

Surfing the Urge



Many people try to cope with cravings by gritting their teeth and toughing it out. Some cravings, especially when you first go back to places where you used to drink/use, are too strong to ignore. When this happens, it can be useful to stay with your urge until it passes. This technique is called ‘urge surfing’. 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.

Like waves, urges rise, building up to their cresting point, and then fall. As the intensity of an urge builds, it feels like it is going to keep on getting worse, and that if you don’t give in to it, it will last forever. When you experience an urge and then act on the impulse, your brain makes the connection that you can only make the urge go away by using drugs/drinking. However, research tells us that urges typically last for 20-30 minutes, which means the feeling will pass, whether you drink/use or not. Over time, you are able to re-teach your brain that it is possible to experience an urge without acting on it.

The idea behind urge surfing is similar to the idea behind many martial arts. In Judo or Aikido, you overpower your opponent by first *going with* the force of the attack. By joining with the opponent’s force, you can take control of it and re-direct it to your advantage. This technique of gaining control by first going with the opponent also allows you to take control while using the least energy possible.

Urge surfing is similar. You can initially join with an urge (*as opposed to fighting it*), as a way of taking control of it. There are three basic steps in urge surfing:

1. Find out how you are actually experiencing 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 and on your breathing. Allow your attention to wander through your body. Notice where in your body you experience the craving and exactly what the sensations are like. Notice each area where you experience the urge and tell yourself what you are experiencing.

For example, “Let me see ... my craving is in my mouth and nose, and in my stomach”.

How intense is this feeling on a scale from 0-10 (10 is high intensity)? What other feelings are present? What thoughts are there? As best you can, be present, without judgement. Just notice what is already there.

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 breathe out, I can imagine the smell and buzz of speed.” Does the sensation have a colour, a shape, a texture?

Now bring your attention back to 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 by moving from one part of your body to another. Keep coming back to giving attention to your breathing.

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

This technique is also taught to people to help them manage pain. Cravings and pain can both feel intense and uncomfortable. Giving attention to your actual bodily sensations and describing them to yourself, in a non-attached and non-judgemental way, helps you to gain some distance, and to feel less overwhelmed.

What else helps with urge surfing?

One way to surf the urge is by breaking it down into one or five minute intervals – set a timer, and when the timer goes off – reassess your urge. In this way, you can make the time riding out the urge more manageable and break the connection between the urge and the behaviour (i.e. drinking/using).

In general, finding things that distract, relax, and/or change your physiology are helpful in riding the wave. Below are some examples you might find helpful:

- Hold ice in your hand, or against your face/forehead/neck
- Take a warm shower
- Take a few minutes to focus on your breathing – slow and steady.
- Call a friend or family member
- Play a playlist of your favourite songs
- Watch funny You Tube videos
- Light a scented candle or use some scented lotion or oils
- Imagine a very relaxing scene or re-play a joyful memory in your mind
- Say encouraging statements to yourself as though you are talking to your best friend