

**Dealing with Alcohol and Drug Cravings
Manage Those Cravings and Prevent
Addiction Relapse
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Cravings don't cause relapse. If cravings were all it took for recovering alcoholics/addicts to relapse, no one would ever acquire any long term sobriety. Cravings are however, a common and typical experience in the recovery process. In an addiction context, a "craving" or an "urge" is a strong yearning for something to alter one's mood. Although cravings are very common in the early days of abstinence and are usually experienced more intensively and frequently during the detox process, they can persist over the long haul, or stop then return periodically. Cravings can involve physical and psychological/emotional symptoms.

Physical symptoms, like "shakes", racing heart, rapid breathing, might be accompanied by obsessive thoughts about needing the chemical to not feel the physical symptoms. Defense mechanisms serve the purpose of making it "ok" in the newly recovering addict's mind to use. "Denial", an example of a defense mechanism, is seen as an integral part of addiction and serves the purpose of distorting reality to the addict so that s/he can continue to use in the comfort of not fully recognizing the extent of their problem.

Common examples of defense mechanisms (including denial), paired up with ambivalent feelings about quitting could sound something like these examples: "I don't have to do this; I can quit tomorrow", "I'll just drink/use a little and not get drunk/loading", "It's nobody's business but my own", "I don't really have a problem", "Just a little to take the edge off", or, "Nobody will know". Obsessive thoughts about the chemical, along with psychological defense mechanisms and ambivalence about quitting could be a deadly combination.

Perceptual and psychological cues can trigger cravings. Perceptual cues could involve intentionally or unintentionally being around old using friends, places, or things. They could involve smells or music that has been associated with your using. Cravings could be cued by accidentally finding a long lost stash in a pocket of an old housecoat.

Psychological cues generally involve uncomfortable emotional states. Cues that could trigger cravings might involve feeling angry and frustrated and remembering that you used to use alcohol and/or other drugs (AOD) to chill out. Psychological cues could involve being restless, bored, and lonely, and remembering that drinking at the bar seemed to fix that-at least temporarily.

Cravings don't cause relapse. You can have cravings and still not use. Cravings are not intolerable. Cravings don't last forever. If you don't use, they will go away. Cravings usually hit their peak after a few minutes then begin to subside and go away. Cravings are usually pretty strong in early abstinence, but as you practice using abstinence skills in fighting the cravings, they continue to decrease in intensity and frequency. If you act on them by using, you keep putting yourself back in the early abstinence stage, where cravings are most frequent and most intense.

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