

By Chandler Scott McMillin

There's nothing abnormal about experiencing some craving during recovery. It's even predictable. The secret is to learn how to manage it.

Definition of *craving*: a sudden or persistent desire, of varying intensity, for a particular substance or sensation. Drug and alcohol craving operates on two levels -- biological and behavioral.

It's partly about the body attempting to restore an internal balance. The principle is called *homeostasis*, or stability within. For instance, when you've been eating very salty food—potato chips, for instance—you'll begin to feel thirsty, the body's signal to add water.

Something comparable happens when you've become dependent on certain drugs. The body uses withdrawal to signal the user that it wants more. If you fail to provide the substance, withdrawal symptoms temporarily intensify --- as if

the body wants to make sure you got the message.

With cocaine or meth, intense craving can be so strong as to feel irresistible. It *isn't*, technically, but your brain works overtime to convince you otherwise.

Craving is also the product of *conditioning*, or reinforcement through repetition. Say you smoke a pack of cigarettes every day. That translates to 50-75,000 'puffs' annually. Over ten years of smoking, you experience a desire for a hit of nicotine, and gratify it, more than half a million times. What lesson do you think your brain is learning? It's become convinced of the 'need' for the substance. When that substance isn't available, the brain can panic. Takes a while to calm down again.

Scientists say addictive drugs are *self-reinforcing*. Unlike a lab rat, we don't need kibble as a reward for pressing the

lever to get more of the substance. The drug supplies its own reward, through the brain's pleasure centers.

Once your brain has been conditioned to expect a drug, it doesn't easily forget. It can take a long while to extinguish craving entirely. But the frequency and intensity is sharply reduced over time.

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Is craving a problem for you? If so, how do you deal with it? Begin by taking the quick inventory below.

Craving: A Quick Inventory

	Never	Occasional	Often
1. I still have vivid dreams about drug or alcohol use.			
2. I find myself thinking about how good it once felt to get high.			
3. Thoughts of a drink or drug will pop into my head for no reason.			
4. Certain sights, smells, sounds will trigger a craving.			
5. I find myself automatically reaching for a drink or drug.			
6. I still miss alcohol and drug a lot.			
7. I have daydreams about drinking / using.			
8. Since I stopped, I tend to forget the bad parts about drinking/using.			
9. I remember how good alcohol/ drugs made me feel.			
10. Certain people or situations will trigger a desire to drink or use.			
11. I get upset because I still crave it.			
12. I worry that my desire will never go away.			

If you have five or more checks in the 'Occasional' or 'Often' columns, you'll benefit from developing some skills in craving management.



Craving Management Skills

First, three things to remember:

Cravings vary in intensity

The most common are probably vivid dreams (night or day). Intrusive thoughts of drinking or drug use may pop into your mind at inappropriate intervals, like annoying TV commercials. On a slightly higher level are euphoric memories of the 'good' experiences you had earlier in your drug or alcohol use, before things turned sour. Some people experience episodes of drug hunger severe enough to remind them of acute withdrawal – mostly anxiety, nervous tension, and insomnia. If you find yourself in this last condition, don't try to manage it by yourself – seek professional help.

Try thinking of craving as your brain's misguided way of talking you back into drug use. It fades as the days and weeks pass. But it may be a long while before it disappears entirely.

Cravings are not abnormal

No addict can expect to avoid craving altogether. Some have it worse than others. Some have it worse at certain times than others. Craving doesn't mean you're a hopeless addict, however. In fact, you might interpret it as a sign that you're getting better.

Cravings are time-limited

Most go away in a relatively short span. If you have a depressive or anxiety disorder, medications may help. The key lies in not giving in to a slip.

A Simple Method for Managing Craving

Try the following three steps:

Recognize craving

The desire to use can come in many different forms – as an intrusive thought or euphoric memory of drug use, as a wave of anxiety or panic, or that form of negativity that 12 Steppers label stinkin' thinkin'. Don't fall into the trap of blaming your feelings on others or on circumstances. Don't begin a critical examination of your past or future (that just makes it worse). Craving for alcohol or drugs is a symptom of addiction -- no more, no less.

Reduce craving

There's more than one way to accomplish this, and every recovering person has a favorite. First, if you think the craving might be triggered by something in your immediate surroundings, remove yourself gracefully from those surroundings and go elsewhere. That almost always helps.

Some recovering folks swear by vigorous aerobic exercise (a brisk walk, running or bike riding, even a short burst of calisthenics). Old-time AAs carried candy with them as a sort of substitute; the nutritionally-minded prefer fruit or crackers. Many learn to use relaxation exercises and self-hypnosis to cleanse the mind of obsessive thoughts. Still others talk it through with someone else, by phone or in person. Whatever works. Try some different approaches.

Refocus on recovery

You need to start thinking of yourself as a success – as a person who is successfully managing a chronic disease. Be aware of your progress. At the end of each day, remind yourself how far you've come. Take time to be grateful.

Summary

Hopefully this article has given you some perspective on one of the most common problems in recovery from addiction. As is so often the case, there's no single 'perfect' solution to craving. You seek knowledge from others, experiment a little to see what works best for you, and have faith that by sticking to the path, you'll reach your destination.



Chandler Scott McMillin, Principal of Recovery Systems Institute, has created and operated successful addiction treatment programs for more than thirty years. He has written countless articles and co-authored seven books on addiction treatment and helped hundreds of families with successful interventions.