

Riding the Wave: Using Mindfulness to Help Cope with Urges

Changing a habit is hard. Anyone who has tried to change their eating habits, quit smoking, start an exercise program, or stop drinking or using drugs can tell you how difficult it can be at times to change old habits. In [my last post](#) I discussed how slipping (i.e., falling back into an old habit) can sometimes set us up for a relapse (i.e., continuing a habit beyond the initial slip) due to a phenomenon known as the Abstinence Violation Effect. In this post, I'd like to talk about a technique that can help you before you slip, a technique called "urge surfing."

What is Urge Surfing?



Urge surfing is a technique attributed to the late psychologist Alan Marlatt, Ph.D., a pioneer in the field of addictions treatment. We can think of an urge as an impulse to engage in an old habit, such as drinking or using, and they are often experienced as physical sensations in the body. Urges are like waves in that they rise in intensity, peak, and eventually crash.

Here's a brief exercise you can do to explore this technique: Stop for a moment and think about an urge that you recently experienced. As you think about this urge, see if you can notice all the sensations that come up as you think about it; see if you notice how these sensations shift across time. Use your breath to help you ride out the waves (i.e., the urge); like a surfboard, you can simply observe your breath as you ride out each wave that arises. Congratulations! You just successfully surfed your first urge!

Urges usually peak between 20 – 30 minutes, *if we let them*. What I mean by this last phrase is this: if we adopt an open and curious attitude about the urge and watch it without doing battle with it, then the urge *will* subside. However, if we go to battle with our urges (e.g., "I can't stand this urge! I have to get rid of it right now!"), they will subside more slowly. Worse, by giving into urges we can actually strengthen them and we can lose confidence in our abilities to change our old habits.

How to Surf an Urge

There are slight variations of the urge surfing technique, but most include the following steps:

1. Take a few moments to notice where you experience urges in your body. You can do this by taking some time to sit in a quiet place, and if you are

comfortable doing so, closing your eyes, and just allowing your attention to go to the place(s) in your body where you tend to feel urges. If you are having trouble noticing urges, think back to a time when you experienced an urge to engage in an old habit.. Picture the situation as clearly as you can in your imagination. Once the situation is clear in your mind notice where in your body you are experiencing the urge.

2. Once you have noticed what part of your body is most connected to the urge, focus your attention on it (if you notice that more than 1 area of your body is connected to an urge, start with the place that you most intensely notice the urge). Take note of the sensations you are having in this body part. What do the sensations feel like? Does it feel like pressure, tingling, warmth, or coolness? How much space do these sensations take up in this place in your body? Try to draw an outline around the place where the sensations are felt. See if the sensations have any movement.
3. It helps bringing to this exercise some kind of **acceptance and letting be attitude** rather than fighting them and a sense of curiosity what happens next. Breathing into the areas of intensity with some warmth and kindness . For some people it can be helpful to silently describe the sensations in an objective and non-judgmental manner (e.g., I notice warmth and tingling in my belly). If more than one part of your body is associated with an urge, go through this exercise with each body part. Also saying
4. **Bring your attention to your breath.** You do not need to change your breathing at all. Notice your breath for the next 1-2 minutes. Some people find it helpful to bring their attention to a particular place in their body where they notice their breath (e.g., the abdomen); some find it helpful to say phrases like “breathe in,” “breathe out” as they inhale and exhale.
5. Gently shift your attention back to the part(s) of your body where you notice the urge. Allow yourself to notice whatever sensations come up in these places. If it becomes overwhelming to notice the sensations, gently return your attention back to breath for a few moments and then go back to noticing the sensations connected to the urge. You may find it helpful to imagine sending your breath to the parts of your body that are associated with the urge (e.g., you can breathe into your shoulders and let your breath fill up that part of your body). Notice if and how the sensations change as you watch them. Be sure to practice this step for at least 1 minute, but longer is probably better.
6. ***This next step is optional, but I have found it to be helpful in my own life and in working with people with addictions. Imagine that the sensations connected with your urge are a wave.*** Watch the wave rise and fall over and over again as the intensity of your sensations peak and subside. Your job is to use your breath as a surfboard to ride these waves. No matter how big the wave gets, no matter how much you feel as if the wave will consume you, you are a skilled surfer and you will use your breath to ride each wave as it comes.

7. As you're riding the wave (or just noticing the sensations), you may find it helpful to silently describe the sensations in an objective and non-judgmental way (e.g., I notice warmth in my belly that is increasing...the warmth in my belly is decreasing and my belly feels cooler).

8. When you are done surfing the urge, take a moment to thank yourself for taking the time and being willing to do something different with your urges. You can also use this time to set your intention for the next few minutes, hour,

You'll find that, with practice, urges will become easier to ride out. You may even start to feel a sense of pride or accomplishment as you successfully surf urges and act according to your values, instead of according to your urges.

