

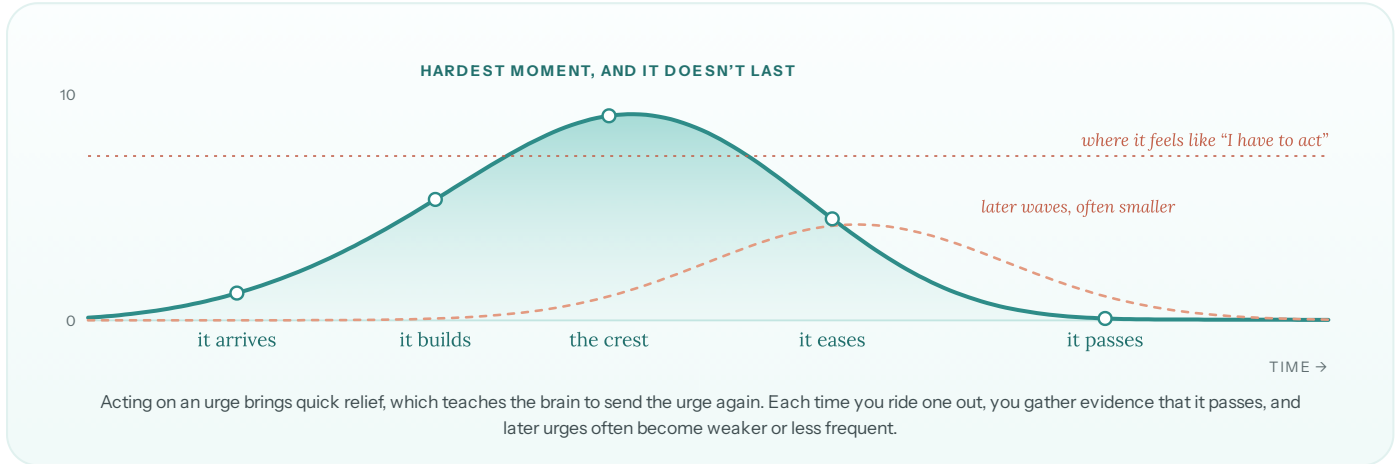
Urge Surfing

Riding the wave of an urge, without being carried away by it

An urge (to drink, use, binge, check, avoid, scroll or snap at someone) can feel as if it will keep growing until you act. In practice, urges behave more like **waves**: they rise, crest and fall. Urge surfing means staying on the board and watching the wave closely, **without fighting it and without giving in to it**.

01 The shape of an urge

Intensity, from 0 to 10, over time



02 How to surf: S·O·B·E·R

A brief practice from mindfulness-based relapse prevention

S

Stop

Pause. Notice the urge has arrived, and step out of automatic pilot.

O

Observe

Where is it in your body? Notice pulling, heat, tightness, restlessness.

B

Breathe

Bring attention to your breath and ride each breath like a small wave.

E

Expand

Widen your awareness to your whole body, the room and this moment.

R

Respond

Choose what to do next, mindfully, rather than reacting on autopilot.

What an urge can feel like

Naming sensations helps you observe the wave rather than be swept up in it.

pulling tightness heat buzzing restlessness
emptiness pressure a racing mind watering mouth
tension in hands a "now" feeling

What the research suggests

- In a randomised study, smokers taught urge surfing **smoked fewer cigarettes** over the next week, even though their urges were not weaker (Bowen & Marlatt, 2009).
- The aim is **not to make urges vanish** but to change how you respond to them.
- Mindfulness-based relapse prevention, which includes this practice, has shown benefits for substance use over the longer term (Bowen et al., 2014).

03 Knowing my high-risk moments

Spotting waves before they arrive

TIMES OF DAY

PLACES

FEELINGS

PEOPLE & SITUATIONS

After the wave, I can...



Urges to harm yourself are different. If you notice urges to self-harm or thoughts of suicide, follow your safety plan and reach out for support rather than surfing them alone. If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services.

SOURCES

Bowen, S., & Marlatt, G. A. (2009). Surfing the urge: Brief mindfulness-based intervention for college student smokers. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 23(4), 666–671.
Bowen, S., Witkiewitz, K., Clifasefi, S. L., et al. (2014). Relative efficacy of mindfulness-based relapse prevention, standard relapse prevention, and treatment as usual for substance use disorders: A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 71(5), 547–556.

Bowen, S., Chawla, N., Grow, J., & Marlatt, G. A. (2021). *Mindfulness-based relapse prevention for addictive behaviors: A clinician's guide* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
Marlatt, G. A., & Gordon, J. R. (Eds.). (1985). *Relapse prevention: Maintenance strategies in the treatment of addictive behaviors*. Guilford Press.