



Urge Surfing

What is urge surfing?

Urge surfing is a technique that can be used to avoid acting on any behaviour that you want to reduce or stop. Some examples of behaviours may be: smoking, over-eating, substance use, spending, lashing out at someone, etc.

Some facts about urges

1. Urges rarely last longer than 30 minutes if you don't "feed" them. We feed urges through ruminating, giving them attention, planning to fulfil them, engaging in apparently irrelevant and unimportant behaviours, justifying, etc. Urges will pass on their own if we allow them to.
2. Suppressing a thought, feeling or sensation ultimately increases it. Fighting urges (even by trying to talk oneself out of them or distracting from them) often makes them bigger.
3. When urges grow, it can feel like they are never-ending until you give in to them.
4. The mindfulness understanding of urges is that you can't get rid of them—you can practice ways to accept them and ride them out without giving in to them.

Purpose of urge surfing

1. Whatever you repeat gets stronger, and whatever you don't repeat gets weaker. If you ruminate on the urge, it will likely grow. If you practice urge surfing, then your ability to surf the urge will likely increase and improve.
2. With urge surfing, you can learn to experience the urges in a new way and to "ride them out" until they subside.

Using metaphors of water to understand the concept.

Ocean wave: Imagine that urges are like ocean waves that arrive, crest and subside. They are small when they start, will grow in size, and then will break up and dissipate. Surfers have to trust that the waves will eventually get smaller and reach the shore even when the waves feel large and overwhelming. You can ride the "wave" by using the breath as a kind of surfboard until the urge passes.

Riptide: A riptide is a strong current of water flowing toward the sea (away from the beach). If you are caught in one and try to swim directly to shore (fighting the riptide) you will become exhausted and it will not be effective. If you swim in the direction of it or parallel to the shore, you will eventually float out of the riptide and be able to make your way back to shore.

Waterfall: Trying to fight urges is like trying to block a waterfall. You can end up being overwhelmed with the water. With the approach of mindfulness, you can step behind the waterfall and watch the water (cravings, impulses & urges) just go right past.

How do you urge surf?

Start with by practicing mindfulness:

- Watch the breath. Don't alter it. Let the breath breathe itself.
- Notice your thoughts.
- Without judging, feeding or fighting your thoughts, **gently** bring your attention back to the breath

Notice the urge as it affects the body:

1. Focus on one area of the body where you can feel the physical sensations associated with the urge and notice what is occurring.
2. Notice quality, position, boundaries & intensity of the sensation:
 - Does the sensation feel tight or loose?
 - Does the sensation have a temperature?
 - Where is the sensation located?
 - What are the sensation's exact borders?
 - Are these borders well defined and firm like the edge of a football or soft and fuzzy like a cotton ball?
 - How do these qualities vary with each breath?
3. Repeat the focusing process with each part of the body involved.
4. Be curious about what occurs and notice changes over time.
5. Replace the fearful wish that the urge will go away with interest in the experience.
6. You may notice the urge crest and subside like waves in the ocean. In this way it becomes more manageable.
7. Watch it for at least five cycles of breathing (which only takes about one minute). Do you notice any changes in the intensity or size of the urge?
8. When you find your mind turning to thoughts, notice the thoughts and come back to the physical sensations of the urge.
9. Use one of the metaphors discussed earlier to imagine the process of "riding out" the urge

Tips for success:

1. Try to only surf one urge at a time. Making changes is challenging and we only have a limited capacity for willpower and self-regulation at any one time. If you try to make too many changes at once, you will deplete your self-regulation reserves and you will likely decrease your effectiveness.
2. Use "reducing vulnerability" skills (treat physical illness, balance eating, balance sleep, avoid mood-altering substances, get exercise and build mastery) so that you are not depleted as you work toward not giving in to urges.
3. Studies show that willpower is strengthened the more we practice self-regulation (what we practice and repeat can grow). With practice, you will become more skilled at urge surfing.
4. Praising yourself for trying even if you don't have success will help you to stay motivated in order to continue working toward your goal.