



Coping with Urges to Use Alcohol or Drugs

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In difficult moments, many people find themselves turning to substances such as alcohol or drugs to ease the pain and discomfort. If you go through a traumatic experience, are experiencing significant mental health concerns, or are feeling overwhelmed by everyday life stressors, you may find that substances provide some short-term relief. Unfortunately, you may have trouble stopping over time, and you may find it difficult to develop other healthy coping strategies. If you are feeling this way, you are not alone. There are coping strategies you can try and resources available if you want help.

Self-care strategies

When you're having an urge to use alcohol or drugs, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and out of control. It's helpful to find some ways to slow down your body and mind, and learn to focus your attention on the present moment. Here are some ways to do that:

- Sit in a comfortable position and start breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth (remember: smell the birthday cake, blow out the candles). Then start breathing in the following pattern: breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, breathe out for 6 seconds. Continue this breathing pattern until you feel calmer, more comfortable, and relaxed.
- Try to engage all your senses in the moment. Start by looking around the room and name five things that you can see. Then name four things that you can feel/touch. Then name three things that you can hear. Next, name two things that you can smell. Lastly, name one thing that you can taste. Immerse yourself in each sense slowly to bring you more fully into the present moment.
- Say to yourself (either out loud or in your head): "My name is _____. I am ____ (insert age) _____. I am at _____ (insert location) _____. I am safe. I am okay. I can let this urge run its course and then fade away." Take a few deep breaths and repeat as needed.
- Take some time to self-soothe in whatever way is comforting to you. Do some stretching or yoga, make yourself a cup of herbal tea, wrap yourself in a favorite sweater or blanket, take a warm bath or shower, do some self-massage. This will help you feel better in the moment and will remind you that you don't always need substances to help yourself calm down and relax.
- Reconnect with an activity that is fun and interesting to you. You might try listening to music, watching a TV show or movie, or doing a creative activity such as drawing, painting, playing music, writing, or cooking. Taking a walk, exercising, or spending time in nature can be very helpful as well.

Social support

Urges can seem harder to resist when you're lonely or isolated from others. Here are some ideas for reaching out to others to help you through a difficult moment:

- Call or text a friend or relative you feel comfortable with. You don't need to tell them that you're having an urge to use substances, although you can certainly do that if you want to. Sometimes it can help just to find out what's going on in someone else's life or talk about interests that you have in common. This can offer a distraction that helps you take your mind off your struggles and connects you to other things going on in the world.
- Get out of the house and go somewhere you won't be tempted to use alcohol or drugs. Sometimes just being around other people, even if you don't know them, can ease loneliness and take the edge off urges to use substances.
- If you're part of a 12-step group such as Alcoholics Anonymous, attend a meeting or call your sponsor.

Professional support

If you find that you want more support after trying these strategies, please know that help is available! You can use [PPA's Psychologist Locator](#) or call your insurance provider for referrals to qualified therapists in your area. Reaching out for help is a sign of strength, and there are many people who can and want to help you.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.