

## Beliefs about urges

It's likely that you've been feeding your urges for so long that you don't even think about them. They feel like they're part of who you are. You may hold beliefs about your urges that are unrealistic or untrue, and that actually make them worse. When your beliefs about urges are accurate and true, it's possible to ease them or even prevent them.

Here are some opposing beliefs about urges that may help you understand them:

**Unrealistic:** *My urges are unbearable.*

**Realistic:** Urges are uncomfortable, but you can bear them. If you keep telling yourself that you can't bear them, you're setting yourself up to use. Urges won't kill you or make you go crazy; they'll just make you uncomfortable.

**Unrealistic:** *My urges only stop when I give in.*

**Realistic:** Urges may last only seconds to minutes, but rarely much longer. Sometimes urges come in batches, several shorter ones rather than one long urge. Urges always go away. Here's why: Your nervous system eventually stops noticing stimuli. If it didn't, you couldn't wear clothing because it would be too uncomfortable. If you fast, you know hunger eventually fades away. The dentist-office smell that was so strong when you walked through the door isn't even noticeable by the time you leave.

You can teach yourself to ride out urges. It does get easier over time.

**Unrealistic:** *My urges make me use.*

**Realistic:** Using is always a choice. When an urge hits, you have two choices: to use or to ride it until it subsides.

**Unrealistic:** *Urges are a sign that my addictive behavior is getting worse.*

**Realistic:** They're a normal part of recovery. They may be stronger at first – or maybe later in your recovery – but they weaken, and eventually disappear. You *can* have a life without urges.

**Unrealistic:** *Giving in to an urge isn't harmful.*

**Realistic:** Giving in to urges prolongs their presence in your life because it reinforces the behavior pattern. It will make stopping harder as the next urge will likely come more quickly and be more intense. Like a rash, if you scratch it occasionally but use healthy remedies the rest of the time, the occasional scratching still increases the healing time. If you occasionally give in to your urges, you simply prolong your dependence on the substance or behavior as a way out when you believe the pain is unbearable.

What happens when a child nags for hours for a new toy and you say no until you tire of their whining and say yes just to get them to stop? You stop the immediate whining, but you teach the child that if they whine long enough, you'll give in. In the same way, you strengthen your urges every time you make the choice to give in to them, even if it's just occasionally.

**Unrealistic:** *I must get rid of urges.*

**Realistic:** Your urges are normal. Addictive behaviors cause changes in your brain that make urges very powerful, so "getting rid of them" is an unrealistic expectation. You can't control urges, but you can control how you respond to them. It takes time and practice to replace old thoughts and behaviors with new ones. Don't expect urges to end immediately, don't expect to be perfect, and don't give up.

**Unrealistic:** *I'm self-destructive or I wouldn't do these self-destructive things.*

**Realistic:** Our brains are hard-wired to seek out things that provide pleasure. Substances and behaviors that light up the pleasure centers in our brains can be destructive if the desire for them turns into a need. Oh, and as human beings, we all do stupid things.

**Unrealistic:** *I use because I like to.*

**Realistic:** While that was probably true in the beginning, it's probably more complicated than that now. While using continues to light the pleasure centers in your brain, your rational brain can't ignore that the short term "pleasures" are incompatible with your long-term goals. With more exploration, you will probably find that you have fallen into the "addictive behavior trap," in which you ignore the benefits of stopping because you may be preoccupied with how difficult it will be.

SMART's tools and strategies give you an edge in dealing with your urges. The tools and strategies – along with your motivation – can make it possible for you to successfully cope with urges.

HANDOUT