

THE CRAVING CYCLE
Ronna Kabatznick, Ph.D.
TCME Board Member
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PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW

This teleconference is specifically designed to explain the dynamics of craving that lead to mindless eating, overeating or bingeing. In order to release ourselves from the craving cycle, we need to know how it works and become mindful of the places where we get caught. (A future teleconference will show how mindfulness, insight and wisdom help release us from the craving cycle's compulsive grip.)

The powerful dynamics of the craving cycle take place largely on an unconscious level, and often happen in seconds. The momentum of the cycle is so strong that it has been compared to the experience of falling out of a tree—as we're falling through the branches, we don't notice we're getting cut and bruised. It's when we hit the ground that we realize we're hurt. Sometimes the consequences of mindless and compulsive eating are quite severe and affect physical and mental health, finances and relationships. The consequences can also be more subtle, less dramatic. For example, instead of paying attention to what we're eating, and enjoying it, we detach from the experience, lost in thoughts and feelings. We eat mindlessly and then wonder why we're still hungry and unsatisfied.

When intoxicating cravings and desires flood the mind, and strong mindfulness is not present, it is very challenging to interrupt this repetitive cycle. The illusion that emotional and physical cravings can be satisfied by obtaining something from the outside (food, new clothes, drugs, sex, cars, vacations, etc.) fuels the cycle again and again.

A key point: the craving cycle is not a linear process (a leads to b, leads to c). We can get stuck in it at any time and at any point. Sometimes we can identify a pattern; other times we cannot. The momentum of the cycle is largely dependent on the depth of our belief in the promise that once our cravings are satisfied, we'll be happy and content, never to need or want anything so badly or desperately again. Our prayers for happiness have been answered.

AT THE ROOT OF THE CRAVING CYCLE

The craving cycle is based on deeply ingrained, misguided perceptions about the nature of craving and desire, and life itself. We erroneously believe that:

1. Suffering is unnatural and wrong, something to be avoided at all costs;
2. Sensual indulgence is the best way to alleviate emotional and physical pain and suffering;
3. Pleasure can be sustained and is the source of enduring satisfaction;
4. Our thoughts, feelings, body, perceptions, and habits are *who we are*.

■ SHORT GUIDED MEDITATION

Invite clients or group members to sit in a relaxed, yet erect position, with the dignity of a king or a queen, to gently close their eyes, take a few deep breaths prior to mindfully returning to normal breathing. Then slowly read the following questions aloud. Allow ample time between each question to encourage personal reflection and exploration.

- Have you ever found yourself staring at an empty plate, without any awareness of having eaten the food that was just on it?
- Do you wonder why, no matter how committed you are to healthy and mindful eating, you eventually slide back into your old eating patterns?
- When you try to comfort yourself with your favorite food, often lots of it, do you tend to feel worse?
- When you're in the grip of craving a certain food, do you feel that you have no choice, that you're obsessed, and you don't care about the consequences?
- After binging or overeating, do you ever feel like you're being beaten up or condemned by critical and cruel thoughts, to such an extent that you give up even trying?

Please provide adequate time for individual or group discussion. Ask clients or group members what questions and answers captured their personal experiences. Ask them to describe one or two examples of situations or responses that relate to these questions and their answers.

After the meditation and sharing, you can move onto the expanded meditation on the dynamics of the craving cycle.

■ EXPANDED GUIDED MEDITATION

Once again, invite clients or groups members to sit in a relaxed, yet erect position, with the dignity of a king or a queen, to gently close their eyes, take a few deep breaths prior to mindfully returning to normal breathing. Explain that you'll be describing a cycle of mindless eating. Encourage them to tune into the descriptions and examples of internal voices that fuel the cycle, noticing the aspects that they can identify with, based on their own experiences.

THE SETUP

The setup is the doorway into the craving cycle. It represents the *potential* for getting lost in craving, wanting and desiring, that often leads to and/or accompanies mindless eating. Often the setup takes place before we're conscious of it. There may be some, or no, awareness of vague feelings of boredom, uneasiness, or agitation stirring within. The habit to avoid uncomfortable feelings, no matter how weak or strong, triggers the desire to escape them, to seek out something that promises pleasure and release from pain.

Sometimes the setup is quite dramatic, even terrifying: we're in an emotionally charged situation, filled with tension, fear, anxiety, self-doubt. The potential for getting lost in craving also occurs when nothing particularly special or dramatic is happening. We might be feeling tired, bored, lonely, or even happy, and in reaction, we reach for food.

Deep cravings live within us, always ready to manifest, ready to respond to any triggers, large or small, internal or external. Just about anything can be a trigger: thoughts, feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), sensations, smells, certain people, places, stores, images, web sites, or advertisements. The list of triggers is endless.

Inner Voices

Neutral: (feeling bored) *What's happening on the cooking channel? I wonder if there's ice cream in the freezer?*

Pleasant: *This party is great! I wonder where the luscious cheeses are?*

Unpleasant: (exhausted after work) *I need a pick-me-up. These cookies look delicious. Why deprive myself?*

IT'S JUST ME AND MY CRAVING

Now the blinders come on as our vision narrows to the object of our desire—chocolate, another plate of spaghetti, ice cream, or whatever. We often idealize and project onto these objects the ability to make us finally feel satiated. We are lost in the illusion that the feeling of satisfaction is so close, we can almost feel it, taste it. We feel consumed by desire and driven by demanding feelings of we “need to, want to, have to” get what we want. We become so preoccupied and enamored by what we're craving, that it feels like the world has shrunk to “just me” and “the object of my desire.”

Inner Voices

All I can think about is that spectacular chocolate cake.

I just have to have another piece of pizza.

This pint of ice cream is what I need to feel better.

THE GREAT DEBATE

At this point in the craving cycle, an internal debate often takes place. Sometimes it takes seconds; other times hours, days or months. It depends on the situation. For example, say you have an illness made worse by eating sweets. You're feeling worn down by the deprivation, tired, and in the grip of an ice cream craving. The defense makes its case on behalf of the ice cream, assessing its indisputable value—why it is so outstanding, unique and essential to have now! The argument is perfectly attuned to the cues that are going to hook us: *It's organic, reduced fat ice cream, imported from Belgium. I could really go for a pint. It's so creamy and satisfying. I've done really good sticking to my diet. A little bit of ice cream isn't going to hurt. It will give me a boost.*

The goal of the defender is to dazzle, convince, or seduce us into believing that the object of our desire is so worthwhile and special, and will make us feel so good, that we'd be crazy to pass up an opportunity to enjoy it. The job of the defender is to also activate denial, so we completely lose sight of the fact that falling for this “pitch” works only in the short-term. We are blinded to the negative consequences and the larger context. These arguments usually awaken the prosecutor who makes an opposing case: *Don't do it! Stop! Don't believe these false promises. Don't compromise your health, or the good feelings that come from eating mindfully, in moderation. Think about your deep desire to live a healthy and meaningful life.*

The key question is who is going to win the debate? Do we go for the object of craving, or do we resist it?

GOTTA HAVE IT

If the defense wins the debate, the “decision” to pursue the ice cream has been made. Lost in craving, feeling driven, and with the fantasy of how great this is going to be, we do whatever needs to be done to get the ice cream. We get in our car late at night to go to the all-night grocery, or we plow through the buffet line to get more cake. The promises and pitches made by the defense—that eating this food has the capacity to stop our discomfort or fulfill our heart’s desires—feel more compelling than ever. We feel completely spellbound and intoxicated by desire. These feelings are so strong, we can't see any disadvantages to this pursuit nor the inevitable letdown and disappointment that lie ahead.

Inner Voices

This ice cream is going to be so worth it! It will taste incredibly good. Might as well enjoy myself today. I'll go back to my food plan tomorrow.

IT'S MINE

Before we know it, we're at the freezer taking hold of the ice cream carton. We've actually made the grab and it's in our hands. This is the moment of maximum intensity, when we're guaranteed the gratification that we've been craving, the sublime feeling that this pleasure will make our life worth living.

Inner Voices

Finally! Great! I've got it. It's all mine. It's just what I want. This is going to be so good. Happiness is in my hands.

OH WOW—THE ECSTASY

As we're just about to eat the ice cream, there is the ecstatic moment of total gratification. The object of craving we've been longing for and fantasizing about has been satisfied. Everything we've done to pursue this incredible feeling is totally worthwhile and justifiable. (It's the biochemical process of getting the dopamine hit which floods the pleasure centers in our brain.) But even as we're consuming the ice cream, the thrill and rush of good feelings are diminishing. The temporary hit of ecstasy starts to wear off, spinning toward the feelings we are trying to avoid. The OH NO is gearing up to move in, to take its predictable role.

Inner Voices

Ahh, this is ecstasy. It's everything I dreamed of. It's out of this world. I can't believe how great it tastes.

OH NO—THE AGONY

But as we bite into the ice cream, there is a mingling of ecstasy and disappointment. We've all had this experience. OH WOW changes to OH NO. It's the first inkling that says: *I don't feel as good as I thought I would. I can't believe this isn't it.* We're staring at an empty dish, wondering what happened. The pleasure has waned or exhausted itself.

The OH NO experience can ripen in two ways:

1. It can trigger the Inner Tyrant, the voice of regret that is laden with self-loathing:
That was a really stupid thing to do! You've got no self-control. How can you be so impulsive? You're hopeless. You couldn't get out of bed two days ago after you ate that candy bar, and you're going to do it again? What an idiot!

2. It can trigger the insatiable Hungry Ghost, the voice that says, if one bowl of ice cream tastes good, a pint would be even better. We'll keep consuming more and more food, whatever it takes to return to that sublime, OH WOW feeling again and again. We are immune to any negative consequences. We are lost in the futile effort of trying to fill up a black hole, a bottomless pit of need and desire.

NOT AGAIN

Now the complex of negative and painful thoughts and feelings flood in to fuel the next setup. The message of these voices depends on our habits of mind. We may lash out at ourselves with anger and recrimination or have intense feelings of failure and self-hatred. If we believe in our feelings and see them as who we are, we may experience deep shame or become depressed. With a full tank of fuel, now we're ready for another lap around the track. *Because I'm such a failure, I need something to cheer me up, to take away the misery.* Again we feel the missing piece, the emptiness, the lack and hunger.

THE SET UP

We then return to where we began, to that feeling of lack, emptiness, deprivation. And we repeat the cycle.

Inner Voices

I shouldn't be so hard on myself. I think I'll get some chocolate (or a new diet book, or new workout clothes, etc.) to make myself feel better.

After the meditation, encourage clients or group members to engage in a discussion of what aspects of the cycle they can identify with, and what inner voices are most familiar.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude and appreciation to my meditation teachers, Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro, co-abbots of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, and to my treasured colleague, Marylyn Genovese, for their invaluable wisdom and guidance in creating this document.

Ronna Kabatnick is a TCME Board Member based in Berkeley, California. She is a former psychologist to Weight Watchers International and is the author of *The Zen of Eating: Ancient Answers to Modern Weight Problems*. She is creating a program called METTA (Mindful Eating Training Through Awareness). Metta is the Pali term for loving-kindness, friendliness, and goodwill. When mindful eating practices are imbued with metta, misguided and destructive eating habits can be overcome, leading to enduring feelings of well-being and contentment that no food can ever offer. The METTA Program is based on a variety of meditative traditions which teach mindful eating as part of the path to healing and wholeness.

For more information about METTA workshops and lectures, please contact Dr. Kabatnick at ronna@mindfulmanagement.com