

# Mindfulness

Dealing With Triggers, Cravings & Urges

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**One Step Rehab**

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this module you should have ...

- i. A basic understanding of triggers and why they occur
- ii. Know the difference between internal and external triggers
- iii. Understand why cravings happen
- iv. Have a basic understanding of the difference between mindfulness and formal meditation
- v. Be able to surf urges and practice basic mindfulness

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# 1. What Are Triggers, Cravings & Urges?

Getting sober is only the first part of recovery. There are many things in our environment that will remind us of our addiction, and there are also many internal states that can drive us back to active addiction. In this module we will explore those external and internal states before going on to learn about what methods we can use to deal with them.

## Triggers

The word 'trigger' comes from learning research where a reward is associated with an object or event (also known as a cue). Ivan Pavlov (an early psychologist) conducted many experiments on human behavior, and in his most famous experiment he looked at conditioning (how we are taught to do things). In this experiment, Pavlov trained dogs to associate a bell ringing with food. The dogs would begin salivating as soon as the bell rang, even before the food was presented. In this case, the bell was the cue or trigger, and food was the reward (or the drug!).

The latter phases of addiction are characterized by cravings which are accompanied by persistent and euphoric memories of past using experiences. Many of us have experienced overwhelming memories when we triggered by music we used to get high to, or passed a street where we used to buy drugs, or a bar where we used to drink. All of these things augment and intensify the activation of the reward and pleasure circuit, because they interconnect this circuit with other brain regions controlling social meaning, sight, sound, smell and well-being.

## Sensory (External) Triggers

A sensory or 'external' trigger is usually a person, place or thing which we associate with using or acting out. Sensory triggers vividly remind us of our addiction and stimulate a euphoric feeling in us without us even having to drink or use drugs. We will then begin to crave and eventually without engagement in a recovery activity we will use or drink.

*Scenario:*

Many people drink coffee, smoke a cigarette, and read the morning paper after breakfast. For these people, the coffee, cigarette, and the morning paper have become associated with each other. If these people tried to stop smoking cigarettes, they would be likely to have a strong urge to smoke every time they read the morning paper and drink a cup of coffee. The coffee and newspaper are the cues or reminders to smoke a cigarette. This cue or reminder is a sensory, external trigger.

## Emotional (Internal) Triggers

An emotional, internal trigger is a significant event or adversity which upsets or disturbs us and in the case of addicts this often makes us want to use. Emotional triggers are different to sensory triggers. Sensory triggers remind us directly of using whereas emotional triggers are a *feeling* which then reminds us that using is what we usually do when we have that difficult feeling. That feeling can be created by a reaction to an event (becoming angry and irate at someone) or it can come seemingly from nowhere, e.g. a sudden mood swing.

With emotional triggers (whether they are reactions to events or ongoing internal states) we have an irrational and selective memory of how using relieves our

psychological distress and we have built an association of *relief* with the act of using. We have also developed denial systems which help us to forget the distress which follows using drugs or acting out addictively.

*Scenario:*

You are 2 days into trying to stop using or acting out. You are having a stressful day at work. The thought pops into your mind that you can use, drink or act out immediately after work. In this sense your stress is the trigger as you associate it with using drugs to gain relief. Once you have made the decision that you will use or drink you experience a sense of relief and your stress is reduced.

## **Cravings & Urges**

As any person suffering from addiction knows, cravings can occur whenever we interrupt the active addiction cycle (e.g. when we stop). Craving is our brain's method of motivating us to pursue our rewarding behavior again, and is not to be confused with physical withdrawal symptoms. Physical symptoms of drug dependence can be easily medicated during detoxification, but psychological cravings can continue long term. Examples of psychological craving are;

- Constant mental obsession (playing the desired activity through in your mind again and again)
- Agitation, anxiety and low mood until the reward is attained
- Inability to concentrate on anything else until the reward is attained

The word 'urge' has a slightly wider connotation than the word 'craving'. Often the word urge is used to describe the intention to use drugs (or do anything pleasurable) whereas the term craving is specific to having a desire to experience the effects of the drug. In practice, they are often used simultaneously. Again, as anyone who has been actively addicted will testify, urges can become obsessional and can appear stronger than our will to resist. So how do we deal with these powerful forces?

## 2. What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can refer to a human quality, trait or state of being e.g., "He is very mindful of how to behave" ... meaning ... he knows how to behave correctly because he is paying attention and is focused on the situation.

Or, it can refer to a *meditation practice*. As a meditation practice mindfulness originated approximately one hundred years ago in the *Theravada* tradition of Buddhism which is predominant in South East Asian countries like Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. In *Theravada* Buddhist practice Mindfulness is known as *vipassana*. Roughly translated *vipassana* means 'insight meditation', or 'gaining insight and awareness into things through meditation'.

Mindfulness has also grown into the western tradition of psychology, where it is used as a treatment for a range of psychological disorders such as; depression, anxiety, stress and substance abuse. Secular (non-religious) forms of mindfulness training have been adapted for use in schools, prisons, hospitals, veterans centers, and other environments, and are practiced by psychological professionals like counselors, psychotherapists, psychologists, teachers and doctors.

So "mindfulness meditation" may refer to either the modern secular, practice of mindfulness, or to traditional Buddhist Vipassana-meditation. To define it more exactly, mindfulness is....

- A universal human capacity which can foster clear thinking and open-heartedness. When applied to meditation practice it requires no particular religious or cultural belief system.
- An intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment.
- "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (John Kabat Zinn, 2001)

## Is Mindfulness Buddhism?

Not really, at least not if you don't want it to be. Modern mindfulness practices can be, and usually are completely secular (non-religious).

However, mindfulness training did evolve out of a Buddhist tradition and so the aims and objectives of training in mindfulness are somewhat influenced by Buddhist philosophy.

In Buddhism, mindfulness practitioners sought to gain insight into the true nature of reality, which in Buddhist philosophy is;

- To see the *impermanence* of all things.
- To see the un-satisfactoriness or imperfection of every 'thing' that exists. (Called *Dukkha*, in Buddhist terminology)
- To understand the concept of *non-self*. This is not the belief that there is no-self (soul/spirit/individuality) but rather the idea that viewing the world from a perspective of your 'self' is unhelpful in securing lasting peace, because to enter a state of mindfulness one needs to be relatively unattached to concepts like self-image, status or possessing material things as a way of defining yourself.

## Popularization

Mindfulness is now very popular and is used widely outside of the medical and spiritual fields, by business people, sportsmen and anybody who desires to increase their mental/physical health. It is increasingly being used in the fields of mental health, and now also, in addiction recovery.

### 3. The Evidence Base for Mindfulness in Mental Health

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (**MBSR**) is a CBT/mindfulness program developed at the University of Massachusetts medical center. It has been the subject of controlled clinical research for many years. The research suggests that it may have beneficial effects, including;

- Stress reduction
- Increased functioning in parts of the brain's cerebral cortex
- Greater relaxation

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (**MBCT**) is another psychological therapy which uses mindfulness to treat depression (specifically Major Depressive Disorder). It also uses CBT in conjunction with mindfulness. What the research shows is that mindfulness is similar to CBT in that it works by training clients who have depression to notice when they become distressed and when they are using negative automatic negative thoughts (NATS) that can trigger a depressive episode.

The goal of MBCT is to interrupt these NATS and teach the participants to focus less on reacting to activators and instead learning to observe them less judgmentally - to alter their reaction to be more of a reflection than a reaction. Research supports the effects of MBCT in reducing relapse rates for Major Depressive episodes by 50%.

As well as reducing depression and anxiety, research additionally supports the effectiveness of mindfulness meditation to reduce cravings for substances or behaviors that people are addicted to. Mindfulness meditation conducted by smokers decreased smoking by about 60% and reduced their cravings, even for those smokers in the experiment who had no prior intentions to quit. Brain scans of people practicing mindfulness meditation has shown increased activity in the prefrontal cortex, a sign of greater self-control.

Practicing mindfulness for addiction recovery can help people to ramp down the intensity of their cravings. The particular method is called “urge surfing” and it was developed by the psychiatrist Alan Marlatt, specifically for use in addiction. The way it helps to calm urges and cravings is by helping people to picture addictive urges as waves that rise and fall in their intensity.

## **Urge Surfing**

Urge surfing works on the principle that all human emotion is observable through the body, or more specifically, by noticing the sensations in the body. This idea is also a central tenet of Buddhist philosophy. Recent scientific research into the bodies nervous system seems to agree.

Emotions are thought to affect the body via the nervous system and particularly via the **vagus nerve** which runs through many of the bodies organs. As we saw in the module on trauma, hyper-arousal has a significant effect on the body. Therefore it makes sense that if we are to gain more power to emotionally regulate ourselves then we should start with the body.

Usually urges don't last that long. About 20 – 30 minutes maximum. If, during that time, we watch what is going on in our body without fighting the craving or urge, then we find that it subsides. If we give in to the urge than it has the counter effect and strengthens the neuronal connections linking the urge and the object of desire (the 'drug'). Conversely, each time we successfully 'ride out' an urge, we strengthen the new neuronal connections which drive recovery.

## 4. Practicing Urge-Surfing & Mindfulness

It is generally accepted that meditation is conducted in various 'forms' which are not random. For example, *sitting, kneeling, lying* or *walking* are the most common 'forms' assumed whilst meditating. Sitting meditation is probably the most commonly seen form that meditators adopt across most traditions. In some forms of Buddhist meditation it is common to kneel, but the Vipassana tradition teaches cross legged sitting meditation. Non-religious practitioners often sit in a chair. Both sitting in a chair, and cross legged posture on the floor, are referred to as 'sitting' meditation. It is most usual to keep the back straight and body symmetrical whilst meditating and if seated to keep the feet firmly planted on the floor. If you are practicing on the floor (cross legged) it is probably more comfortable to sit on a cushion.

Unlike other meditation practices which often have complex breathing instructions, we are not going to worry too much about 'how' to breathe. Let's assume that you know how to do that! Maybe you don't breathe quite deeply enough for maximum health, but this type of meditation practice is not teaching you how to breathe more healthily, it is teaching us how to de-stress, calm down, and become more aware. No doubt after you have been practicing for a while your breathing will become deeper and more natural anyway as a result of becoming more mindful and aware, so for now it doesn't matter how deep or shallow your breathing is, or how long you breathe in and out for. You will just focus on breathing naturally, the way that is most comfortable for you. There is no right or wrong way. We will concentrate on using our breath as an *anchor* to increase our awareness or mindfulness.

## Exercise 1: Mindfulness Practice

Sit down somewhere comfortable with your back straight. You will use your breath as an anchor, which means that you are going to learn how to become mindful of whenever your thoughts wander away from stillness, and when they do you will use the breath as a *reference point* to return to.

Each time your attention wanders back to the concerns of the everyday world (e.g. “What am I going to do tomorrow”? or “I’m so angry with my work colleague” etc.) then simply notice it, and direct your attention back to your breathing again. To do this it helps to say to yourself internally:

*“rising...falling...rising...falling”*

This refers to way your breath makes your abdomen (stomach) rise and fall when you breathe in and out.

You can use a range of techniques for re-entering mindfulness when distracted.

1. Simply *notice* the distraction and return to breathing  
*“Rising.....Falling....Rising.....Falling.”*
2. Notice the distraction (an intruding *thought, feeling, physical sensation or external disturbance*) and *acknowledge* it.
  - “I am thinking about tomorrow’s meeting”
  - “I am feeling sad about leaving tomorrow”
  - “There is a noise” such as a plane flying overhead.
  - “There is a pain in my back”

Then return to the anchor of your breathing

*“rising....falling....rising....falling....”*

3. If the intrusion persists and you cannot ignore it (for example, because of pain in your back, or an itch that doesn’t go away) then you may move

into a more comfortable position, but attempt to do so in a *mindful* manner. You can break the movement down into microscopically small sections

- Think to yourself "*intention to move my arm*"
- Then move your arm very slowly upwards towards your nose, whilst thinking "*moving my arm*"
- Scratch your nose very slowly whilst acknowledging, "*I am scratching*"
- Very slowly lower your arm whilst acknowledging "*I am lowering my arm*"
- Back to the anchor of the breath "*rising...falling...*"

Finally, record any patterns you notice about frequent intrusive thoughts in the **meditation log** at the back of the book. Try to meditate for 10 minutes every day for a month and see if it improves your stress levels.

## Exercise 2: Impromptu Urge Surfing

Whenever you are experiencing a craving (and this needn't be a drug craving) you can take a moment to practice urge-surfing.

Sit somewhere comfortable and then place your attention on the PART OF THE BODY where you feel the urge is located. It might be in your stomach or your chest, or even in your arms or legs.

If you want to practice this at other times, but you are concerned about triggering yourself if you think of drugs, then of course it makes sense to find another source of cravings and urges. A good example of this would be **discomfort, thirst or impatience**. (It is obviously not wise to put yourself in a triggering situation with your drug of choice just to test your ability to surf urges).

A safer practice method would be to experiment with your ability surf the urge to scratch yourself when you are itchy. For example, if you experience the urge to

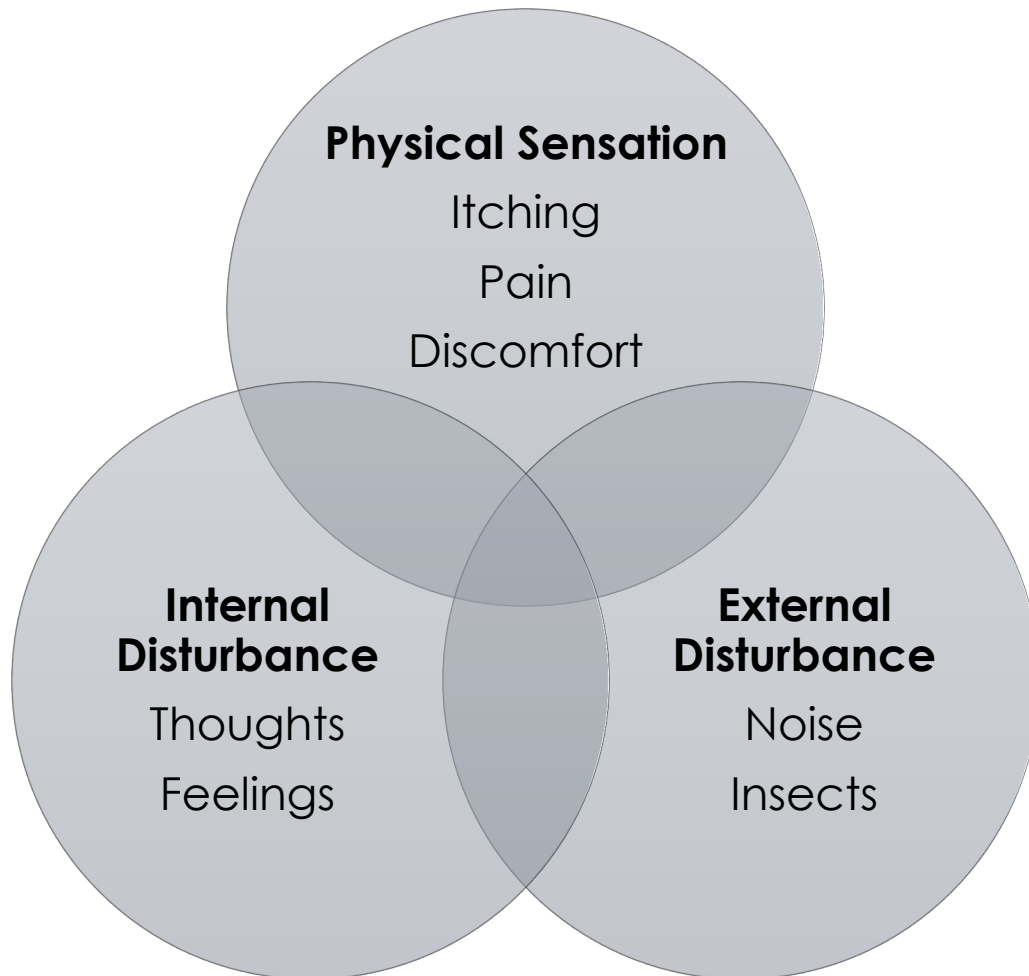
scratch yourself when you feel an itch on your arm or face, you could sit comfortably and experiment with how the intensity of the itch rises and falls.

Notice how the more you fight it, the stronger it becomes. It is important to know that if you don't scratch the itch almost always goes away after a few minutes. Try experimenting with this and see how it goes.

Also note the sensations involved. Exactly where is the itch located and does it spread outwards or jump around from place to place. How much surface area does it cover? Try to imagine that space in your mind's eye.

Note down what you discover in the **urge-surfing log** at the back of the book.

*Fig. 1: Thoughts, Feelings, Sensations & External Disturbances are the main sources of distraction which will cause the mind to wander*



MINDFULNESS LOG WEEK 1		
	NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
WED		
THU		
FRI		
SAT		
SUN		

MINDFULNESS LOG WEEK 2		
	NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
WED		
THU		
FRI		
SAT		
SUN		

MINDFULNESS LOG WEEK 3		
	NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
WED		
THU		
FRI		
SAT		
SUN		

MINDFULNESS LOG WEEK 4		
	NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
WED		
THU		
FRI		
SAT		
SUN		

URGE SURFING LOG WEEK 1		
	TRIGGER	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
WED		
THU		
FRI		
SAT		
SUN		

URGE SURFING LOG WEEK 2		
	TRIGGER	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
WED		
THU		
FRI		
SAT		
SUN		

URGE SURFING LOG WEEK 3		
	TRIGGER	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
WED		
THU		
FRI		
SAT		
SUN		

URGE SURFING LOG WEEK 4		
	TRIGGER	SENSATIONS
MON		
TUE		
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