

# Coping Strategies for Cravings

## 1. Distraction Techniques

The aim here is to focus your attention away from the physical feelings that contribute to your cravings. Try to use all your senses in turn to see, smell, hear and touch things in your immediate external environment. Notice how the green leaves of a plant curl at the edges, describe your surroundings as you would to someone unable to see them for themselves. Occupy your mind with tasks such as thinking of a girl's name for every letter of the alphabet, or any other category such as countries, animals, pop groups, books, authors, sports-stars, cars etc. Engage in simple mental arithmetic – subtracting 7 from 100 (i.e. 100, 93, 86, 79...), saying the alphabet backwards.

Distraction can also be achieved through physical activity – going for a walk, doing things around your home or garden, phoning a friend, taking a bath or shower.

You can also help by changing your internal environment by eating something or having a drink of water, fruit juice or milk.

## 2. Flashcards

Flashcards are postcard or credit card sized cards that contain positive messages to help you cope. You can develop ones that work best for you. Examples: “These feelings will pass” and “I am strong enough to cope”. It might also be helpful to include a note of the positives you experience by not drinking, what you might lose if you take another drink, and reminders of the other strategies listed here.

## 3. Challenging Automatic Thoughts

The idea here is to identify errors in your thinking that might increase the risk of you giving into the urge to drink. Such thoughts include “This is unbearable”, “The feelings will become so intolerable that I will give in eventually”, “I can have just one drink and no harm will come of it”. After identifying the thought that is most relevant to you, the next step is to challenge it, to argue against it. For example, “The feelings will reach a peak and then begin to fade”, “Taking one drink has never worked in the past”, “Taking a drink will be like Russian roulette”.

#### **4. Relaxation Training**

The use of relaxation strategies can reduce the anxiety and arousal associated with cravings. Try to ensure your breathing is deep and slow – this can best be achieved through diaphragmatic breathing – this means breathing in and out with your tummy rather than your chest. You may have to practise this at home before you can use it in real life situations. Also check for muscle tension throughout your body – ensure that your shoulders are not hunched up or that your jaw is not clenched or that your fists are not clenched. Tell yourself over and over again to relax, relax, relax – try to imagine a peaceful scene by the sea, by a river, in the mountains, in a meadow or favourite garden.

#### **5. Activity Scheduling**

This is in some ways a form of distraction. It is about having plans in place to ensure that you minimise the amount of empty time in your day to day life – it is at these times that thoughts are most likely to turn to topics that are worrying or upsetting you, which in turn may become triggers for eliciting the thoughts and feelings associated with cravings. Try to have one or two “must dos” each day, however small these may be – e.g., doing the washing up, paying a bill, contacting a friend. It is important that you balance enjoyable and pleasurable activities with those that are more mundane or unpleasant. It works best when you follow an unpleasant or boring activity with something that it is enjoyable. If necessary, make a list of all the activities that you find enjoyable so you can select from an extensive menu – e.g., visiting a friend, reading a magazine, watching a favourite DVD/TV programme, listening to music, walking in fresh air, shopping, listening to music, jigsaw puzzle, arts and crafts, surfing the net, surfing the waves....

## 6. Imagery Techniques

These techniques harness the well demonstrated power of visualization. Top sports people are trained in similar techniques – creating strong images of performing at the top of their game, the archer’s arrow flying unerringly towards the bull’s eye, the sprinter’s chest breaking through the winning tape and so forth. There are 5 variations ...make the images as vivid as possible.

### *i) Image Refocusing*

This is another form of distraction. The first task is to disrupt the flow of unhelpful thoughts and images by imagining a large “STOP” sign, or a brick wall, or other type of barrier. You then need to turn your attention to the external environment – focus on a small detail, such as a picture on the wall, a plant, a passing cloud...

### *ii) Negative Image Replacement*

This is most helpful when your cravings are linked to thoughts about the good aspects of drinking. You need to create an image that focuses on the **negative** aspects of drinking – e.g., feeling ill, the sense of letting yourself down, the effects on work, finances, relationships etc.

### *iii) Positive Image Replacement*

This is helpful when your cravings are linked to negative thoughts about not drinking – the sense of loss, of missing out, other problems in your life, wanting to forget, needing comfort or a reward. You need to develop **positive** images related to abstinence – e.g., all the things you could do or achieve only by remaining abstinent, getting back to work, improving personal and family relationships.

### *iv) Image Rehearsal*

This is the technique most used by performers and sports people. It is useful for preparing yourself to cope in situations that you predict will be challenging – e.g., attending a social event where other people will be drinking. You need to create images of yourself being successful – e.g., refusing drinks, dealing with conversations, choosing the soft drink option.

### *v) Image Mastery*

This is most helpful when you begin to feel or believe that alcohol is stronger than you. You need to redress the balance by making the drink weaker – it is no longer shouting at you from the supermarket shelf, it is cowering in a corner – and/or making yourself more powerful like a superhero, using your special powers to say “No!” and banishing alcohol to damnation in a bottomless pit.