

The Science Behind The RETURN Way™

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Why the Science Matters

The RETURN Way™ was not built in a laboratory. It was built from the inside out — from lived experience, recovery, and the kind of self-examination that only happens when you have nowhere left to hide.

As I developed The RETURN Way™, I began noticing that many of its principles were echoed in established research from psychology and neuroscience. I wasn't trying to build a scientific model — I was trying to understand why this process helped people change. The more I read, the more meaningful connections I found.

No single theory explains the full complexity of human behavior. But The RETURN Way™ draws from multiple well-established areas of psychology and neuroscience. What follows is a look at the research that helps explain why each step works.

The Core Premise

"You cannot think your way out of a problem that automatic thinking created."

This is the spine of The RETURN Way™. It is also a reflection of how the mind operates.

Research into cognitive processing, popularized by Daniel Kahneman's work on "System 1 and System 2" thinking, demonstrates that most of our reactions are fast, automatic, and

reflexive [1]. These automatic responses are often rooted in implicit memory and early adaptations — the structures laid down before we had language to articulate them.

Cognitive insight alone often isn't enough to change deeply ingrained patterns, because it frequently stays on the surface. To create lasting change, we need a process that slows down the automatic response, examines the meaning we have assigned to it, and addresses the deeper roots driving the behavior. The RETURN Way™ provides that structure.

R — Reveal

Step back and observe the situation objectively. What are the facts — who, what, where, and when? Only then look at the story your mind began to tell.

What Happens In This Step Reveal is the moment of separation. Most people are inside their patterns, not watching them. By identifying the objective facts of a situation before interpreting what they mean, Reveal creates the first crucial gap between the event and your reaction to it.

The Science

- **Cognitive Defusion and Decentering:** In psychology, the ability to step back and observe mental events rather than becoming fused with them is known as decentering or cognitive defusion — a core concept in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy [2]. It is the skill of seeing thoughts as thoughts, rather than as absolute facts. Reveal actively trains this capacity.
- **Affect Labeling and the Prefrontal Cortex:** The act of deliberately noticing and naming an experience engages the prefrontal cortex, which can help regulate emotional reactivity [3]. The process of identifying the facts helps shift the brain from an automatic, emotionally reactive state to a more observant, regulated one.

- **Narrative Construction:** The brain rapidly constructs meaning — a "story" — from events to predict and navigate the world. Reveal forces us to recognize that the story your mind began to tell is a construction, not the event itself.
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E — Explore

Identify the thoughts your mind is telling you about what happened. Notice the interpretations, assumptions, and judgments fueling your emotional response.

What Happens in This Step Explore asks you to examine the meaning you have assigned to the facts. The emotion you feel is not the problem; it is the result of the interpretation your mind just made. This step identifies the specific thoughts fueling your distress.

The Science

- **Cognitive Appraisal:** A foundational principle of cognitive psychology is that the meaning a person assigns to an event shapes their emotional experience [4]. Two people can experience the exact same event and feel entirely different emotions based on their immediate thoughts, assumptions, and interpretations. Explore targets these cognitive appraisals.
 - **Constructed Emotion:** Research by Lisa Feldman Barrett and others suggests that emotions are not simply reflexive reactions "caused" by external events [5]. Instead, the brain constructs emotional experiences based on predictions, past experiences, body states, and current interpretations. By identifying the thought, Explore addresses the cognitive component of that construction.
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T — Trace

Connect this reaction to where you've felt it before. Follow the pattern back to its earlier origins.

What Happens in This Step Trace is the step that asks, "Where did this come from?" The answer is almost always earlier than you think. It is the process of recognizing that a current reaction is often an echo of an older adaptation.

The Science

- **Implicit and Autobiographical Memory:** Present situations frequently activate learned expectations and associations formed through earlier experiences [6]. The hippocampus contributes to contextual and autobiographical memory, while emotional learning involves broader, interacting brain networks. Trace asks the mind to locate the historical context of the current feeling.
 - **Pattern Recognition and Early Adaptation:** The brain relies on past experiences to predict current threats. Landmark research, such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, demonstrates that early environments wire behavioral and physiological patterns that persist into adulthood [7]. These are not character flaws; they are adaptations. Trace helps explain why present reactions often have earlier origins, locating them without judgment.
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U — Uncover

Go one layer deeper. What are you actually afraid is true? Identify the underlying fear driving the pattern.

What Happens In This Step Uncover goes beneath the behavior, the emotion, and the pattern to the root: the fear. The RETURN Way™ proposes that recurring patterns are often organized around underlying fears that the nervous system is trying to protect you from.

The Science

- **Threat Appraisal and Defensive Responding:** Brain and body systems rapidly evaluate possible danger based on present cues, prior learning, and context [8]. Crucially, the nervous system does not only scan for physical danger. Social experiences — such as rejection, humiliation, abandonment, or loss of control — can be processed as significant threats.
 - **Distributed Threat Processing:** The brain's threat circuitry, which includes the amygdala as one component of a broader network involved in salience, learning, and threat processing, operates rapidly to protect us [9]. By identifying the specific fear (e.g., "I am afraid I am not enough"), Uncover brings a threat assessment into conscious awareness, where it can be examined rather than blindly obeyed.
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R — Rewrite

Draft a truer, more grounded story — one that isn't driven by the old fear. Let some light and air in. This isn't positive platitudes. It's letting in other possibilities.

What Happens in This Step Rewrite is the deliberate introduction of a truer, more current meaning. It is not forcing positive thinking over an unexamined wound. It is choosing an interpretation that reflects reality and who you are now, rather than who you had to be when the pattern formed.

The Science

- **Memory Updating and Reconsolidation:** Under certain conditions, reactivated memories may become open to updating when new information contradicts what was expected [10]. While rewriting a story does not guarantee neurological reconsolidation, the Rewrite step is consistent with this broader principle of memory updating — introducing a grounded truth that challenges the old fear-based expectation.

- **Narrative Identity:** Research by Dan McAdams demonstrates that humans construct the self through story. Developing coherent, redemptive narratives — where difficulty is integrated into an account of growth — is strongly associated with greater psychological wellbeing [11]. Rewrite is the act of authoring that truer narrative.
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N — Nurture

Act from the new truth, even before it feels completely solid. Every time you respond from the new story instead of the old fear, it takes deeper root. This is how the change becomes who you are.

What Happens in This Step The final step recognizes that rewriting a story is not the same as living from it. Nurture is the practice of supporting the new understanding until it becomes natural — through action, through different choices, through responses that reflect who you actually are.

The Science

- **Experience-Dependent Neuroplasticity:** The brain changes based on what it repeatedly experiences. Research in experience-dependent neuroplasticity demonstrates that the brain's structure and function can be shaped by repeated experience and deliberate practice [12].
 - **Self-Compassion:** Kristin Neff's research demonstrates that shifting from self-criticism to self-compassion reduces threat system activation and supports a baseline of safety [13]. Nurture practices help shift the nervous system's orientation from defense to connection.
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Why RETURN Is Different

Many approaches to behavioral change focus on one layer of the process. Some help people become aware of their thoughts. Others focus on emotions. Others explore childhood. Others emphasize behavior change. Each addresses something real.

The RETURN Way™ integrates these processes into one sequential framework:

Observe. Step back from the automatic story. **Understand.** Identify the thoughts creating the emotional response. **Trace.** Follow the pattern to its earlier origins. **Uncover.** Name the underlying fear driving it. **Rewrite.** Choose a truer, more grounded meaning. **Practice.** Act from that truth until it becomes natural.

The RETURN Way™ is not claiming to have invented thoughts, fear, memory, or neuroplasticity. The contribution of The RETURN Way™ is the integration — a structured, sequential path that moves through these layers in an order that makes each step possible.

That is the innovation.

Why the Sequence Matters

The RETURN Way™ moves intentionally: from surface narrative, to underlying fear, and back out to a grounded reality.

Each step prepares the next. Observation creates space. Understanding thoughts reveals patterns. Patterns expose fear. Fear can then be examined rather than obeyed. Only then does rewriting become meaningful. And repeated practice helps the new perspective become increasingly familiar.

The RETURN Way™ isn't just based on lived experience. It is also supported by established research in psychology and neuroscience, helping explain why this six-step process can be such a powerful catalyst for lasting change.

What The RETURN Way™ Is Not

To fully understand the framework, it is equally important to understand what it does not do. The RETURN Way™ is not:

- **Positive thinking or affirmations:** It does not ask you to overlay happy thoughts on top of unexamined pain.
 - **Suppressing emotions:** It asks you to investigate emotions, not ignore them.
 - **Reliving trauma:** It asks you to trace the origin of a pattern, not to re-traumatize yourself by dwelling in the past.
 - **Blaming childhood:** It views early adaptations with compassion, not blame.
 - **Changing memories:** It changes the *meaning* and *impact* of a memory, not the facts of what occurred.
 - **Pretending fear disappears:** It teaches you to act from truth even when fear is present.
 - **Replacing therapy:** It is a powerful tool for self-examination and behavioral change, but it is not a substitute for professional mental health treatment.
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