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Your Relationship with Urges and Cravings

The challenge of urges, wants, desires and cravings (referred to from here on as “urges”) to use drugs, alcohol, pornography, gambling and other addictive processes and substances is frequently experienced by people seeking to achieve or maintain abstinence from addictions. This challenge tends to reduce over time but can be triggered again many months or even years into abstinence.

A very important point to consider is that it is normal to have urges to return to substance or addictive behaviours, it doesn't mean that a person doesn't want to stop or stay stopped, it just means that their addiction and related neurocircuitry is seeking to use again. Many people experience ambivalence, the urge to use and the want to not use. The key to not using is largely influenced by what you do and how you relate to the urges to use. You have a choice what you do when triggered by an urge, approach the urge with skill and a determination to live your life in line with your best self, the self that wants the best for you and those around you and you stand a good chance of mastering it.



A current development in the field of recovery is focused on people changing their relationship with urges, that is, cultivating a once removed relationship, an observer of the urge, rather than being overcome by it. Some of the suggestions given lend themselves to this approach. A good place to start, is to put distance between you and the sensations, thoughts and feelings of the urge. This takes practice. A good way to think about this is the difference of being in the sea, overcome and swimming against the tide of the urge, or being on the shore observing, watching, and calmly deciding what to do next. Another way to think about a once removed relationship to urges is to understand them as time limited events, they will come, and they will go, and you have a choice of how you respond to them. They may be uncomfortable, challenging and at times, distressing, but accept this, so that you can master it and it will pass.

Here are some tips, skills and ways that people use to work with cravings and urges. It is important to remember that urges will pass; they will lose power, especially when you have handled them skilfully a few times.

Don't use for another hour... Then another hour ...or don't use for another 5 minutes, if an hour is too much. This puts a space between the urge and using; in this time the urge to use will decrease.

Urge Surfing ... Similar to the above. Notice the urge and surf it, notice it come, climb and subside...yes, it will pass. The average length of a craving is around 15 minutes.

Pros and Cons... Do a quick stocktake of the pros and then the cons of using. Be sure to include the longer term bigger picture, to not do so is denial of your truth.

Eat and / or drink... Sometimes feelings of hunger and thirst can feel like cravings.

Substitution ... Have 3 things you can think about (non-addiction related) that you can think of anytime you think of using. For example; the place you enjoy being most, the reward you are going to give yourself when you reach a milestone of recovery or a loved one.

Count the blessings of recovery ... When you have a bit of recovery you will know all the benefits this has bought to you and your life; focus on these for at least 15 minutes.

Tell... don't go in there alone ... Reach out, speak to someone, a peer or another person that understands your struggle and can help you to continue along your path of recovery.

Put a gap between the urge and action ... This is very closely related to Mindfulness (check out mindfulness information online, especially Mindfulness Based Relapse Prevention). A handy acronym is SOBER, it works like this

1. **Stop**, slow down, take a moment, stop
2. **Observe**, what am I really experiencing? bring your attention to your insides, your feelings, your deep awareness, you can be with the feelings and urges, you don't have to use on them, you can just observe from a distance
3. **Breathe**, that is all ... just a few slow deep breaths, this will help to regulate your nervous system, calming you
4. **Expand**, widen your awareness to all that is going on, all that is going on within you and outside of you, take in the bigger picture
5. **Respond**, not react, this is not automatic, this is respond in line with your values, in line with your desire for recovery

For this to be most helpful, practice it and then... practice it again and then repeat so it becomes automatic. Practice it when you don't need it, then you will have this skill when you need it.

Mindfulness for many is a helpful skill that can be learnt. You will find lots of great content online or in a local Mindfulness group.

Play the tape to the end ... When people think of using they often recall the "good times" or the "good feeling", this is often an illusion and always discounts and ignores the true negative consequences of using, both in the short and long term. "Play the tape to the end" invites you to connect with and consider the truth of using, not just the illusion and/or the immediate result, but where it takes you.

Ask yourself “if I didn’t want to use, what would I really want”? ... This is a wonderful question to explore what you really need, what is it that you use your addiction for; this question might well lead you to some helpful truth that you can act on. You may discover you are stressed, lonely, hurt, bored or in pain (emotional and/or physical). By having the answer to the question you can take positive life affirming value directed steps towards meeting that need and want.

Avoid / Leave ... Do you need to leave the place where you are at? If this is what is causing the craving, put space between you and it and reflect on the situation.

Spot the lies that addiction is telling you ... Relapse is usually based on a lie or half-truth, it will be some addictive thinking that is a distortion of the truth, or minimising of the true consequence, or a negotiation that ultimately is weighted in favour of acting out. Your job is to spot the “addictive BS” or “cognitive distortions” (that is the therapy term). Be a BS detective, spot the lies early on, the ones that are setting you up to act out... these come way before the urges sometimes. Others refer to these thoughts as “red flag thoughts”. Get good at spotting these and challenging them with truth, these thoughts do not do well when you counter them with facts, historical or present.

Congratulate yourself! Every time you skilfully cope with an urge take a minute and congratulate yourself, reflect on what and how you did what you did, these are important moments in your continued recovery. If it was particularly difficult reward yourself with something that’s good for you, and something that you will enjoy.



This is just a start, explore, find more, get to know you and your urges, checkout what others do. If you are part of a peer support group and can ask others what they do, follow that, experience is a great teacher. Explore online, pop in a search engine “ways to deal with cravings”, learn about the neuroscience of addiction (YouTube is a good source for this), attend AA, NA, SMART or other peer support groups, seek the support of an experienced addictions counsellor do whatever it takes to achieve lasting recovery.

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