

Urge Surfing & Emotion Surfing

*Urge surfing - and its twin sister, emotion surfing – are very useful mindfulness practices that in ACT would come under the heading of “Acceptance”. On pages 1 and 2, you can see how I described urge surfing in my book, *The Happiness Trap*. On pages 3 and 4 you’ll find some tips. On pages 5 and 6 you’ll find scripts.*

Extract from Chapter 15 of “The Happiness Trap”

Emotions prime your body to take action; that is, every emotion gives you the impulse to act in a certain way. We call that impulse an ‘urge’. In anger, we may feel the urge to shout, smash something (or someone), or just prove ‘I’m right, damn it!’ In sadness, we may have an urge to cry, curl up into a ball, or have someone cuddle us. In fear, the urge may be to run away and hide, pace up and down, or talk too fast.

We also experience all kinds of urges *not* associated with emotions. For example, the urges to eat, drink, sleep, or have sex. Or the powerful urges of addiction: to gamble, smoke, drink or take drugs. And when we don’t feel too good, we often feel strong urges to use control strategies. For example, whenever I’m anxious, I get a strong urge to eat chocolate or go to the movies. In someone else, anxiety might trigger an urge to have a double scotch, smoke a cigarette or go for a run.

To Act Or Not To Act?

Whenever an urge arises, you have two choices: act upon it or don’t act upon it.

Therefore, once you are aware of an urge, you need to ask yourself: If I act on this urge, will I be acting like the person I want to be? Will it help take my life in the direction I want to go? If the answer is yes, then it makes sense to act on that urge. For instance, if you’ve been nasty to someone and you’re feeling guilty, you may have an urge to apologise. If this is consistent with who you want to be and what you want to stand for, then it’s sensible to go ahead and apologise.

On the other hand, let’s suppose you’ve been nasty to someone and you’re still feeling resentful towards them. In this case, rather than the urge to apologise, you may feel the urge to write them a nasty letter or say spiteful things about them to others. If this urge *isn’t* consistent with who you want to be, then it’s sensible *not* to act on it.

So when it comes to handling your urges effectively, the first step is simply to acknowledge what you’re feeling. Just silently say to yourself, ‘I’m having the urge to do X.’

The second step is to check in with your values: ‘Will acting on this urge help me be the person I want to be? Will it help me take my life in the direction I want?’ If the answer is *yes*, then go ahead and act, using that urge to guide you and give you momentum. But if the answer is *no*, then instead take some action that’s more in line with your values.

To exemplify this, let’s take a look at Lisa, a 21-year-old university student. Lisa values close relationships with her friends, and socialising with them regularly is an important part of her life. But when she feels depressed she has the strong urge to stay at home, all by herself. (This is a very common urge with depressed moods.) So here we have the setup for a major conflict of interest. Lisa’s values are pointing her in one direction — socialising — but the urge is pointing her in another direction — staying home alone. Which action is likely to take Lisa’s life in the direction she wants: to act on her urge and stay home, or to act in line with her values and go out and meet her friends?

Extract from Chapter 15 of “The Happiness Trap” ... continued

Of course, it would be different if Lisa *truly valued* staying at home — if, for instance, she wanted to catch up on her studies for an important exam. If that were the case, staying home alone *would* be taking her life in the direction she wants, so it would make sense to act on the urge.

The Push And The Pull

So what do we do if an urge pushes us in one direction and our values pull us in another? We don't want to *struggle* with that urge because then it's hard to focus on effective action. So rather than try to resist, control or suppress it, the aim in ACT is to *make room* for it, to give it enough time and space to expend all its energy — in other words, to practise *expansion*. And one marvellously useful technique for this is known as 'urge surfing'.

Have you ever sat on the beach and watched the waves? Just noticed them coming and going? A wave starts off small and builds gently. Then gradually it gathers speed and grows bigger. It continues to grow and move forward until it reaches a peak, known as a crest. Then, once the wave has crested, it gradually subsides. The same happens with urges in your body. They start off small and then steadily increase in size.

All too often we get into a struggle with our urges; that's why we talk of 'resisting' them. In urge surfing, though, we don't try to *resist* our urges — we just give them space. If you give an ocean wave enough space, it will reach a crest and then harmlessly subside. But what happens if that wave encounters resistance? Ever seen a wave *crash* onto the beach or *smash* against the rocks? It's loud, messy and potentially destructive!

So urge surfing is a simple but effective technique in which we treat our urges like waves, and 'surf' them until they dissipate. The term was coined back in the 1980s by psychologists Alan Marlatt and Judith Gordon, as part of their groundbreaking work with drug addiction. The same principles they used with addictive urges can be applied to *any* urge: whether it's an urge to stay in bed all day, to quit a course, to avoid a challenge or to yell at someone we love.

To surf an urge rather than be 'wiped out' by it, all you need to do is:

- Observe it: notice, with openness and curiosity, where you feel it in your body.
- Acknowledge, 'I'm having the urge to ... X, Y, Z.'
- Breathe into it and make room for it. (And *don't* try to suppress it or get rid of it.)
- Watch the urge as it rises, crests, and then falls again. (And if difficult thoughts arise, 'thank your mind' or 'name the story' or use your preferred unhooking technique.)
- It's often helpful to score the urge on a scale of 1 to 10. For example, 'I'm having the urge to smoke, and it's now a 7.' Keep checking in on the urge: noticing whether it's rising, peaking, or falling.
- Remember, no matter how huge that urge gets, you have room for it. And if you give it enough space, then sooner or later it will crest and then subside. So observe it, breathe into it, open up around it, make lots of space, and allow it to come and stay and go in its own good time.
- At the same time, check in with your values. Ask yourself, 'What action can I take right now - instead of trying to resist or control my urges - that will enhance my life in the long term?' Then whatever the answer is - go ahead and do it!

Tips for Urge Surfing & Emotion Surfing

Urge surfing and emotion surfing are basically the same. The metaphor is that urges and emotions are like waves: they rise, peak and then fall. The idea is to 'surf' the wave, rather than resisting it.

Basically this means you observe the inner experience mindfully, and allow it to rise peak and fall again, without acting on it.

BUT MY WAVES LAST FOREVER!

Sometimes clients will protest that their waves go on and on and on for ages. We would validate, "Yes, that's right. At the moment, your waves last for a long time because you resist them. *(Therapist now recaps what the client usually does in response to urges/waves: e.g. you struggle with them, fight with them, try to get away from them, ruminate about them, worry about them, try to distract yourself, try to push them away, etc.)* And as long as you keep responding to them that way, they will go on and on for ages. You've never learned how to surf them, so you've never had that experience of letting them naturally rise and fall of their own accord; usually, this will happen very quickly."

PRACTICE

These surfing skills require practice, practice, practice. We encourage clients to practice them throughout the day with milder urges and emotions, so they can build up their surfing muscles over time. You can use the analogy of real life surfers: they don't go out on day one and try to tackle the biggest waves; they build up their skills over time, starting out with smaller, less challenging waves.

It's essential to actively practice these skills in session first, before asking clients to practice them out of session. Don't fall into the trap of sharing the metaphor and thinking that's enough; you need to actively practice emotion or urge surfing in session.

MOTIVATION

Why would a client bother to practice these challenging new skills, in session and between sessions? We need to clearly link these new skills to the client's problems and therapy goals. What values and values-congruent goals would this be in the service of? If the client learns how to surf difficult emotions and urges, without acting on them, how will that help her; what will she be able to stop/start, do more of or less of?

One quick and simple way to do this is to map it out on a choice point diagram. At the bottom, write down the emotion or urge (and thoughts, feelings, sensations or memories that go with it). On the left arrow, write down the 'away moves' the client does when hooked (i.e. values-incongruent ineffective actions the client takes when she responds to the urge/emotion with fusion and/or experiential avoidance). On the right arrow, write down the 'towards moves' (i.e. values, values-based goals, and values-based actions – including overt and covert behaviours) that the client would prefer to do when those urges/emotions are present. We can then summarise: "The idea of learning these skills is so that next time this urge/emotion arises (points to bottom of diagram), instead of doing this stuff (points to away moves), you can unhook yourself and do this stuff (points to towards arrow)."

FIRST: LEARN HOW TO "DROP ANCHOR"

Urge surfing and emotion surfing will be a lot easier to learn if clients first develop the basic mindfulness skill of "dropping anchor" (see chapter 10). Once clients can run through the basic A.C.E. formula (Acknowledge thoughts and feelings; Come back into your body; Engage with the world) of dropping anchor, this can form the foundation for the more challenging work of urge surfing (or any other type of challenging acceptance practice).

IDEAS FOR EXERCISES

In the ideal world, we will work in session with the same urges/emotions the client struggles with outside of session. However, this isn't always possible. The good news is, mindful surfing is a transferrable skill, which we can practice on any emotion or urge. So here are some ideas to get uncomfortable emotions and urges happening in session, in order for the client to actively practice surfing.

Goal Setting

Almost always, when you start actively setting goals in session that are going to pull the client out of their comfort zone, difficult emotions and urges will show up: feelings of anxiety, urges to change the topic or give up. You can then actively work with these.

Avoided Tasks

If clients are avoiding difficult tasks, you can ask them to actively do these in session. This could involve making phone calls, sending emails or text messages, starting on a study assignment, making an appointment etc. This will usually trigger difficult emotions and urges

Imaginary Exposure

Ask client to vividly remember a past event or vividly imagine a future event that involves these feelings or urges. Often, this will actively trigger the urge/emotion in session

In-vivo Exposure

In session, organise active contact with stimuli that usually trigger urges for the client. For example, you might ask the client to bring in a packet of cigarettes (if smoking is his issue), or a sample of the food she binges on, and ask the client to look, touch, taste or smell these items, and notice the urges that arise.

Schedule Sessions

If possible, schedule a session for a time when the client is likely to be feeling strong urges – e.g. at a time when he usually would start drinking, gambling, smoking – so the urges are already present when he attends the session.

Urges to Swallow

Ask the client to place a grape or a chewy lolly (lolly = Australian term for “piece of candy”) such as Mentos, inside the mouth and rest it on the tongue. Allow the saliva to build up and notice the urges to swallow (or chew) without actually swallowing (or chewing).

Be Creative

There are many ways to bring emotions and urges into a therapy session. Remember, mindful surfing is a transferrable skill, so you can practice it on any urge or emotion. For example, another option is to squeeze an ice cube hard, and notice the urge to ease off the grip or drop the ice cube. Let your creative juices flow. 😊

ADAPT AND MODIFY

The script that follows is to practice surfing the urge to swallow. You can readily adapt the steps given to work with any urge or emotion. As with any script in ACT, modify all the words to suit your way of speaking and the clients you work with.

DURATION

As with any exercise in ACT, we adapt its duration for the demands of the situation and the capabilities of the client. We often need to experiment and ‘titrate the dosage’. To play it safe, it's a good idea to aim for 5 to 10 minutes the first time you do this. Over time, if needs be, you can increase the duration, to help the client build his ‘surfing muscles’.

Urge Surfing Exercise – Part 1: Setting Up

(NB Do this on yourself first before you try it with a client, so you know what to expect!)

Step one: Recap the aims

Recap the surfing metaphor and the two main aims of the exercise: a) to allow an emotion or urge to rise, peak and fall, without acting on it or struggling with it; and b) to experience that even with the emotion/urge present, you can take control of your physical actions and focus your attention on what's important.

Step two: Explain what it involves

Explain that you will ask the client to place a grape or Mentos inside her mouth, to let it rest it on her tongue without biting it, and then close her mouth again and let it sit there. Saliva will rapidly build up and with it, the urge to swallow. The idea is to allow the saliva to build up and notice the urges to swallow (and/or chew) - notice how they rise, peak, and fall; then rise again, peak again, fall again.

Explain: "The aim is to do this for several minutes and see if at least once you can let the urge rise, peak and fall - without resisting it, turning away from it, or giving into it."

Reassure: "Even if your mouth is full of saliva, you can still breathe through your nose."

Safety signal: "At any point, we can stop." Agree on a hand gesture the client can use to signal this.

Pre-empt that anxiety is probable: "Often as the urge to swallow gets stronger, feelings of anxiety show up. The idea is to surf those feelings too. Notice how as the urge rises, your anxiety builds; and as the urge drops, you feel a sense of relief. Then as the next urges, your anxiety starts to rise again."

Count-to-ten strategy: "If you reach a point where the urge to swallow is really strong - and it seems like you absolutely have to swallow, you can't hold off a moment longer, then nod your head at me, and I will ask you to count to ten - and then once you reach ten, to make a choice: either swallow carefully - really noticing what it feels like and sounds like to swallow - or don't swallow, and keep watching the wave and see what it does next." **Note: make sure to emphasise that this is NOT a distraction technique!** "The idea is that as you count, you keep your attention on the urge. It's not a distraction technique, to take your focus away from the urge and instead give all your attention to counting numbers. You want to keep attention focused on the urge, as you count."

Brownie points: "You won't lose any Brownie points for swallowing; and you won't gain any Brownie points for not swallowing. Our aim is to learn how to observe the wave, and notice what it's like if and when we get swept away by it, and notice how it's different if and when we can surf it."

Automatic swallowing: "We all swallow on autopilot all day long. So when the exercise begins, you'll probably swallow automatically before you even realise it ...but as it continues, you'll be able to switch off autopilot and start to consciously choose at what point you swallow."

Step three: Link to Values and Values-based Goals

"Before we start, let's take a moment to acknowledge why we're doing this. *(Therapist recaps the client's values and values-based goals, that this exercise is in the service of. If the therapist doesn't know these, they must first be clarified before going any further.)*"

Step four: Set up for defusion

"As we do this, expect your mind to interfere. It's going to say all sorts of unhelpful things to try to hook you and pull you out of the exercise." *(Therapist asks the client if she can predict some of things her mind might say. Whatever she comes up with, therapist validates. If client can't predict anything, therapist suggests likely thoughts - e.g. "It's too hard", "I don't like this", etc.)* "So as we do this, see if you can let your mind chatter away like a radio playing in the background, and keep your attention focused on the task at hand." *(Obviously, the therapist can use other metaphors to build on previous defusion exercises, e.g. let your thoughts come and go like leaves floating down a stream.)*

Urge Surfing Exercise – Part 2: Surf's Up!

Now that you have set up the exercise with those first four steps, you can move into active work.

Step five: Establish an anchor

"Can we take a moment to set up a sort of anchor for you ... something to hold you steady as you do this work, so that if at any point you get overwhelmed or swept away by difficult thoughts and feelings, you can come back to this anchor, to steady yourself. *(The therapist now establishes a mindful anchor, such as the flow of the breath in and out, or the sensation of the client's feet pressing against the floor, or the feeling of her back against the chair, or the feeling of her hands resting on her lap etc. The therapist has the client notice these sensations mindfully for thirty to sixty seconds to get the idea. Ideally, this builds on earlier "dropping anchor" exercises; whatever the client uses to "come back into her body" can serve as the anchor here.)* The idea is, as we do this exercise, keep around 10% of your attention on X (*X = the chosen anchor*), so you're always aware of it, there in the background. And any time you drift off, or get distracted, or get hooked by your thoughts and pulled out of the exercise, you can come back to this anchor, refocus all your attention on it, and then, as fast as possible, continue with the exercise."

Step Six: Posture

The therapist encourages the client adopt a posture that has helped her to stay present and come back in to her body in previous dropping anchor exercises. Often (not always) this will involve sitting up, straight spine, feet firmly on the floor.

Step Seven: Back to the anchor

The therapist now directs the client's awareness back to X (the anchor established in step 5). E.g. "Take a moment to anchor yourself. Bring your attention to X ... really notice the sensations of your feet on the floor (or breath flowing in and out etc)."

Step Seven: In goes the grape

The therapist now asks the client to place the grape inside her mouth and let it rest it on her tongue without biting it, and then close her mouth again.

Step 8 A: Observe with curiosity

Using similar instructions, pauses and pacing as in other mindfulness exercises, the therapist now encourages the client to notice her experience with openness and curiosity. The therapist may draw attention to any or all of the following: Notice ...

How the saliva builds up in your mouth

How the temperature changes inside your mouth

Urges in your tongue to explore or move the grape

Urges in your gums and teeth to chew

Urges in your throat to swallow

Any areas of tightening or tensing up ... especially in your chest ... throat ... shoulders

Feelings of anxiety or frustration or impatience

Feelings of tension or restlessness in legs, feet, hands, arms

Urges to fidget or move

Urges to distract yourself ... to turn away from the urge or think about something else

Urges to end the exercise

Your relief when the urge drops ... and your discomfort as it rises again

How your mind tries to hook you ... distract you, get you out of this, end this

At times, you swallow automatically, without even realising at

The therapist can also invite the client to silently name the urge or emotion ("*I'm noticing the urge to swallow*") and/or to scale its intensity, from 0-10 ("*and now it's a 7*")

As with other acceptance and mindfulness exercises, the therapist may include comments about acknowledging and allowing the discomfort to be there, opening up and making room for it, etc.

Urge Surfing Exercise – Part 2, continued

Step 8 B: Repeat key instructions

In between the instructions mentioned in 8 A, the therapist repeats previous important points as desired:

- Breathing through the nose, even as the mouth fills with saliva
- Keeping 10% of attention on X (the anchor)
- Returning attention to X (the anchor) if overwhelmed or drifting off, and then ASAP redirecting attention to the difficult urges and feelings
- Letting the mind chatter away like a radio playing in the background
- When the client nods her head to indicate the urge to swallow is at its peak and she can't hold on any longer, the therapist says, "Okay, now count slowly to ten – and once you reach ten, make a choice: either swallow carefully – really noticing what it feels like and sounds like – or don't swallow, and keep watching the wave."

Step 9: Control of physical actions and ability to focus attention

As the exercise progresses, the therapist encouraged the client to notice that even with the urge present, she can a) focus her attention and b) exert control over her physical actions.

For example, the therapist might say:

"Notice, even with this urge present, you can choose how and where you direct your attention ... first, turn focus inwards, noticing wherever the urge is strongest in your body Now broaden your focus, noticing the urge, and your body around it – arms, hands, legs, feet, back, head Now widen your focus even more, noticing the urge, and your body around it, and you and me here working together, and the room around you ..."

And:

"Now focus again on the urge, and notice that even though it's there, you have a lot of control over your physical actions .. check it out, move your feet up and down ... turn your head from side to side ... put your arms out and have a stretch."

Step 10: Step up the intensity

The therapist can step up the intensity, if appropriate, by asking the client to bite into the grape or candy/lolly/sweet; to bite it in half and let both halves sit on the tongue. Usually this ramps up the amount of saliva in the mouth and intensifies urges to bite, chew and swallow

Step 11: Finish and debrief

The exercise finishes by asking the client to swallow mindfully and then spit out or eat the food item.

In debriefing the exercise, the therapist may want to explore:

What was that experience like for you?

Did you get to observe at least one wave rise and fall?

What did you get out of it?

What was the hardest part?

How did your mind interfere?

AND VERY IMPORTANTLY: How could this skill be helpful for you with ABC? (ABC = client's problems and goals for therapy)

In particular, the therapist wants to highlight key insights: a) that urges/feelings rise, peak and fall; b) that we can make room for them; c) that we can have urges and at the same time usefully direct/focus our attention on what's important; d) that we can have urges and at the same time exert control over our physical actions.

The therapist also wants to set homework based on developing this skill:

Would you be willing to practice this? When and where? With what urges/emotions? In what situations? How often will you practice? For how long?