



COUNTERACTING CRAVING CUES

GOAL: The goal of the Handout is to describe a technique involving the use of cueing and neuro-reactivity to quiet cravings and restore rational decision-making in the event of a cravings flare-up or relapse. The goal of the technique is to counteract food craving provocation methods developed by the food and media industries. We are reducing 'food-cue reactivity' and replacing it with cues to calm.

APPLICATION: A compoundedly cued-calming place for stopping cravings can be used by food addicts to desensitize reactions to a craving place, recover from triggered cravings, and reduce risks associated with going to a highly-cued food place. Cued-food cravings have been shown to be a leading cause of relapse into overeating. Cued-calming uses a similar conditioning process to teach the brain to stop craving and restore rational decision-making and restraint.

The development of compoundedly cued places for calming the brain has three phases.

- Set up multiple calming cues in a particular place.
- Expose the brain repeatedly to calming practices in that place to condition the brain to associate calming with that place.
- Go to the cued-calming place at times of cravings triggers. We can go to the place physically or through visualization.

RATIONALE: Research shows that the brain can be conditioned to react to processed food cues by producing craving neurotransmitters such as dopamine, opiate, serotonin, endorphins, and endocannabinoids. The flood of these neurotransmitters has been shown to coincide with the suppression of the key 'thinking' functions necessary to resist cravings such as decision-making, memory, and restraint. This combination of intense cravings coupled with loss of rational thought may be considered as a primary dysfunction driving addiction to processed foods.

- The kinds of cues which trigger addictive brain responses include sights, sounds, smells, availability, stress, fatigue, relationships, and intense positive or negative emotions. These cues can become associated with the place in which they occur. Place cues are powerful. Furthermore, food cues can be associated with any object, time of day, time of year, place, or persons who are present when the food craving is being provoked.
- These processed food cues are plentiful in many environments and food addicts cannot reasonably expect to avoid exposure enough to eliminate the risk of triggered cravings. The cues are often compounded meaning that several different kinds of food cues may be present at one time. Exposure to processed food cues may be prolonged during business meetings, restaurant visits, family visits, social events, etc. Both compounded cues and prolonged exposure have been shown to intensify the flood of craving neurotransmitters and increase the risk of relapse into processed foods.

IMPLEMENTATION: Pick out three to four places where you spend the most time. Common places might be kitchen, bedroom, car, and work/volunteer place. Then pick out activities that are most calming to you. These might include reading, meditation tape, soothing music, yoga, an exercise video, affirmations, an art/craft project, pleasant pictures, breathing, prayer, dancing, or listening to a meeting tape. Do not watch television in these places because television is a source of anxiety. You can associate these calming activities with a piece of jewelry you wear often, a pleasant smell, or even a motion such as a tugging on your ear. Use these calming activities repeatedly in your chosen places. Use as many different techniques as possible to create compounded calming cues.

Also, condition your brain to expect and experience non-addictive foods in these places. You might take pictures of clean meals and keep them in a folder in these places, or you might even eat clean meals in the place. While looking at the pictures or eating, you can repeat affirmations such as, 'This is my food. This food keeps me safe. I am safe with this food.'

There are a number of ways to use this technique.

- **Desensitization.** You can desensitize your brain to places associated with past use of addictive processed foods. This would be especially useful for rooms in your home such as kitchen, dining room, and bedroom. This would also be applicable for rooms where you've watched television because television conditions the brain to crave. Just sit in that room and use calming techniques repeatedly and for prolonged periods of time. Not only will you disassociate cravings from that place, but you will also replace craving cues with calming cues.
- **Risk management.** You can also use this technique if you are going to a high-risk place such as a meeting room, relative's home, or restaurant. Although you may not be able to go physically to the new place, you can imagine yourself using your calming techniques in that place. By repeatedly using different calming techniques while visualizing the high-risk place, you are conditioning your brain to associate calming with that place. When you go to that place, your brain will be conditioned to go into a calm, stable state.
- **Trigger management.** If you are triggered, you can visualize yourself in one of the places where you have conditioned your brain to react with calm. Or, you can physically go to that place to cue your brain into a calm state.

Food addiction can be a tough disease to put into remission. And it can be tough to maintain the disease in remission. However, by practicing and maintaining brain-calming conditioning and by protecting your brain from reactions to cues, you are decreasing the chances of relapse. And, you may find that having a calm brain is a pleasurable way to live life. Enjoy!