Cravings are a natural part of changing drug use. This means that you won’t have any more difficulty changing your drug use than anybody else does. Understanding cravings helps people to overcome them, so let’s go through some simple facts.

Cravings are the result of long-term alcohol/other drug use and can continue long after your use has stopped. So, people with a heavier history of use will experience stronger urges.

Cravings can be triggered by: people, places, things, feelings, situations or anything else that has been associated with alcohol/other drug use in the past.

A craving is just like a wave at the beach. Every wave in a set starts off small, and builds up to its highest point, and then it breaks and flows away to shore. Each individual wave never lasts more than a few minutes. A craving is just the same. It starts off small, and then builds up – with physical parts, behaviours and thoughts. But, it reaches peak, just like a wave, and it will eventually break, and disappear. This whole process usually doesn’t last more than about 10 minutes.

Cravings will only lose their power if you don’t add force to them by drinking/using. Even if you use only once in a while, you will still keep those cravings alive. Cravings are like a stray cat – if you keep feeding them, they will keep coming back.

Like the picture below, each time a person does something other than drink or take drugs when they are craving, the craving will lose its power. The peak of the craving wave will become smaller, and the waves will be further apart.

Quitting alcohol/drugs totally, is the quickest way to get rid of the cravings. Cravings are strongest in the early parts of quitting/cutting down, but people may continue to experience cravings for the first few months and sometimes even years after the drug use has ceased.

Each craving will not always be less intense than the previous one. Be aware that sometimes, particularly in response to stress and certain triggers, the peak will return to the maximum.

Figure 7.1 Facts About Cravings
Coping with Cravings

Sometimes, cravings can’t be avoided, and so you need to find ways to cope with them. Below are some things for you to try out, to cope with the physical, behavioural and psychological effects of cravings. Put a tick (✓) in the box next to those things you think you could do.

- Eat regularly, even when you don’t feel like it
- Drink plenty of water – especially when you get the craving
- Instead of drinking alcohol or using, drink water or chew gum
- Use “Delaying” and “Distraction” when your craving is set off. When you experience a craving, put off the decision to drink or use for a while. Go and do something else during that time like go for a walk, listen to music, etc. This breaks the habit of you immediately reaching for alcohol, pot or speed when you get a craving. You will find that once you are interested in something else, the craving will go away.
- Use relaxation and deep breathing techniques to cope with a craving once it is set off. If a craving develops in response to stressful situations, relaxation techniques and deep breathing exercises are really useful – you can’t be stressed if you are relaxed! Get yourself in a comfortable position – maybe sitting on the lounge. Close your eyes and take 3 big, deep, slow breaths. Concentrate on your breathing. Breathe deeply in, and as you breathe out, say the word “relax”. Wait a few seconds between each breath. Once you are relaxed, form a picture in your mind of a wave at the beach. This is a craving wave, and remember that the craving wave will build up to its highest point, and then fall away as it rolls into shore. Picture the craving wave building up, getting ready to break, see it break, see the foam form, and see the wave fade away as it rolls into shore. Now, picture yourself riding the wave, surfing the craving wave into shore. You don’t fall off, you don’t get dumped and churned around, just picture yourself calmly surfing the craving wave into shore. Remind yourself that this little craving wave, is only a small part in your day. You can surf the craving wave at any time, and wait for it to fade away.
- Use positive talk when a craving is set off. Tell yourself that cravings only last about 10 minutes. Tell yourself this feeling will pass. You will find that the urges and cravings themselves will be easier to deal with. Say to yourself, yes, this feels pretty bad, but I know it will be over soon.
- Use your self-monitoring form to write down your thoughts and feelings about the situation that triggered your craving. Check whether you are falling into an unhelpful pattern of thinking, and see if your can think of other ways to look at the situation.

Other ideas:

Other ideas:

Figure 7.2 Coping with Cravings
All Purpose Coping Plan (NIDA, 1989)

Remember that running into problems/crises is part of life and cannot always be avoided, but having a major problem is a time to be particularly careful about relapse.

If I run into a high risk situation:

1. **I will leave or change the situation**
   Safe place I can go:

   ____________________________________________________________

   ____________________________________________________________

2. **I will put off the decision to use for 15 minutes. I'll remember that my craving usually goes away in ___ minutes and I have dealt with craving successfully in the past**

3. **I'll distract myself with something to do**
   Good distracters:

   ____________________________________________________________

   ____________________________________________________________

4. **I'll call my list of emergency numbers**
   Name: ___________________________________________________
   Name: ___________________________________________________
   Name: ___________________________________________________

5. **I'll remind myself of my success to this point**

   ____________________________________________________________

6. **I'll challenge my thoughts about using with positive thoughts**

   ____________________________________________________________

Figure 7.3 All Purpose Coping Plan

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