LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

What Is the Substance Doing for Me?

Substance use can serve a function, even when it is also causing harm. Understanding that function can help us identify the need underneath the behavior and find additional ways to meet that need.

There may be more than one function. There are no "right" answers. Share only what feels okay.

REWARD & STIMULATION

- ☐ Makes things feel more interesting
- ☐ Gives me something to look forward to
- ☐ Helps when I feel bored or understimulated
- ☐ Gives me an immediate sense of reward
- ☐ Gives me energy
- ☐ Helps me feel more alert or engaged
- ☐ Creates novelty or excitement
- ☐ Other:

SENSORY

- ☐ Makes sensory input feel less intense
- ☐ Helps me tolerate overwhelming environments
- ☐ Helps me feel less aware of uncomfortable sensations
- ☐ Helps me feel more connected to my body
- ☐ Helps me feel less connected to my body
- ☐ Makes sensory experiences feel more enjoyable
- ☐ Other:

EMOTIONAL & NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION

- ☐ Quiets my mind
- ☐ Helps me slow down
- ☐ Helps me feel less anxious
- ☐ Makes intense emotions feel less intense
- ☐ Helps me escape or disconnect for a while
- ☐ Helps with irritability or agitation
- ☐ Helps me sleep
- ☐ Helps me recover after an overwhelming day
- ☐ Other:

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

- ☐ Makes it easier to start something
- ☐ Helps me stay focused
- ☐ Makes boring tasks easier to tolerate
- ☐ Helps me transition between activities
- ☐ Makes everyday responsibilities feel less overwhelming
- ☐ Helps me get through tasks I have been avoiding
- ☐ Helps me keep going when I am exhausted
- ☐ Other:

SOCIAL NAVIGATION

- ☐ Makes it easier to start conversations
- ☐ Makes me feel less self-conscious
- ☐ Helps me worry less about saying or doing the "wrong" thing
- ☐ Makes socializing feel less effortful
- ☐ Helps me tolerate crowded or stimulating social environments
- ☐ Helps me feel more connected to other people
- ☐ Makes masking feel less effortful
- ☐ Gives me a predictable way to participate socially
- ☐ Other:

ESCAPE, RELIEF & RECOVERY

- ☐ Gives me a break from demands
- ☐ Helps me stop thinking about everything I need to do
- ☐ Gives me permission to stop being productive
- ☐ Helps me disconnect from painful thoughts or memories
- ☐ Helps me recover from masking or social exhaustion
- ☐ Gives me time when nobody expects anything from me
- ☐ Other:

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Get Curious

Before I use, I often feel:

After I use, I am hoping to feel:

Using makes _____ easier.

Using makes _____ quieter.

Using gives me _____.

If I didn't have access to the substance, the thing I would miss most is:

WHAT'S UNDERNEATH THE BEHAVIOR?

What need might the substance be helping you meet?

What parts of that need aren't being met elsewhere right now?

Are there other ways we could meet some of that need - without expecting one strategy to replace everything the substance has been doing?

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Clinician Formulation Tool

Use this tool to move from observed behavior → possible function → neurodivergence-related barriers → accessible treatment response. These are hypotheses to explore collaboratively, not assumptions. This tool does not replace withdrawal, medical or safety assessment.

1. WHAT FUNCTION MIGHT THE SUBSTANCE BE SERVING?

- ☐ Reward / stimulation
- ☐ Boredom / understimulation relief
- ☐ Emotional regulation
- ☐ Nervous system regulation
- ☐ Sensory dampening
- ☐ Sleep / slowing down
- ☐ Energy / alertness
- ☐ Task initiation
- ☐ Attention / sustained effort
- ☐ Transitions
- ☐ Social navigation
- ☐ Reduced masking demands
- ☐ Connection / belonging
- ☐ Escape from demands
- ☐ Trauma-related relief
- ☐ Recovery from overwhelm / burnout
- ☐ Routine / predictability

ASK: What does using make easier, quieter, more tolerable or more accessible?

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Neurodivergence-Related Barriers

2. WHAT ADHD-RELATED FACTORS MIGHT BE MAKING CHANGE HARDER?

- ☐ Immediate reward outweighs delayed consequences
- ☐ Boredom / understimulation
- ☐ Task initiation
- ☐ Difficulty stopping once started
- ☐ Impulsivity / pause difficulty
- ☐ Time blindness
- ☐ Working memory
- ☐ Coping strategies inaccessible in the moment
- ☐ Routine maintenance
- ☐ Transitions
- ☐ Emotional dysregulation
- ☐ Sleep difficulties
- ☐ Arousal / stimulation regulation
- ☐ Executive demands of treatment
- ☐ Knowing-versus-doing shame

ASK: Are we interpreting an executive functioning barrier as a motivation problem?

3. WHAT AUTISM-RELATED FACTORS MIGHT BE MAKING CHANGE HARDER?

- ☐ Sensory overwhelm
- ☐ Sensory dampening function
- ☐ Identifying internal states / needs
- ☐ Recognizing escalation before overwhelm
- ☐ Predictability / routine
- ☐ Use embedded in ritual
- ☐ Transitions / changing established patterns
- ☐ Substance-centered social environment
- ☐ Social interaction feels less effortful
- ☐ Masking demands
- ☐ Recovery from social/sensory demands

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Put the Formulation Together

The substance may be helping this person:

ADHD-related barriers may include:

Autism-related barriers may include:

What are we currently calling "resistance," "noncompliance" or "lack of motivation" that might be better understood another way?

If the substance were removed tomorrow, what need would still be there?

What could we change about the environment, treatment approach or available supports rather than asking the client to do all of the changing?

The goal can stay the same while the path to the goal changes.

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Accommodation & Treatment Adaptation Bank

Start with what you are seeing. Consider what may be contributing, then choose an adaptation that reduces the barrier.

	CONSIDER	TRY
Frequently late or misses appointments	Time blindness, prospective memory, transitions, executive functioning	Multiple reminders • recurring appointment • calendar invite • shorter scheduling horizon • telehealth • transition buffer
Doesn't complete homework	Initiation, working memory, overwhelm, unclear or low-value task	Do first step in session • one priority • written instructions • collaborative choice • reminders • remove unnecessary homework
“Knows what to do” but doesn’t do it	Knowing-doing gap, initiation, sequencing, overwhelm	Stop repeating psychoeducation • identify breakdown point • body doubling • external cues • smaller steps • practice in session
Impulsive use despite wanting to stop	Immediate reward, inhibition, regulation need	Increase friction • immediate competing reward • shorter time horizon • visual plan • rehearse decision points
Uses when bored	Understimulation, novelty/reward seeking	Movement • music • sensory input • novelty • engaging activity • pair boring tasks with preferred stimulation
Uses immediately after work/school	Transition difficulty, masking, sensory overload, depletion	Protected decompression • fewer demands • low-light/low-noise space • sensory input • predictable transition ritual

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Accommodation & Treatment Adaptation Bank

Start with what you are seeing. Consider what may be contributing, then choose an adaptation that reduces the barrier.

	CONSIDER	TRY
Uses to "turn brain off"	Cognitive hyperactivity, rumination, sensory overload	Low-demand decompression • repetitive activity • movement • headphones • dim lighting • externalize thoughts
Uses to sleep	Arousal regulation, racing thoughts, sensory needs	Predictable wind-down • sensory-friendly sleep environment • review medication timing with prescriber • reduce nighttime demands
Uses before/ during social situations	Masking, social uncertainty/ anxiety, sensory demands	Smaller gatherings • quieter setting • support person • planned arrival/departure • scripts • breaks • sober alternatives
Avoids groups	Social processing load, sensory environment, negative experiences	Individual/smaller/virtual option • sit near exit • camera flexibility • written participation • agenda in advance • breaks
Doesn't participate verbally	Processing time, communication differences, uncertainty	Don't equate speech with engagement • writing/chat • questions in advance • pass option • processing time • no eye-contact demand
Shuts down in session	Overload, processing demand, trauma response	Reduce language/questions • silence • written choices • sensory break • grounding without forced verbal processing

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Accommodation & Treatment Adaptation Bank

Start with what you are seeing. Consider what may be contributing, then choose an adaptation that reduces the barrier.

	CONSIDER	TRY
Says "I don't know" frequently	Alexithymia, interoception, broad questions, processing time	Examples/choices • concrete questions • scales/visuals • observable events/body cues • return later
Distressed when plan changes	Predictability, transition difficulty, cognitive flexibility	Advance notice • explain why • written schedule • choices • predictable session structure
Overwhelmed by recovery plan	Executive load, too many simultaneous changes	Reduce goals • one behavior at a time • visual plan • one-step instructions • separate now/later • collaboratively sequence
Understands consequences but keeps using	Immediate reinforcement, function remains stronger than delayed outcome	Move beyond consequence education • examine function • change environment • make alternatives immediately accessible/rewarding
Returns to use after progress	Function remains unmet, depletion, trigger, all-or-nothing thinking	Functional review without shame • identify what changed • revise supports • preserve progress • plan for recurrence
Appears "unmotivated"	Burnout, overwhelm, goal mismatch, executive dysfunction	Ask what feels possible • reduce demands • center client goals • smaller time horizons • meaningful choices • assess accessibility

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Accommodation & Treatment Adaptation Bank

Start with what you are seeing. Consider what may be contributing, then choose an adaptation that reduces the barrier.

	CONSIDER	TRY
Appears "resistant"	Autonomy needs, coercive history, unclear rationale, intervention mismatch	Explain rationale • ask permission • offer alternatives • increase choice • collaborate • explore what isn't working
Can't identify triggers	Interoception, alexithymia, delayed awareness	Track where/when/who • sensory load • demands • sleep • hunger • transitions • visual tracking
Struggles with open-ended questions	Processing / communication differences	Specific questions • examples • multiple-choice starting points • questions in advance • written responses
Treatment setting is dysregulating	Sensory/social accessibility	Adjust lighting/noise • movement/fidgets • flexible seating • telehealth • breaks • headphones • fewer people
All-or-nothing recovery thinking	Rigidity, perfectionism, shame, prior treatment messaging	Multiple measures of progress • visual tracking • distinguish lapse from failure • plan for multiple outcomes

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

Before You Call It Resistance

Before labeling a client "noncompliant," "resistant" or "unmotivated," ask:

What is making the expected behavior difficult?

What function is the current behavior serving?

Can we reduce the barrier before asking the client to work harder?

Accessibility changes how treatment is delivered.
It does not require abandoning the treatment goal.

© Little Seed Counseling, PLLC 2026