

# Future Projection Forced Empathy for Habits

## What Is the Future Projection?

The Future Projection technique, developed by Dr. David Burns, helps you reduce emotional distress by imagining yourself in the future offering wisdom, compassion, and clarity to your present self. By stepping into the mindset of a calmer, more grounded future version of you, it becomes easier to challenge unhelpful thoughts and tolerate discomfort in the present.

## Future Projection for Habits

Future Projection for Habits is a variation designed to help change behaviors rather than emotions alone. Instead of focusing on how you feel, this version focuses on how today's choices shape tomorrow's outcomes. You imagine two possible futures:

1. **Your best future self** - the version of you who successfully let go of the habit and built a meaningful, values-driven life.
2. **Your worst future self** - the version of you who continued the habit and experienced its long-term consequences.

Emotionally connecting with both futures strengthens motivation to protect the life you want and avoid the life you don't.

## Future Projection Forced Empathy for Habits

Future Projection Forced Empathy is another variation of this method. Instead of imagining *your* future self, you imagine the future experience of **someone you deeply care about** who is affected by your habit.

In this exercise, you temporarily step into their shoes and experience how *they* might feel in two possible futures:

1. **Best Future** - How this person experiences life knowing you successfully gave up the habit.
2. **Worst Future** - How this person experiences life knowing you continued the habit and suffered the consequences.

By emotionally connecting with how your behavior impacts someone you love, you create powerful motivation for change, often stronger than motivation driven by self-criticism or willpower alone.

## Why Does This Work?

Many people find it easier to change when they feel connected to others rather than pressured by guilt or shame. Forced empathy helps bypass resistance by:

- Activating care, love, and responsibility rather than self-attack
- Making long-term consequences emotionally real instead of abstract
- Highlighting the *relational cost* of habits, not just the personal cost

When you vividly experience both the joy and the pain your choices could create for someone you love, change often feels more meaningful—and more urgent.

---

## Case Example: *Gaming addiction*

Troy struggled with a mobile gaming addiction that involved frequent microtransactions. Each purchase gave him a brief sense of excitement and progress in the game. He often told himself, “*It’s only \$20. I can stop anytime.*” Over time, the spending increased, and Troy began playing during work hours. Eventually, his wife, Ysenia, discovered how much money had been spent, and the strain on their relationship became clear. They agreed Troy should seek help.

**Therapist:** I’d like to show you a tool called *Future Projection – Forced Empathy for Habits*. It may help when the urge to game shows up. Would you be willing to try it?

**Troy:** Sure.

**Therapist:** There will be two role-plays. In both, you’ll play Ysenia, and I’ll be the therapist. One role-play represents the best possible future, and the other represents the worst. Ready?

**Troy:** Let’s do it.

### Roleplay (Best Future)

- **Therapist:** Hi Ysenia. I hear things have been going really well between you and Troy lately. Can you tell me what life is like now?
- **Troy (as Ysenia):** Troy has been amazing. Ever since he stopped playing mobile games, he’s been so present. He listens, takes me out on dates, and really shows up for our relationship. We even have a son now, and he’s such a loving, involved father.
- **Therapist:** That sounds like a meaningful life. Present-day Troy often tells himself, “*It’s only \$20. I can stop anytime.*” Do you agree with that?
- **Troy (as Ysenia):** Oh no, not that thought again. That’s exactly how it started before. It was never just \$20. It became thousands, and that thought kept him stuck. Hearing that scares me.
- **Therapist:** What would you want to say to present-day Troy?

- **Troy (as Ysenia):** Please stop now. If you love me, don't give up this future for a game. You're meant to be an incredible husband and father.

**Therapist:** What was it like playing Ysenia in this future?

**Troy:** It made me really happy and emotional. I want that future so badly.

### **Roleplay (Worst Future)**

- **Therapist:** Hey Yesnia, tell me what life looks like for you and Troy now
- **Troy (as Ysenia):** We separated a long time ago. I couldn't take it anymore. He kept spending money, lost his job because he was gaming at work, and started lying constantly. Last I heard, he moved back in with his parents and still plays all day.
- **Therapist:** That sounds incredibly painful.
- **Troy (as Ysenia):** It was. I loved him so much, but the games always came first. He said he loved me, but I felt completely invisible.
- **Therapist:** Present-day Troy still believes, "*It's only \$20. I can stop anytime.*" Is that true?
- **Troy (as Ysenia):** He said that over and over. It was never true. If he could stop, we'd still be together.
- **Therapist:** What would you want him to do differently?
- **Troy (as Ysenia):** I just wanted him to be present. To choose me instead of the games.

**Therapist:** What was it like being Ysenia in this future?

**Troy:** It hurts. I don't want to lose her. I can see how close I am to that future.

**Therapist:** What do you want to do now to influence your future?

**Troy:** I'm done. I'm deleting the game right now.

After the exercise, Troy deleted the game and asked Ysenia to password-protect his phone to prevent reinstalling it. Their relationship began to improve.

---

## **How You Can Use This Technique**

**Step 1.** Identify a tempting thought that leads to your habit. Example: "One more time can't hurt." Write yours here

---

---

---

**Step 2.** Write the name of someone you deeply care about who may be impacted by your habit.

---

**Step 3.** Imagine your **best future**. Step into that person's shoes. Describe what their life is like with you after you gave up the habit.

---

---

---

---

**Step 4.** As that person, respond to the tempting thought from Step 1.

---

---

---

---

---

**Step 5.** What advice would they give your present-day self?

---

---

---

---

---

**Step 6.** Notice how it feels to imagine being this person in the best future.

---

---

---

---

---

**Step 7.** Now imagine your **worst future**. Step into the same person's shoes and describe their life if the habit continues.

---

---

---

---

---

**Step 8.** As that person, respond to the tempting thought again.

---

---

---

---

---

**Step 9.** What warnings or advice do they give you now?

---

---

---

---

---

**Step 10 .** Notice how it feels to imagine being this person in the worst future.

---

---

---

---

---

**Step 11.** Write a self-control response to your original tempting thought

---

---

---

---

---

### **Important Things to Keep in Mind**

- This technique works best after Positive Reframing, Cost-Benefit Analysis, or a Double/Triple Paradox.
- You do not need to feel motivated first. Action often creates motivation.
- The more vivid the imagery (sights, sounds, emotions), the more powerful the effect.
- The goal is understanding impact, not shaming yourself.
- If this exercise feels overwhelming, working with a therapist can help guide the process.

## Final Note

Future Projection Forced Empathy can be especially powerful because it draws on the care, love, and attachment we feel toward the people who matter most to us. Many people find that they are more willing to change a habit when they can clearly see how it affects someone they love. Particularly when the risk is emotional distance, disappointment, or even loss.

This technique is not about inducing guilt or shame. Instead, it helps you reconnect with what you value most in your relationships. By emotionally experiencing both the joy your change could create and the pain your habit could cause, motivation often arises naturally. Change becomes less about forcing yourself to stop, and more about protecting the people, connections, and future you do not want to lose.