

MARC PIMSLER, LPC

The Ways We Cope

Understanding the Behaviors and Patterns We Use to Survive



"We are the most in-debt, obese, addicted and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history." — BRENÉ BROWN

There is an undercurrent of **fatigue** and **overwhelm** with which most of us unconsciously exist. There's nowhere to run and nowhere to hide from the stress that doesn't even have a name—or maybe has so many that naming feels futile.

Our stress is so commonplace that we've stopped questioning it. It is simply a part of our day to day, and we strive to find small moments of reprieve. Just before the feeling overtakes us, we seek out an all too familiar escape—a way to cope.

At Onsite, we often refer to the things that bring us moments of reprieve by another word—**medicators**.

WHAT IS A MEDICATOR?

Medicators relieve the "dis-ease" of the stress we experience in our lives.

A medicator is "anything we reach for in order to turn up a feeling we want more of or turn down a feeling we want less of." Medicators are not to be confused with helpful or needed medication. Instead, medicators are things we turn to when we're feeling disturbed, distressed, or otherwise are in need of a distraction.

THE VOICE OF MEDICATORS

"I deserve to have this cookie."

"I'm just having this glass of wine to take the edge off."

"I'm having this affair because my partner doesn't see me."

"I'm working this hard because they need me."

"I've earned this retail therapy."

The voice of our medicators is not always conscious or loud enough for us to even hear. Sometimes the urge and the action are so intertwined that they feel as if they are one. Urge, action, rinse, and repeat. The stress sets off an unconscious pattern that is often so subtle we are asleep to it. The stress arises out of our unmet needs. Medicators are an **external solution** for an **internal unmet need**. They show up in our lives in several areas. They can be a person, place, thing, situation, behavior, feelings, or combination of the above.

The truth is that medicators are not inherently good or bad; they are things that get misused. They are, in fact, inherently neutral.

UNDERSTANDING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH MEDICATORS

We all use some kind of "medicine" to alleviate the pain and stressors of our lives, and as with all medicine, misuse and abuse are going to have side effects.



What do you use to relieve the "dis-ease" of stress?

- | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Drugs | <input type="radio"/> Serving Others | <input type="radio"/> Meditation | <input type="radio"/> Reading |
| <input type="radio"/> Alcohol | <input type="radio"/> Work | <input type="radio"/> Thrill-seeking | <input type="radio"/> Hobbies |
| <input type="radio"/> Gambling | <input type="radio"/> Busyness | <input type="radio"/> Working out | |
| <input type="radio"/> Gaming | <input type="radio"/> Perfectionism | <input type="radio"/> Sex | |
| <input type="radio"/> Social Media | <input type="radio"/> Hosting | <input type="radio"/> Eating | |
| <input type="radio"/> Bingeing TV | <input type="radio"/> Spiritual Practice | <input type="radio"/> People | |

On a scale of 1-10 how healthy do you feel like your relationship is with each of these things?

Ab-use

The prefix “ab” in medical terminology is used to indicate from, away from, or off.

Example:

Ab-duction (movement of a limb away from the midline of the body)

Ab-normal (away from normal)

The word “use” means accomplishing a purpose or achieving a result.

The word “abuse” is derived of these two terms and is used anytime we get away from the intended purpose of the referenced item.

It’s not about the thing itself, but rather our relationship with it. Working out has a purpose of increasing health. We can move away from its intended purpose if we work out in excess, in exhaustion, or to the point of injury—or even when we continue working out after an injury. Thus, the problem does not lie with the activity of working out, the problem lies in our approach to the activity.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEDICATORS AND ADDICTIONS?

While all addictions start off as medicators, not all medicators become an addiction.

The problem with alcoholism is **not alcohol**. In fact, many alcoholics will say that alcohol was their solution not their problem.

As a person in long-term recovery myself, I have often said that I am so very grateful for alcohol and other drugs. Bet you’ve never heard an addict say that? But my addictions kept me from killing myself—and alive long enough to enter into a process of recovery.

Terence Gorski, known as the father of relapse prevention, used to say that the number one cause of relapse was **stress**. When you take away the alcohol from the alcoholic, all that is left are the stresses, unresolved trauma, and pain that made them drink in the first place.

The solution is not in taking the edge off of life, the solution is getting to the source of our pain so that we can live a life that does not require us to take the edge off.

FOUR TOOLS TO ADDRESS MEDICATORS

Addressing our medicators is a lifelong process. As with any process there will be ups and downs, but it is all about progress, not perfection.

From my own experience, I want to encourage you to start with one or two things that you want to address or make a shift in. Do not attempt to change everything all at once. I find it useful to start with the most dangerous or life-threatening medicators which might require a doctor’s support or medical attention such as detox.

Then from there, downshift your medicators, focusing first on those that are most harmful and most problematic for you and then move to the ones that are less harmful and less intrusive.

Here are some of the tools I have found helpful in the journey of addressing my medicators.

① Grace

I believe grace is ours for the taking. Many of us have heard grace defined as unmerited favor; I like to define grace as *un-earned* favor. It is not that we don’t deserve grace, but rather that we don’t have to work for it. We are enough. When we mess up. When we’re not perfect. We don’t have to earn acceptance within ourselves or from something greater than ourselves.

We will not do it perfectly, but rather we will do it perfectly imperfect. And every setback is a step forward on a lifelong journey of emotional wellness.

② Self-Compassion

It's important to extend compassion to ourselves as we walk this road.

At Onsite, we say that this healing is not something you need, but something you deserve. We already are lovable and there is nothing you can do about that fact.

I find that the greatest gift I can give myself is to extend the same love and compassion to myself as I would to everyone else around me. Compassion is easier when the recipient isn't looking at us in the mirror, but that doesn't mean we don't keep trying.

③ Curiosity

Everything makes sense in context.

I encourage people to get curious on this journey. Our medications exist for a reason and have served us for a long time to cover up the painful feelings we've long ago buried. Often the feelings we've hidden have roots in the past when our needs were not met, or when we got the message that our needs didn't matter, or that we had to meet our own needs because no one else was going to do it for us.

When we get curious about our needs, everything changes. Separating our wants from our needs can give us a significant grounding in what might be most helpful to us. This is a profound practice of coming to the realization that we do have needs, our needs matter, we are allowed to have needs, and we're allowed to ask for what we need from ourselves and those around us.

④ Community

It will be hard, it will be messy, and it will be worth it in the long run. You are not alone.

Finding community who can walk with you in the journey of wellness is the greatest gift. Find your people who can walk with you and who will support you as you address the things that are keeping you from living authentically, wholehearted and awake to the world.

Addressing our medications is not about calling us out on our unhealthy behaviors, but rather calling us into a deeper connection with our self and the world.

MARC PIMSLER, MA, LPC, serves as a Clinical Experiential Therapist. He has worked in a variety of coaching, counseling, and consulting capacities since 2004. Marc is passionate about recovery, both his own as well as his participants', believing that sometimes all we need is a helping hand and a fresh perspective. Grounded in the belief system that everyone has the capacity to recover, Marc brings humor and spirituality to everything he is involved in, including the programs and groups he facilitates for individuals and mental health professionals.

If you are curious about the role of medications in your life, Onsite offers several emotional wellness experiences that help you assess and address the ways you cope. Onsite's Living Centered Program (page 52) is a group experiential workshop designed to help you bring your life back to center by connecting your current behaviors to past patterns and narratives. Onsite's six-week Rediscovering You online course (page 47) will help you identify what's working, and connect your past and present, to pursue the future you want. Our emotional wellness master class, Rightsizing the Wrongs (page 43) will invite you to explore the role of trauma in your past and its connection to the unhealthy behaviors you've used to cope.

