from drinking and what I actually experience has grown over time.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Fantasy vs. Reality Disconnect

16. I maintain drinking fantasies that have little resemblance to my actual recent experiences with alcohol.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
17. I selectively remember positive aspects of drinking while filtering out negative consequences.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
18. I hold persistent beliefs about alcohol's benefits that contradict my lived experience.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
19. I've noticed a pattern where drinking consistently fails to deliver the experience I anticipated.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
20. I catch myself idealizing past drinking experiences in ways that don't align with reality.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Reward System Distortion

21. I experience stronger emotional responses from anticipating drinking than from actual consumption.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
22. Being in environments associated with past drinking creates a 'high' feeling even without alcohol.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
23. I've found myself deliberately extending the anticipation phase of drinking to prolong the pleasurable tension.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
24. The buildup to potential drinking situations feels more compelling than the drinking experience itself.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
25. I notice myself seeking the anticipatory 'rush' more than the actual effects of alcohol.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Risk and Boundary Testing

26. I create 'close call' situations with alcohol that produce excitement without actually drinking.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
27. I derive a sense of thrill from testing or pushing recovery boundaries regarding alcohol.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
28. I experience heightened emotional states when placing myself in triggering environments.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
29. The risk of potentially relapsing creates its own form of exhilaration.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
30. I engage in behaviors that mimic pre-drinking rituals even when not planning to drink.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Cognitive Justification Patterns

31. I maintain elaborate mental justifications for why 'this time would be different' if I were to drink.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
32. I create increasingly complex scenarios justifying exceptions to recovery commitments.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
33. I engage in detailed mental rehearsals of drinking scenarios.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
34. I maintain selective attention to information that supports drinking while dismissing contradictory evidence.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
35. I participate in 'euphoric recall,' where drinking memories become increasingly positive over time.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Part 2: Responding to Anticipation-Based Patterns

Neurochemical Understanding

36. I educate myself about how anticipation affects brain chemistry in addiction.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
37. I recognize moments when my brain is responding to anticipation rather than actual need.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
38. I utilize healthy activities that provide natural dopamine release to counter craving states.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
39. I practice techniques that interrupt anticipatory thought cycles before they gain momentum.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

40. I share with others when I notice my reward system responding to anticipation triggers.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Ritual Replacement

41. I've developed alternative rituals that provide satisfaction without involving substance use.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
42. I consciously redirect anticipatory energy toward recovery-affirming activities.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
43. I've created new environmental cues that trigger recovery-supportive behaviors.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
44. I practice mindfulness during moments when anticipation arises, observing without acting.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
45. I've established healthy routines that compete with and replace former drinking-related rituals.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Reality Testing

46. I actively recall the actual effects and consequences of past drinking episodes with complete honesty.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
47. I maintain written records of the reality of drinking's effects versus the anticipated benefits.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
48. I practice comparing my romanticized drinking memories with documented reality.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
49. I share with others when I notice disconnects between my anticipated and actual experiences.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
50. I use structured reality-testing exercises when experiencing glorified drinking thoughts.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Transparency Practices

51. I promptly share anticipatory thoughts with recovery supports rather than harboring them privately.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
52. I maintain complete honesty about environmental triggers and responses with my support network.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always
53. I've eliminated secret areas of my life that could harbor anticipation-based thinking.
☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

54. I practice naming and externalizing anticipatory thoughts as soon as they occur.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

55. I have accountability partners specifically for moments when anticipation arises.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Interrupting Anticipation Cycles

56. I recognize my personal early warning signs that an anticipation cycle has begun.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

57. I have developed specific techniques to interrupt anticipation once identified.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

58. I practice redirecting anticipatory energy into immediate recovery-affirming actions.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

59. I utilize physical movement or environment changes to disrupt anticipation patterns.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

60. I engage recovery support at the first sign of anticipatory thinking rather than waiting.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Processing Underlying Needs

61. I work to identify the emotional needs driving anticipatory excitement.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

62. I've developed healthier ways to meet the needs once fulfilled by anticipation and secretive behaviors.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

63. I regularly examine what function anticipation serves in my emotional regulation.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

64. I practice addressing root emotional needs directly rather than through substitute behaviors.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

65. I connect anticipatory patterns to specific unmet needs and develop appropriate responses.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Integration and Reward Recalibration

66. I work to integrate all aspects of my life with awareness of how anticipation affects me.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

67. I consciously develop appreciation for subtle, sustainable rewards rather than intense, short-lived ones.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

68. I practice gratitude for natural rewards that support long-term wellbeing.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

69. I've restructured my environment to reduce anticipation triggers while increasing recovery cues.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

70. I celebrate the freedom gained by recognizing and addressing anticipation-based patterns.

☐ 1 Never ☐ 2 Rarely ☐ 3 Sometimes ☐ 4 Often ☐ 5 Always

Your scores, and what they mean, are in the app.