

Managing Triggers

Now that you've learned to identify the triggers and consequences of your gaming, you can start to learn how to deal with these triggers more effectively.

Basically there are 3 main ways of handling triggers so that they don't lead to gaming. These are:

1. Avoid the triggers (e.g. take a different route home so that you don't go past the arcade)
2. Actively re-arrange your environment so that you will be less likely to encounter your triggers (e.g. don't have your gaming gear out and ready to use, pack it away)
3. Be prepared by developing new coping methods (using behavioural, thinking and emotional/physical techniques)

Managing cravings and urges



Doing techniques

Relaxation

Physical activity burns off adrenaline. Sometimes people report that the only way they can get rid of the anxiety associated with thoughts of gaming is to game. There are other ways to get rid of adrenaline. Adrenaline causes changes in your breathing and muscle tension – so one way of reacting to this change is to do the opposite behaviour. Control your breathing and relax your muscles – it can help stop the production of adrenaline.

With breathing simply count in for 3 and out for 4, this will regulate your levels of oxygen in your body and calm you down. Whilst doing this, find somewhere to sit and work your way through the muscles in your body tensing and relaxing them each in turn. Start with your toes and work up through your calves and thighs and bum, tensing and relaxing each muscle in turn. Don't forget to do your face too. Once you have completed this exercise go back over your body and check that there are no tight muscles remaining.

Breathing and relaxation can take about 5 minutes and can be a helpful distraction method as well as reducing the level of discomfort you are feeling.

Activity

Physical activity is known to burn off adrenaline. If you find you are in a situation where you can burn off some energy then it may be an idea to do so. Remember, you must not be thinking about gaming whilst you are doing this. Any fairly rigorous physical activity will help with the craving feelings.

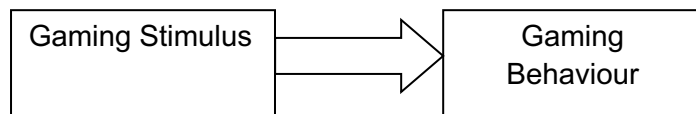
Talk it through

Sometimes it can be very helpful having someone you can phone when you are feeling like gaming. This is something you should arrange before the cravings occur. The other person does not have to give you advice, sometimes merely saying out loud what you are thinking of doing is enough to snap you out of the craving state, you start to think consciously again and not automatically. Leaving a message can be as effective as you know the other person will ask you whether you gamed later – you can no longer 'get away' with it.

Stimulus control

A gaming stimulus simply means something that reminds you of gaming. Stimulus control simply means taking away the availability of gaming, reducing the opportunity to game.

Gaming is an impulse control disorder; what this means is that people find themselves gaming often without making a 'conscious' decision to do so. They act on impulse only.



In the early days of change it is important to try to limit your exposure to gaming stimuli as much as possible.

So we talk about limiting exposure. By limiting exposure we are aiming to interrupt the automatic process of being exposed to a stimulus and going on to game.

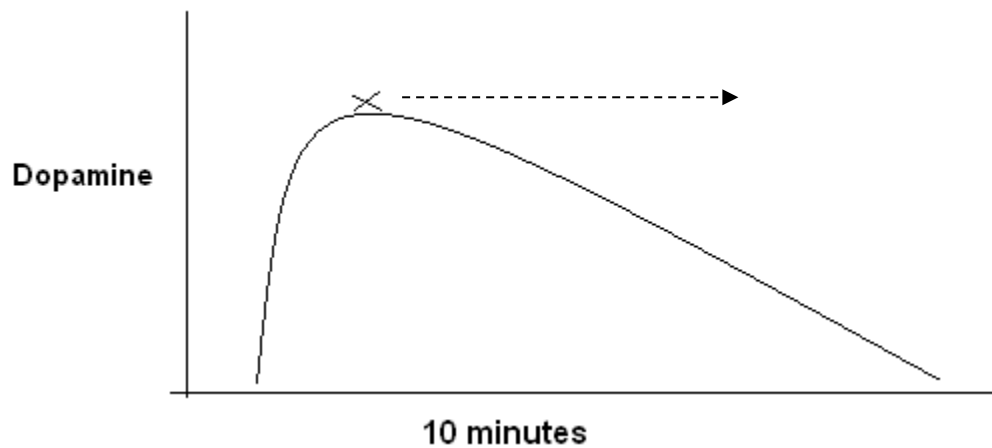
Whatever it is that is causing you to think about gaming must be removed from your senses. If it is gaming premises, walk the other way, if it's a website shut the computer and leave the room – remove yourself from the situation in which you are thinking of gaming.



Thinking techniques

Surf the wave

When your dopamine system is set off by a gaming stimulus what you do next is crucial. If you remain in the presence of the gaming stimulus – whatever that may have been, a sight or a thought – then dopamine will continue to be produced. You will still be thinking about gaming and your brain will be trying to make you complete the behaviour. If you remove the stimulus, the dopamine will shut down. This normally takes around 5-10 minutes only. Take a look at the graph below. When there is a burst of dopamine you can prolong it by thinking about gaming, or you can stop thinking about it and let the system relax and fade away again.



People sometimes refer to this as ‘urge surfing’ as it means just riding the wave of discomfort until the feeling goes away.

Urge surfing.

Many people try to cope with their urges by gritting their teeth and toughing it out. Some urges, especially when you first return to your old gaming environment, are just too strong to ignore. When this happens, it can be useful to stay with your urge to game until it passes. This technique is called urge surfing. Urges are a lot like ocean waves. They are small when they start, grow in size, and then break up and dissipate. You can imagine yourself as a surfer who will ride the wave, staying on top of it until it crests, breaks, and turns into less powerful, foamy surf. Urge surfing is similar. After you have practiced urge surfing several times and become familiar with it, you may find it a useful technique when you have a strong urge.

There are three basic steps in urge surfing:

1. Take a measure of how you experience the craving. Do this by sitting in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths and focus your attention inward. Allow your attention to wander through your body. Notice where in your body you experience the craving and what the sensations are like. Notice each area where you experience the urge, and tell yourself what you are experiencing. For example, “Let me see . . . My craving is in my stomach and hands and fingers.”
2. Focus on one area where you are experiencing the urge. Notice the exact sensations in that area. For example, do you feel hot, cold, tingly, or numb? Are your muscles tense or relaxed? How large an area is involved? Notice the sensations and describe them to yourself. Notice the changes that occur in the sensation.
3. Repeat the focusing with each part of your body that experiences the craving. Pay attention to and describe to yourself the changes that occur in the sensations. Notice how the urge comes and goes. Many people, when they urge surf, notice that after a few minutes the craving has vanished. The purpose of this exercise, however, is not to make the craving go away but to experience the craving in a new way. If you practice urge surfing, you will become familiar with your cravings and learn how to ride them out until they go away naturally.

Reacting to thoughts

Some thoughts are worth challenging, some are not. If you get into a dialogue with these thoughts you are more likely to game. Why? If you are thinking about whether or not to game you are thinking about gaming and this is producing more dopamine. Thinking about gaming when craving is a gaming stimulus, it is the same as standing in front of a machine staring at it. You should make a short challenge to these thoughts and then distract from them.

Distracting tasks need to be fairly simple. Your mind is not functioning very well at this time because dopamine is affecting its ability to think clearly. So, choose something simple beforehand that you can do to distract when you are thinking of cravings.

Minimal challenging

If you find it hard to distract yourself you may need to give a small challenge to your thoughts, and then distract again. Remember, do not get into an argument with your craving, it is too well practised in getting around competing thoughts.

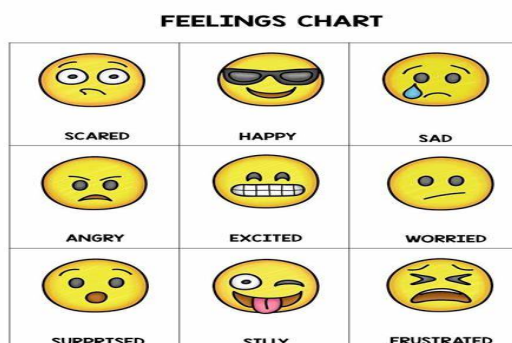
One good challenge is termed the worst case scenario.

What do you think would happen if you did not give into a craving – think worst case scenario?

With cravings it is always useful to ask what would happen if you don't give in to the craving. People can have some unconscious catastrophic thoughts about not giving in to cravings. These may come from the systems we have to prevent us coming to harm – we crave food, water and rest for example. If you don't follow these urges something unpleasant may happen to you. However, you won't become unwell if you resist the craving or urge to game; you will be uncomfortable for a few minutes and then it will just go away. You may challenge the belief that the craving must be sated.

Decision delay technique

Another technique that can be useful when urges to game are difficult to shift is to tell yourself that you will delay the decision to game for a period of time. Choose a time interval that you can commit to where you are 100% confident you will not game (even if this is only a few minutes). At the end of that time period again decide to postpone the decision to game for a further interval that you are confident you can achieve. If you are distracted from gaming during this time the dopamine system will stop functioning and the urge to game will fade.



Feeling techniques

What you are asking yourself to do when standing up to a craving and not giving in is to tolerate a bit of physical discomfort for a short period. But it is not essential to 'feel bad' during this; you can do things to make yourself feel a little better

Self-Soothing

Self-soothing is little more than doing something nice for yourself that will make you feel better. It is best to think about your soothing your senses when attempting to do this. It might be looking at a pleasing picture or photograph in a book, going to a gallery perhaps, or find a nice place to walk in. You may try to find some pleasant sounds – listen to a calming piece of music, or pick some sounds out of your environment, like rain or wind. Do something that soothes your skin like taking a hot bath or shower, or stroke a pet, put on a woolly jumper or lie in fresh bed clothes. You might want to eat or drink something nice, just something small that you like and can savour as you taste it.

Self-soothing is about comforting, nurturing and being gentle and kind to yourself when you don't feel too great.

Opposite or contrary emotions

Try intervening directly with your emotions. Doing something opposing to the way you feel – recall your favourite joke, read a funny book, look at some cartoons. Recall anything that might bring a small smile to your face – it will have an effect on the hormones at work in your brain.

Dealing with triggers planning handout

The **3 ways of handling triggers** so that they don't lead to gaming.

1. Avoid the triggers

E.g.

- choose not to go to places where your gaming friends hang out

What are some other ways you can avoid your triggers?

Trigger	Ways to avoid this trigger
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2. Actively re-arrange your environment so that you will be less likely to encounter your triggers

e.g.

- put away all your gaming stuff

List some of the ways you can re-arrange your environment so that you will be less likely to game.

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3. Be prepared by developing new coping methods

e.g.

- if you get into an argument, go to the gym rather than to game

List some other plans you can have for when you encounter a trigger

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Homework for this session:

Complete the diary with *craving strength* and *coping skills* column

Every day in the coming week note one trigger for gaming and consider various options for handling such a trigger.

Identify one coping skill from the 'doing', 'thinking' and 'feeling' categories to try out in the coming week.