



Cravings Are Waves

How urges rise, peak, and pass · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

A craving is not a command, and it is not a character flaw. It is a memory with muscle behind it. Clinicians call the mechanism **cue reactivity**: the brain wired your substance to everything that ever surrounded it, the people, the corner, the payday, the feeling, and when one of those cues shows up, the brain fires a surge of wanting, automatically, the way your mouth waters at the smell of food. Brain scans show it plainly: show a person in recovery a picture connected to their use and the memory-and-emotion centers light up before they've had a single conscious thought about it.

Here is the part almost nobody gets told: cravings have a shape. They rise, they peak, and they pass, like a wave, and the whole ride is usually measured in minutes, not hours. Most people never learn that, because for years every craving got answered before it could peak. Answer a craving at minute two and you never find out what minute nine feels like. This session is about learning the shape of your own waves, and training the skill that beats them: not fighting the water, riding it.

What is in this session?

This session has four parts, usually covered over two group meetings:

CLASS 1 1. What a Craving Is 2. The Shape of the Wave

CLASS 2 3. Riding It 4. The Craving Log

After this session you will be able to

- Explain what a craving is and why it isn't a sign of failure
- Describe your own wave: what starts it, where it peaks, how long it really lasts
- Use urge surfing and two backup skills to ride a wave to the other side
- Keep a craving log that turns every wave into information

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to study your cravings instead of being ashamed of them. Talking about cravings in detail can stir them a little; that's normal, it passes, and it's exactly the muscle this session trains. If a wave shows up in group, say so. There's no better place for one.

Part 1: What a Craving Is

WAIT, REALLY?

In brain-imaging studies, showing people in recovery a picture tied to their use lit up memory and emotion centers **before any conscious thought**. The craving starts before you are even aware of it. That's why "just decide not to" never worked.

Three truths about cravings: First, having one means nothing about your commitment; it means you have a brain that learned. Second, cravings are triggered, not random; there's always a cue, even when you can't spot it yet. Third, a craving can't make you use. It can only make you uncomfortable, and discomfort is survivable. Every person in this room has already survived every craving they didn't act on.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. I've had a craving show up out of nowhere, with no reason I could see. ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. I've felt ashamed just for having a craving. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I have survived every craving I didn't act on. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 2: WHERE CRAVINGS LIVE IN ME

Check how a craving shows up in your body and mind:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Tight or fluttery chest | ☐ Tunnel vision on the idea |
| ☐ Watering mouth or taste memory | ☐ Suddenly irritable for "no reason" |
| ☐ Restless hands or legs | ☐ Bargaining thoughts ("just one," "I've earned it") |
| ☐ Stomach pull, like hunger | ☐ Other: _____ |

My first signal, the earliest one: _____

Part 2: The Shape of the Wave

WAIT, REALLY?

Most cravings **peak and pass within minutes**. Almost nobody knows their own number, because for years every wave got answered early. Have you ever actually timed one?

The wave has three parts. The rise, where the cue fires and the pull builds; the peak, the worst minutes, where the bargaining voice gets loudest; and the fall, which comes on its own if nothing feeds the wave. Two things feed a wave and stretch it out: fighting it in a panic ("oh no oh no") and negotiating with it ("maybe just..."). Two things let it pass: naming it and riding it.

EXERCISE 3: MAP ONE WAVE

Pick a craving you remember well. Map its shape:

The cue that started it (person, place, feeling, time):

How it built (what the rise felt like): _____

The peak (what the voice said at the worst minute):

How long the whole thing really lasted, honestly: _____

Teresa

Teresa gets her tax refund on a Friday, more money than she's held in a year. The wave starts in the parking lot of the bank. By the drive home it's peaking: her chest is tight, her mouth remembers, and the voice is doing math about what's left over after bills. At a red light she looks at the clock: 4:51. She decides one thing only: not before 5:15. She calls her sister and talks about nothing. At 5:09 she notices the wave is smaller. At 5:15 it's a memory. The refund is still in the bank. Nobody but her knows Friday almost went differently, and she knows one new fact: her wave is about twenty minutes.

EXERCISE 4

1. What was Teresa's cue? _____

2. What two things did she do while the wave passed?

3. Why does knowing "my wave is about twenty minutes" change the next wave?

4. What's your refund-Friday, the cue you can see coming?

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- What's your earliest craving signal, and how long do you think your wave runs?
- What feeds your waves: the panic, or the negotiation?

Part 3: Riding It

Urge surfing is the skill of staying with a wave instead of fighting it or feeding it. It sounds backwards and it works. The steps:

- **1. Name it.** "That's a craving. It's a wave. It peaks and it passes." Out loud if you're alone.
- **2. Find it in your body.** Where exactly? Chest, mouth, hands? Describe it to yourself like a scientist: tight, warm, pulling, buzzing.
- **3. Breathe at it.** Long, slow exhales, aimed at the spot. You're not pushing the wave away; you're keeping the body calm while it moves through.
- **4. Clock it.** Look at the time. Decide nothing for ten minutes. Hands busy helps: walk, dishes, shower, call.
- **5. Watch it fall.** Notice the first moment it's smaller. That moment is the lesson your brain needs most.

Two backups for the big ones: play the tape forward, all the way to tomorrow morning, and tell one person, in the moment, not after. A spoken craving is half a craving.

EXERCISE 5: PRACTICE RUN

The group walks through urge surfing now, using a mild real pull (coffee, phone, cigarette, sugar). Rate it:

Pull before (0 to 10): _____ Pull after the walk-through (0 to 10): _____

Where it lived in my body: _____

EXERCISE 6

Answer yes or no:

1. I've made it through a bad wave before, with or without knowing how. ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. Saying a craving out loud to someone has ever shrunk it. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. There's a person I could text mid-wave who would get it. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 7: MY RIDE PLAN

My first signal (from Exercise 2): _____

My naming line, word for word: _____

My ten busy minutes will be: _____

My mid-wave person: _____

Part 4: The Craving Log

Surfers study waves. A craving log turns every urge from a scare into a data point: what cued it, how strong, how long, what helped. Within a few weeks a log shows you your pattern, and a patterned enemy is a beatable one. It also shows you something shame never will: the waves get shorter and farther apart. That's not a feeling. It's a trend line you can watch.

EXERCISE 8: THE LOG (THIS WEEK'S PAGE)

Day	Cue	Peak (0-10)	Minutes it lasted	What helped

Bring this page back next group.

EXERCISE 9

One more honest look:

The cue I most need to stop pretending isn't a cue: _____

The bargaining line my peak always uses: _____

What I'll say back to it next time:

SKILL OF THE DAY: CLOCK ONE WAVE

The next urge of any kind this week, substance or not, time it. Note the minute it starts, ride it, note the minute it's clearly smaller. Write the number down. Knowing your number is worth more than a hundred promises.

Take it to the group

- What's the longest you've ever actually watched a craving last, without feeding it?
- What does your bargaining voice sound like at the peak? Say one of its lines out loud.
- Teresa's sister never knew what the call was for. Who's your nothing-call person?
- What would change if every craving became a data point instead of a verdict?

Session summary

A craving is cue-fired memory with a shape: rise, peak, fall, usually in minutes. Fighting it in a panic or negotiating with it stretches it; naming it and riding it lets it pass. This session you mapped your waves, practiced urge surfing live, built a ride plan with a mid-wave person, and started a log that turns urges into information and shows the real trend: shorter, and farther apart.

Words used in this session

- **Cue reactivity:** the brain's automatic wanting response when it meets something linked to past use.
- **Urge surfing:** riding a craving with attention and breath instead of fighting or feeding it.
- **The peak:** the worst few minutes of a wave, when the bargaining voice is loudest.
- **Craving log:** a written record of cue, strength, length, and what helped. Pattern beats panic.

Takeaway: A craving can make you uncomfortable. It cannot make you use. Learn your wave's shape, clock it once, and you'll never fully believe its peak again.
