

Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention for Cravings and Negative Moods

Addiction to alcohol and other drugs can be successfully treated. Left untreated, this brain disease causes harm to those who have it, to their families and others, and can be fatal if left untreated (NIDA, 2010; Leshner, 2001). Stopping the use of alcohol and other drugs is necessary for recovery. However, recovery is not only about abstinence; it is also about actively seeking personal growth (Gorski, 1989). It's a journey that creates a much better quality of life.

Among the top reasons people relapse back into active addiction are cravings and negative mood states. Mindfulness-based relapse prevention involves deep breathing and noticing what's going on inside without judgment. This practice can be used to manage cravings and negative moods, and can help to maintain recovery (Witkiewitz, et al., 2013). Spiritual practices, including those suggested by 12 Step fellowships, are also very effective. These can be combined with mindfulness-based relapse prevention.

How to Do It

Breathe deeply while paying attention to your breathing. Notice your thoughts and feelings. The basic premise is that we can train ourselves to breathe deeply in and out, notice our inner experiences, and do this without becoming attached to our thoughts. If you start to drift into focusing your thoughts on something in particular, just bring the focus back to your breath. Also, we make it a point to not judge ourselves for the thoughts we have. We stay in the present moment (Witkiewitz, et al., 2013). I would suggest doing this meditation practice regularly so that if you really need it to manage cravings or negative moods, it will already be familiar to you.

For recovering people, thoughts about drinking, drugging, or unhealthy behavior can be triggered unconsciously; they just happen sometimes. Typically, over time they happen less and less. When conscious thoughts about using occur, it's extremely important to redirect these thoughts very quickly towards intentionally remaining abstinent. Breathe deeply, remember the reasons you're choosing a life in recovery, and practice mindfulness-based relapse prevention. Do this for a minute or two, longer if needed, and then reevaluate and continue until eventually cravings go away and moods change.

It is hypothesized that the neurobiology of our brains changes in recovery so that triggers to use become less and less likely to lead to relapse in a stimulus-response cycle (Witkiewitz, et al., 2013). The consequences of a relapse can be devastating, and regularly focusing our intention on staying abstinent and being in good recovery works. Being honest, grateful, in contact with supportive others, and practicing other recovery activities produces good results.

Gorski, T.T. *Passages through recovery: An action plan for preventing relapse*. Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1989.

Leshner, A.I. *Addiction is a brain disease*. Issues in Science and Technology Online, 2001.

NIDA. *Drugs, brains and behavior: The science of addiction*. NIH Publication Number 10-5605. Published 2007, revised August 2010

Witkiewitz, K., Lustyk, M., Bowen, S. *Re-training the addicted brain: A review of hypothesized neurobiological mechanisms of mindfulness-based relapse prevention*. Psychol Addict Behav. 2013 June ; 27(2): 351-365.