
Urge Surfing (US)

Core concept: Accept painful emotions and urges and ride the ebbs and flows.

Urge Surfing involves accepting feelings and urges rather than pushing away, fighting, or amplifying them. This approach requires Mindfulness and being nonjudgmental. We are watching and being with the experience without trying to influence or change it. In some ways, this is the opposite of our natural tendency to escape or fix an uncomfortable state. Paradoxically, urge surfing gives us control over what feels uncontrollable.

A surfer goes with the flow and rides a wave to its natural conclusion. High feelings and urges seem like they will not end when we are in the thick of them, often leading us to judge and amplify the experience and/or to act impulsively. Instead, we want to ride them until they ebb and wash out.

You probably have “surfed” urges in life without realizing it. Think about a time you had a strong craving without acting on it or otherwise changing it. The peak of those moments can be hard, but chances are the urge ultimately faded out without you doing anything about it.

To urge surf, we simply Observe the natural ups and downs of emotions and urges. Start by checking in and noting the intensity level from 1 to 10 or simply note whether it is low, medium, or high.

As you continue to Observe, periodically recheck the intensity. You can even chart the intensity level every 5 minutes to get a more objective picture of the ups and downs in actual time (this is a nice way to assess the accuracy of our perceptions of “psychological time”; situations tend to seem longer when we are in distress).

As you practice this skill, you may need to mix in some other Distress Tolerance skills if you get too overwhelmed. Remember to focus on what works. Even world-class surfers stay off of the waves if they are too intense and unsafe!