

COPING WITH URGES

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Habits and urges go hand in hand. In fact, many people in the throes of an addictive behavior problem, whether it is overeating, drug use, alcohol abuse or smoking, claim that they derive no pleasure from their habit—that it is nothing but the relentless craving that fuels ongoing addictive behavior. What is usually most difficult for people when changing a bad habit is coping with the sometimes relentless urges. The initial days of a habit kicking plan can be exhausting as urges dominate thinking and interfere with the daily routine. Many people give up change efforts because they feel that there is no way they can function without their habit as the urges interfere too much with quality of life.

It is important to remember that urges, in and of themselves, are normal. We experience craving in varying degrees every day. And because your habit has been important to you for a long time, it may be unreasonable to expect urges to vanish completely. What is hoped is that you will come to experience urges with less frequency and that when they are experienced you will be able to react in a way that avoids relapse.

The "three D's" can be helpful in coping with urges and craving, whether these urges are related to alcohol or drug use, overeating, tobacco use or any habit you are attempting to change. The D's stand for Decatastrophizing, Disputing expectancies and Distracting.

Decatastrophizing

Especially early on in your change efforts, craving can seem excruciating. Your daily routine has been altered by the elimination of an important part of life and now you can't get your mind off of it. Everything you see reminds you of your habit. If you smoke, every room you enter may bring to mind the image of a cigarette and associated pleasure. The inability to satisfy the urge can lead to frustration and inner statements like, "I can't stand this!" or "There is no way I will be able to live without giving in." "I'll just go crazy!" Statements like this can be overwhelming. So much so that people often give up efforts.

As is the case with anxiety, catastrophic thoughts can lead to a great deal of arousal which can, in turn, make things seem worse than they are. If you believe that you are completely out of control, your emotions will follow. What is important to remember is that urges are normal and typically decline in intensity as you continue implementing change. To combat catastrophic reactions to urges it is important to remind yourself of times in the past when you have successfully changed habits (think now, we all have done so at least once or twice!). Do you still experience urges? If so, are they as intense as during the initial phase of your change efforts? Probably not, right? Furthermore, think about other people you have known who have undergone significant change. Do they seem haunted by urges such that they cannot function? If not, who is to say that you cannot accomplish that also?

Try to take some of the power away from an extreme adjective like "horrible" or "unbearable." Belief in horrible extremes only makes you feel worse. Just how unbearable is your urge right now? To accurately answer this you may need to conjure images of what other types of suffering reported as unbearable are like. Is this as unbearable as getting stabbed in the stomach? Or better still, what have you endured which was worse than your current urge? Was that unbearable? If so, does it follow that your urge is less than unbearable and perhaps only "very uncomfortable."

Disputing Expectancies

Craving is, in essence, the activation of expectancies. Beck and his colleagues (Cognitive Therapy of Substance Abuse, 1993, Guilford Publications) believe that there are three beliefs associated with "the acute decision to engage in substance abuse." They are Anticipatory, such as "I'm gonna be Mr. Wonderful after one line." Relief Oriented, such as "I won't have to think about work if I drink this bottle of wine." and Facilitative or Permissive, such as, "I've been good all week, I'm entitled to an evening high." Though Beck and his colleagues presented these fundamental beliefs in reference to substance abuse problems, it is this au-

thor's contention that these beliefs can function in any habit urge. The trick is to recognize their presence and then step back and put them into perspective.

Since we rarely think about distant consequences when craving, bring them to mind deliberately. Bring to mind the negative emotions which may be experienced at a later time due to engaging in your habit. Urges are "myopic" in that they can only see advantages. You must shed some light on your craving in order to effectively control it. Ask yourself questions like:

- * How will I feel later if I give in to my urges?"
- * What consequences might I suffer if I give in?"
- * Will the negatives outweigh the positives in the long run if I give in?"

Another way to cope with urges is to imagine that someone very close to you is voicing the very urge you are experiencing. How would you go about convincing them not to give in. Sometimes distancing ourselves from our urges is imperative before you can subject them to any scrutiny.

Your ability to conjure vivid images can be used in your favor when you experience craving. In the presence of a strong urge, try to imagine a very negative outcome. The more negatively graphic the better. The more true to your life the better. For example, if you have a problem with alcohol and experience a strong urge to walk down to the convenience store and buy a bottle of Vodka, imagine the worst hangover possible. Imagine vomiting all morning. Better still- imagine someone very important dropping by, someone you really want to impress, and seeing you in that condition. It is amazing how powerful our own imagination can be in fueling and impeding behavior. Use it to your advantage in your habit change efforts!

Distracting

Some urges are so relentless that talking back to them is insufficient. You still can't get your mind off your habit. Good old fashioned distraction is sometimes the only medicine that can pull your thoughts away. Distraction can be "cognitive," in the form of some mental exercises, or "behavioral," in the form of activity. Certainly the latter is going to be the most effective, in that urges tend to occur in environments which are the same or similar to those in which the habit occurred in the past. If you are trying to quit smoking, and you have previously smoked at in your office all day, being in your office is going to elicit a strong drive to light up. Certainly if possible, taking your work into a conference room, or taking a break and walking outside will often be enough to decrease the urge to a manageable level. You must evaluate your schedule and determine which situations evoke the most intense craving and create as much flexibility as possible so that you can "escape" if necessary--especially in the initial days of your change efforts.

Cognitive distraction can be very powerful. Certainly imagery has been used as a means of helping stressed people learn to relax. You too can use imagery to take your mind off an urge which is dominating consciousness. Conjuring a pleasant place like a beach or on a raft in a lake can help you not only take your mind off the urge but relax as well.

However, "relaxing" images are not helpful for everyone. Some find that if they relax when craving they will only want it more. This makes sense as we have discussed that many habits are associated with relaxation and pleasure, and evoking these feelings in places previously associated with your habit can strengthen urges tremendously. I recommend that you find some mental task that will be very difficult to finish but which is interesting and consuming that you can activate in response to an urge. I like to refer to these as Mental Tapes. Some examples of tapes which have been helpful are:

- * Mentally writing the perfect epic novel or screenplay.
- * Planning the perfect vacation.
- * Creating the ideal moneymaking business
- * Interpreting a dream from the night before
- * Picking an acquaintance and trying to "figure them out."

Certainly what you choose will depend on your interests, but the key is to make it something that will be easy and perhaps interesting and fun to do. Choosing to think about all the mistakes you've made this year and how you could have done things differently is not going to prove a good distraction tape as it won't be enjoyable. In fact it may increase the power of your urge, especially if stress has precipitated your habit in the past.

It is sometimes best to try one urge control technique at a time so that you don't get overwhelmed. These techniques work, but they also require a great deal of mental energy and conscious effort. The aim here is not to make change excruciating or extraordinarily taxing, but to provide you with some tools which you can add to your armory at a your own pace.

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