



## COPING WITH IMPULSIVITY

### Background:

- **Impulsivity** (or impulsiveness)...involves a tendency to act on a whim, displaying behavior characterized by little or no forethought, reflection, or consideration of the consequences.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impulsivity>
- **Impulse Control** – The degree to which a person can control the desire for immediate gratification

In simple terms, if you have a problem with impulsiveness, then you may often speak or act without thinking and at times you may end up facing consequences that could have been avoided had you taken the time to stop and think first.

- **Peck's 85% Rule:** "85% of life's problems\* can be avoided simply by taking the time needed to think before we speak or act."

**\*In actuality there is no scientific proof that 85% of one's problems can be avoided, however the figure 85% was chosen as a way to represent that "the vast majority" of problems in life can be avoided by thinking before speaking and acting**

### **Developing Impulse Control – The Bad news and the Good news:**

- The bad news about impulse control is that for some people, especially someone with a diagnosable mental health condition such as ADHD or Bipolar Disorder, there may always be some degree of struggle with consistently avoiding impulsive behavior
- The good news about impulse control is that with persistence and practice, anyone can learn to minimize the frequency of impulsive speech and behavior and thereby reduce consequences

### **Coping Skills for Preventing and Managing Impulsiveness**

#### ***Understanding and dealing with impulsivity – Some skills to practice;***

- 1. Remember** – When you mess up and make an impulsive decision that does not end up well, try to remember and hold on to how that feels. It is important not to quickly forget things like getting arrested, hurting our loved ones, losing money, or other consequences. For example, before impulsively allowing yourself to get high, remember that awful feeling you will have when your money is all gone or when you are hungover or dope sick and broke. Remember that good feeling you will have when you wake up the next day knowing you did the right thing. ***This is obvious but essential for everyone to learn***
- 2. Practice Time Outs** – You've hear this one 1000 times before but that's only because it works so well. Take time to ***practice waiting before speaking or acting***. Count to 10, imagine a big red STOP sign – Do whatever you need to do in order to make it a regular habit to stop and wait first before pulling the trigger on an impulsive decision, especially one you may regret later.



3. **Deny Yourself** – Learn the special art of simply saying “no” to yourself. Practice **delayed gratification**: The ability to resist the temptation for an immediate reward and wait for a later (often better) reward. For example: *“I feel like watching my favorite show now but instead I will finish studying for my exam first and then I’ll be able to sit back and enjoy my show a lot more later”*
4. **Sleep On It** – Again, this one is cliché but it really works, especially for the big decisions. Quite often you may feel very different and much more level-headed in the morning if you can just wait it out over a decent night’s sleep before making a move.
5. **Recognize Emotional Reactions** – When you are about to do something you may regret, first get in the practice of asking yourself: **“Am I making this decision based on my emotions?”** – If the answer is “Yes” then you are better off waiting before acting because decisions based on emotions can be bad news. Let your head catch up with your heart
6. **Phone a Friend (Not a Fiend)** – Another old but good one – Call a friend before you do something regrettable or stupid. Isn’t that what friends are for? (Make sure it’s a good one not someone who is going to lead you astray)
7. **Spirituality** – If you believe in something greater than yourself, use that to your advantage when it comes to managing your impulses.
8. **Know Your Triggers – Then Prepare**: If you know that there are certain people, places or things that set you off then if you can’t avoid those situations, at least go into them **prepared and ready** to control your impulses ahead of time. Bring a friend if it’s going to be really tough going for you.
9. **Mind Your Mind** – During calmer moments in your life, try to really get to know yourself and what stresses you out or gets you upset, anxious or excited. Know and understand what feelings set you off when it comes to impulsive decision making. With time you can learn **emotional regulation**. You can also develop the skill of accepting your feelings, even the difficult ones, without giving in to the urge to act out just because you are experiencing them. **(Manage your emotions instead of allowing your emotions to manage you)**
10. **Relax** – Even if just a little, if you can learn to calm yourself, you are much less likely to make an impulsive move when you are more relaxed. It’s easier to be patient when you’re relaxed and patience is essential when it comes to impulse control.

**GROUP DISCUSSION – Everyone needs to work on #1 because it is so important. What other skill or two can you focus on practicing to learn to increase your impulse control?**



### **Group Exercise – Impulse Control Coin Flip**

#### **Directions:**

In this exercise, group members are going to be asked to respond to various scenarios. First, the group needs to come up with some interesting short scenarios.

Everyone in the group should get a pen and some paper. On each piece of paper each group member should come up with a brief scenario in which someone may be inclined or tempted to make an impulsive decision. Consider a few examples (Feel free to use these later if needed)

- ***“You are at a crowded public place and the loud talking person standing next to you keeps on accidentally bumping into you over and over***
- ***You go to your neighbor’s apartment and you are greeted by his (or her) attractive fiancée who tells you that you have at least an hour before anyone else gets home if you want to get to know each other more intimately***
- ***You stop at a friend’s apartment and he opens up a large bag containing a good amount of your favorite drug. He looks like he is already high and he invites you to come in and join him free of charge***

Everyone in the group should come up with and write down with at least two or three interesting scenarios. When everyone is done, pass the papers up to the counselor or group leader

The counselor or group leader will read one short scenario and select someone to take a turn. When it is your turn, flip a coin and answer the following way:

- If the coin flip is “heads” provide a quick, impulsive response to the scenario
- If the coin flip is “tails” provide a well thought out (NOT impulsive) response. Keep in mind:
  - Try to think about the response that will best help you avoid consequences down the line
  - Even if it does not come naturally to you, try to consider what is socially acceptable, healthy, wise and mature about your choice

**Discussion:** **After each turn**, briefly stop and process each answer given, as a group. Whether the answer given was impulsive or well thought out, discuss what likely would happen next in the imaginary scenario. Include potential consequences experienced by impulsive behavior or consequences avoided by thinking things through first.