

Resist Urges and Cravings Using DEADS Strategies

Objective

To effectively manage urges using DEADS strategies.

What to Know

“Urge control” is a common term used in addiction treatment for managing waves of cravings as they come and go. Some urges are brief and related to specific triggers, and on average, a craving lasts 15 minutes or less. If an urge or craving lasts only 15 minutes, the most logical approach is to delay the behavior when you first get the urge. The urge can and will go away. “Urge Surfing” allows you to observe the urge rise on a wave as you ride the wave all the way through until the urge is gone.

Urges do not only apply to addiction – they also refer to mental habits and reactions. Two examples are the urge to react in the same way you have in the past, or the urge to lash out in anger. The DEADS strategies provide a practical framework for managing urges and breaking habitual patterns.

Delay – When you feel an urge, avoid acting on it immediately. Give yourself some time. Delay means putting off reacting, using, or giving in to the craving, urge, or intense emotion for a time while understanding the urge will go away. Even if you can delay for 5-10 minutes, that may change the experience you have, making you better able to handle it. Delaying allows the initial intensity of the urge to subside, giving you a chance to think more rationally. It prevents impulsive actions and provides an opportunity for the rational mind to regain control.

Escape – Physically remove yourself from the situation or environment triggering the urge. For example, leave the room if you are having a heated argument where you may lose control. Take a pause. Avoid situations that you know can be triggering. If you regularly go places that remind you of using drugs, for example, avoid those locations or situations. Escaping allows you to create distance between yourself and the source of the temptation. This physical separation can reduce the immediate impact of the urge and give you a chance to reassess your choices in a less stimulating environment.

Avoid – Identify and avoid situations, people, or triggers that commonly lead to your urges. Avoidance is a proactive strategy to minimize exposure to situations that may elicit undesired behaviors. By recognizing and sidestepping potential triggers, you reduce the likelihood of giving in to your urges.

Distract – Redirect your attention to something else, engaging in an activity that requires focus. Distract means that you take control of the urge by getting busy and paying attention to something other than what is triggering you. Avoid sitting and ruminating on the urge – instead, put your focus on something else. For some people that may be baking or creating art, while for others it could be watching TV, reading a book, taking a walk, showering, or exercising. Distracting yourself diverts your mind from the urge and helps break the cycle of obsessive

thoughts. Whether it is a hobby or any constructive activity, the key is to shift your focus away from the urge until it loses its grip on you.

Substitute – Replace the undesired behavior with a healthier alternative. If you have difficulty managing your anger, take a walk. If you are trying to stop smoking, pick up a piece of fruit or vegetable. Although a carrot or celery stick may not give you the same effect, it helps you by simply having something to put in your mouth. You could also use a toothpick or straw. The trick is to come up with something that can be easily substituted in. Substitution involves finding a positive and constructive activity that fulfills the same need or desire as the urge. This way, you address the root cause of the urge while channeling your energy into a more positive outlet.

As Gandhi said, “We cannot, in a moment, get rid of habits of a lifetime.” So, remember that resisting an urge is a practice of choosing strategies that help you develop new habits that are healthier or more productive than your cravings or urges.

This worksheet is designed to help you manage urges using the DEADS strategies: Delay, Escape, Avoid, Distract, and Substitute. By using these strategies, you can develop effective tools for breaking habitual patterns, overcoming urges and cravings, and fostering healthier behaviors.

What to Do

What specific urge or behavior are you experiencing?

Rate the intensity of the urge on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being low, 10 being high): _____

DEADS Strategies

1. Delay. Write down three reasons why delaying your response to this urge might be beneficial.

Set a specific time frame for delaying action (e.g., 10 minutes, 30 minutes): _____

What obstacles might get in the way of delaying acting on the urge or craving? Be specific.

2. Escape. Identify the environment or situation triggering the urge.

List three ways you can physically distance yourself from this trigger when the urge arises.

3. Avoid. Identify specific people, places, or activities that commonly lead to the urge.

Develop a plan to proactively avoid or minimize exposure to these triggers. Be specific!

4. Distract. List three activities or hobbies that you enjoy and can easily engage in when you experience a craving or urge.

Choose one activity from the list that you can use as a distraction when the urge arises.

5. Substitute. Identify a healthier alternative behavior that can fulfill the same need or desire.

Write down how you can integrate this substitute behavior into your routine.

Choose at least two DEADS strategies and create a step-by-step plan for implementing these strategies the next time you experience the urge.

Over the next month, record your experiences in the following chart. Note the date, identify the craving or urge you experience, and describe which DEADS strategy you used. Finally, write down whether you avoided giving in to your urge or craving.

Date	Urge/Craving	Strategy Used	Avoid Giving In? Y / N

Reflections on This Exercise

What was challenging about this exercise? Be specific.

Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

Did you feel better able to manage your urges after completing this exercise? Why or why not?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
