

# Insights from *Dopamine Nation* by Anna Lembke

When you pursue pleasure, you get pain.

Pursuing and enjoying pleasure will spike dopamine in your brain, but every dopamine spike is followed by a prolonged dopamine crash below your “feel-good baseline.”

Picture a pleasure-pain seesaw in your brain. When you check your phone for interesting messages, consume your favorite comfort food, or play an immersive favorite video game, you jump on the pleasure side of the pleasure-pain seesaw. But the brain must achieve balance (i.e., homeostasis) so it hires gremlins to jump on the pain side of the pleasure-pain seesaw.

Once a gremlin lands on the pleasure-pain seesaw, it stays for an extended period. If you experience frequent pleasure (which is easy to do in the modern world), gremlins accumulate on the pain side of the pleasure-pain seesaw. The pleasure-pain balance explains why people in rich countries with access to constant pleasure have the most suicides, depression, and physical pain.

If you lack motivation to do most things or no longer enjoy the simple things in life, you must get gremlins off the pain side of your pleasure-pain seesaw by doing one of two things: pursue pain or abstain.

## Pursue Pain

Anna Lembke says, “Pressing on the pain side of the balance can lead to its opposite—pleasure. Unlike pressing on the pleasure side, the dopamine that comes from pain is indirect and potentially more enduring.” When you explore the following methods to pursue intermittent pain, you startle the gremlins camping out on the pain side of the pleasure-pain seesaw and get them to jump over to the pleasure side:

1. **Turn down the temperature** on the gremlins by plunging your body into an ice bath or enduring a cold shower for several minutes. The initial shock you experience will be followed by a gradual 200% rise in dopamine (equivalent to the dopamine rise one gets by snorting cocaine, but unlike cocaine, you don’t experience a massive dopamine deficit afterward).
2. **Turn up the temperature** on the gremlins by vigorously exercising and sweating for several minutes. Voluntary exercise leads to a gradual 100-200% rise in dopamine.
3. Briefly starving the gremlins by **intermittent fasting** (consuming only water and electrolytes) for 16-20 hours. Your energy will paradoxically rise at the tail end of the fast and you will get tremendous pleasure from simple foods (like broccoli or blueberries) when you break the fast.



## Abstain

Abstaining is intermittent dopamine fasting – temporarily avoiding dopamine spikes so the gremlins get bored and leave the pain side of your pleasure-pain seesaw – until you regain a baseline level of motivation to do simple things. A dopamine fast typically means sticking to low-stimulation activities and abstaining from: *Chocolate or foods you crave (ice cream, fast food, etc.), drinking or partying, energy drinks and dopamine boosting drugs (cocaine, methamphetamines, etc.), pornography, and immersive video games and mobile apps (like TikTok and Twitter).*

Only engage in low stimulating activities until your brain resets its dopamine levels and you no longer feel miserable (this can take several days). If you have a craving for a particular substance or activity, you must abstain from that substance or activity for 30 days to reset the reward circuits in your brain. Author Anna Lembke has created a D.O.P.A.M.I.N.E. guide to help you get through a 30-day dopamine fast:

**Data:** When you collect data on your behavior, you might be shocked to learn how bad your addiction has gotten. For example, recording the amount of sugar you consume in a single week and learning that you ingest 700g a week - which is over 80lbs of sugar a year – can spark a feeling of disgust which will create a desire to abstain from soda drinks for 30 days.

**Objective:** When a girl in the book started smoking marijuana, she wanted to reduce her anxiety. But after months of smoking marijuana, she constantly thought about her next “joint”, and her baseline level of anxiety was higher than ever before.

**Problem:** All addictive behaviors enslave you by making you crave the substance or activity just to feel normal. What’s more, addictions gradually erode the relationships you care about most.

**Abstain:** Abstain for 30 days to reset your rewards circuits.

**Mindfulness:** Your abstinence is an opportunity to practice mindfulness. When you experience a craving, wonder where your craving is coming from inside your body. The more curious you are, the less your abstinence will feel like torture.

**Insight:** The girl who abstained from marijuana told Lembke, “*The first few days were bad. I felt blah. I threw up on the second day. Insane! I never throw up. I had this really sick feeling. That’s when I realized I was withdrawing, and that motivated me to keep going with abstinence...Because it was the first piece of evidence I had that I was really addicted.*”

### Next steps

*What will you do after your 30-day dopamine fast is over?* Planning to enjoy an addictive substance or activity in moderation after the 30-day abstinence can motivate you to complete the dopamine fast.

### Experiment

After experimenting with moderation, you might relapse and realize your addiction is too powerful. In that case, resolve to stop the behavior for good. Be like the alcoholic who tells his friends, “I don’t consume alcohol.”