

# Helpful Coping Strategies for Gambling Cravings

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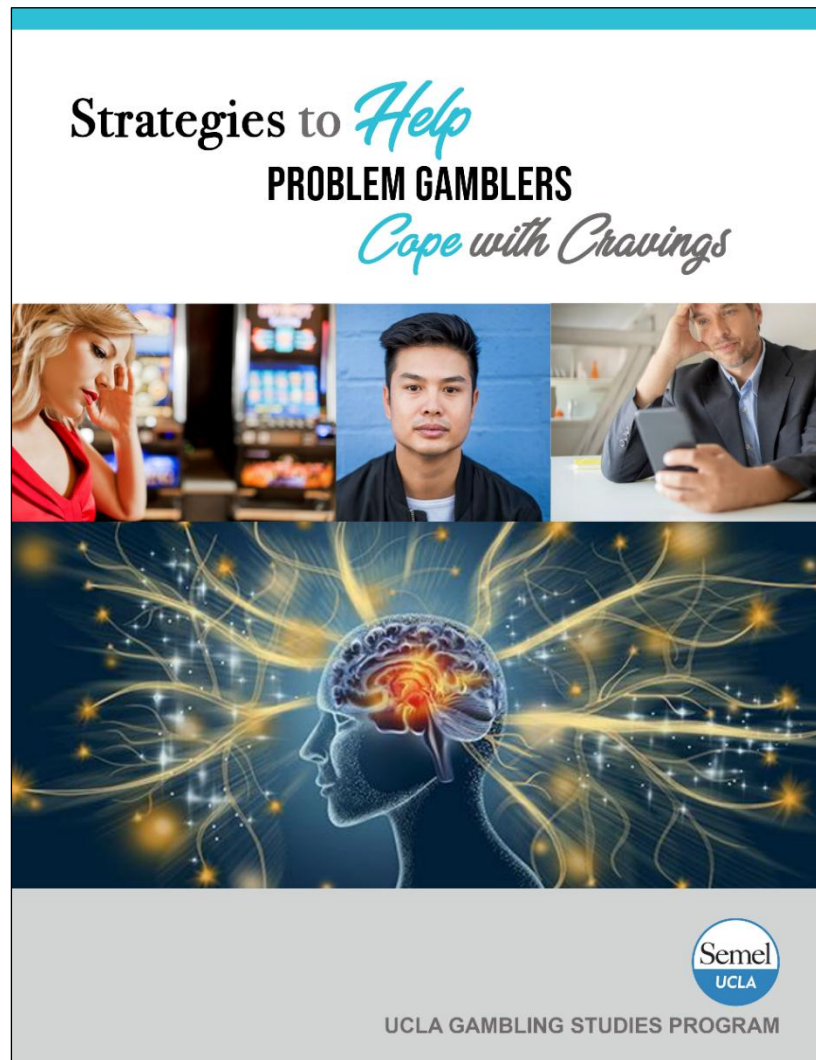


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# Conflicts of Interest to Declare

CATEGORY	CONFLICT DECLARATION
Employment	None to Declare
Research Support	None to Declare
Scientific Advisory Boards	None to Declare
Consultancy	None to Declare
Speakers Bureau	None to Declare
Major Stockholder	None to Declare
Patents	None to Declare
Honoraria	Modest Compensation
Travel Support	Provided
Books, Products, Services	None to Declare
Pharmaceutical	None to Declare

- Measuring Cravings, Assess at Beginning and Across Treatment
- Psychoeducation about the Neurobiology of Addiction, Cravings
- Help Patient Reorganize their Thoughts and Beliefs About Craving
- Understand and Responding to Triggers with Curiosity, Non-Judgement
- Challenging Irrational Beliefs about Cravings
- Healthy Distractions, Incompatible Activities
- Connecting with Community
- Mindfulness Based Strategies



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UCLA GAMBLING STUDIES PROGRAM

# Defining Craving and How to Measure Craving in Problem Gamblers

**CRAVING**

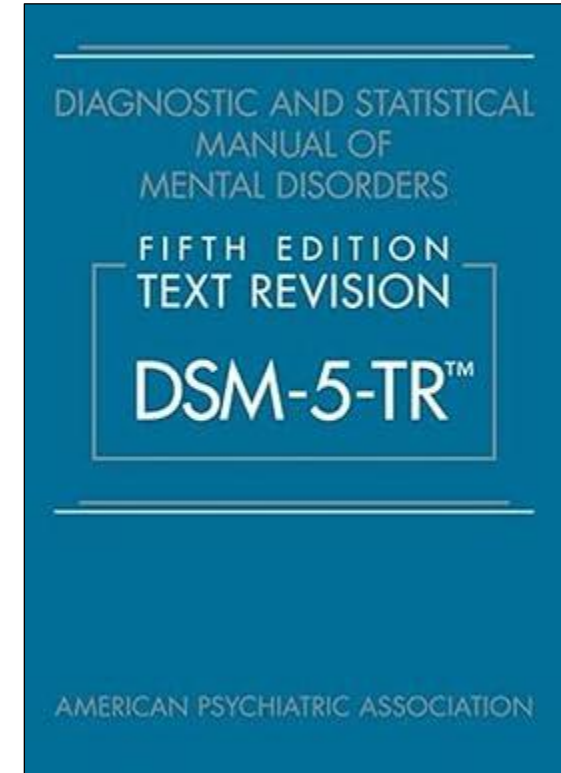
**URGE**

*The **desire** to reexperience the effect of a substance or **behavior** that is **strong** enough to **distract** a person from **everything** else in their life.*

***Urge: Impulse to act on a craving.***

# Craving Not a Symptom of Gambling Disorder in DSM-5 but Craving is a Symptom of SUDs

- 1. Conceptual:** Craving for substances is thought to be biologically tied to the presence/absence of a drug. With gambling, craving is more *psychological* (e.g., urges, fantasies, mental rehearsal). Some experts argued this was already captured under “preoccupation with gambling.”
- 2. Diagnostic Parsimony:** DSM committees often try to avoid redundancy. Including both *preoccupation* and *craving/urge* likely overlapped too much.
- 3. Measurement Challenges:** Craving in gambling can be highly variable and harder to standardize. Research measures of gambling craving (e.g., Gambling Urge Scale) are newer compared to decades of craving research in substance use.



## REGARDLESS...

1. **Cravings and Urges** are *very common* in gambling disorder and have been shown to be a strong predictor of relapse.
2. **Neuroimaging** studies have shown that craving among problem gamblers activates brain reward pathways (ventral striatum, insula) similar to substance cravings.
3. **Treatment** approaches such as CBT, mindfulness and pharmacological interventions specifically target managing cravings and urges.
4. **World Health Organization in the ICD-11** acknowledges “Individuals with gambling disorder often experience urges or cravings to engage in gambling behaviour” as an additional clinical feature.

## Measuring Craving...

Cravings are believed to be a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of subjective, behavioral, physiological, and neurochemical dimensions making them complex to measure and understand.

Our team at UCLA adapted one of the more established scales applied in the substance abuse field, the Penn Alcohol Craving Scale to problem gambling.

# Clarity about Cravings: Measuring Cravings with Specificity

<b>UCLA Gambling Craving Scale</b>		Name: John Doe	Date:
<i>Instructions:</i> Below are a number of statements that attempt to understand your experience of gambling cravings <b>during the past week</b> . For this questionnaire, define cravings as a desire or urge.			
1.	During the past week, <i>how often</i> have you had an urge or desire to gamble?	Most of the Time (21-40 times during the past week or 5-6 times a day)	
2.	During the past week, <i>how much time</i> was spent experiencing urges or desires to gamble?	Between 3 to 6 hours	
3.	At the most severe point, <i>how strong or intense</i> was your urge or desire to gamble this past week?	Very strong desire	
4.	How <i>difficult</i> was it for you to <i>control or resist urges</i> to gamble this past week?	I wasn't able to control, I gambled	
5.	Keeping in mind your responses to the previous questions, rate your <i>overall average desire</i> to gamble this past week.	I had a desire to gamble most of the time	

# Clarity about Cravings

6. If you gambled this past week, please respond to the following questions:  I did not gamble this past week

How *many occasions* did you gamble this past week?

How *much total time* did you gamble this past week? Hours:  Minutes:

What was the *overall outcome* of your gambling this week:

What *percentage* of your *weekly* income did you win/lose?  % How much money won/lost?

Was there a stressor, situation, experience or trigger that led you to gamble this past week (if you gambled)?

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Boredom            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Wanted to Make Money        | <input type="checkbox"/> Need for Relaxation                  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Felt Sad/Depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> Restless                               | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Urges were too Strong     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Loneliness         | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Stress Relief               | <input type="checkbox"/> Wanted Social Connection             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excitement Felt               | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Needed Distraction / Escape | <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict with Family/Friends         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anxious                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Social Pressure                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict with Romantic Partner       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Felt Lucky                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't Care                            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Wanted Money to Pay Debts |

# Treatment Strategies to Help Problem Gamblers Cope with Cravings

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## **cope**

a verb meaning to deal successfully with a difficulty, a problem, a responsibility, or a demand

# Psychoeducation about the Neurobiology of Addiction, Craving

Why do we educate patients about the neurobiology of addiction and in what way do we believe it's helpful?

1. It reduces stigma by reframing a gambling disorder as a brain-based condition rather than moral failings.
2. It validates the patient's lived experience by explaining why cravings, withdrawal, and relapse occur despite strong intentions to abstain.
3. Psychoeducation can increase motivation for recovery, improve treatment adherence, and enhance engagement with both pharmacological and behavioral interventions.
4. It normalizes the nonlinear recovery process and provides a scientific rationale for coping strategies, stress management, and ongoing care.
5. For families, this education fosters empathy and reduces blame, creating a more supportive environment for recovery.

Revisit Your Handouts, TedTalks, YouTube Videos, etc...

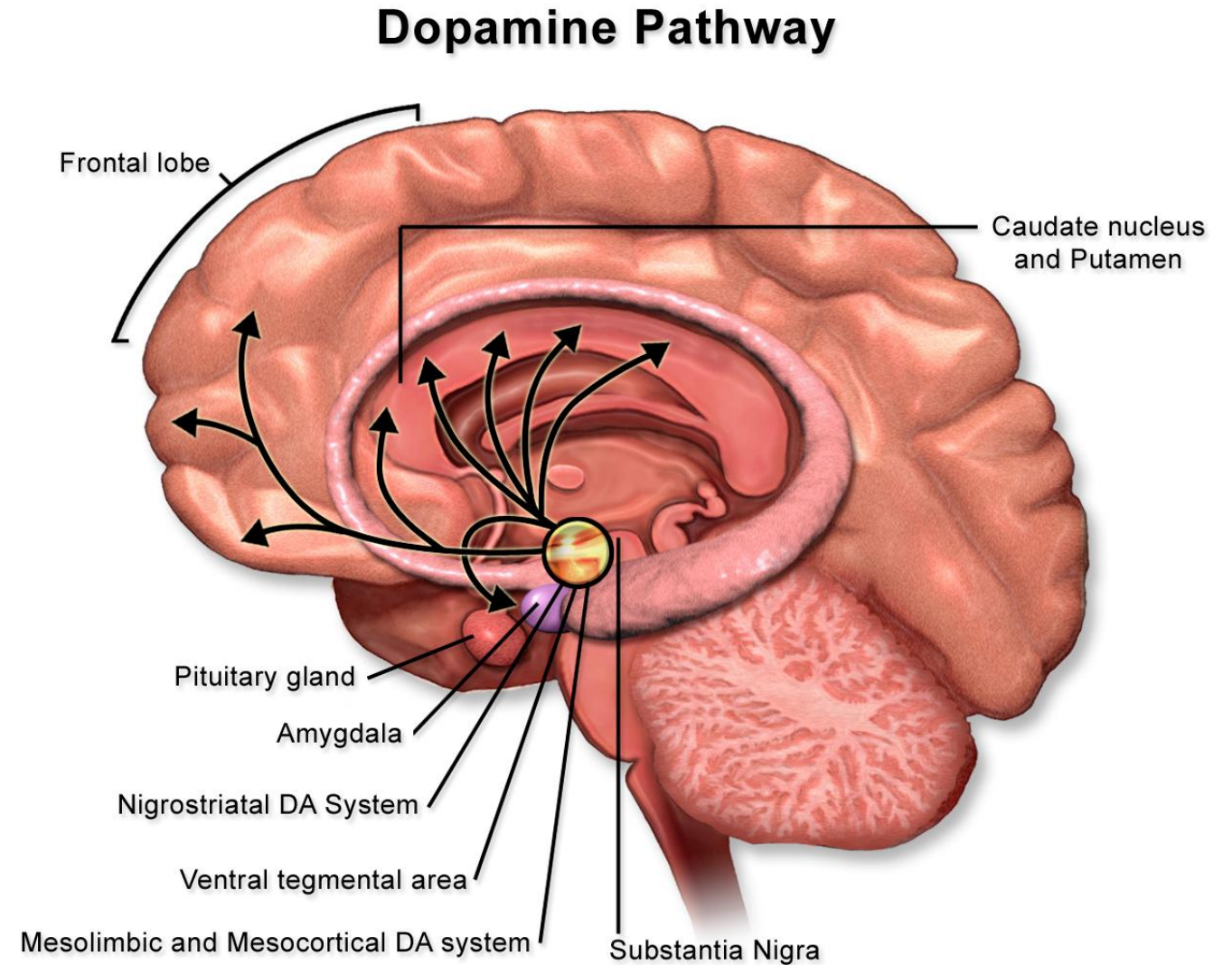
The **reward system** is a network of interconnected brain structures, including the ventral tegmental area (VTA), nucleus accumbens, prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus, that processes rewarding stimuli and reinforces behaviors necessary for survival. This system is crucial for **motivation, learning** (including networks of attention and memory), and the **experience of pleasure**, with the dopamine neurotransmitter playing a key role in signaling the **value of stimuli** and **motivating reward-seeking behavior**.

This system of interconnected brain networks is **much more complex than we have previously thought** and we are continuing to learn new things.

## Key Components

- Ventral Tegmental Area
  - Nucleus Accumbens
  - Prefrontal Cortex
  - Amygdala
  - Hippocampus
- Discussion about Neurotransmitters

**Beyond Pleasure.** While dopamine is strongly linked to feelings of pleasure, its primary role is more about motivation and reward-seeking. The dopamine system signals the value of a reward, encouraging the brain to prioritize and pursue activities associated with those stimuli.

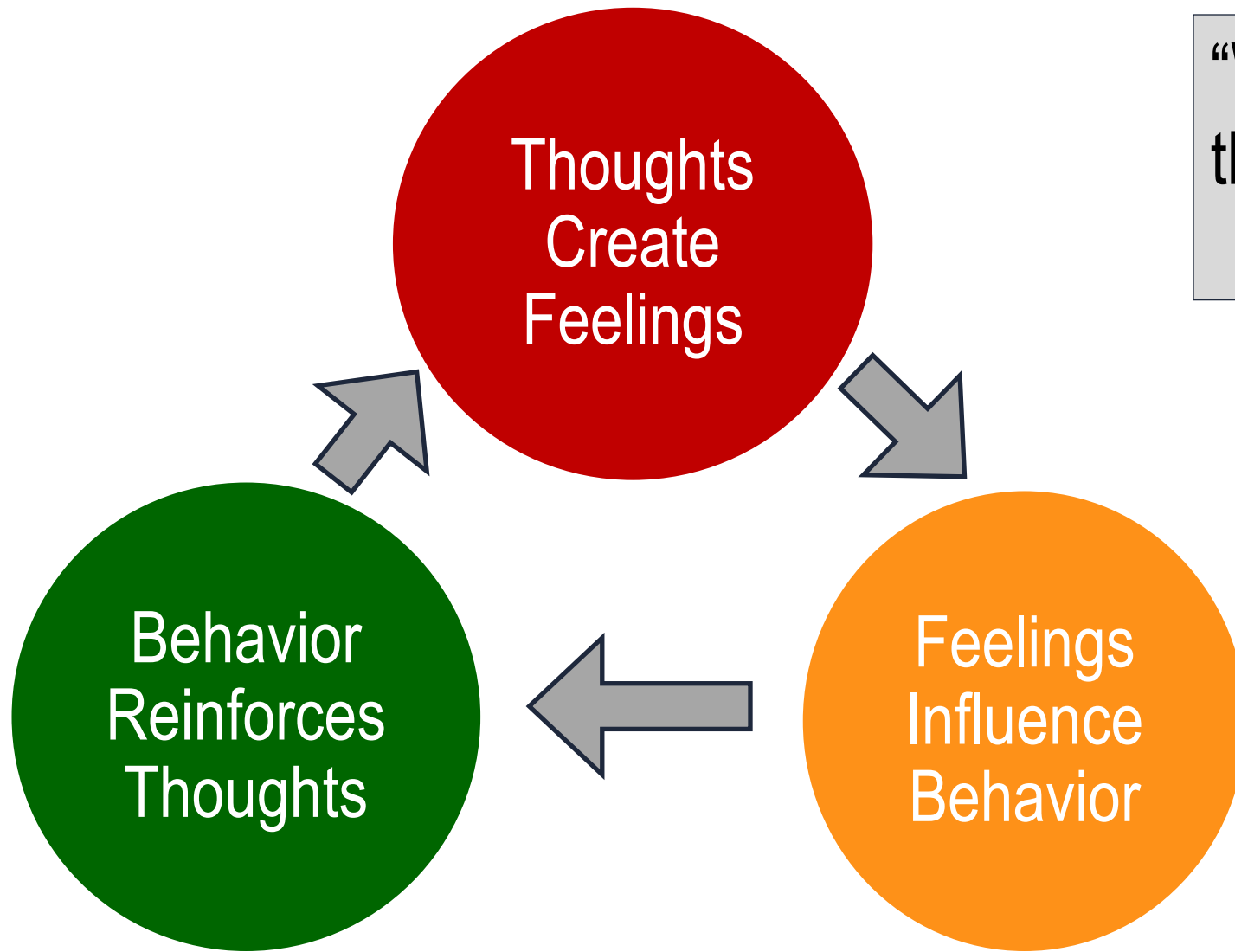


## How Does Gambling Activities Capitalize on Neuroscience?

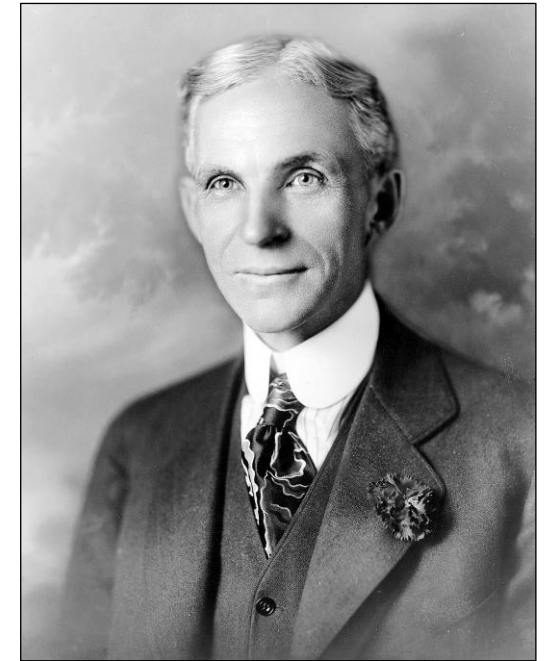
1. Random, variable reinforcement schedules of rewards creates a stronger dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens to uncertain rewards than predictable ones, keeping people's attention and keeping them engaged.
2. Near misses exploit this system as well. Almost winning activates similar brain regions as actual wins motivating players to continuing playing.
3. Games and gambling devices are engineered to promote **immersive flow states** where players lose track of time.
4. Online platforms track player behavior and use **predictive algorithms** to adjust difficulty, reward timing, and marketing to keep individuals engaged.

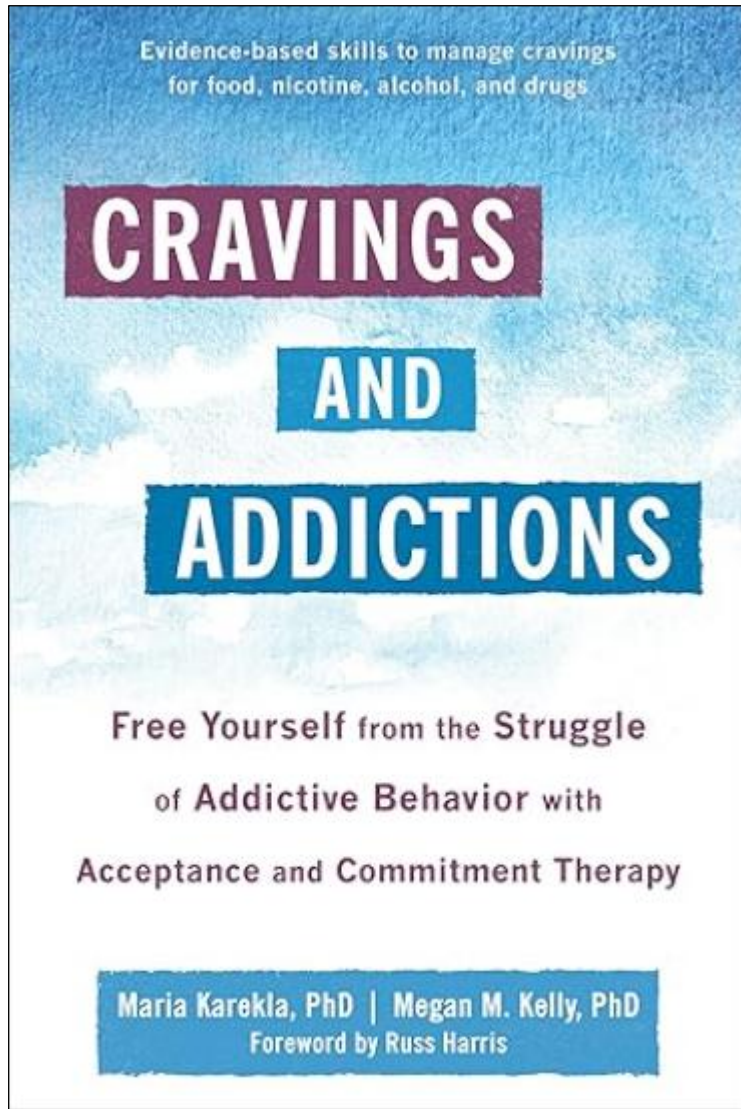
Changing Your Thoughts about Cravings  
Can Change How You Feel  
Which Can Change How Your Respond (Behave)

# Changing Your Thoughts, Changes Your Feelings, and Your Behavior



“Whether you think you can or think you can’t — you are right”  
~ Henry Ford





“We affirm that, to make an important life change, we need to change not whether we *experience* cravings, but whether we can *change our relationship* to and perceptions of cravings and addictions. This doesn’t demand some kind of perfection, or that we structure our lives to avoid temptation. It’s actually achievable.”

# What beliefs are held about cravings? How can we reorganize our relationship with cravings?

Old Relationship	New Relationship
Cravings are the enemy	I can co-exist with cravings
Cravings are given special status	Cravings can be put in perspective
Cravings are irresistible	Cravings are uncomfortable
Cravings influence me beyond my control	Cravings influence but don't determine my choices
Cravings are stronger than my willpower	My thoughts are more powerful than my cravings
I have to fight my cravings, tug of war	I can live in peace and harmony with my cravings
Cravings have mystical powers	Cravings are a physical and psychological experience
Cravings are going to get stronger and stronger	Cravings come and go, they rise and fall
My cravings are relentless, will never go away	Cravings do not persist or last forever, I can survive

# Cognitive Restructuring: Examples of Changing our Thoughts about Cravings

Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviors
My cravings are relentless, they will never go away	Hopeless, discouraged, exhausted	Gamble
My craving is stronger than my willpower, I can't beat this urge	Powerless, helpless, defeated	Gamble

# Challenging Irrational Thoughts

## THOUGHT

My cravings are **relentless**, they will **never** go away

## DISTORTION

Catastrophizing  
Absolute Thinking

## CORRECTION

My cravings are **episodic**, they rise, fall, and **fade away**

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1. Is this thought realistic, accurate, logical?
2. Am I basing my thoughts on facts or on feelings?
3. Am I treating my thought like it's a fact?
4. What is the evidence for this thought?
5. Could I be misinterpreting the evidence? (Do I have an Attention Bias?)
6. Am I viewing the situation as absolute when it's really more complicated?
7. Am I having this thought out of habit, or do facts support it?

**I will gamble just a little to prove to myself it's not a problem anymore.** *This thought is just flirting with temptation and it's ridiculous. I'm gambling with my sobriety which is a non-monetary form of gambling. I'm not trying to see how close I can get to the edge without going over the cliff. Wisdom would suggest I stay as far away from the edge as possible to ensure my safety.*

**I have a 'FreePlay' voucher so I will not be using my own money.** *FreePlay is never free, to the contrary, it's very costly. These vouchers and bonus points are used by the gaming venues to get me in the door but I will eventually begin using my own money, and then chase my losses. If I win, I will chase my winnings with the belief I will win more, and then lose whatever gains I made. At a minimum, the "FreePlay" will cost me my sobriety.*

# Be Curious and Non-Judgmental with Your Cravings

# Being Curious and Non-Judgmental About Cravings

- How does the craving manifest in the body? What sensations are felt (e.g., increased breathing, heartrate, tense shoulders, etc...)?
- What is the frequency, intensity, or average duration of cravings? What makes it more intense, less intense? For example, do certain thoughts make it more intense or less intense?
- What other thoughts arise in the wake of a craving? How does having (or not having) money influence the trajectory of a craving?
- **Can you be curious about *what you are really craving*?** For example, one gambler reported craving the feeling of being special when he won money because people treated him differently, crowds cheered, attractive women would pay attention to him, and so forth. So, what he was really craving was attention, connection with people, and the need to feel special or important.

# Identify Triggers, Precipitating and Perpetuating Risk Factors

# Pay Attention to External and Internal Triggers and the Thoughts that Follow



## External Triggers:

- Access to Money
- Seeing an Advertisement
- Sports Events (e.g. Superbowl)
- Holidays, Special Events
- Getting a Bill in the Mail
- Driving by Gaming Venue

## Internal Triggers:

- Unpleasant Emotions such as Shame, Boredom, Powerlessness or Positive such as feeling Happy
- Feeling Stress
- Conflict with others
- Trauma induced experiences

# Develop Healthy Distractions

# Create a List of Healthy Distractions

Category	Activity
Exercise	running, yoga, swimming, rollerblading, pickleball, tennis, hiking, stretching
Personal Growth	mindfulness meditation, journaling, gratitude list, spirituality, self-help reading, podcast
Games	crossword puzzles, computer, board games, chess, darts
Learning	a language, an instrument, a skill, a hobby, history information, ask ChatGPT questions
Chores	yardwork, cleaning, laundry, cooking, grocery shopping, organizing
Arts, Creativity	crafts, photo collage, write a poem, draw/paint, visit art gallery, origami, make a wish list
Outdoor	hiking, bird watch, walking, biking, find a new park to sit and relax
Reading	self-help books, GA/SMART recovery materials, new food recipes, emails
Listening/Watching	listen to music, a TedTalk, a movie, find a place to people watch, a podcast
Social	attend a MeetUp, a club/group activity, connect with friends, family, community events
Volunteer	random act of kindness, donate clothes, homeless shelters, church, hospice, soup kitchen
Planning	plan a trip, a bucket list, a dinner with friends, personal goals
Fun	tourist in your own city, perfect signature, find interesting quotes, explore world records
Connecting	Call a friend/family, meet with a sponsor, mail a letter, attending a meeting



# Connecting with Others

# Everything You Think You Know about Addiction is Wrong

**TED**

Ideas change everything



Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong

21,478,601 views | Johann Hari | TEDGlobalLondon • June 2015

# Connecting with Others

- GA Meetings
  - SMART Recovery
  - MeetUp Groups
  - Family
  - Friends
  - MeetUp Groups
  - Volunteer Work
  - Coworkers
  - Strangers
- 

## Enhancing Connections with Others

1. Be your authentic self
2. Respect people's boundaries
3. Stay focused on the present
4. Move past the surface level
5. Share the conversation
6. Be genuine with your admiration
7. Be a good listener
8. Schedule your time
9. Maintain eye contact
10. Offer a smile

*“I had a craving at 2:00 am in the morning. Part of me wanted to rationalize gambling by telling myself there was no one I could call at such an early hour. Then I remembered the [www.gamblersinrecovery.com](http://www.gamblersinrecovery.com) international website and found an online meeting hosted in Dublin, Ireland. Listening to other gamblers from across the world and their experiences gave me hope and inspired me to abstain from gambling. My craving went away and I regained perspective about my recovery from the meeting. Thank God for the Irish.”*



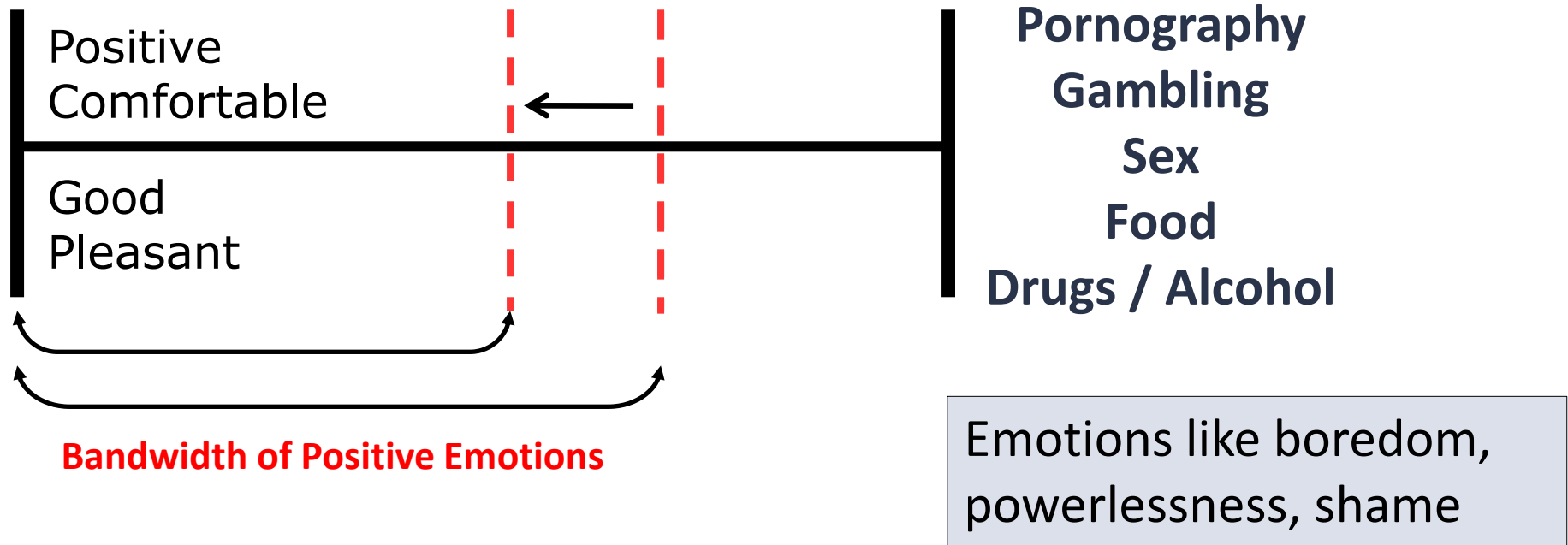
# Mechanisms of Action: How Does Mindfulness Exert an Effect on Problem Gambling?

- 1. Increases tolerance for uncomfortable feelings;** learning to be present, curious, open, and non-judgmental of emotions
- 2. Stress coping** through letting go of the stories that give rise to stress and regulating breathing helps reduce stress
- 3. Reorganizing relationships with cravings;** letting go of thoughts about cravings, being present in the body, curious about cravings, open, non-judgmental

## Mechanisms of Action: How Does Mindfulness Exert an Effect on Problem Gambling?

- 4. Enhances ability to regulate attention**, sustained focus on whatever is happening at the moment; letting go of distracting thoughts and refocusing attention again and again
- 5. Reduces impulsivity** through helping people be present with the “**space**”, increasing levels of self-control, and reducing the effect of emotional dysregulation on impulsive responses

# Increasing Tolerance for Unpleasant Experiences



Emotionally avoidant people become numb and detached from both good and bad feelings. True, they've avoided pain and negative emotion, but they've also diminished or extinguished their ability to feel positive emotions.

# Contrast Helps Us Appreciate Differences through Comparisons



**Reorganizing relationships with cravings;**  
letting go of thoughts about cravings, being  
present in the body, curious about cravings,  
open, non-judgmental

# Reorganizing Relationships with Cravings

- Addictive cravings are powerful and can be intense
- Patients often get into a tug-of-war with cravings
- Patients often give special status to cravings
- Patients have an adversarial relationship with cravings

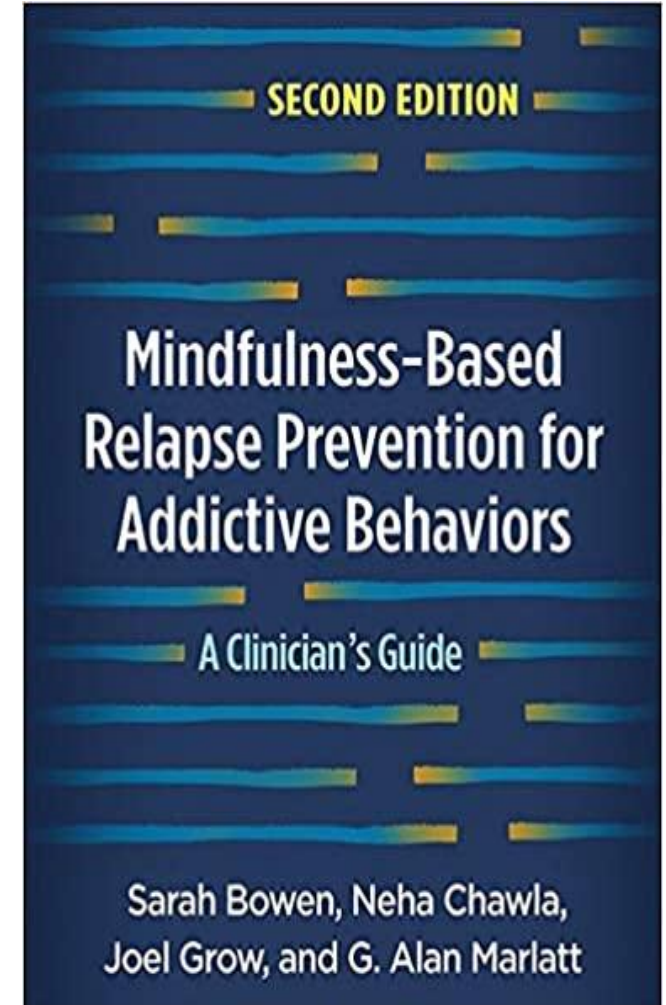


**Reorganize relationship with craving** to co-exist: Neither avoiding nor indulging, just being present in a non-judgmental, curious manner.

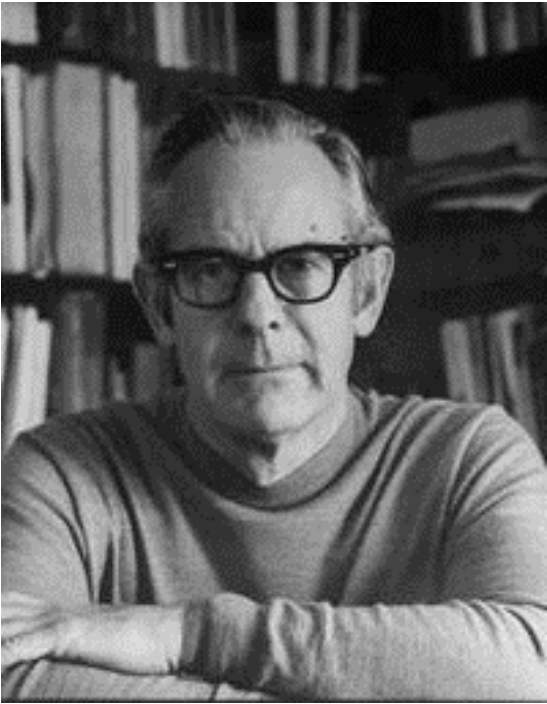
Mindfulness may recruit brain regions not implicated in executive deficits

# Urge Surfing

Urge Surfing teaches gamblers to recognize their relationship with craving from one of fear or resistance to that of “being with” the craving in a curious, non-judgmental way.



Between the stimulus and response there is a space...



*Between **stimulus** and **response** there is a **space**. In that space is our **power to choose** our response. In our response lies our **growth** and our **freedom**.*

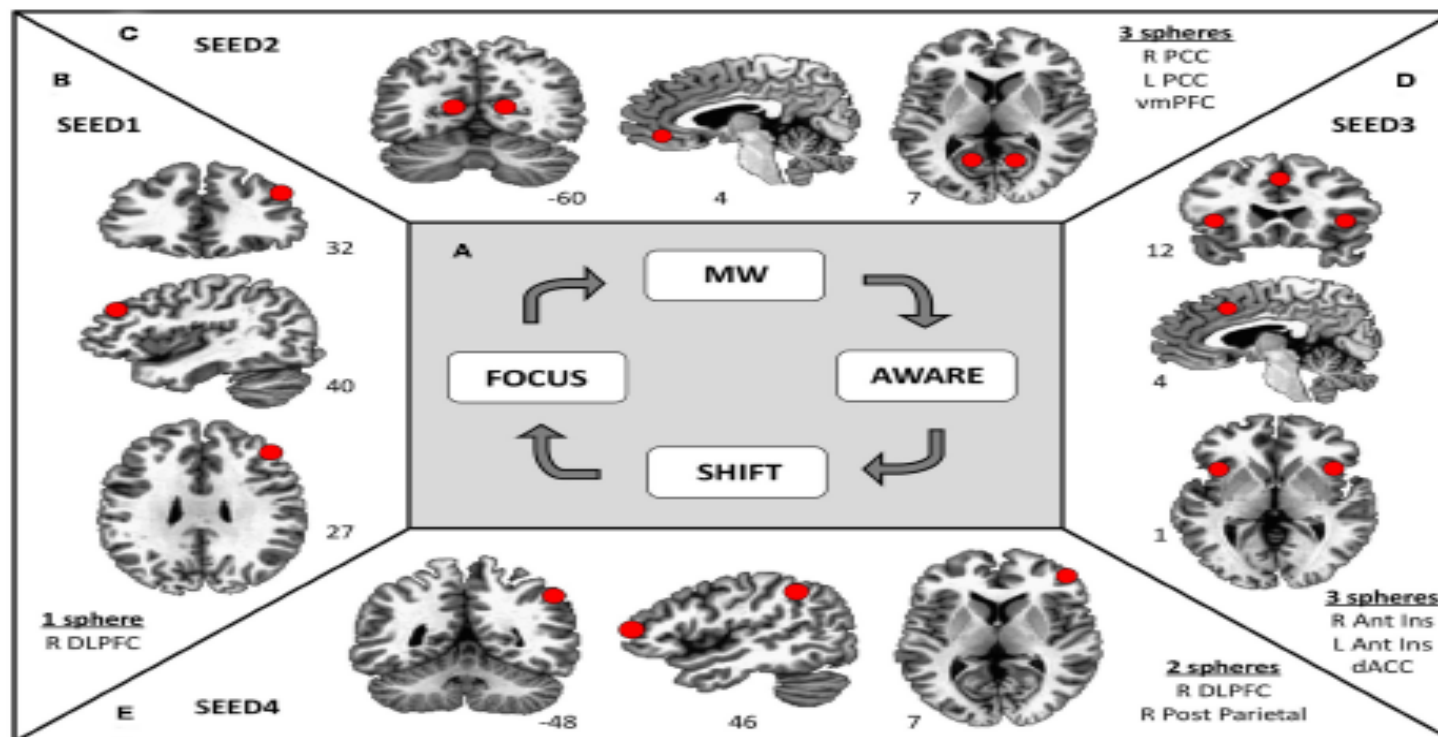
*—Dr. Rollo May (1963),  
Freedom and Responsibility Re-Examined*



## Effects of meditation experience on functional connectivity of distributed brain networks

Wendy Hasenkamp\* and Lawrence W. Barsalou

Department of Psychology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA



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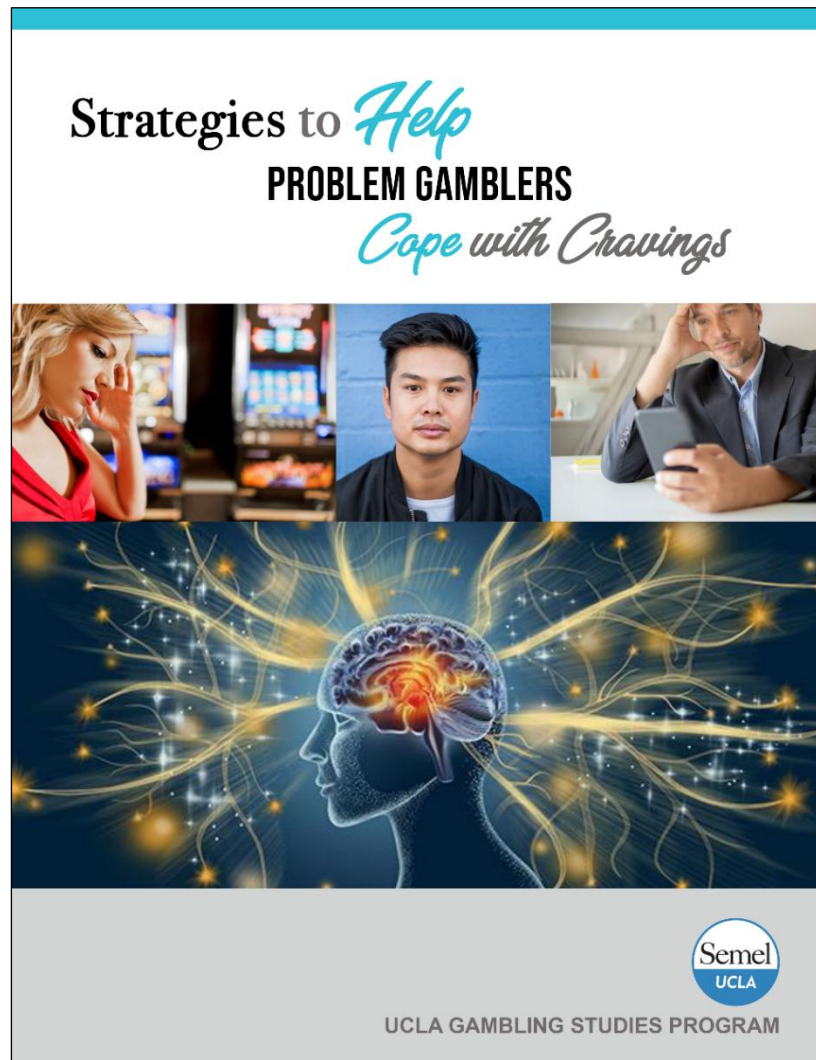
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**Gambling Addiction**

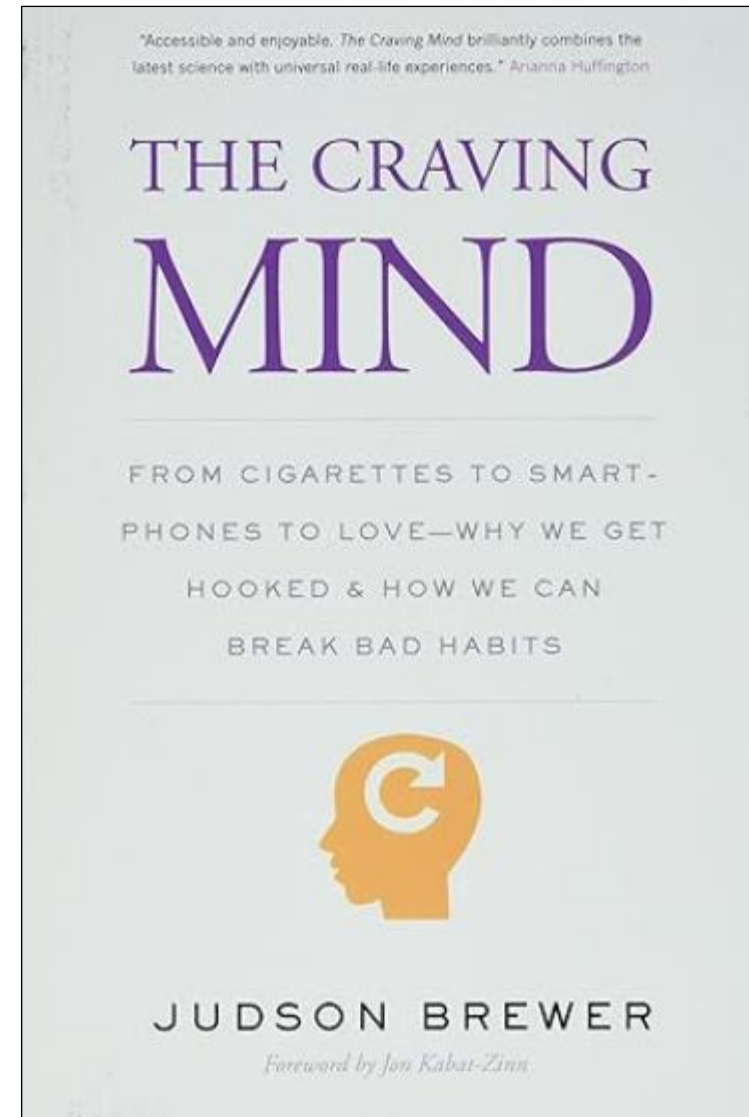
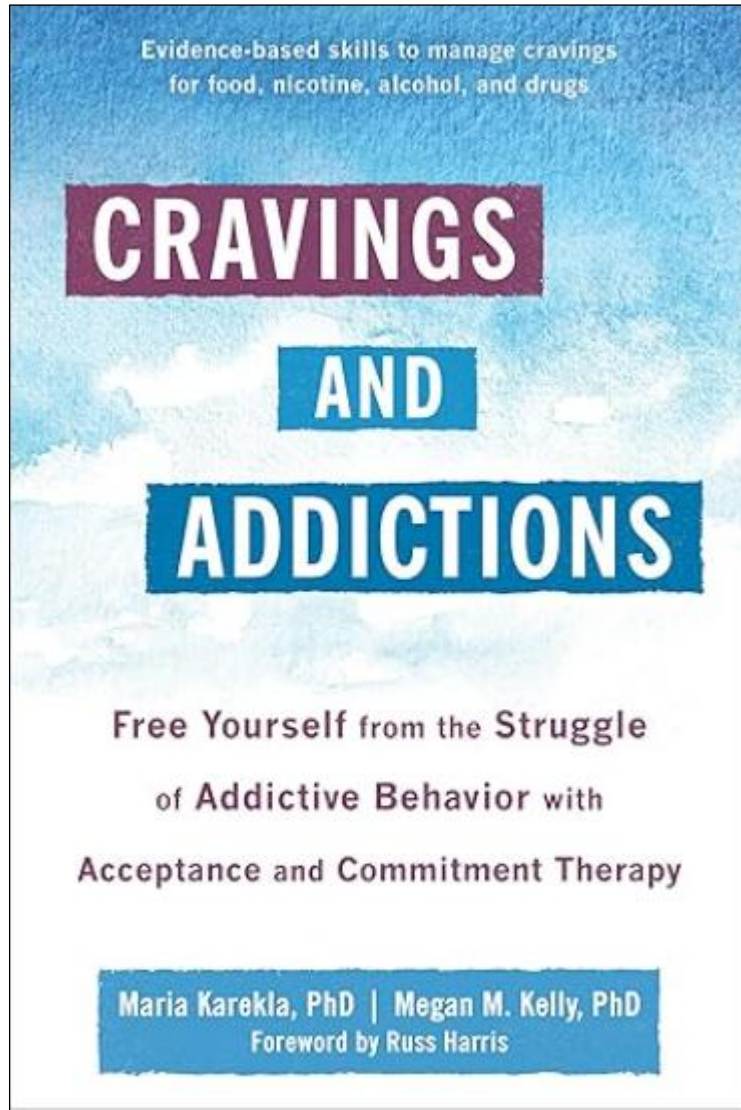
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# Recommended Readings



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