



Urge Surfing

BACKGROUND

Urge surfing is a mindfulness technique can be used to help with any addictive behaviour such as gambling, overeating, inappropriate sex or any other destructive impulses.

Urges for substance use rarely last for very long if there is no opportunity to indulge them. People admitted to a high quality detoxification centre, where there is no access to their drug of choice, often find it remarkable how little craving they get.

Where there is no opportunity to use then there is no internal struggle. It is this internal struggle that feeds the cravings. Trying to fight cravings is like trying to block a waterfall. We end up being inundated. With the approach of mindfulness, we step aside and watch the water (cravings, impulses & urges) just go right past.

Most of us will have had past experiences of urges passing. This is an important strategy to identify, as it can greatly improve self efficacy for riding out urges.

The main message is that urges do not have to be acted upon.



HOW FIGHTING URGES FEEDS THEM

Often people try to eliminate the urges by distraction or talking themselves out of them. This usually just feeds the urges and creates the illusion that they are interminable until you give in to them.



There is plenty of research to show that suppressing a thought feeling or sensation, including pain ultimately increases it. (Clark Ball & Pape 1991, Gold & Wegner 1995, Wegner, Schneider, Carter & White, 1987, Wegner, Schneider, Knutson & McMahon 1991, Cioffi & Holloway 1993) Just try to not think of something in particular! I have a friend who repeatedly tells his workshop attendees not to think of a little green frog sitting on his head. Of course the more he says it, the more the participants end up thinking about the little green frog. That is what happens inside our own minds when we try not to think of something.

When we try to argue with ourselves or our urges we do no better. We end up being like those characters in the old cartoons where they have a little angel on one shoulder and a little devil on the other. The more they argue the more stressed we become. As the stress increases the power of the urges also increase. So the devil almost always wins. The rare person who succeeds in arguing their way through urges becomes incredibly tense and obsessed with not giving in. That sort of person in Alcoholics anonymous is known as a dry drunk. Not only are they very stressed themselves, they also are a cause of stress for everyone around them! Urge surfing is a much better option!

THE EXERCISE: EXPERIENCING THE CHANGING NATURE AND IMPERMANENCE OF URGES

- Sitting with the back unsupported in a chair or on a cushion on the floor
- Starting Mindfulness Meditation
- Waiting for any sense of discomfort
e.g. Restlessness, an itch
- Noting the desire to move and resisting it
- Noticing thoughts that arise
e.g. "I wish this itch would go"....."It is driving me crazy"....."This too will pass" – in a calm tone....."This too will pass" – in an irritable tone....."It is not bloody well passing!"....."I would love to scratch right now" etc etc
- These thoughts are just thoughts. So gently bringing your attention back to your breath and bodily sensations
- Noting the changing position, shape and quality of the discomfort over time. Being interested in feeling it as precisely as you can. Noticing how the shape and intensity changes with the cycle of the breath. Is it stronger during the in breath or during the out breath?
- You might find your thoughts spontaneously going to other matters,
e.g. Your shopping list, a fight with you partner, a football game, planning a holiday.

These are still just thoughts.

- Gently bringing your attention back to your breath and body sensations. They are probably different again.

You have just observed the changing nature and impermanence of urges.





When you notice the physical sensations with interest, you are directly facing the urges rather than feeding them through fighting them.

THE TECHNIQUE OF URGE SURFING

Mindfulness allows us to bypass these problems associated with avoidance and disputation. Instead of trying to distract from or argue with the unpleasant thoughts, feelings or urges, mindfulness simply makes the thoughts, feelings or urges less important. When we use mindfulness we stay exposed to the thoughts feelings or urges for their natural duration without feeding or repressing them.

In fact, if we just let an urge be – non judgmentally – without feeding it or fighting it (Fighting it is just another way of feeding it anyway) then it will crest subside and pass.

Of course the urges come back again but over a period of time. However each time you outlast a bout of cravings they become less intense and less frequent . We don't feed the urges and we don't give in to the addiction. Moreover our mindfulness technique of urge surfing improves. If we have a slip and give into the impulse, we will have increased urges for a while. However we can still apply urge surfing all over again.

Giving in to urges can be compared with feeding a stray cat. In the beginning, you may want to feed the cat because it cries for food and attention. You may find that it is a nice thing to do and you feel good for being kind. However, your act of feeding the cat encourages it to repeat its cries and attention seeking. You find yourself giving in each time. Over a period of time the cat grows bolder and other cats join it in crying for food and attention.

You may begin to regret your actions, as a large number of strays are now contributing to noise and other problems. But you cannot resist their cries. You may believe that their survival now depends on you, and that your actions are more important than ever. They have you trapped in a cycle of problem behaviours.

If you make a decision to resist feeding the “cat army,” there will be loud and pitiful cries for a few days. In fact they will be at their strongest when you have decided not to reinforce their behaviour. Soon, however, they will come to realise that they are no longer being reinforced, and will gradually diminish and disappear. Your decision to stick with the action you know is best for you will “undo” the problem that you unknowingly built up in the first place.

Urges do go away, but they may be very strong for a short while immediately after quitting. Knowing that they will weaken will help you to continue to surf the impulses that you feel, especially in response to your personal triggers.



Urge Surfing Summary

Purpose

To experience the cravings in a new way and to “ride them out” until they go away

Preparation

1. Remember that urges pass by themselves.
2. Imagined that urges are like ocean waves that arrive crest and subside. They are small when they start, will grow in size, and then will break up and dissipate.
3. Practise mindfulness regularly and especially notice any impulses or urges that appear. Then we are well prepared to ride these waves without giving in to the urge by using mindfulness. Your brain will have built the circuitry that makes this process more manageable.

Urge surfing itself

- **Practise mindfulness**
- Watching the breath without altering it. Allowing the breath to breathe itself.
- Noticing your thoughts.
- Without judging them, feeding them or fighting them **gently** bringing your attention back to the breath
- **Noticing the craving experience as it affects the body.**
- Focusing on one area where the urge is being felt and noticing what is occurring.
 - Noticing quality, position, boundaries & intensity of the sensation
 - Noticing how these change with the in-breath and out-breath
- Repeating the focusing process with each part of the body involved.
- Being curious about what occurs and noticing changes over time.

The key is replacing the fearful wish that craving will go away with interest in our experience. When we do this we notice the cravings change, crest and subside like waves in the ocean. In this way it becomes more manageable.

