

Mindfulness Meditation for Addiction Cravings

EHC Patient Education Module

Intensity of Cravings. When people begin to develop cravings for alcohol or drugs it usually means that they have developed an addiction. These cravings can be hard to resist. Even when the individual has made promises to curb their alcohol or drug intake they will relent because of their cravings. These desires to use a substance are a great deal stronger than just liking something and wanting more of it. Sometimes people do use the word craving to refer to wanting something, but it is not the same as an addictive craving. Some addicts will experience such an intense craving for their drug that they would be willing to crawl across broken glass to get to it.

Mindfulness Defined. Mindfulness can be defined as a non-judgmental form of observation. It means the individual is deliberately focusing their attention on the present moment. Every time thoughts wander off into the future or the past the individual gently brings themselves back to the present.

Mindfulness is made up of three different elements: remembering, awareness, and attention. The meditator needs to be aware of the object they wish to focus upon. They will then focus their attention on this object and need to remember to keep it there.

Benefits of Mindfulness Practice. Practicing mindfulness meditation can benefit people in a number of ways including:

- * It helps them become less judgmental.
- * They become better at living in the present moment.
- * When unpleasant emotions or thoughts do arise they can experience them safely.
- * The individual develops increased compassion for other sentient beings.
- * They begin to feel more connected with other people.
- * The individual develops increased self-acceptance.
- * It leads to increased feelings of calmness and peacefulness in their daily life.
- * It allows them to become more aware of things they have been trying to avoid.
- * The individual begins to see that they are not their thoughts.
- * They become increasingly self-aware.
- * They become less troubled by unpleasant experiences.
- * Their emotions become more under control.
- * They begin to see that everything changes and even uncomfortable emotions will fade away.
- * It allows them to deal much better with stress. It therefore reduces the risk of developing stress related illness.
- * They are likely to experience far less anxiety in their life.
- * Mindfulness meditation is believed to be a useful treatment for depression. It may also prevent depression arising in the first place.
- * Mindfulness can help the body fight off disease. This is because it boosts the immune system.
- * Addicts can see their cravings for what they are and overcome them.

Cravings Explained. A craving can be defined as a consuming desire or yearning. Those individuals who have developed a physiological or psychological dependence on any substance will experience cravings. This desire to use alcohol or drugs can be strong. It is suggested that such cravings originate in the subconscious mind so the individual will find it hard to avoid them. Even those people who have been successfully sober for many years, can still experience cravings.

Cravings and Incentive Sensitization Theory. One possible explanation for why people will experience cravings is provided by incentive sensitization theory. It is suggested that the reason for why these cravings occur is that the brain develops a strong association between the addictive substance and reward. This occurs by way of four steps:

- * If people are repeatedly exposed to an addictive substance they can develop hypersensitization. This means that in the future these addictive substances will cause a greater neurobehavioral response in the future.
- * This hypersensitization leads to incentive salience. The individual develops a desire for the substance that goes beyond mere liking.
- * This incentive salience insures that the individual will repeat the behavior in the future.
- * This process that has been working in the unconscious mind develops into an outward craving for alcohol or drugs.

The incentive salience that takes place leaves a strong association in the brain between the addictive substance and reward. This explains why people will still experience cravings even after they have been sober a long time.

Cravings and Romancing the Drink or Drug. Cravings can often lead to romancing the drink or drug. When people first give up their addiction the pain of their personal rock bottom will still be fresh in their minds. Over time their memory of this fades and memories of how they once enjoyed using these substances will resurface. This is referred to as romancing the drink or drug. It can lead to cravings and it can also result from them; when the two are combined it can easily lead to relapse. If people find that they are romancing the drug they need to halt it right away. They can do this by reminding themselves of why they gave up in the first place. Those individuals who kept a recovery journal at the start of their sobriety will benefit from this now. It will remind them of what they really left behind when they decided to become sober.

Mindfulness and Cravings. If insensitive sensitization theory is correct then the individual is not responsible for the arising of these cravings. In other words they can view these cravings as alien visitors in their mind, and they are under no obligation to obey them. By being mindful the individual will be able to see that these cravings appear in the mind and then disappear. They are like clouds passing through the sky. Sometimes just acknowledging the craving will be enough to make it disappear. The meditator learns to deal with this mental phenomenon in a new way. They can look carefully into the craving to see that there is nothing of substance there. Instead of living in fear of the cravings the mindful individual just observes and allows them to subside. They never need to act on them.

It may not be possible for people to completely escape cravings, but they can learn to live with them. Mindfulness meditation is an excellent tool that allows the individual to have increased control over their mind. There is a saying that, the mind is a wonderful servant but a terrible master.

Mindfulness for Cravings While Abusing Substances

Mindfulness may have some value to people who are still addicted to alcohol or drugs. The problem is that in order to get the most from this practice the individual needs good levels of concentration and a clear mind. Those who abuse alcohol or drugs will be anesthetizing their brains so they will struggle with any attempts to be mindful. This is why mindfulness practice will be of more value to those who dealing with cravings in recovery.

Mindfulness of Breathing. One of the simplest forms of this type of practice is mindfulness of breathing. This practice involves:

- * Sit comfortably with the back straight. It is not necessary for the individual to sit in any special pose in order to reap the benefits of mindfulness practice.
- * Take a couple of deep breaths just to relax the body.
- * The meditator should now allow the breath to return to normal. They should not attempt to take control of their breath in any way.
- * The next step is to just observe the breath. This can also mean observing any sensations that are caused by the breath.
- * It is normal for the mind to wander away from the breath at times. There is no need to feel bad about this just bring the attention gently back to the breath.

Other Techniques for Dealing with Cravings. There are other steps that people can take when they are dealing with addiction such as:

- * It is difficult for people to change their current mind state if they remain in the same environment. Something as simple as going for a walk will be enough to shift cravings.
- * The individual needs to always keep in mind that they are not their cravings. They are under no obligation to respond to these cravings.
- * Distraction is another technique that can be effective for dealing with cravings. This could involve activities such reading a book, listening to favorite music, or watching TV.
- * Another effective way to cope with cravings is to directly challenge them. The individual can remember all those times that these thoughts got them into trouble.
- * Talking to somebody else can be another good way to combat cravings. Those individuals who have a sponsor can use this resource or any trusted sober friend will do.
- * Sometimes cravings can be associated with HALT; hunger, anger, loneliness, and tiredness. It is a good idea to assess for any of these and rectify the situation.
- * If the individual begins to romance the drink or drug they should combat this right away by remembering their reasons for giving up in the first place.