

Worksheet 9.1
Emotion Regulation
Introduction to Urge Surfing: Rehearsal Worksheet

1. **Rationale.** People often feel overwhelmed by their urges and cravings to engage in self-defeating behavior such as gambling, drinking alcohol, using drugs, overeating, and inappropriate sex. They more or less have the idea that strong urges/cravings *require* acting on them.

In reality, we control the majority of our urges most of the time. Scientific proof of this statement comes from the fact that a great percentage of infants prone to screaming in the middle of the night reach their first birthday despite the homicidal urges of sleepy parents in the middle of the night.

2. In the following exercise, you are asked to *imagine* some aspect of your problem behavior, particularly situations that typically tend to trigger that urge in you. For a gambler, it might be reading about the point spread for football games in the newspaper or hearing a hot tip on a horse. For other problem behavior, it might be passing a bar or street corner where you did drugs.
3. Close your eyes and calmly visualize yourself in that setting. Imagine as clearly as you can its sights, sounds, colors, emotional feelings, energy, excitement, allure, and your own reactions. Play the scene out slowly as if you were watching it on video.
 - a. As you begin, note the intensity of any urges to engage in your problem behavior that may perhaps arise. Describe its intensity on a scale of 0-9, with 0 being no intensity at all, and 9 being as intense as you could ever imagine.
 - b. Continue to play the scene out in your head for 4-5 minutes, periodically jotting down the intensity level that you are experiencing.
4. Analysis
 - A. What did you notice about your urge levels throughout the exercise?
 - a. You may have noticed that it was not nearly as intense for you as the real situation, because it was only imaginary.
 - b. If you are like most people, you may have also noticed *both* (a) your attention wandered a lot, making it difficult to keep thinking about the situation, and (b) your urge intensity fluctuated considerably over time.
 - B. Assuming this was the case for you, what are the implications of how easy it is for our minds to wander, and how rapidly urges change their intensity over time?
 - a. What does this suggest about your ability to maintain control over your urges?
 - b. What would be a sensible emotional response to having these urges, instead of a sense of panic about being overwhelming?
5. **Conclusion.** Thousands of years ago, spiritual masters discovered how to draw on the mind's power to control strong urges, and today psychologists are studying these methods scientifically. Spiritual masters call this practice "acceptance."
 - A. Some psychologists who have applied these tools to recovery call this skill "urge surfing." The idea is not to fight the thoughts about gambling, drinking, using, etc., but to let the thoughts "surf" your mind in the same way that surfers handle strong waves—not by fighting or resisting, but by moving in harmony with them.
 - a. Rather than being overwhelmed by this powerful force, people can learn how to let its energy work for them, and, most importantly, not to flee from them.
 - B. If you would like to try out urge surfing, use the Acceptance-Urge Surfing Worksheet to see how it might work the next time you experience a notable urge or craving