Noticing Your Urges and Cravings

Objective: To gain better control by recognizing and tracking your urges and cravings.

You Should Know

Now that you are more familiar with what people, places, and things might trigger your desire to use substances, let's look more closely at that desire to use, or what are called "urges and cravings."

Urges and cravings—terms that are often used interchangeably—are a challenging part of recovery, especially in the early going. Most people would describe an urge or craving as a powerful physical sensation and/or mental compulsion to use their substance of choice. Physical urges and cravings are frequently accompanied by a sudden stream of thoughts that make you feel compelled to pick up, as if there is no choice. People who are not in recovery from drug and alcohol use can relate by thinking about the feeling they experience "dying for" that first cup of coffee in the morning or a sugary treat after dinner.

Books and articles about addiction often point to the role of "positive" hormones such as endorphins and dopamine, which can cause euphoric feelings, in feeding the cycle of addiction. We won't be delving into brain chemistry here, but you should know that the feeling of being out of control and helpless in the face of a craving can in large part be chemically based, especially for long-term users.

Once you get better at identifying your triggers, which often lead to urges and cravings, you can take steps to feel more in control.

Does This Sound Like You?

Roderigo, 19, has been using prescription Xanax, a benzodiazepine, to treat his anxiety for two years. He wanted to stop using Xanax because he was afraid he was addicted and wanted to face his life stresses without medication. His doctor put him on a slow program to taper off, and now Roderigo hasn't used any benzodiazepines for the past month. At random times throughout the day, Roderigo has some mild shakiness and a fluttering heart. "It freaks me out," he says. He describes both a strong physical craving and difficulty letting go of his obsessive thoughts about wanting to take a pill.

How are you like Roderigo? How are you different?

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Have you experienced physical or mental urges or cravings for your substance of choice? Describe briefly.

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What to Do

For the next week, notice and record, or be mindful of, your urges or cravings: when they occur; where you are and whether you are alone; how intense they are on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = mild, 5 = moderate, 10 = intense); and how long they last. As you do this exercise, remember to let go of any judgment, shame, or guilt, and just notice.

Example: Tuesday	**Time of day**	**Where were you? Alone or with others?**	**How intense was it?**	**How long did it last?**
	8 p.m.	*Home alone unexpectedly*	*7*	*10 minutes*

Week of _____

	Time of day	**Where were you? Alone or with others?**	**How intense was it?**	**How long did it last?**
Sunday				
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				

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	Time of day	Where were you? Alone or with others?	How intense was it?	How long did it last?
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				

Now that you've begun to notice the people, places, and things that trigger you and the frequency and duration of your urges and cravings, what can you do? Here are some options:

- Stop. Breathe. Feel your feet on the ground. Count to ten. Keep breathing.
- Distract yourself by doing something else—read, write, walk, run, go to the gym, have a snack, play a video game. (Later on, we'll take a broader look at things to do instead of using.)
- Call a safe person, someone who will help you avoid picking up without judging or shaming you.
- Go to an AA or SMART Recovery meeting.
- Practice "urge surfing," in which you simply notice the urge and its intensity, like a wave coming to shore. You don't have to do anything. Just watch it arrive, swell, peak, and then get smaller, until it disappears. Sometimes cravings last a few seconds, sometimes a few minutes or more. Most cravings diminish much more quickly than you'd think.

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For this exercise, chart your responses to your urges and cravings over the next week, adding on the information in the new column on the right.

	Time of day	**Where were you? Alone or with others?**	**How intense was it?**	**How long did it last?**	**Your response**
Example: ***Sunday***	*1 p.m.*	*After an AA meeting*	*7*	*5 minutes*	*Told a buddy that I was triggered.*

Week of _____

	Time of day	**Where were you? Alone or with others?**	**How intense was it?**	**How long did it last?**	**Your response**
Sunday					
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					

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Reflections on This Exercise

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How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area of your recovery?

_____
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