

Dealing with cravings



Although often talked about separately from other drugs, let's be clear; **alcohol is a drug.**

Alcohol is a psychoactive drug that is the active ingredient in drinks such as beer, wine, and distilled spirits.

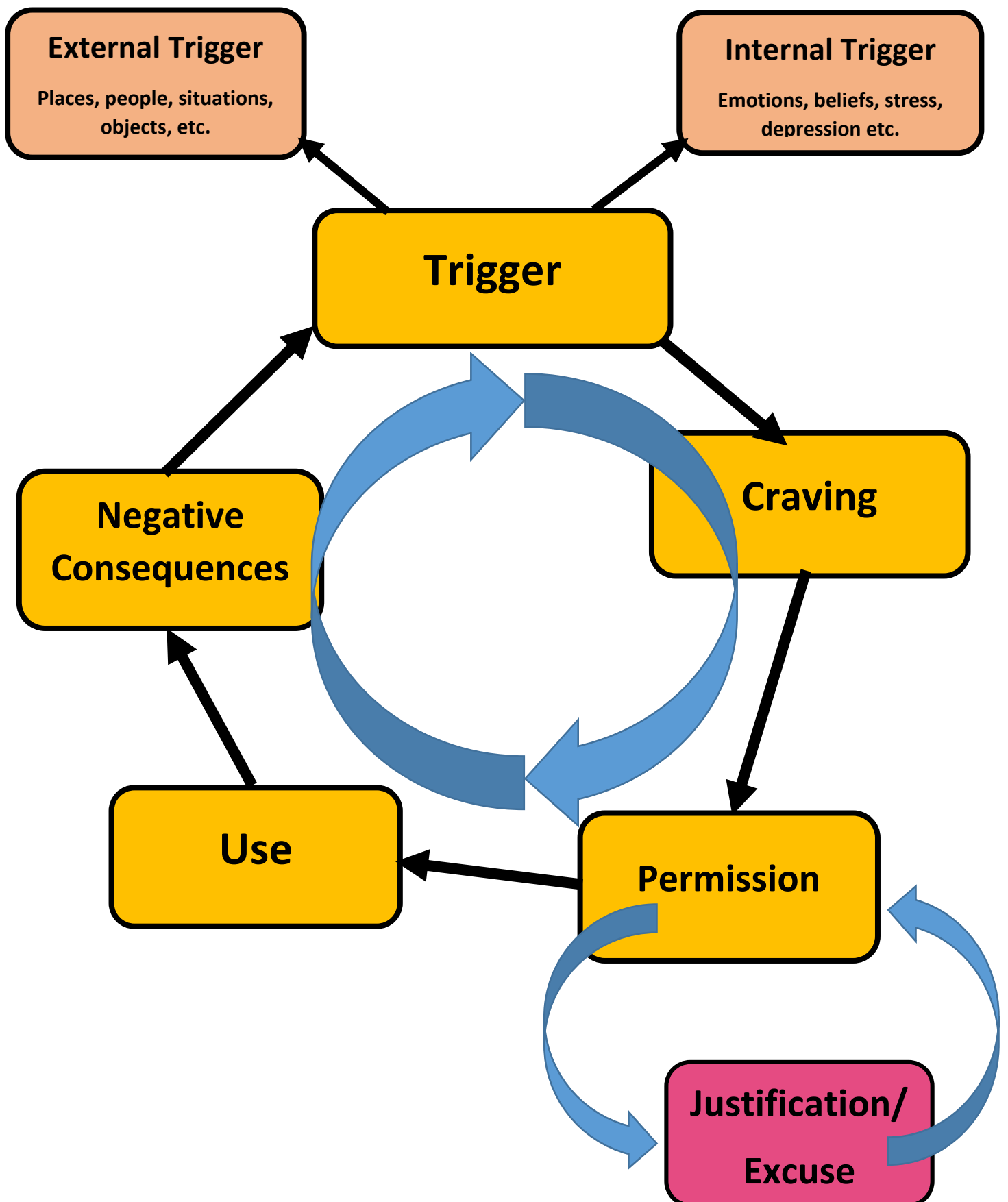
Alcohol/drug addiction or dependency describes a compulsion to continue taking alcohol and/or other drugs in order to feel good or avoid feeling bad *despite adverse, negative consequences.*

Often addiction has two aspects: Physical (using to avoid physical discomfort caused by withdrawals) and psychological (using to cope with stress, frustration, reality, or life).

Addiction tends to run in a cycle of: trigger, craving, and using, which all too often leads to unwanted negative consequences. These negative consequences (e.g. guilt, shame, self-hatred, withdrawal, poor mental/physical health, financial difficulty etc.) are often the trigger to further craving and so the cycle goes on. Many people locked into this cycle often tell themselves "I'm sick of this, I really want to stop". Whilst we're under the influence of our drug of choice, stopping seems like an achievable goal. Unfortunately, when we come down or sober up, this goal seems harder and less obtainable. How many times have you told yourself 'It's okay to use today because I'll stop tomorrow'? Once the cravings kick in, people lose motivation and feel compelled to use again.

So, if we wish to stop, we must break this cycle.

Cycle of Alcohol and Other Drug Use





Triggers

A trigger is anything that gets you thinking about alcohol or other drugs, or anything that provokes a memory or impulse to resume using drugs or alcohol. A trigger can be a person, a place or a thing that reminds you of the pleasures you used to get from your habit. This memory of pleasurable use is referred to as 'euphoric recall'. This might also be viewed as 'selective amnesia'; we just remember the desirable aspects of using/drinking and conveniently forget any adverse consequences.

One of the greatest challenges of remaining abstinent is to learn to respond to triggers without returning to using.

Triggers may be split into two categories; there are **external** and **internal** triggers. An example of an **external** trigger for an alcohol user would be passing a pub/bar or seeing bottles of alcohol in the supermarket. For a drug user, an external trigger may be visiting an area where they used to score or seeing people they used to use with. An **internal** trigger would be when a person in recovery experiences a strong emotion (such as anxiety/anger/or feeling hurt following an argument) that prompts them to fall back on drugs/alcohol in order to 'cope' or artificially soothe themselves.

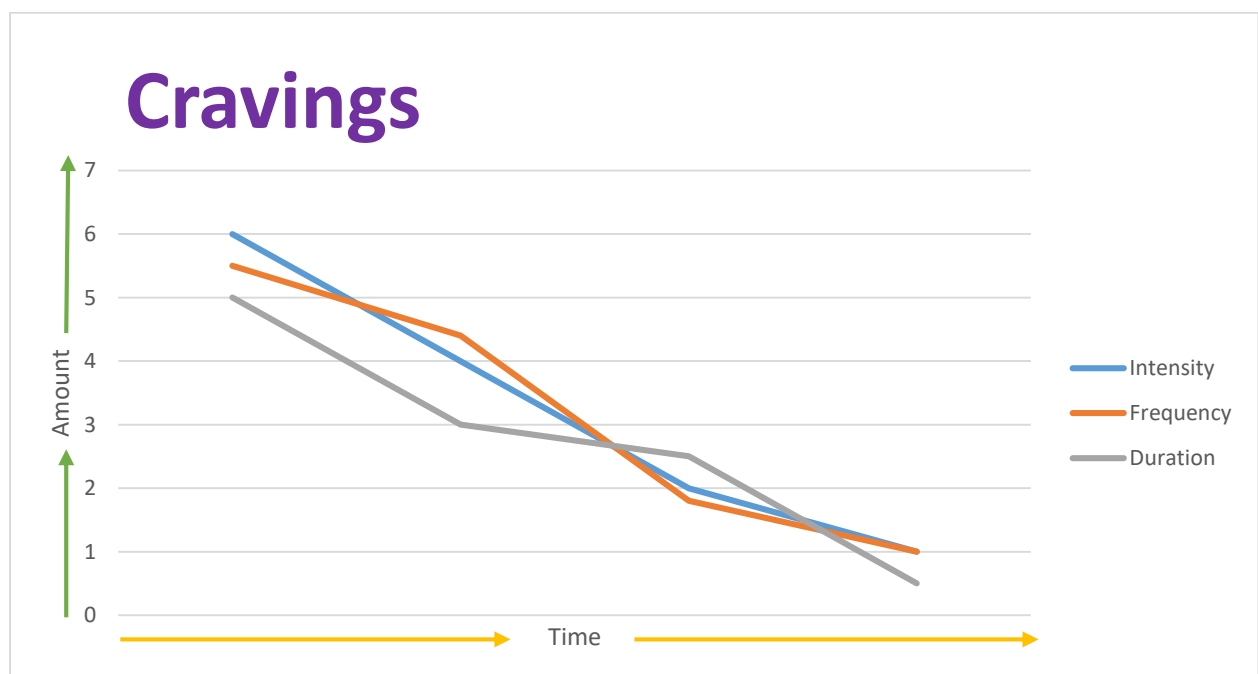
Some triggers may be avoided. For example, you can avoid areas where you used to score. If your journey involves passing a pub or off-licence, you can choose a different route. However, not all triggers are avoidable, especially internal ones. Because we have spent a substantial amount of time using alcohol or other drugs, there are numerous places, people, situations and things that we inevitably associate with our drug(s) of choice. As the Burt Bacharach and Hal David song says; "There's Always Something There to Remind Me". When you split up with a long term romantic partner, you spend a good deal of time getting over that relationship. Equally, because you've been in a relationship with your chosen drug for a substantial amount of time, so naturally, you will not immediately stop thinking about that drug when you choose to stop using it.

Cravings

A good working definition of “craving” is; a strong desire to use alcohol or other drugs that, if unfulfilled, produces an often powerful degree of physical and/or mental suffering. Facing cravings and learning to deal with them without giving in to them is an essential part of recovery. They can feel very intense and uncomfortable, but even the most intense craving WILL GO AWAY. They grow stronger only up to a point and then they weaken and disappear.

Cravings cannot harm you. You are able to control the urge to use or drink and make healthier, less self-destructive decisions. Triggers and cravings are not permanent. They will become extinct if you continue to consistently refuse to use.

Cravings do not necessarily always follow trigger situations, in fact people who have been in recovery for some time report that although they are still susceptible to triggers, the triggers now very rarely lead to a craving. The evidence proves that the more you ‘refuse to use’, the less power cravings will have over you. When we continuously abstain, the duration (how long they last), the frequency (how often we have them), and the intensity (how powerful they feel), of our cravings all decrease.



Cravings cannot make us use. They do not control us. They may feel powerful and intensely uncomfortable, and they may give us a strong

invitation to use, but we still have choice. People attending a remote residential rehab facility, where the opportunity to use is removed, report experiencing fewer cravings than they might at home. We are all capable of coping with cravings and not giving in to them. We can learn to resist them. Of course dealing with one craving is not the end of the story. Further cravings will inevitably follow, urges do come back again but over time, they will subside and fade. Each time you outlast a bout of cravings and don't give in to the addiction, they become less intense and less frequent. In scientific terms this is known as habituation.

Habituation is a decrease in response to a stimulus after repeated exposure to it. For example, a new sound in your environment, such as a new ringtone, may initially draw your attention or even become distracting. Over time, as you become accustomed to this sound, you pay less attention to the noise and your response to the sound will diminish. This diminished response is habituation.



Permission and Justifications

A craving has the potential to persuade us to use, but as mentioned before we still have a choice. And because using is a choice, arguably we need to give ourselves the permission to do so. We have to convince ourselves that in this moment, in this circumstance, it is okay to use. We convince ourselves by using justifications; thinking up good reasons or excuses as to why it is acceptable or reasonable to do so. Unfortunately, if we have made the decision to stop using or even cut down, these justifications are not helpful. They are also not always based upon reason, facts or good evidence. They are not helping us to achieve our long term goals. Generally speaking, we are just kidding ourselves; 'having ourselves over' or pulling the wool over our own eyes.

Justifications

Typically we'll be telling ourselves:

- I'll just have one
- It'll be different this time, I'll control my use
- I've been abstinent for 'X' amount of time so I'll be okay
- I can't cope without it
- I can't bear this situation
- I need a drink/drug
- I deserve it
- I'll get away with it, no one will know
- I've got the money, it's payday, I can afford it
- F**% it!

So let's look at these justifications more closely. Let's put them on trial. We can do this by asking the following questions:

- **Is it true? Does it make sense?**
- **Is it factual? Is there evidence to support it?**
- **Is it helpful? Is it helping me to achieve my long term goals (e.g. abstinence, a better life, reaching my potential)?**

So let's take those justifications one by one:

'I will just have one' - How true is this? How much evidence do you really have that you can control your use and stop at one? How much evidence do you have that once you've had one, you will feel compelled to have another, and another, and another, and

'It'll be different this time, I'll control my use' - Really? Why? What's so different this time? Under what unique circumstances are you suddenly able to control your use and exercise restraint? As the much repeated phrase goes; 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'.

'I've been abstinent for X amount of time so I'll be okay' - Is this statement factual? Is there evidence to support it? Or are you about to reawaken your addictive behaviour and begin down that slippery slope into more negative consequences. Is it helpful to think this way? Is it helping you to achieve your long term goals?

‘I can’t cope without it’ - You can’t cope? What does that mean? That you will shrivel up and die? How true is this statement? Or are you arguing that you alone are incapable of learning new ways to cope?

Fact: Addiction is a learnt behaviour, one that can be unlearned.

Experience shapes the neural pathways in our brains, we become what we do. You will only learn to cope without picking up a drink or drug by doing it. The more times you do it, the easier it will become and the more assured you will be that you can indeed cope. **YOU CAN COPE.** It is unhelpful to tell yourself otherwise.

‘I can’t bear this situation, I need a drink/drug’ - So you are arguing that this situation, or this way you are feeling is unbearable? You are incapable of bearing it. A good definition of ‘unbearable’ might be; being fed feet first into a wood chipper; it will remove your toes, and then your feet and it will be ages before it reaches any major organs and kill you. That’s unbearable. What you are experiencing may be uncomfortable, or distressing even, but it will eventually pass, and you can bear it. Maybe you need some extra support right now to help you through. Arguably, it is unhelpful to tell yourself that you cannot cope. It is not helping you achieve your long term goals.

‘I need a drink/drug’ - Really? Okay, if you are dependent on alcohol or heroin, you will go into withdrawal if you do not use/drink, and an alcohol withdrawal is dangerous, so you may need one if you are dependant. But, if you’ve detoxed, you no longer *need* one. You may *want* one, indeed you may feel a strong desire to have one but ‘want’ is not ‘need’. It’s time to be honest with yourself; what you really mean is that you want one. However, you can choose not to.

‘I deserve it’ - Maybe you’ve worked hard or got through a difficult period in your life and you feel that you deserve a reward. But, if you deserve a drink/drug, then arguably you deserve the negative consequences that will automatically follow. Drinking/drug using and adverse consequences are joined at the hip. There is no loophole here, they are indivisible, inseparable. So, you may feel the nice effects of the alcohol or drug but then you’ll sober up. You’ll be feeling guilt, shame, remorse, self-hatred. You’ll realise that you’ve no money left, that you’ve destroyed the trust loved ones had in you. You will feel anxious, depressed and disappointed. Doesn’t sound like much of a reward eh?

‘I’ll get away with it, no one will know’ - Well okay, you might ‘get away with it’ and not get caught out by another person. But is this the

whole truth? Won't you know? Who or what are you ultimately doing this for? And when you return for your next group or appointment and pretend you haven't used, how will that lie leave you feeling? Have you got away with it? In any case, if we do believe that we have 'got away with it', then we will be more likely to repeat this behaviour more and more often, and soon we're on that slippery slope back into addictive, self-destructive behaviour again

'I've got the money, it's payday, I can afford it' - So this justification relies upon the idea that the only negative consequences of your drinking/drug using were financial. Is that true? Can your relationships with partners, family members or friends afford it? Can your physical or mental health afford it?

F% it!** - Arguably, there's not much helping us when we hit the 'eff it' button. This justification relies upon the idea that you don't care about the consequences when you use alcohol and/or other drugs. But, let's be honest, if that were true would you be reading this hand-out right now? Would you be accessing treatment and support? In this given moment you may convince yourself that you do not care about the consequences, but will that be true tomorrow? Next week? When the resulting negative consequences follow, when you're feeling remorse, guilt and disappointment with yourself, how will you feel about the decision to drink or use? Also, what is 'it' anyway? Who gets screwed over in this process? Are you in fact just saying f**% me?

Methods for dealing with cravings:

1. Distraction
2. Flashcards
3. Imagery
4. Rational responses to automatic thoughts
5. Activity
6. Relaxation
7. Play the whole film
8. Talk to someone
9. Urge Surfing

1. Distraction – the idea behind this method is to shift your attention away from the craving, and focus on something else. Here are some suggestions- they seem simple, but they can all be effective -

Concentrate on your surroundings and describe them to yourself in detail, this can be quite 'grounding' when you feel like you're losing it.

Talk to someone, anyone. A trusted friend, relative, your key-worker or even a total stranger if need be. It can help you get away from that loop running in your head.

Change the scenery - go for a walk, a drive, a bike ride, just get away from wherever you are right now.

Cleaning up or other household chores can be hugely distracting if you're craving, and you might feel some sense of achievement too.

Video games can require enough concentration and challenge to take your mind off it, and of course, you can play them alone.

2. Flashcards - when you're in the grip of an intense craving, it's hard to think rationally and remember all the things you're supposed to. So writing yourself some instructions on a small card can be useful. (This helps tremendously for people with anxiety problems too). The cards can then be pushed into your purse/wallet/pocket so they are at hand when you need them.

The message should be simple and direct and should be aimed at either convincing yourself that you can cope with this situation, or what your long term goals are (goals that cannot be achieved if you drink or use drugs), or to remind yourself what you've achieved so far, and what you will be losing if you drink or use drugs. Here are a few examples of things you might write:

Things are going well with my partner right now, I don't want to mess it up

This craving will pass if I just give it time

I am able to cope

I'm not helpless here, what action can I take?

What are the pros and cons right now?

3. Imagery - there are a few different types of imagery which can work - Command your craving to STOP (see a big stop sign), then refocus on a relaxing location of your choice - a favourite peaceful spot.

If you start remembering good times when you were using, then replace that image with the bad times, your lowest ebb when you felt ashamed and disgusted, do you want to end up back there?

If it's negative, depressing images that are giving you cravings then imagine an optimistic view of your near future, with friends or family, having fun without using (or any other positive image).

If you know you've got an event coming up which will give you cravings - try rehearsing the image in your head of you dealing with it appropriately. Run through the feelings you'll have so you are not caught off-guard by them.

4. Rational Responses to Automatic Thoughts - whenever you feel a craving, ask yourself "what thoughts are going through my head right now". Many of the thoughts you are having will themselves be responsible for your craving. It becomes a matter of responding to those thoughts in a more rational way.

Look for evidence to back up or contradict your thoughts and ask yourself:

- What will happen after I have used or drank, how will I feel when the effects have worn off?
- Can I look at this situation differently?
- If what I'm thinking is true, what really are the consequences?
- What is likely to happen if I carry on thinking like this?
- What positive action can I take to solve this problem?

Try not to make such catastrophic predictions about your cravings, like "there's no way I can stand this, so I might as well just use and get it over with", "I keep having cravings, I'm just a hopeless addict, I can't beat this..." etc.

5. Activity - If you've had an addiction for a long time, then you may not have many hobbies left. In fact using or drinking are the only activities some people actually do for fun. So when you try and stop, boredom is one of the biggest hurdles. There's no way around it - you're going to have to try some new activities and develop a new range of interests

that will engage your mind and distract you. Action may be especially useful at those times of day when you used to drink/use. Do something else, plan your time and involve other supportive people in your plans if possible.

6. Relaxation - Anxiety, Anger, Frustration and Stress are amongst the biggest triggers for cravings. So learning some relaxation techniques can be a life-saver. If you're not so tense, you're less likely to act impulsively. And if you've been using drugs to relax for a long time, then you are going to have to learn some other methods.

7. Play the whole film – As mentioned before, when craving our drug of choice we tend to only focus on the benefits of using and not the adverse consequences. This memory of pleasurable use is referred to as 'euphoric recall'. This might also be viewed as 'selective amnesia'; we just remember the desirable aspects of using/drinking and conveniently forget any adverse consequences. One way to counteract this is to 'play the whole film'. Imagine that someone has filmed you using drugs or drinking alcohol, from the moment you are off to buy your drug of choice right through to the 'come down' and the resulting adverse consequences. When craving, we only focus on the first part of the film, the part where we are excited at having the drink/drug in our hands, the consumption of that drink/drug and the 'high' we will feel. We then stop the film. But if you were to keep watching, if we play the whole film, we would see our behaviour whilst we are high, the come down with its accompanying feelings of anxiety, depression, guilt, remorse and disappointment. We would see that we are now skint and unable to afford bills, food, debts etc. We might see how worried our loved ones are about us, how our behaviour is impacting on them, how it is affecting our relationships. In short all of the resulting unwanted negative consequences.

So, play the whole tape, acknowledge the whole picture. Using/drinking comes with self-destructive adverse consequences.

8. Talk to someone – When experiencing an intense craving it can often be difficult to think clearly. In these moments, reasons for staying abstinent may be temporarily forgotten, or drowned out by the self-talk accompanying the strong urge to use. Talking to someone you trust and who has your best interests at heart may be a useful option at this point.

Tell the person what you are experiencing and let them help you. Using alcohol or other drugs often requires deception and secrecy. People often feel the need to conceal their behaviour and regularly lie in an attempt to keep their use hidden. If we are honest about our urge to use, if we share it with others, we significantly diminish the opportunity to 'get away with it'. Our addictive behaviour thrives in the concealment of darkness, so expose it to the light. Replace the secrecy and deception with honesty, transparency and openness.

9. Urge Surfing - Urge surfing is a mindfulness technique that can be used to help with any addictive behaviour. When experiencing cravings we often have an internal struggle between a strong urge to use and a desire to stop and remain abstinent. It is this internal struggle that feeds the cravings. Trying to fight cravings can be like trying to block a waterfall. We can end up being inundated. With the approach of mindfulness, we step aside and watch the water (cravings, impulses & urges) just go right past. See additional hand-out for more information on Urge Surfing.