

The RETRACE Protocol for an Encourager

*Occasionally, a person in recovery contemplates a relapse. In the best cases, that person will reach out to someone before the relapse takes place. When that happens, it can help for the person who receives the call to use the RETRACE Protocol (Restorative Empowerment Tool for Responding to Acute Compulsion- & addiction-centered Engagements) as a content map and discussion guide in those situations. **In all potentially life-threatening situations, call 988 for the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, or call another local crisis hotline, before using this Protocol.***

The person who is considering the relapse (the Contemplator) and the person that they've contacted (the Encourager) can engage in a dialogue that can promote sobriety. The goal of the dialogue is to stir the Contemplator's intrinsic desire to avoid the relapse. This is why they have contacted the Encourager.

A note to the Encourager: *If you can, privately pray for the Contemplator before starting your interaction. It is vital to pray internally during your interaction. As you pray, remember the good things the Lord wants for the Contemplator. Keep an encouraging verse present in your thinking as you engage.*

Below, two people are engaged in a late-night call. The first person, the Encourager, is talking with the second, the Contemplator, who is considering a relapse. This dialogue is written to aid the Encourager and therefore presents the interaction from the Encourager's perspective. The bold questions are from the Encourager. The guidance after each question is guidance for the Encourager.

"What's happening in your life right now?"

During the ensuing dialogue, invite the Contemplator to share their current — within the last 24 hours — experience. With gentle guidance and limited responses, keep the content focused on the present. Do not argue or dictate. Agree. Try not to engage with complaints about the distant past or the future. Gently bring the Contemplator back to the present. Use questions to encourage clarity.

"How are these situations affecting you?"

Help the Contemplator to talk about their feelings (body words, like tired or nervous) and their emotions (core emotions like angry or scared). Try to keep them in the present. Use confirming statements like, "So, you feel _____ . . ." (insert words they have used while speaking with you). Or, "So, you're thinking more and more about _____ . . ."

"What do you *think* will happen?"

Be prepared to wait for this answer. Let them consider what their future is if nothing changes in their life. Be patient as the Contemplator rummages around their thoughts to find the right response. Be patient but help them identify the worst case. An example: "So, things are bad in your marriage, you feel terrible, there is a lot of temptation around you, and it seems like you are going to fall soon?" Give them time to work through their thoughts. Eventually confirm their conclusion with a question like, "That's what you're really afraid of, right?"

"What do you *hope* happens for you?"

This question is similar to the famous Miracle Question, but this question is intended to explore the hope still resident in the discouraged Contemplator. Again, please be patient as the Contemplator may initially recoil or protest the question. It may seem like they are answering previous questions ("What's happening in your life right now, and how is it affecting you?"). Monitor your own frustration and responses because you are modeling sober determination. If you need to, patiently walk again through the prior questions with the person and eventually arrive back at this question—"What do you hope happens to you?" It's okay to repeat that same question, verbatim. Be patient.

"If that did happen, . . . (1) How would your life change? . . . (2) How would your thinking be affected? . . . (3) What would be different for you?"

This is a very important stage of the interaction. The Contemplator is deeply considering the impact of thinking differently. Be patient. The Contemplator may go to prior answers but will likely drift back to your last question on their own. Let them work through it. There may be silence in communication as they consider the options. You work to be comfortable with silence. If confusion seems evident, repeat the question. Be patient.

The RETRACE Protocol *Continued*

You may hear responses like, “I’m not sure it could happen,” or “It’s never worked for me before.” Encouragers should not be discouraged by these responses. Don’t resist them—roll with them. Accept where the person is today, being very confident in the work being performed in them. Dance with the person, and move diligently toward an answer to the question on the table: “How would your life or situation be different if the thing you said you hoped for actually happened? How would your situation change?”

“What would you do in the next hour if you knew the change you hoped for was going to happen?”

You are helping the Contemplator shape hope for themselves. They are actualizing their own hope. They are considering what hope does, how hope proceeds, and how hope responds. Help them work toward specific actions they can take in the next hour. This is a good time to remind them that they took one action already by interacting with you knowing that you would encourage them. They contacted you on purpose. Now, we’re looking for the next right action.

“And, if you took that action (their answer to the previous question), what would you do after that? If you take that action, what’s the next good action to take after that?”

Now we are stacking. 😊 In other words, you are feeding the Contemplator’s thinking about an alternative outcome. Collaborate for at least two hope-derived actions that the Contemplator can take.

“How confident are you that you *can* take the actions you mentioned? What number would you give your confidence level—a number between 1 and 10? Why are you at ____ (number given)? What could I pray for you that would encourage you to move from ____ (number given) to ____ (the next number above)?”

These are successive questions, given one at a time (waiting on the Contemplator’s answer). We are moving from the recognition of hope. . . to the actualization of hope. . . to the enhancement of hope.

“I’m going to pray for you as you take those actions (the actions identified earlier). What can I do for you to encourage you to keep going forward? What kind of treat or small gift can I promise you?”

You are strengthening your covenant with the Contemplator. Establish what you will be doing while the Contemplator is moving forward from your interaction. Researchers have also found that small, healthy rewards help enhance motivation and build strength in recovery. Agree to something tangible.

“Please start the prayer for us to close our talk right now. I’m going to pray for you after your prayer.”

Share an encouraging verse before you ask the Contemplator to pray. After their prayer, you pray to close the interaction. Importantly, remember that you must keep your commitment to the Contemplator to give them a gift. Also, contact at least one other person and request that they pray for you and the Contemplator (you may choose not to share the Contemplator’s name).

Notes: *This protocol incorporates several therapeutic approaches (listed below) to help support the Encourager as he/she interacts with the Contemplator. It guides the Encourager to engage in a way that is contemplative, preventative, and constructive. The Encourager’s hope is that the Contemplator uses the Encourager to build courage and motivation to maintain sobriety and ultimate self-sustainability.*

Remember, the Contemplator is making the choice to follow their desire for good or to accept the offer of the temptation. The Encourager does not control the Contemplator, so the Encourager is not responsible for the Contemplator’s actions. Yet, the Encourager can provide a supportive interaction to help the Contemplator achieve the reason they’ve initiated contact. The Contemplator should also be encouraged to seek formal help (a clinician, clergy, etc.) after this encounter.

Theoretical framework of The RETRACE Protocol: *The guidance provided above incorporates aspects of de Shazer and Kim Berg’s Solution-Focused Therapy, elements of Miller and Rollnick’s Motivational Interviewing, Worthington’s hope-focused approaches, Contingency Management, and Kellemen’s Spiritual Friendship.*