

Future Projection for Habits

What is the Future Projection?

The Future Projection technique, developed by Dr. David Burns, is a wonderful method where you imagine yourself in the future to help your current self with the negative thinking and emotions you're experiencing. By picturing a wiser, calmer, and more grounded future version of yourself, you can gain comfort, clarity, and emotional relief in the present.

Future Projection for Habits is a variation of this original method.

Instead of focusing on emotions, this version helps you change habits and behaviors. You imagine two possible future selves:

1. **Your best future self** - the version of you who successfully let go of the habit.
2. **Your worst future self** - the version of you who continued the habit and faced the consequences.

By emotionally connecting with both futures, you create powerful motivation to protect the life you want and avoid the life you don't.

Why does this work?

Humans are motivated by emotion. It's one thing to know a habit is hurting you. It's another thing to feel the consequences or rewards of your choices. Future Projection helps you vividly experience the future you want and the future you want to avoid so your current self becomes motivated to take action today.

Most people only seek help when things feel like they're falling apart. When they're about to lose something important. But with this technique, you can create emotional energy not from fear alone but from deeply feeling what a better life could look like. And then, by imagining losing that future, you become even more committed to protecting it.

Case Example: *Gambling Temptation*

Arnold developed a habit of gambling. Sometimes he won and felt a huge high. Other times—like now—he lost a tremendous amount of money and felt ashamed. Even though he wanted to stop, the thought “Just one more time so I can win it all back” kept tempting him.

Therapist: I want to show you a tool called Future Projection for Habits. It might help with the temptation to gamble. Want to try?

Arnold: Sure.

Therapist: There are two role-plays. In both, I'll play "Current Arnold," and you'll play a version of your future self. First the best version, then the worst. Ready?

Arnold: Let's do it.

Roleplay (Best Future)

- **Therapist (as Current Arnold):** Hey Arnold, I'm tempted to go to Las Vegas one more time. Can you show me what your life looks like in the future?
- **Arnold (as Best-Future Arnold):** I remember this moment well. After that session, I decided not to go. That one choice changed everything. I built better habits and never gambled again.

Life is honestly amazing now. All the time I used to waste in Las Vegas? I now use it to improve my life.

You won't believe this. I got married because I finally focused on building real relationships. I became great at my job and earned multiple promotions because I stopped studying poker strategies and started investing in myself. I saved money instead of losing it. My relationships with my parents and friends completely improved because I stopped borrowing and losing their money.

I have a loving wife, financial security, a strong career, and people who trust me again. My life is truly good.

- **Therapist (as Current Arnold):** Wow. That sounds incredible! But honestly... isn't one more time okay? Just so I can win it all back?
- **Arnold (as Best-Future Arnold):** You know how it goes. We always say "one more time," but it never stops. When I chose not to go, it started a chain reaction of good habits that built the life I have now.
- **Therapist (as Current Arnold):** How can I have a life like yours?
- **Arnold (as Best-Future Arnold):** Make the decision today. If you want a loving wife, a good career, financial security, and real friendships, stop now. Even if you're down money, you can rebuild. This is your chance.

Therapist: What was it like playing your best future self?

Arnold: It felt amazing. Like I really lived that life. I want that future so badly. It felt real.

Roleplay (Worst Future)

- **Therapist (as Current Arnold):** Hey Arnold, I want to see the future again. I'm tempted to go to Las Vegas one more time. What does your life look like now?

- **Arnold (as Worst-Future Arnold):** Everything is falling apart. I kept chasing wins and kept losing. I lost my job because I wasn't focused. Gambling took over everything. I moved to Las Vegas thinking I needed "more opportunities," but it only made things worse.

I lost my parents' and friends' trust. They won't lend me money anymore. They don't even pick up my calls. I owe money everywhere. I'm basically homeless, running away from people I'm in debt to. I wish I had stopped years ago. I wish I had listened.

- **Therapist (as Current Arnold):** That sounds terrifying. Losing family, friendships, stability... I don't want that.
- **Arnold (as Worst-Future Arnold):** It's horrible. And it all started with "just one more time." I kept telling myself the same thing you're telling me now.
- **Therapist (as Current Arnold):** But if I go one more time just to win it back, maybe..
- **Arnold (as Worst-Future Arnold):** Are you serious? Did you not hear a word I said? Stop. Stop right now. You think one more time won't hurt? That's what I thought. Look at my life. Look at me. You do not want this future.
- **Therapist (as Current Arnold):** So what should I do?
- **Arnold (as Worst-Future Arnold):** Stop today. You can still save what you have left.. your job, your friendships, your parents' trust. You're closer to losing them than you think.

Therapist: What was it like being your worst future self?

Arnold: Terrible. I hated seeing myself like that. It made me feel hopeless and ashamed. I don't ever want that future.

Therapist: What do you want your future to be?

Arnold: The good one. I'm done gambling. I'm stopping for good today.

After doing both roleplays, Arnold quit gambling, rebuilt his relationships, and focused on his career. The Future Projection helped him feel the life he wanted and the life he never wanted. That emotional contrast gave him the motivation to change.

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. Imagine your best future self. The version of you who gave up the habit completely. Describe their life in detail:

Step 3. Imagine the current you sharing the tempting thought with this best-future self. How does your best-future self respond?

Step 4. What advice does your best-future self give you about how to create a life like theirs?

Step 5. What does it feel like to imagine this best version of you?

Step 6. Now imagine your worst future self. The version of you who continued the habit and experienced the worst outcome. Describe their life:

Step 7. Imagine the current you sharing the tempting thought with this worst-future self. How does this version respond?

Step 8. What warnings or advice does your worst-future self give you?

Step 9. What does it feel like to imagine this version of your future?

Step 10. Write a self-control response to your original tempting thought

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- For best results, do a Positive Reframing, Triple/Double Paradox, or Cost-Benefit Analysis first.
- This technique doesn't work for everyone, and that's okay. There are many other tools.
- You don't need to feel motivated to take action. Action often creates motivation.
- The more vividly you imagine your future. The sights, sounds, emotions. The more powerful this technique becomes.
- You don't have to do this alone. A therapist can guide you through the process.

Final Note

Future Projection for Habits is a powerful way to boost motivation by helping you emotionally connect with the future you're creating through your choices today. When you vividly imagine both the life you want and the life you want to avoid, it becomes easier to take action, stay committed, and protect the future that matters to you.