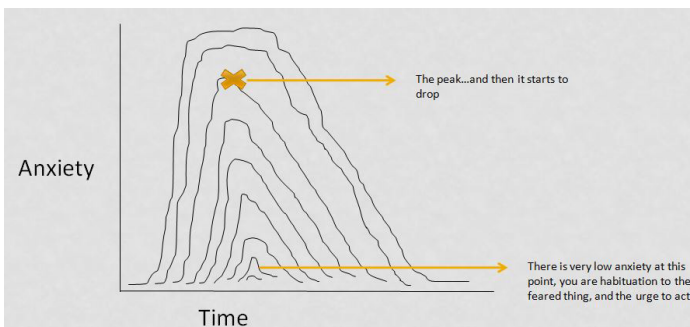


Eating Disorders: Urge Surfing

Urge surfing involves riding a wave of strong emotions or distress by stepping back from your experience and using mindfulness skills. **It involves noticing the urge to enact in eating disorder behaviours without giving in.** You simply observe and describe these urges in a non-judgmental way without reacting to them.

Urge surfing can help you to stop engaging in eating disorder behaviours and help you manage overwhelming emotions.

In the image below you can see the main phases for every urge. The urge rises, reaches a peak of intensity, and then gradually declines.



For every urge there will be a peak - the highest point of distress. This is when most people give in to their urges, without knowing that at some point the urge will become less intense.

People often do not experience the dissipation of an urge because they feed it before it reaches the peak. If people give in as the urge rises, they may only experience urges as getting stronger and stronger without ever experiencing the reality that urges do pass.

Three phases of every urge

1. The Build-Up

At first, there is a build-up period that begins with a trigger or a prompting event. This is when the idea of engaging in a disordered behaviour comes up.

2. The Peak

The urge becomes more and more intense until it reaches the peak. This is the highest and hardest point of the urge. The time it takes to reach the peak differs between people. It is difficult to withstand the peak without giving in, because you have to notice the feelings and resist reacting to them. This is a good time to engage in an alternative activity.

3. The Run-Off

Lastly, there is a run-off period. During this phase the urge gradually returns to a baseline level. If you are able to resist without giving in, the urges will not be reinforced. Of course they come back again, but each time you overcome a bout of cravings without feeding the urges, they become less intense and less frequent.

With time and practice your urge surfing techniques will improve, and the urge will take less time to peak and less time to return to a baseline, where you feel safe and comfortable.

If you have a slip up and give in to the impulse you will notice increased urges for a while, but you can still apply urge surfing all over again. Try to be patient.

Remember: The urge may be very strong in the moment, but if you abstain from giving in, the urge goes away.

Urge Surfing

Exercise:

Record your experience

Next time the urge to engage in a disordered behaviour comes up and you are facing a surge of discomfort, try to “ride the wave” and observe what is happening.

Every minute after the urge begins, write down whether there is any change in the level of intensity you are experiencing.

Does the urge vary?
Did you notice the peak?
Did you notice the urge reducing in strength as time passed?

Compare different urge episodes, and check if there is any difference in the amount of time it took to decrease to a manageable level.

Remember: Urges do go away, but they may become very strong for a short while after you decide to resist it.

Knowing that urges will fade will help you to continue to surf the wave of distress and discomfort that you feel. The most important part of developing this skill is repeated practice.

Urge surfing involves acceptance that urges will occur. You have to be willing to experience the urge as it runs its natural course. If your urges are no longer being reinforced they will diminish and fade away.

Exercise:

Urge surfcards

Fill out the “urge surfcards” below with urge-surfing information and words of encouragement. Refer to them when you notice an urge or overwhelming emotion start to emerge.

You can cut-out the cards and put them around the house or in places where you usually experience urges to engage in disordered behaviours (e.g. the kitchen, with your exercise gear). You can also use them as a bookmark, or carry them in your wallet.

If I resist, the urge will get stronger and then it will fade

I can ride the wave of discomfort and distress until it passes

Every urge is an opportunity to be patient and confident

The urge is strong, but if I resist now, the next one will be weaker