

Controlling Your Impulsive Fire Setting

Objective

To help you understand your fire-setting impulses and behaviors and understand why “playing with fire” is a serious problem that requires professional help.

You Should Know

Fire setting, or *pyromania*, involves intentionally or repeatedly setting fires. People with pyromania are fascinated by fire and everything to do with fires, such as lighters, matches, and so on. A fascination with fire can include repeatedly lighting matches to see them burn, but can also include setting fires in garbage cans and even setting fires that can get out of control.

A fascination with fire is relatively common in children and teens, but can also be a symptom of a more severe psychological problem in teens and adults. Childhood fire setting does not necessarily lead to adult pyromania. The problem is relatively rare (just over 1 percent of the population) and tends to occur much more in males than females, especially in males with poor social skills and learning problems.

People with pyromania are unable to stop their impulse to set fires. They might seek out activities or careers related to fire. They often feel a sense of pleasure, satisfaction, or release from anxiety after setting a fire. A proper psychological evaluation by a mental health professional is an important first step to interrupt the pattern, which can become addictive or compulsive over time.

Does this sound like you? It is important to know that any type of fire setting is considered serious because of the potential danger. In this worksheet, you will be asked a number of questions to determine whether you are suffering from pyromania, or impulsive fire setting. Some suggestions and treatment options follow.

What to Do

Below is a list of common features of people who set fires impulsively. Next to each item, indicate on a scale from 0 to 4 whether these statements apply to you: 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = occasionally, 3 = frequently, 4 = always.

_____ I feel a strong attraction to fire.

_____ I like to set things on fire, such as paper or other flammable items; or burn holes in rugs and fabrics.

_____ I have set more than one fire on purpose.

_____ I feel tension or anxiety prior to setting a fire and relief afterwards.

_____ I think a lot about fires, and fire-related paraphernalia, sometimes to the point of obsession.

_____ I have visited fire departments to satisfy my urge to be in a fire-related environment.

_____ I am or have thought about becoming a firefighter or volunteer “watcher” in my community.

_____ I find it exciting to watch any kind of fire, whether in movies, TV, online, or in person.

_____ I have pulled a false fire alarm and waited for the fire department to arrive.

_____ I hide fire-related paraphernalia from loved ones or others for fear of being caught.

_____ I have been arrested for setting fires.

_____ I have tried to stop impulsively setting fires but I have not been successful.

_____ Other:

If you rate most of these items 2 or above, please seek professional help. Now, answer the following questions as you continue your assessment of your impulsive fire setting. If you are already working with a mental health professional, your answers will help you both in your understanding of the problem.

1. How old were you when you first experienced a strong urge to set fires? _____

2. How many fires have you set, to the best of your recollection? _____

3. How often do you experience the urge to set fires?

4. What are the typical circumstances in which you act on your urge to set fires?

5. How often do you act on the urge to set fires?

6. If you have ever been caught or arrested for setting fires, what happened as a result?

7. How would you describe your feelings before, during, and after you set a fire?

8. What are the main stressors in your life that might be contributing to your fire-setting?

9. Are you aware of anything specific (a feeling, a person) that triggers your urge to set fires?

10. What have been the consequences thus far of your fire setting in your family life, social life, work or school life?

11. Have any of your close relatives had a problem with impulsive fire setting or with other mental health conditions, such as depression or alcohol or drug abuse?

12. Do you use alcohol or recreational drugs? What and how often?

13. Have you been treated for any other mental health problems? If yes, what treatments were most effective?

14. Are you currently being treated for any medical conditions?

Here are some things you can do to help you confront your impulsive fire setting. Put a check mark by the ones that you would most likely try.

Talk to a psychiatrist or medical professional about taking antidepressant medication or mood stabilizers. Certain medications have been found to be helpful for people who exhibit impulsive or addictive behaviors.

_____ Find a therapist who specializes in CBT, cognitive-behavioral therapy, to learn new coping skills for dealing with your impulses, including “exposure and response prevention” techniques and “habit reversal training.”

_____ Attend AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) or another 12-step program meeting; AA is designed to help you address addictive behaviors using a self-help model.

_____ Avoid situations that might trigger impulsive fire setting.

_____ Make a list of people you could call or text if you have an urge to set a fire.

_____ Make a list of other activities you can engage in that bring you pleasure and a sense of purpose—hobbies, classes, sports, volunteering, etc.

_____ Find other emotional outlets—spiritual groups, therapy groups, places where you can express your feelings safely.

Four-Step Technique to Stop Your Impulsive Fire Setting

Like with other addictive or compulsive behaviors, there is not one simple solution to stopping your fire setting. However this behavioral technique can help you to manage your impulses in the moment.

1. Say the word “stop.” When you first notice that you have an urge to set a fire or engage in fire-related activities, practice saying this word to yourself. Take a breath and redirect your focus immediately.
2. Ask yourself, “What am I feeling? What am I thinking?” Write your answers down.
3. Think ahead about the negative consequences of fire setting.
4. Remind yourself that you are a good person and that you value yourself, your freedom, and that you respect others’ rights.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What is the biggest challenge you feel you must overcome to get help for your impulsive fire setting?

2. Who or what could help you to overcome that challenge?

3. What are your feelings about asking for professional help with your fire setting?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
