

To Get Sober, Delay Having a Drink by Ilana Simons, PhD

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(Found by good ol' Lyman)

One strategy for handling cravings is to practice delay.

A delay is a good learning opportunity: a stretch of time to live, even for an hour, without a drug of choice. A delay can also open the space for an interruption (a phone call, good news) to get someone's mind off her craving. Here I'm listing six great things that can happen during a short delay:

1. An alternative can distract your attention.

Cravings drive us to indulgence with a nasty tunnel vision--and interruptions can save us from ourselves. For instance, imagine a woman traveling home from work who's fixating on having a drink when she gets home. The [brain](#) is a master of focus during its fixation: This woman thinks that her drink, and nothing else, is capable of relaxing her. But if she gets home and can put off [drinking](#) for even just a bit, there's a chance she'll be distracted by [stress](#)-relievers that she didn't consciously trust: the taste of dinner, a phone call from someone she likes.

When fixating, the mind doesn't imagine alternatives which might also relax you. But even a short delay can allow some of those alternatives to happen. The actual taste of dinner can be soothing in a way that the addicted brain can't creatively imagine.

2. A person might be that interruption.

If delays are good because they allow for interruptions, the most potent interruptions probably come from other people. Again imagine that woman who's heading home from work for a drink. [Addiction](#) is a drive for a sort of isolation: As you fixate on getting high, you fixate on the chance to block the real world out. But good human interactions can interrupt a seeming need for isolation. A delay between the desire for a drink and taking the drink is a stretch of time in which someone might start a conversation that shifts your attention away from your project of insulating yourself.

3. Confidence builds as the delay grows or repeats.

Someone who feels she "needs" a drink is ashamed on some level of the dependence. But if she can even go one or two hours without drinking when she gets home, she's going to feel some satisfaction: "I lived until 8:00 without a drink." In that way, her delay fuels her confidence, her sense that she can live without a drink. During a delay, she learns how to manage sobriety (realizes she actually likes bubble baths or *The Wire*, etc.).

4. Emotions will change during a delay.

Emotions are more fluid than we think. In the heat of craving, we feel an emotionally pressing sense of "need." But the intensity of the emotion shifts as time passes. A "need" is like [anger](#) or sadness: it does wax and wane. Delaying the drink can bring someone to a period of time in which the emotion loosens its hold.

5. A delay decreases the [alcohol](#) in the blood system (or the drug level, or the snowballing impulse to eat).

Indulgences can snowball, gaining speed as the snow is packed on. After one drink, a drinker can lose inhibitions and crave the next drink right away. It's as if the body knows that in sobriety, it would have better judgment, so it runs headlong into oblivion before rationality has a fighting chance. A similar thing can happen in food binges: "I had one piece of cake. Better to eat the whole cake than deal with the idea of just one piece." But delaying the [race](#) from the first "slip" to the second can give the body a second to stop the snowballing.

6. We learn with each delay.

Each time we delay relying on our drug of choice and live for a few more minutes without it, we learn that we are not just the self that "needs" the drug but the self that can live better sober.