Urge Surfing Worksheet

Part 1. Getting ready

Item	Entry
Name	
Counselor or therapist	
Date I started	

The urges I am working with

Include: what the urge is for, such as drinking, using or smoking, and the times and places it tends to come.

People who support me

Include: people I can call or text when an urge is strong, and their numbers.

If I am in crisis

If I am in danger or thinking about suicide or harming myself, I call or text 988 in the United States or Canada. Elsewhere, I call my local crisis line or emergency number.

My crisis numbers and emergency contacts

Include: 988 or my local crisis line, and the people I will call, with their numbers.

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Part 2. A short urge surfing script

My counselor can read these steps aloud in session. I can also read them slowly to myself, or record them in my own voice and play them when an urge comes.

1. Find a place where you can sit for a few minutes. Rest your feet on the floor and let your hands settle in your lap.
2. Breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly. Let your breath find its own pace.
3. Turn your attention to the urge. Say to yourself, “This is an urge.” Let it be there without acting on it or pushing it away.
4. Notice where you feel the urge in your body. It may be in your mouth, throat, chest, stomach or hands. Choose the place where it is strongest.
5. Describe what you feel there. Is it tight or loose, warm or cool, still or moving? Give the urge a number from 0 to 10.
6. Picture the urge as a wave out at sea. As it builds, keep breathing and stay with the feeling, as if you were riding the wave on a surfboard.
7. Notice any thoughts that come with the urge, such as “Just one won’t hurt.” Name each one as a thought, and bring your attention back to your breath and your body.
8. Every few minutes, check the urge again. Give it a new number and notice how the feeling has changed.
9. Stay with the wave as it crests and falls. When the urge has passed or settled, take one more slow breath and choose what you will do next.

Each time I surf an urge, I fill in a record in my urge log.

When and where I will practice

Include: a quiet time and place for a few minutes of practice each day, before a strong urge comes.

My notes from practice

Include: what I noticed when I practiced, and any words I want to change in the script.

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Part 3. My urge log

I fill in one record for each urge I surf. If I am in crisis, I call or text 988 in the United States or Canada, or my local crisis line elsewhere.

Urge 1

Date and time	
What set off the urge	
Where I felt it in my body	

My ratings

Include: the clock time and a rating from 0 (no urge) to 10 (strongest urge) at the start and every few minutes.

Rating	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Time							
Urge from 0 to 10							

What I did next

Include: what I did once the urge passed or settled, and what helped.

Urge 2

Date and time	
What set off the urge	
Where I felt it in my body	

My ratings

Include: the clock time and a rating from 0 (no urge) to 10 (strongest urge) at the start and every few minutes.

Rating	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Time							
Urge from 0 to 10							

What I did next

Include: what I did once the urge passed or settled, and what helped.

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Part 3. My urge log, continued

If I am in crisis, I call or text 988 in the United States or Canada, or my local crisis line elsewhere.

Urge 3

Date and time	
What set off the urge	
Where I felt it in my body	

My ratings

Include: the clock time and a rating from 0 (no urge) to 10 (strongest urge) at the start and every few minutes.

Rating	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Time							
Urge from 0 to 10							

What I did next

Include: what I did once the urge passed or settled, and what helped.

What I noticed about my urges

Include: how high my urges went, how long they took to pass, and what helped me ride them out.

What I want to talk about at my next session

Include: questions, hard moments and anything I want to add to my plan.

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Clinician guide: teaching urge surfing

- **When it fits.** Teach urge surfing to clients who have urges or cravings while they cut down or stop drinking, using or smoking. In Marlatt's relapse prevention model, clients learn to expect urges, to accept each one as a normal conditioned response to a cue, and to label it that way (Larimer et al., 1999).
- **Practice ahead of strong urges.** Read the script aloud in session and guide the client through one practice, then agree on a daily time to practice at home. Carroll (1998) advises practicing the steps for going with a craving in session or at home before a craving comes.
- **Rate the urge every few minutes.** Repeated ratings let the client see an urge rise, peak and fall. Marlatt's group describes urges and cravings that peak and subside fairly quickly when the person does not act on them (Larimer et al., 1999).
- **Review the log in session.** Look at what set off each urge, where the client felt it, how long it took to pass and what the client did next. Add new triggers and coping steps to the client's relapse prevention plan.
- **Plan for safety.** Fill in the crisis numbers together before the first practice. Ask about thoughts of suicide as part of your usual assessment, and follow your setting's crisis protocol and medical protocols whenever a situation involves risk.

Based on Marlatt's urge surfing technique as described by Larimer, Palmer and Marlatt (1999) and Bowen and Marlatt (2009), and on the steps for going with a craving in Carroll (1998). The layout and wording, including the script, are original.

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Completed example: Nina (a fictional client)

Nina, 29, is a graduate student who stopped using cannabis five weeks ago and is in outpatient counseling. Her counselor, R.K., taught her urge surfing at her fourth session on October 21, 2026, and recorded the script on Nina's phone. Nina kept the log over the next week and brought it to her fifth session on October 28, 2026. Nina, her counselor and every detail of the case are invented.

Part 1. Getting ready

Item	Entry
Name	Nina
Counselor or therapist	R.K., counselor
Date I started	October 21, 2026

The urges I am working with

Urges to smoke cannabis. They come most often late at night when I can't sleep, and after long days in the lab.

People who support me

My sister Dani, who says I can text any time, and my friend Sam, who doesn't use.

If I am in crisis

If I am in danger or thinking about suicide or harming myself, I call or text 988 in the United States or Canada. Elsewhere, I call my local crisis line or emergency number.

My crisis numbers and emergency contacts

Call or text 988. Dani is my emergency contact.

Part 2. A short urge surfing script

Nina practiced the script with R.K. in session and then each night with R.K.'s recording.

When and where I will practice

Every night at 9 on the couch, for five minutes, with R.K.'s recording of the script.

My notes from practice

The urge was strongest in my chest. I changed step 4 to start with my chest and hands, and the recording helps more than reading.

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Part 3. My urge log

Urge 1

Date and time	Friday, October 23, 10:40 p.m.
What set off the urge	I couldn't sleep after a stressful day, and I smelled smoke from the neighbor's balcony.
Where I felt it in my body	Tight chest, restless hands and a dry mouth.

My ratings

Rating	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Time	10:40	10:43	10:46	10:50	10:54	10:58	
Urge from 0 to 10	7	8	8	6	4	2	

What I did next

Made tea, texted Dani good night and read until I fell asleep. Saying "This is an urge" helped.

Urge 2

Date and time	Sunday, October 25, 4:15 p.m.
What set off the urge	Friends posted photos from a party at the house where I used to smoke.
Where I felt it in my body	Heat in my face and a pull in my stomach.

My ratings

Rating	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Time	4:15	4:18	4:21	4:25	4:29		
Urge from 0 to 10	6	6	5	3	1		

What I did next

Went for a walk and called Sam.

What I noticed about my urges

Both urges went up for a few minutes and then dropped. The one at night was stronger because I was tired. Picturing the wave helped me wait it out.

What I want to talk about at my next session

How to wind down on nights when I can't sleep.

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R.K. and Nina looked at the two records together. Nina saw that each urge rose, peaked and fell within 20 minutes, and that the stronger one came late at night when she was tired. They added late nights to her relapse prevention plan, planned a wind-down routine for those nights, and agreed that she would keep practicing each evening and bring the log to every session.

References and further reading

Books for clinicians

Bowen, S., Chawla, N., Grow, J., & Marlatt, G. A. (2021). *Mindfulness-based relapse prevention for addictive behaviors: A clinician's guide* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press. ISBN 978-1-4625-4531-5.

Marlatt, G. A., & Donovan, D. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Relapse prevention: Maintenance strategies in the treatment of addictive behaviors* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press. ISBN 978-1-59385-641-0.

Treatment manuals

Carroll, K. M. (1998). *A cognitive-behavioral approach: Treating cocaine addiction* (NIH Publication No. 98-4308). National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Research

Bowen, S., & Marlatt, A. (2009). Surfing the urge: Brief mindfulness-based intervention for college student smokers. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 23*(4), 666–671.

Bowen, S., Witkiewitz, K., Clifasefi, S. L., Grow, J., Chawla, N., Hsu, S. H., Carroll, H. A., Harrop, E., Collins, S. E., Lustyk, M. K., & Larimer, M. E. (2014). Relative efficacy of mindfulness-based relapse prevention, standard relapse prevention, and treatment as usual for substance use disorders: A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Psychiatry, 71*(5), 547–556.

Larimer, M. E., Palmer, R. S., & Marlatt, G. A. (1999). Relapse prevention: An overview of Marlatt's cognitive-behavioral model. *Alcohol Research & Health, 23*(2), 151–160.

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