

Cravings and Triggers

Managing cravings & triggers

Cravings/urges to use are a natural part of overcoming dependence. They're the result of long-term alcohol & drug use and can continue long after you stop using. Generally, people with a history of heavier use will experience stronger urges.

Cravings can be triggered by: people, places, things, feelings, situations or anything else that has been associated with drinking/using drugs in the past.

Cravings are most intense in the early parts of stopping/cutting down, but people may continue to experience cravings for the first few months and sometimes even years after ceasing use/drinking.

Cravings/urges are like waves at a beach:



Every wave/craving starts off small, and builds up to its highest point, and then it breaks and flows away.

Each individual craving rarely lasts beyond a few minutes.

Cravings will only lose their power if they are NOT strengthened (reinforced) by using drugs. Using drugs occasionally will only serve to keep cravings alive. Cravings are like a stray cat – if you keep feeding them, they will keep coming back.

Each time a person does something other than drink/use drugs in response to a craving, it will lose its power. The peak of the craving wave will become smaller, and the waves will be further apart. This is known as 'extinction'.

If you don't give in to the cravings, over time they'll become less intense and less frequent, and abstinence from alcohol & drugs is the best way to ensure the most rapid and complete extinction of cravings. It is worth remembering that sometimes, particularly in response to stress and certain triggers, the peak can return to the maximum strength but will decline when the stress subsides.



Cravings and Triggers

Urge Surfing

Many people try to cope with cravings by gritting their teeth and toughing it out. Some cravings, especially when you first return to your old drug using environment, are just too strong to ignore. When this happens, it can be useful to stay with your urge to use until it passes. This technique is called 'urge surfing'.

Like ocean waves, urges are usually small when they start, grow in size and then break up and dissipate. You can imagine yourself as a surfer who will ride the wave, staying on top of it until it crests, breaks, and turns into less powerful, foamy surf.

The idea behind urge surfing is similar to the idea behind many martial arts. In Judo, one over-powers an opponent by first **going with** the force of the attack. By joining with the opponent's force, one can take control of it and redirect it to one's advantage. This technique of gaining control by first going with the opponent also allows one to take control while expending minimal energy.

Urge surfing is similar. You can initially join with an urge (as opposed to meeting it with **strong opposing force**), as a way of taking control of it. After you have practised urge surfing several times and become familiar with it, you may find it a useful technique when you have a strong urge to use/drink.

There are 3 basic steps in urge surfing:

1. Take an inventory of how you experience a craving

Do this by sitting in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths and focus your attention inward focusing on your breathing. Allow your attention to wander through your body. Notice where in your body you experience the craving and what the sensations are like. Notice each area where you experience the urge and tell yourself what you are experiencing.

2. Focus on one area where you are experiencing the urge

Notice the exact sensations in that area. For example, do you feel hot, cold, tingly or numb? Are your muscles tense or relaxed? How large an area is involved? Notice the changes that occur in the sensation. "Well, my mouth feels dry and parched. There is tension in my lips and tongue. I keep swallowing. As I exhale, I can imagine the smell and buzz of speed." Does the sensation have a colour, a shape, a texture?

Now focus your attention back on your breathing.

3. Move on to another part of your body that is experiencing the craving

Pay attention to and describe to yourself the changes that occur in the sensations. Notice how the urge comes and goes.

Repeat this process as you move from one part of the body to another. Continue to come back to focusing your attention on your breathing.

Many people, when they urge surf, notice that after a few minutes the craving shrinks and disappears. The purpose of this exercise, however, is not to make the craving go away but to experience the craving in a new way. If you practise urge surfing, you will become familiar with your cravings and learn how to ride them out until they go away.

The technique described is something that is also taught to people to help them manage pain. Both pain and cravings can feel intense, uncomfortable and extremely intimate. Focusing on the bodily sensations and describing them to yourself helps you to gain some distance, and to feel less controlled and overwhelmed. As well as using this technique to deal with urges, try it next time you have a headache, or back pain!

Cravings and Triggers

Another strategy that can be helpful in managing urges and cravings is to use a simple [Mindfulness Breathing exercise](#):

Preparation

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. You may choose to close your eyes or keep them open - if you are feeling tired it may be useful to let just a little bit of light in to keep you alert.

The Breath

Begin by gently moving your attention onto the process of breathing. Simply observe each breath as it happens, whether you focus on the rise and fall of your chest or abdomen, or on the sensation of the breath at the nostrils. Really feel what it is like to breathe, without feeling the need to alter your breath, just observing it as it happens.

As you engage in this exercise you may find that your mind wanders, caught by thoughts or by noises in the room, or bodily sensations. When you notice that this happens, know that this is okay, and simply notice the distraction but gently bring your attention back to the breath.

Ending the exercise

Take a few moments to yourself to really feel connected with the present moment. Expand your awareness from the breath into the room around you, and as you feel comfortable to do so, open your eyes and bring the exercise to a close.

Reflections

Take a few moments to think about what your experience was in this exercise, and how you feel in the present moment.

The 3 D's: Delay, Distract, Decision

Delay

Most cravings pass in about 20 minutes

Distract

Take your mind off using by doing something else

Decision

Remind yourself of all the reasons why you wanted to stop using/drinking

It is a good idea to think through a range of strategies you can use to distract yourself when you have an urge or craving. Below are some ideas to think about, although everyone will have their own ideas about what works for them:

- Read e.g. Newspaper, magazine, book
- Listen to music, a podcast, an audio book
- Go to the local library
- Exercise – walk, run, swim, gym, ride a bike
- Have a shower or bath
- Take up a hobby – woodwork, gardening, craft, photography
- Walk your dog (or a friend's dog)
- Play a musical instrument
- Play a computer game/phone game
- Cook food you like or have never tried - grab a recipe from online
- Call a friend
- Meet up with a friend
- Write a novel, a letter, poetry
- Do some housework
- Surf the net to research something that interests you
- Yoga or meditation
- Watch a comedy on TV or another program you like