

Cravings and Addiction: Turning Inconvenient Annoyances into Manageable Moments

Cravings can feel urgent, powerful, and disruptive, but they are temporary experiences that can be understood, tolerated, and managed with practice.

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Cravings are one of the most common and frustrating parts of addiction recovery. Whether a person struggles with gambling, pornography, alcohol, drugs, nicotine, food, shopping, technology, or another compulsive behavior, cravings can appear suddenly and feel very convincing. They can interrupt concentration, stir up anxiety, create restlessness, and make a person feel as though they must do something immediately to get relief.

But cravings are not commands. They are not proof that recovery is failing. They are not moral weaknesses. A craving is an internal experience. It may be uncomfortable, distracting, and intense, but it is still something that can be noticed, understood, and managed.

One helpful way to begin is to separate two related but different experiences: craving and urge. A craving is the desire to reexperience the effect of a substance or behavior. An urge is the impulse to act on that desire. This distinction matters because a person can have a craving without acting on the urge. The desire may show up, but behavior is still a point in time where choice matters.

This is where recovery begins to grow: in the space between wanting and doing.

What is a Craving?

A craving is a strong desire to reexperience the **effect** of a substance or behavior. That effect may be pleasure, excitement, escape, relief, comfort, numbness, stimulation, connection, distraction, or the feeling of being temporarily free from emotional pain.

Cravings can involve several dimensions at once. They may include thoughts such as, “I need this,” “Just this one time,” “I can’t handle this feeling,” or “I’ll stop tomorrow.” They may include emotions such as anxiety, sadness, boredom, irritability, loneliness, shame, or frustration. They may include physical sensations such as tightness in the chest, restlessness, muscle tension, stomach discomfort, warmth, agitation, or a surge of energy. They may also involve memories, images, fantasies, or familiar routines.

This is why cravings can feel so convincing. They are not just thoughts. They are whole-body experiences shaped by memory, emotion, learning, biology, and habit.

Yet even when cravings feel powerful, they usually rise, peak, and pass. They are temporary. The problem is that many people act on the urge before they get to experience the craving passing on its own.

The Addiction Loop: How Cravings Become Reinforced

Addictive patterns often develop through learning. A person experiences a trigger, engages in a behavior, and receives some kind of reward or relief. The brain remembers this connection.

A simple version of the addiction loop looks like this:

Trigger → Craving → Urge → Behavior → Reward or Relief → Learning

The trigger may be external, such as seeing alcohol, receiving a paycheck, being alone at night, passing a casino, scrolling online, or being around certain people. It may also be internal, such as stress, boredom, anger, shame, fatigue, anxiety, physical discomfort, or painful memories.

The craving is the desire for the effect. The urge is the impulse to act. The behavior is what the person does next. The reward may be pleasure, but often it is relief. A person may drink to feel less anxious, gamble to escape boredom, use pornography to avoid loneliness, smoke to reduce tension, or overeat to soothe emotional discomfort.

When the behavior produces short-term relief, the brain learns: “This worked.” Even if the long-term consequences are painful, the short-term reward can strengthen the habit loop. Over time, the brain becomes better at noticing triggers and producing cravings. This does not mean the person is weak. It means the brain has learned a pattern.

The good news is that the brain can also learn new patterns.

Why Fighting Cravings Often Backfires

Many people try to defeat cravings through willpower alone. They argue with the craving, shame themselves for having it, try to force it out of their mind, or demand that it disappear immediately. Sometimes this works briefly. But often, the harder a person fights the craving, the more attention the craving receives.

Trying not to think about a craving can make the craving more central. Trying to control every feeling can lead to exhaustion. Trying to avoid every trigger can make life smaller and smaller. Avoidance may be useful in early recovery when certain situations are too risky, but long-term recovery usually requires more than avoiding discomfort. It requires learning how to respond differently when discomfort shows up.

The goal is not necessarily to eliminate every craving. The goal is to change one’s relationship to cravings. Instead of treating a craving like an emergency, a person can learn to treat it as a temporary internal event: uncomfortable, inconvenient, and sometimes annoying, but manageable.

Cravings Are Not the Enemy

It may sound strange, but cravings are not always the true enemy. The bigger problem is often what people believe about cravings.

A person might believe:

“I should not be having this craving.”

“This means I am back at square one.”

“I cannot tolerate this feeling.”

“If I have a craving, I will eventually give in.”

“The craving will last forever.”

“I already had the thought, so I might as well act on it.”

These beliefs can give cravings more energy and feel more challenging than they need to be. A craving may be uncomfortable, but the interpretation of the craving can intensify distress. If a person sees a craving as a threat, they may panic. If they see it as a temporary wave, they may be able to pause. In other words, cravings can be intensified if we make up stories about them that aren't true.

A craving is not permission to act. It is also not evidence of failure. It is an opportunity to practice recovery skills.

Urge Surfing: Riding the Wave Without Obeying It

One of the most useful mindfulness-based relapse prevention tools is **Urge Surfing**. The idea is that cravings and urges often behave like waves. They rise. They build. They peak. Then they eventually fall.

When a person practices Urge Surfing, they are not trying to make the craving vanish immediately. They are learning to observe the craving and ride it out without acting on the urge.

A simple Urge Surfing practice might look like this:

Pause and notice that a craving is present.

Name it: “This is a craving.”

Notice whether an urge is also present: “I am having an impulse to act on this craving.”

Bring attention to the body. Where do you feel the craving? Chest? Stomach? Jaw? Hands? Shoulders?

Breathe slowly and steadily.

Observe the sensations as they shift. Are they pulsing, tightening, heating, moving, fading, or changing?

Remind yourself: “This is uncomfortable, but it is temporary.”

Stay with the experience long enough to learn that you can have a craving without obeying the urge.

The power of Urge Surfing is that it teaches the brain a new lesson. Instead of “craving means I must act,” the brain begins to learn, “craving is something I can experience and survive.” Over time, this can reduce the automatic connection between craving and behavior.

Turning Toward the Craving with Curiosity

Cravings often become stronger when people react with fear, shame, or automatic obedience. Curiosity offers a different path.

Instead of asking, “How do I make this go away right now?” a person can ask:

“What triggered this craving?”

“What is this craving promising me?”

“What feeling am I trying to escape?”

“What reward does my brain expect from acting on this?”

“What happened last time I followed this urge?”

“What do I actually need right now?”

Curiosity slows the process down. It helps a person study the craving instead of being controlled by it. This does not mean the craving becomes pleasant. It means the person becomes less fused with it.

A craving might promise relief, but curiosity asks, “Relief from what?” A craving might promise pleasure, but curiosity asks, “At what cost?” A craving might say, “Do it now,” but curiosity asks, “What happens if I wait ten minutes?”

This kind of mindful investigation helps create distance between desire and action.

Acceptance Does Not Mean Approval

Acceptance is often misunderstood. Accepting a craving does not mean approving of addictive behavior. It does not mean giving up. It does not mean saying, “I want this craving” or “It does not matter what I do.”

Acceptance means acknowledging what is already present so that you can respond wisely. If a craving is present, pretending it is not there does not help. Shaming yourself for having it usually does not help. Acceptance means, “A craving is here. I do not like it, but I can make room for it without letting it run my life.”

This is a practical skill. When people stop wasting all their energy fighting the existence of the craving, they often have more energy available to choose what to do next.

Values: Choosing What Matters More

Cravings tend to focus attention on immediate relief. Values help widen the lens.

A craving asks, “What do I want right now?”

Values ask, “What kind of life am I trying to build?”

This distinction is essential. Recovery is not just about resisting substances or behaviors. It is about moving toward a life that matters. A person may value honesty, health, family, freedom, stability, self-respect, spirituality, emotional growth, financial responsibility, or being present for loved ones. These values can become anchors during craving moments.

When a craving appears, a values-based question can help:

“What action would move me toward the person I want to become?”

The answer may be calling a supportive person, going for a walk, attending a meeting, practicing Urge Surfing, leaving a risky environment, eating a meal, taking a shower, journaling, praying, meditating, going to sleep, or simply waiting without acting.

A values-based action does not need to feel dramatic. Sometimes recovery is built in small moments when a person chooses not to make things worse.

Self-Compassion Reduces Shame

Many people respond to cravings with harsh self-criticism. They think, “I’m pathetic,” “I should be over this,” or “Something is wrong with me.” Shame can become its own trigger. The more ashamed a person feels, the more they may want to escape, and the stronger the craving may become.

Self-compassion does not excuse harmful behavior. It creates the emotional safety needed to respond honestly. A compassionate response might sound like:

“This is difficult, but I can get through it.”

“Having a craving does not make me a bad person.”

“My brain learned this pattern, and I can learn a new one.”

“I do not have to act on this urge.”

“I can make the next right choice.”

Recovery requires accountability, but accountability works best when paired with compassion. Shame often keeps people stuck. Compassion helps people reengage.

Practical Strategies for Managing Cravings

Cravings become more manageable when people have a plan before they are in the middle of one. The following strategies can help.

Name the craving. Saying “This is a craving” creates distance. It reminds you that the craving is an experience, not an identity and not a command.

Separate craving from urge. Ask, “Am I experiencing desire, an impulse to act, or both?” This helps you identify where you are in the process.

Delay action. Commit to waiting ten minutes before doing anything. Many cravings change when given time.

Use Urge Surfing. Observe the craving as a wave of thoughts, sensations, emotions, and impulses. Breathe and ride it out.

Identify the trigger. Ask what happened before the craving appeared. Look for patterns involving stress, boredom, conflict, loneliness, fatigue, money, secrecy, shame, or access.

Check the promise. Ask, “What is this craving promising me?” Then ask, “What did this behavior actually cost me last time?”

Move your body. Walking, stretching, breathing, or changing rooms can interrupt autopilot.

Change the environment. Remove access when possible. Delete apps, avoid risky locations, limit cash, block websites, discard substances, or leave situations that increase risk.

Connect with support. Cravings often grow in secrecy. Calling, texting, attending a group, or telling someone “I’m having a craving and I need support” can reduce isolation.

Return to values. Ask, “What would move me toward health, honesty, connection, or self-respect right now?”

Plan for high-risk moments. Cravings are easier to manage when you already know what you will do when they show up.

When Cravings Require More Support

Some cravings are manageable with coping skills, mindfulness, therapy, support groups, and lifestyle changes. Others may require a higher level of care.

For substance-related addictions, withdrawal can sometimes be medically dangerous. People who are stopping alcohol, benzodiazepines, opioids, or other substances should consult a qualified medical provider. Medication may also be helpful for some substance use disorders, including nicotine, alcohol, and opioid addiction. Therapy, support groups, structured treatment programs, and recovery communities can also provide essential support.

Needing help is not failure. It is often wisdom. Addiction thrives in isolation, secrecy, and shame. Recovery grows through honesty, structure, support, and repeated practice.

Slips, Relapse, and Learning

A slip does not have to become a full relapse. A relapse does not erase everything a person has learned. The most important question is what happens next.

After a slip, people often fall into shame and all-or-nothing thinking: “I ruined everything,” “I might as well keep going,” or “There’s no point trying.” These thoughts can make the situation worse.

A more useful response is to study the episode with honesty and compassion:

What was the trigger?

When did the craving begin?

When did the urge become stronger?

What did I tell myself?

What support did I avoid?

What could I do differently next time?

What value do I want to return to now?

Recovery is not built by never struggling. It is built by learning how to respond to struggle differently.

Key Takeaways

Cravings are strong desires to reexperience the effect of a substance or behavior. Urges are impulses to act on those desires.

Cravings can be intense, but they are temporary. They rise, peak, and pass.

A craving is not a command, a moral failure, or proof that recovery is not working.

Addictive patterns are reinforced through learning: triggers lead to cravings, cravings may lead to urges, urges may lead to behavior, and behavior may produce short-term reward or relief.

The goal is not always to eliminate cravings. The goal is to change how you relate to them.

Urge Surfing helps people ride out cravings and urges without acting on them.

Mindfulness, curiosity, values, self-compassion, support, and planning can help turn craving moments into recovery moments.

Final Thoughts

Cravings may be inconvenient annoyances, but they do not have to control your life. With practice, you can learn to notice cravings, separate them from urges, pause before acting, and choose behaviors that move you toward the life you want.

The presence of a craving does not mean you have failed. It means you have a moment to practice. Each time you experience a craving without acting on the urge, you teach your brain something new: discomfort can be tolerated, impulses can pass, and recovery is possible one manageable moment at a time.