

Managing Cravings in Process Addictions

By Peggy Ferguson, Ph.D.

Addictions, whether substance use disorder or "process addictions," are characterized by loss of control, continued engagement in the behavior despite adverse consequences, cravings, and cognitive distortions that protect the continued behavior. Cravings drive this continued engagement.

Any addiction involves obsessive-compulsive behavior, which becomes especially apparent when attempting to quit. Abstaining from process addictions usually involves cravings. The "high" from engaging in compulsive behaviors is produced by enhancing dopamine and endorphin functioning in the pleasure/reward centers of the brain. Over time, these behaviors create an "adjustment" to higher concentrations of dopamine and endorphins—resulting in addiction. When one stops engaging in these behaviors, there is a rebound toward dysphoria, blunting the pleasure/reward centers and thus creating cravings to regain equilibrium.

The absence of pleasure/reward enhancement can lead to negative feelings such as emptiness, boredom, irritability, distractibility, frustration, depression, and mood swings. These negative feelings often precede awareness of cravings. Urges or cravings can be compelling and overwhelming, sometimes seeming impossible to resist. They can dominate your thinking and interfere with daily tasks and routines. Many people give up, believing they cannot withstand the siren's song.

Remember that urges or cravings are expected, especially in early recovery. Emotions and environmental and social cues can trigger cravings well into abstinence and sustained recovery. Once a craving is triggered, unless craving management skills are used to withstand it, the compulsion can grow, making it very difficult to resist. Over time, cravings will decrease in intensity and duration. You must withstand each craving as it occurs—and not engage in the behavior.

Craving Management Tools

Delay:

Postpone engaging in the behavior. Sometimes, the idea of quitting forever feels too overwhelming. Postponing use one day at a time is helpful. Sometimes, it's one hour at a time or even less. Do what you have to do to avoid engaging in the problematic behavior.

Decatastrophizing:

Catastrophizing involves blowing a minor issue out of proportion by telling yourself that you "can't stand it" or that something terrible will happen if you don't engage in the behavior. Extreme thinking contributes to emotional flooding and lowers your ability to withstand cravings. Bring it down to size. Tell yourself the truth: You won't die from not engaging in the behavior. Other people have made it through similar cravings and are in recovery today. You have been through worse experiences and survived. Cravings are uncomfortable but not as bad as other things you have endured.

Distraction: Find something else to do to take your mind off the behavior or its absence. Distraction can involve engaging in some mental or physical activity. Use guided imagery to relax and imagine a calm place. You can mow the lawn, clean the closets, do homework, play golf, call a friend, write a letter, paint, do a crossword puzzle—anything engaging that takes your mind off it.

Disputing positive expectations: When you want to engage in the behavior, you believe it will provide the desired outcome. Sometimes it did; sometimes it didn't. Sometimes, it did briefly, only to turn on you later. Tell yourself the truth and focus on the natural negative consequences of engaging in the behavior.

Review Your Motives:

Remember why you quit. Make a list of why you stopped engaging in the behavior. Keep this list handy and review it when needed to remind yourself.

Think about what you would ultimately give up by returning to the behavior. Do you want to trade your spouse, family, job, home, sanity, and health for that behavior?

Prayer:

Ask for help to prevent yourself from engaging in the behavior. Prayer is a powerful tool. People rarely report giving in to cravings while praying. Call someone. Reach out to your sponsor, spouse, or a supportive family member.

Go to a meeting:

You can attend an in-person meeting or join an online chat room or meeting related to your process addiction.

Use Recovery Resources:

Read or listen to recovery literature or speakers. Recovery websites often have videos and literature. Many groups provide speakers' recordings to members. The Big Book, 12 and 12, As Bill Sees It, and The Grapevine are all valuable resources on recovery from substance use disorders. Most of the information is transferable to your process addiction. Twelve-step group spinoffs are all based on the Big Book, the steps, and the principles of AA. Numerous other books and workbooks about process addiction recovery are available for purchase online.

Think through it:

Think through the first engagement in the behavior to the subsequent actions and their negative consequences.

Other Craving Management Techniques:

List any other craving management tools you know or have heard about to withstand cravings and not engage in the behavior (one day at a time):

Understanding Cross Addiction To Prevent Relapse

Are you struggling to stay on the path to recovery? Have you found that overcoming one addiction sometimes leads to the rise of another? If so, you're not alone. The phenomenon of cross addiction is a significant challenge for many in recovery, posing a substantial risk for relapse. To maintain abstinence from your process addiction and to keep from acquiring a new addiction to take its place, it's crucial to understand and address cross addiction effectively.

The ebook "Understanding Cross Addiction to Prevent Relapse" serves as a guide to prevent acquiring serial addictions and to prevent relapse in your primary addiction. Although this ebook speaks directly about alcohol and other mood-altering drugs, it is easy to see the direct parallels between substance use disorders and behavioral addictions. It's important to understand that addiction affects the brain's reward system and is not a moral failing or lack of willpower. Equip yourself with the knowledge and tools necessary to maintain your recovery journey.



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