

Day 1: Urges



5 Day Reset

with

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Day 1: Urges

Hey everybody, welcome to day one of the Five-Day Reset. We are talking about urges today. We are talking about the urge to drink, because I will tell you, this is the first thing that people run into when they decide to take a break, “What do I do with my urges?”

And I will tell you, I hear the same thing from people over and over again, and it’s usually, “These urges are such a stumbling block, they’re too much, I can’t resist, they’re so uncomfortable, I hate my urges, my desire is so strong...” The list goes on.

So that’s why I wanted to start day one talking about urges and understanding your urges in a totally different way. This is going to be so important for you. So here’s the thing: if you want to understand what an urge is, you have to start by understanding desire.

Desire is just an emotion in your body and you are familiar with your emotions, right? You’re happy or sad or angry or lonely or bored. You have all these different emotional states that you feel in your body, and desire is one of them.

Desire is that emotional state of wanting something or having a hankering or a yearning or a longing for something; that’s desire. Now, you can desire anything; desire is not limited to drinking. You can desire anything, but not all desire feels the same.

Some desire feels kind of calm. Some desire feels very intense, and so the question is, what is the difference? The difference is the intensity of the reward your brain gets when you give yourself the object of your desire. The intensity of the reward your brain gets when you give yourself the object of your desire.

Think about it this way, because remember, you can desire anything, you could desire water. You’ve probably desired water before. When you go give yourself that sip of water, it feels good, you enjoy it, and you might even enjoy it a lot, especially if you are really parched.

Day 1: Urges

But now compare the enjoyment that you feel when you give yourself that sip of water to the enjoyment or the pleasure that you feel when you give yourself a sip of wine. Not the same thing, right? And the reason why they're not the same thing is because the reward that your brain gets is very different. The amount of dopamine that your brain gets is very different.

And it is this differing level of reward that creates the intensity behind desire. Dopamine is just a chemical messenger in your brain. It's a chemical messenger that creates pleasure; that's what most people know about it. But what you might not know about it is that it's also a signal for your brain. It signals your brain that whatever you are doing is important.

So it is connected to pleasure, but it is also connected in signaling to your brain that whatever you're doing is important for survival. Now, dopamine helped humans survive. It was part of how we learned to survive, how our brain evolved this way.

So what happened was that activities connected with survival produced dopamine in our brain. And that's why things like eating feels good and having sex feels good, because eating and sex are important for survival. One is important for your basic nutrition needs and the other is important for survival of the species. And so, when you engage in these activities, the activities release a little bit of dopamine in your brain, because your brain wants to experience that pleasure so that it can do it again. Pleasure encourages that repetition.

Dopamine signals your brain that the activity is important, and your brain then remembers the activity so it can do it again later; it wants to repeat it. Your brain is thinking, "Okay, what was happening? What was going on? Where can I get this dopamine again?"

Now, the problem is that humans developed substances that deliver intense concentrations of dopamine to the brain; more intense than anything that normally exists in the environment. Alcohol and drugs are two of these things. So, all your brain knows is that dopamine is really important

Day 1: Urges

for survival, so it wants to remember what happened and it wants to repeat that again.

But the thing is, when you have a drink, dopamine floods your brain; it's a really concentrated amount of dopamine. So your brain thinks, "Oh this is important for survival; this is a really important thing." Now, once you start to understand that, you can understand urges better.

An urge is just the emotion of desire, right; that emotional state of wanting or having a yearning or a longing or a hankering for something that is then coupled with the expectation of a reward. That's what's happening when you feel the urge; it is that desire piece plus the reward piece.

Your brain has an expectation because it paid attention to what was happening around it when you gave it the reward; and so think about it in the case of drinking. Think about how your brain noticed, "Oh, it's five. We're home from work, we're cooking dinner, we're at a restaurant, we're at a party, we're at a baseball game..." Whatever it is, your brain was paying attention to what was going around and started to remember these things. It started to remember, "Oh, when I do these things, I get this flood of dopamine."

So urges can feel urgent because your brain thinks, your brain expects, that it's about to get something good and it wants you to go get it; that's why it can feel urgent. But now, here's the tricky piece for all of this. Remember, dopamine is connected to things that humans needed to survive. You don't need alcohol to survive. You could go your entire life and never drink a drop of alcohol and you would be totally fine.

It's not necessary for survival but your brain doesn't know that. Your brain just thinks, "Dopamine, lots of dopamine, this is really important", and so it starts to believe that alcohol is important even when it's not. So what happens when you decide to take a break, especially after you have developed a habit of drinking in certain circumstances, certain times of day, and certain occasions, is that your brain is like, "Wait, what? What's going on here? We always get a reward. I remember this situation. I remember

Day 1: Urges

what's happening, we get a reward here. Dopamine is really good, why aren't we getting this reward?"

And so you have your brain not getting what it expects, and that is what can feel uncomfortable. Now, here's the thing. What most people do in the face of urges when they feel an urge and they're on a break period, they're trying to change their drinking, so they kind of freak out. "This feels terrible, I hate this, I don't know what to do, this is so uncomfortable, I'm going to have to give in, I can't resist it." They kind of freak out when the urge appears.

So that's an option. You can freak out, or you can realize that nothing has gone wrong. You're supposed to have urges. It's part of how your brain works. It is part of how the human brain learned to help us survive. It learned that it needed to pay attention to things in our environment that delivered dopamine. Alcohol just happens to be something that humans created to deliver a concentrated amount of dopamine, and so your brain thinks it's important even when it's not.

So here are the most common complaints that I hear when people start a break period and they're trying to deal with their urges. Number one is that urges are so uncomfortable. "I hate them, they feel terrible. It's so uncomfortable to sit with this urge, what am I going to do?" Right? So that's number one, that it's too uncomfortable.

The second complaint is that they never go away. "I just have urge after urge after urge and they never go away, and they're so uncomfortable." So eventually, "What am I going to do? This thing is never going away, it feels too difficult too hard."

And the third complaint is that it's exhausting to deal with them. So you have these uncomfortable urges, they're never going away, and it feels exhausting. And so what eventually happens is that people give in. People say, "I couldn't resist anymore, it was too much, it was too hard, I just had to give in."

Day 1: Urges

Now, what I want to show you is that when you can start to understand your urges in a different way, you can understand that all three of these complaints are not true. You do not need to be stuck feeling that your urges are so uncomfortable, that they never go away, and that you're exhausted when you deal with them.

And the reason is this: you do not have to just push an urge away with willpower. Now, that's what most people do. Most people, when they feel the urge to drink, and they don't want to drink, they are trying to take a break, they just use their willpower. They just summon all their mental energy, they summon it all up and then they try to push it away. Now, the problem is willpower can work, but you can imagine, if you're just always summoning all of your mental energy and gritting your teeth and just trying to bear the situation, that eventually it is going to wear you out.

But the truth is, you don't have to use willpower. You can let that urge be there. You can take a look at the urge. You can understand that when you feel an urge, nothing has gone wrong. It's just part of the habit cycle. There's no problem here, your brain just thinks that it's not getting this thing that it believes is really important. But of course, you know that alcohol actually isn't important for survival. You have that ability to remind your brain, "Hey, it's okay. We're fine, we don't need this flood of dopamine. Everything is going to be okay."

And when you stop just pushing urges away, when you stop thinking that an urge is a sign that something has gone wrong, what you can actually do is start to understand your urges, start to understand why are you feeling it in the first place, what's creating it. You can start to understand how your thoughts are connected to your urges, and not only that, how your thoughts are connected to your ability to deal with an urge and to allow the urge to be there and to say no to an urge. But you cannot look at your thoughts if you if you are always pushing your urges away and thinking that they're a problem.

So the very first thing you need to do is to start to understand what do you think about urges, and what are your thoughts when you have an

Day 1: Urges

urge? These are two really important pieces. What do you think about urges, and what are your thoughts when you have an urge? Now, I will tell you, a lot of people's thoughts when they have an urge sounds something like this, "I can't do this, this is too hard, it's so uncomfortable, why me, something must be wrong, this is unfair, but I need a break, I deserve it, I need a treat, I need a reward."

You have to listen to these thoughts because these thoughts are going to really impact your ability to just allow the urge to be there. The truth is this: if every time you feel an urge you reward that urge with a drink, your habit will just become stronger and more automatic. That is the truth. The more you feel it and the more you immediately reward it, the habit will become stronger and more automatic. So if you want to change the habit, you have to start handling the urges differently, and it means that it's okay to have an urge and not reward it. That's what you're going to be practicing this week. Having an urge and not rewarding it.

So here's what I want you to do for today's exercise. I want you to answer the following questions, and really start to understand what you think about an urge and your thoughts when you have urges. Now, just don't do this in your head. Don't do this mentally. I want you to take and put pen to paper. That's the way to do it. Really answer these questions and spend some time thinking about it. Don't rush through, because I promise that urges are usually the number one stumbling block for people, and so your ability to start to understand them differently will be incredibly transformative.

So here are the questions I want you to answer for yourself. One, are urges positive, negative, or neutral, and why? Now, it's really important here that you're not giving or looking for some sort of correct answer. You just want to know what does your brain immediately think about urges. Are they positive, negative, neutral, and why? So that's the first question.

Question number two is what does an urge feel like in your body? Now, this is a really important question and I want you to focus on physical sensations. Focus on things like, are your muscles tensed or relaxed? Has

Day 1: Urges

your heartbeat or your breathing changed? Do you feel different sensations in different parts of your body? Focus on what is physically happening.

What you don't want to do is just say, "When I feel an urge it feels terrible." That's a judgment. I want you to get really specific and focus on what is happening in your body, and this piece is so important because so many of you will say, "Urges are so uncomfortable, I can't stand them, I just had to give in." If that's the case, then you need to understand what specifically about an urge is so uncomfortable.

Question number three, what does it feel like when you give in to an urge? What does it feel like when you say yes to the urge to drink? And I want you to think about this both what it feels like immediately, as soon as you take that sip, as soon as you say yes to an urge, what does it feel like immediately, and then what does it feel like a little later down the line? Pay attention to both as soon as you say yes to an urge and down the line.

The next question, question four, what does it feel like when you say no to an urge? What does it feel like when you feel the desire, you feel the urge to drink, and you say no to it? So explain for yourself what that feels like.

And then finally, what thoughts do you have, or do you notice, when you feel the urge to drink? Now, here's the thing. Because you're in a break period right now, you have a perfect opportunity to notice these thoughts. Most of us never notice these thoughts because we're just engaged in the habit, and the habit is so fast and so automatic that we don't have time to notice our thinking.

But because you're taking a break right now, you have amazing access to your thoughts. So pay attention. What thoughts do you have when you're feeling the urge to drink? Are you telling yourself, "This is so uncomfortable, it's not fair, I need a treat, I need a break, why me...", whatever it is, it may even be as simple as, "I want that. It looks good. That looks tasty."

Day 1: Urges

Pay attention to those thoughts. Now, here's the thing. You might not be able to do this exercise right at this very moment. It might be easier to do a little later today if you're starting to feel the urges, but make sure that you do it. Make sure that you spend the time to really answer all of these questions and understand your urges in a different way.

Right now, your brain just thinks mistakenly, that alcohol is really important. And it thinks that only because it gets a lot of dopamine when you drink, and dopamine was important for survival. You now are in the position of teaching your brain something different and something new. And so that is what you want to focus on today. If you can shift how you start to think about your urges, if you can look at them, look at what you think about them, look about what thoughts are connected with your urges, you can start to handle them in a different way, and that requires not just pushing them away, not just using willpower, but really doing something different.

So take the time, go through these questions, answer them for yourself, and see what you discover. This urge work is so important and we will definitely come back to it. Alright everybody, I will see you tomorrow for day two.