

Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")

Posted by MenachemGYE - 24 Jan 2020 11:50

This thread will contain a list of many evidence-based methods to **dealing with urges**.

Urge Management techniques are for *everyone*. No matter what program you use to quit, it will always include techniques for dealing with urges. This thread will cover all the evidence-based methods of dealing with urges.

If you master techniques for dealing with urges, you'll be able to stay clean even if there's nothing *external that is stopping you*. If you're serious about recovery, try to learn about all these techniques, and pick the ones you think will work best for you (and add them to [your plan](#)). Then, with trial and error, you'll find out if those techniques really work for you or if you should try other ones. You can also switch your techniques from time to time to keep things interesting...

The list of method can be found below.

Note: I've tried to find out which methods are more effective than others, but couldn't find anything conclusive. 8 studies have found that almost all methods are equal, while 6 studies have found that there are differences. Also, most these studies have been done on people struggling with smoking and alcohol. It's possible that with porn and masturbation, the rankings would be different. I've ordered the list below *informally* according to how many of studies I've found have actually recommended these methods.

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1. **Distract yourself - by doing something else** (16 studies pro, 1 against)
2. **Remembering the pros of abstinence** (12 studies pro, 0 against)
3. **Delay** (12 studies pro, 1 against)
4. **Urge Surfing/Mindfulness** (9 studies pro, 0 against)
5. **Remembering Cons / Recall negative consequences** (10 studies pro, 0 against)
6. **Distract yourself - by thinking about something else** (12 studies pro, 3 against)
7. **Relaxation/Breathing/Meditation** (11 studies pro, 1 against)
8. **Coping / Mastery Statements** (8 studies pro, 1 against)
9. **Escape / Avoidance** (7 studies pro, 0 against)
10. **Acceptance/Mindfulness** (7 studies pro, 0 against)

- 11. **Substitution** (9 studies pro, 2 against)
- 12. **Dispute Thoughts** (5 studies pro, 0 against)
- 13. **Imagery Techniques** (6 studies pro, 1 against)
- 14. **Reach out for social support** (6 studies pro, 2 against)
- 15. **Remembering substance-related successes** (3 studies pro, 0 against)
- 16. **Exercise - during an urge** (4 studies pro, 2 against)

In the post below, I'll describe each of the techniques in more detail.

Warning: Spoiler!

Note: Two methods have been found to be *ineffective*. Those are willpower and self-punishment. In other words, people who rely **only** on those methods aren't more successful than those who use no methods at all...

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by MenachemGYE - 26 Jan 2020 12:24

Introduction: Why these techniques work?

When you have an urge to do something, the urge will usually go away by itself after a short time. If you have an urge to scratch a mosquito bite, how long does the itch last if you do nothing? Maybe a few minutes. The same thing happens with urges to engage in a behavior. If you do nothing, the urge will be gone in a few minutes.

The exact amount of time can vary from person to person, but it rarely lasts longer than 20

minutes. (Unless you are exposed to a trigger such as an immodestly dressed person, or if you are purposely fantasizing etc.)

That's right, if you don't give in to the urge, you won't explode, it will eventually get weaker and disappear. The techniques below are about training yourself to withhold from acting on the urge until the urge has passed.

As you practice these techniques for a few weeks, your brain will start unlearning the habit of masturbating and watching porn, and over time, the urges will become less intense and less frequent.

Distract yourself - by doing something else

Make a list of possible distracting activities you can engage in when you have an urge, and add it to your plan. Find something that you think can really distract you. It needs to be something interesting that will grab your attention. Pacing back and forth in the room won't do the trick...

Since your mind can't think about 2 things at once, the distraction will redirect your attention away from the urge and into something else. Some examples are calling a friend or family member, playing a game, reading a good book (you might want to reserve a book just for this purpose), exercise, or taking a walk outside.

Be realistic, for some people a sefer can be distracting enough. For others, they'll need a good (kosher) movie to do the trick. By the time you have an urge, it will be hard to come up with ideas of how to distract yourself. But if you plan in advance exactly what you will do and include them in your plan, you can start a distracting activity the moment you get an urge.

Remembering the pros of abstinence

Sometimes when we have an urge, our thinking becomes blurred, and we can't remember why we decided to quit. To use this technique summarize the list of benefits of staying clean (if you've done a Cost - Benefit Analysis - [CBA](#), you'll can take the list from there), and keep it handy. Then next time you have an urge, read the list and think about the great benefits you'll gain if you resist the urge.

Delay

Make a commitment that no matter what, you won't act on an urge right away. Instead you'll wait at least 20 minutes (or some other amount of time). Hopefully, by then the urge will have passed. If you want to use this technique, decide how many minutes you are ready to wait, and add it to your plan.

Even if you ended up watching porn or masturbating after 20 minutes, congratulate for at least sticking to your plan! You're still better off than if you have done it right away. By refusing to gratify yourself instantly, you have strengthened your self-control muscles which is good for your long term success. If this happens repeatedly, try increasing the number of minutes, until you find the amount of time that works best for you. It's also possible that your urges last longer than usual because your actively focusing on it (e.g. fantasizing about what you're like to watch). If you notice such a pattern, try to spice up your delay technique to make it more practical, for example instead of just waiting for 20 minutes, commit to do some activity for 20 minutes, like taking a walk.

SMART Recovery has a spin-off technique called Deny & Delay. Here's how they describe it:

Deny & Delay (Don't give in to the urge) — Remind yourself, repeatedly if necessary, this urge will pass. Refuse to give into it — no matter what! — SMART Handbook

Mindfulness / Surf the Urge

Mindfulness is a very broad area and has been gaining a lot popularity in recent years. For now I'll discuss a mindfulness style technique called "Urge Surfing". This technique was first described in *Relapse Prevention* (1985) p. 10 and p. 241, and has been gaining popularity ever since. The short description below doesn't do justice to the topic, but it's a start...

Just like a surfer knows how to ride a wave without getting hurt, and urge surfer learns how to let an urge come and pass without getting affected. When an urge comes, observe it curiously, as if you are an outside observer. Think to yourself, "Hmm... here comes the urge, I wonder where it came from. It's not my true desire, the proof is my CBA. It's just a fleeting urge coming from who-knows-where, like images in a dream..." Keep on observing the urge, noticing how it feels, until it reaches its peak. Then notice how the urge gets weaker and weaker until it

disappears. By doing this, you just sit (or lie down) and do nothing when you get an urge. You don't fight it, and you don't try to distract yourself. You just observe it until it's gone.

This technique is very powerful, because all it requires is your mind. Even when you have no way to distract yourself, and don't have the energy to fight, you can still use the technique. However this technique takes some time to practice. So if you want to include it in your plan, try to practice urge surfing for everyday things until you become good at it. For example, when you feel the urge to eat a 5th cookie at midnight, try to "surf the urge".

An idea that goes along with this technique is externalizing the urge. Instead of identifying with your urge, view it as a response to some external trigger or situation. Instead of thinking "I need to watch porn right now," think "I'm currently experiencing an urge to watch porn".

If you have access to YouTube (I hope you don't!) you can listen to the following audio clips that can help with a lot with urge surfing. These audios were prepared by Fortify. Search YouTube for "Fortify Urge Surfing Guidance (In The Moment)" and "Fortify Urge Surfing Practice"

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by MenachemGYE - 26 Jan 2020 12:51

Recall negative consequences

Anytime you start thinking about the benefits of porn or masturbation, use it as a reminder to start thinking about the negative consequences. This can help somewhat neutralize the urge, or at least give you enough motivation to resist the urge. Your [CBA](#) can help you find out what the negative consequences are for you.

In *The Porn Myth* by Matthew Fradd, he describes it like this:

Finish the fantasy. This might sound counterintuitive, but it is so practical. When something

triggers an initial thought, our mind gets stuck in a rut of anticipation. Thoughts are focused on what is coming or what we could be doing. Instead of staying in that rut, finish the fantasy: picture yourself following through with the action—walking to your computer, binging on porn for a few hours, masturbating, and then feeling like a miserable failure as a result.

Another variation is to think about both the negative consequences *and* the the pros of quitting. The SMART handbook recommends:

Review your CBA. It may not turn off the discomfort, but it may help you maintain your motivation to resist your urge. It may help to review it regularly, even when you're not having an urge.

Similarly, in Changeology, Dr. John Norcross writes:

Remind yourself of the reason for your goal. Remember to use both sides (the two-headed push-pull) of the motivation: the push away from the disgusting behavior and the pull toward a brighter future. Such a process rarely stops a raging urge, but it powerfully reminds you of the psychological triggers in the past and the psychological payoffs in the future.

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by MenachemGYE - 26 Jan 2020 13:28

Distract yourself - by thinking about something else

In contrast to the distraction technique mentioned earlier, this one is about redirecting your attention by using your mind alone (cognitive only). This seems to be more helpful for low intensity urges. The benefit of this is that since it's all in your head, you can do it immediately, no matter what situation you are in. Here are some suggestions on how to do this:

Decide on three substance-free things that you will begin thinking of immediately whenever you experience a craving or urge. These will be your fallback or go-to responses whenever cravings/urges arise and can be the building blocks of a new habit. These thoughts can be of events, people, songs, phrases, or even places that are special to them in some way. Examples could be the birth of a child, earning a raise or promotion at work, or simply a loved one. -- Group Treatment for Substance Abuse

What is the happiest place you can imagine? Think about being there. Think of every sensory detail—see, hear, smell, taste, and touch these. -- The PERFECT Program

Distract Yourself. Concentrate on something other than your urge ... Focusing on your [Hierarchy of Values](#) is a positive form of distraction.

In The Porn Trap, the author suggests:

A simple sensory awareness exercise can help you shift your attention away from what you've been thinking about and on to something else in your environment. Begin by saying the phrase, "Now I'm aware of..." and then complete it by stating something you see in your environment. For example, "Now I'm aware of the sun coming through the window." Repeat and complete the phrase "Now I'm aware of..." until you have identified five different things that you see. Continue the exercise stating five different things you are aware of hearing, then five things you are aware of touching or feeling in side your body. This exercise can help center you sensually in the reality of your present environment and take you farther away from the fantasy world of porn.

Dr. Thomas Horvath in his Workbook for Overcoming Addictions writes:

Deliberately shift your focus to something that is easy to stay focused on. For instance, look around you. Is there something in the room that you could count? It might be ceiling tiles, floor tiles, designs on wallpaper or paneling, window blinds, leaves of a plant, or something that you

can observe through a window outside the room. Count the objects that you see as rapidly as you can. For instance, count the number of blinds that you see on a window. If you count very rapidly and as accurately as you can, you will find that other thoughts that were on your mind go away, because you are focused on the counting.

Horvath also gives the following examples:

- Subtract numbers (for instance, subtract 7 from 1,000 and get 993, subtract 7 again and get 986, subtract 7 again, and so on)
- Say the alphabet backwards
- Read words backwards (say the word correctly but read the sequence backwards: "backwards words read")
- Play the "alphabet game" by looking at license plates, book titles or a printed page and find an A, then a B, then a C, etc.
- Tighten the muscles in your body in a particular sequence, over and over (tighten your feet, then your calves, then your thighs, then your pelvis, then your stomach, then your chest, then your shoulders, then your neck, then your face, over and over again) / reach into your pocket or purse and attempt to identify coins or other objects there just by feel.

Now ?????? ??? ??? ?????, there are plenty sources for this idea (called ????? ?????) in Torah sources. Here's a list of references, and be"h in the future, I'll post the actual quotes:

Redirecting attention to neutral things

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by DavidT - 05 Feb 2020 20:38

Today I started getting a slight urge ... I banged my hand against the table in a gesture of "NO! not going there" , all my good ideas are very good after the initial decision that it's not even a remote option to let the urge go further.

The sefer divrei yechezkal (shinev) says by yosef hatzadik on the word ?????????? ?(he denied to be with the wife of potiphar) the reason there is a shalsheles there is that when the yetzer comes to a person to tell him to sin, don't start to argue and explain to him why not to do it, he's much smarter than you and you'll lose...**just say NO!!!!!! 3 times!**then you can start having discussions and telling him the reasons...

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by mggsbms - 06 Feb 2020 00:01

[DavidT wrote on 05 Feb 2020 20:38:](#)

Today I started getting a slight urge ... I banged my hand against the table in a gesture of "NO! not going there" , all my good ideas are very good after the initial decision that it's not even a remote option to let the urge go further.

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I find the benefits of all the options enumerated above on how to deal with urges is the fact that they are not merely about saying no. Nice vort from the Divrei Yechezkal!

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by ColinColin - 06 Feb 2020 01:12

Very useful and practical thread, thank you.

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by MenachemGYE - 06 Feb 2020 11:27

Relaxation/Breathing/Meditation

This technique is about trying to calm ourselves down until the urge subsides.

Take a breather. Take a few deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly. Slow down your physical cravings and your runaway thinking. Relaxation will get you through a surprising number of potential slips. —Changeology

"Sit back, breathe easy, let your muscles and mind go for a while, and tell yourself to be calm."
—Changing for Good

The Candeo Program suggests a variation of this called **Gratitude Breathing** to help specifically with sexual thoughts.

"When you feel sexual thoughts or urges start to come onto the stage of your mind, either during scheduled practice or in real life, immediately begin gratitude breathing."

I'm personally not familiar with gratitude breathing, but there is an abundance of information about it on the web.

In *The Porn Trap*, author W. Maltz provides additional info about how relaxation can help:

"Thinking about using porn can trigger certain physiological reactions, such as changes in heart rate, blood pressure, genital blood flow, and pupil dilation... In addition, anticipating using porn can trigger the release of dopamine and other pleasure-related chemicals in the brain... This is why it is so important to figure out how to calm yourself, both physiologically and emotionally, once your sexual energy has become activated."

This book then gives some practical suggestions of how to relax with breathing exercises. Here's another technique from the same book:

"Another helpful approach is to massage the outer area of your ears, a spot that can induce relaxation and calm.

Massaging your feet can also quiet your agitated mind and body by helping move your attention and energy away from sexual excitation and toward feeling good in a non-sexual way. Some people find that quiet prayer or meditation helps create feelings of calm and relaxation, while still others prefer burning off excess agitated energy through vigorous exercise, such as jogging, lifting weights, or riding a bike."

In *Fortify*, it's included as part of their STAR technique:

"Take a few conscious breaths. This allows you to focus your attention in one place and settle your mind. If you can, close your eyes and notice the lungs fill up with air slowly, and then

release... Brain scientists are discovering that something as simple as conscious breathing can help calm the body and mind, in part, by slowing or short-circuiting the chemical rush to the brain in a difficult moment."

SMART mentions this technique, but doesn't push it so much.

The only Torah source I found for this technique is in the writings of R' Shlomo of Zeviv. In the Sefer Yesod Tzadik (p. 203), he writes as follows:

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In the footnote he interprets the posuk ?????? ?' ??????? ?? in the sense that breathing (???????) ??) can help those that seek kedusha (????? ???):

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On page 204, he even mentions gratitude breathing!

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This concept is also hinted to in Bereishis Raba:

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by MenachemGYE - 07 Feb 2020 09:57

Coping / Mastery Statements

This strategy is really simple, it involves telling yourself that you can handle the urge without acting on it. Here are some examples of coping statements:

- "Even though it sucks that I have to deal with X problem, [porn] isn't going to help me." (This instead of thinking, "I deserve [porn] because I have to deal with X problem," — SMART Handbook
- "I can do it". —Hester & Miller p. 228
- "Yes, I can." (Remind yourself in no uncertain terms that you have resisted successfully many times before. Affirm your resilience.) —Changeology

Here's another bunch from A Workbook for Overcoming Addictions (Horvath):

- This craving will go away in a while if I don't act on it. If I do act on it, it will return shortly, and probably be even stronger than this one.
- If I don't act on it, this craving will go away, and eventually all of them will go away or become so small as not to be a bother.
- The craving itself won't hurt me.
- It's normal to have a craving for now, because I just began changing. In time they will be gone.
- This craving can't force me to do anything, I'm the one in control.

You can also come up with your own...

- This is only a *nisayon*, I can handle it.
- Hashem knows I can handle this urge. It's hard but I can do it.
- I've handled many urges already -- I'm ___ days clean on the 90 day chart! I can do this!
- This urge is super uncomfortable, but it's not unbearable. I'm not gonna die from it. It will soon go away... and I'll feel great about myself for resisting.
- Let me just focus on today. I can stay clean one day / hour / minute / at a time.

How to use this technique: Choose or compose a statement based on the ideas above and tell it to yourself next time you have urge. You can memorize it, or write down somewhere and keep it handy.

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Re: Dealing with Urges ("Urge Management")
Posted by MenachemGYE - 07 Feb 2020 12:02

Escape / Avoidance

This is a broad category that includes:

- Avoiding urges, triggers and temptations
- Placing physical barriers that will prevent us from acting out even when we have an urge (e.g. having a good filter or kosher phone).
- It also includes "escaping". E.g. if we have an urge to watch porn, you can just leave the room without your phone until the urge subsides. Or if we have an urge to masturbate, we can take a walk in a public place.

This is especially useful if you're not confident yet that you can handle strong urges without slipping. However, it's not practical to rely only this method because it will never be fool proof.

In this week's Parsha it talks about how the Yidden *escaped* Mitzrayim - ?? ??? ??? . It's explained in seforim that the reason they needed to escape was not because there was a physical risk of staying in Mitzrayim, rather it was a spiritual risk. The Yidden have sunk into the 49 *shaarei tumah*, and it was only an "outside" force - Hashem - that was protecting them. That's why they need to escape. Later in the next 49 days, they did internal work to prepare themselves for *Matan Torah*. Changing our environment externally without internal change is called "escape". But it definitely has its place!

There are many Torah sources for this method:

- Shabbos 13a (???? ????? ????? ?? ?????)
- Sanhderin 107a (????? ?? ????? ?? ????? ????? ????? ????? ??? ??? ????? ????? ????? ??????)
- Nusach Hatefillah (??? ??????? ?? ????? ?????? ??? ????? ??????)
- [Mesilas Yeshorim Ch. 13](#)
- And much more...

This is a very broad topic and there's a dedicated thread for it at guardyoureyes.com/forum/54-SMART-Recovery/346961

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