



# How to cope with cravings

If you become dependent, you can find that certain situations, moods and ways of thinking can become associated with cravings to use - sometimes these can be strong, especially in the early stages of change.

## Cravings are common and normal: they are not a sign of failure.

Try to identify your triggers for cravings. Triggers can come from within us, our thoughts, feelings or physical reaction to a situation. Or triggers can be prompted by external forces such as where we are or who we are with. It can help to use a craving diary. Write down what happened under the headings of "place and time", "thoughts", "physical feelings" and "behaviours"

### Example: John's Craving Diary

Place and time	Thoughts	Physical Feelings	Behaviour
Friday evening friend's place	I need it now I can't get it out of my head It calls me		
Friday evening My house Old Street		Intense craving Pain in my stomach I started smelling it.	
Friday evening Old Street			I went down a street where I used to use with my friends and immediately felt a strong craving.

The best way to make sure that cravings eventually disappear completely is to not use. Every time you don't use when you have a craving, your cravings will gradually become weaker.

Helpful strategies to cope with cravings include:

- Delay
- Distract
- Decide
- Positive Self Talk
- Urge Surfing

### Delay

Cravings or urges are like waves that build up to a peak and then reduce over time. Urges may be strong for a while but they do pass. If you delay your decision to use for 30 minutes the craving is likely to pass.

At the end of the 30 minutes remind yourself about why it is important to you that you do not use.

If 30 minutes seems too long you can delay for 5-10 minutes at a time until the craving passes.

### Distract

Don't sit in one place thinking about drugs or about your craving. That only feeds it and makes it bigger. Get busy! Distract yourself with another activity. This could include chores or a hobby.

Here are some suggestions. You can add to the list.

- Visit a supportive friend
- Watch TV
- Gardening
- Walking
- Reading
- Engaging in a hobby you enjoy
- Cooking a meal you like

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## Decide

Make the decision not to use.

- Make a list and remind yourself of the reasons that you decided to change your substance use.
- Go back and look at your list of problems and at your balance sheet, [How to set a goal](#).
- Make a list of all the benefits you have gained by not using, as well as all the things you will lose if you do use.
- It may be helpful to write the reasons on a card to carry with you or to display in a prominent place.

## Self-Talk

Self-talk refers to the things you say to yourself – either the thoughts in your head or what you say out loud.

Self-talk can be helpful or unhelpful.

Unhelpful self-talk can make your cravings feel worse.

You can challenge the unhelpful self-talk and change it to helpful self-talk.

## Example:

Unhelpful	Helpful
This is so bad.	This feels bad right now but it will pass
I can't cope with this.	I have coped with problems before, I can cope now. I got through the last craving, I will get through this one.
I am so weak, I am a failure.	I have failed in the past but it doesn't mean I will always fail.
I can't change.	Even though I am really tempted I have done really well and haven't used for two weeks.

**It may help to write down some of your unhelpful self-talk and then write some helpful self-talk that you would like to use.**

Unhelpful	Helpful

## Urge Surfing

Urges and cravings are like waves in the sea. They start small, rise to a peak and then fall away. Urge Surfing is a Mindfulness tool that can help you to 'ride the wave' of a craving.

Urge surfing means noticing your craving and just watching it rise and fall without having to respond. Every time you surf an urge or craving without acting on it your cravings get weaker and happen less often.

### How to Urge Surf

- Pay attention to your breathing. Notice the air going in and out.
- Notice your thoughts. Don't react to them or judge them, just notice them and let them go.
- Now return to focussing on your breathing.

- Notice the craving as a feeling in your body. Where do you feel it in your body?
- Focus on an area of your body where you feel the craving. What does it feel like? Is it tense or relaxed? Is it hot or cold? Is it painful? Is it moving? How strong does it feel? Give it a score out of 10. Did you notice the peak? Is it getting weaker?
- Every time you feel a craving, be curious about what happens and notice how it changes over time.
- Pay attention to your breathing again

Remember all cravings will pass all by themselves. Cravings that are not fed will get weaker and weaker.

Practice urge surfing regularly, the more you practice the better prepared you will be to surf the craving without giving in to it. You could even start [practicing mindfulness](#) to help you managing your urges and cravings when they occur.

## Alternatives to Substance Use

For many people, substance use has become a part of life. It is a habit they feel lost without. But just as you made a habit in the first place, you can make a new one, step by step.

Every time you stop yourself from following an old substance use habit, you are laying a path to better and safer habits.

You can choose not to use. But simply stopping doing something leaves a vacuum. So, make your choice easier by finding enjoyable alternatives and non-using company.

Gradually build a new balanced lifestyle that doesn't include substance use.

- Think about what you would like your life to be like.
- Set some goals and work out how you will achieve them – step by step.
- Get involved with people and activities that give you meaning and purpose.

Many people who use substances say they most want to use when they are trying to cope with uncomfortable feelings about themselves or their lives.

You need to find new ways of coping with your feelings, without substances.

- Practice ABCDs and mindfulness.
- Open up – share your feelings with your partner, a friend, your supporter or a counsellor.
- Look for activities you enjoy doing.
- Be around people who inspire you.
- Take courses, read books and listen to podcasts that can help you to safer use and a happier, healthier lifestyle.

It is also useful to consider putting a plan in place for when things might go wrong. Check out our sheets [how to prepare for a slip](#) and [how to manage a slip](#).

**Now that you have learned how to cope with cravings, here are some related sheets that you might find useful:**

[How to challenge unhelpful thoughts](#)

[How to be assertive](#)

[How to stick to your targets](#)

[How to practice mindfulness](#)

