

Stress

How can stress cause you to relapse?

As a recovering person, you're faced with deciding how to avoid stressful, high-risk situations on a daily basis. Some of these will be easy decisions. You'll probably choose not to attend the annual Halloween party at the local pub. But what about situations involving family, friends, or job responsibilities? Is there danger in these seemingly safe situations?

Many people return to chemical use in situations where they believe they are safe. This lack of awareness can be dangerous. You could easily place yourself in an extremely stressful situation without having thought about the possible consequences. Any place that has the potential for "bad news"—such as a doctor appointment, a court proceeding, or a meeting with someone who has "pushed our buttons" in the past—can be a problem. In early recovery you do not yet have the skills to handle high-stress situations safely.

You may be unaware of the level of stress in your life. Left unattended, it can create an unmanageable situation.

How can stress affect sobriety?

You may find it difficult to identify all the stressors in your life, because over time even stressful situations can seem normal.

Examples of stress-inducing situations can include any time or situation where

- there is a change—negative or positive (stress is an inherent factor in all change)
- you're feeling physically ill or dealing with chronic pain
- you're feeling hungry, angry, lonely, or tired (HALT)
- you're feeling powerless or out of control
- you're feeling shameful or inadequate
- you're feeling alone and/or hopeless
- you're feeling angry and resentful
- you're trying to avoid conflict
- you're living in fear

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- you're feeling pressure from others (directly or indirectly) to perform in some preconceived manner

How can you deal with stress?

Avoid certain people or places

Avoiding people or places that have caused or could cause emotional trauma is also important. Attending a funeral, visiting a cemetery, interacting with former lovers, and confronting past failures all have the ability to trigger traumatic memories. These emotions and memories can create strong urges to suppress the resulting emotional hurt. You could easily revert to old thinking and behaviors to deal with the pain.

Create stable daily activities

In early recovery, you need structure and stability on a daily basis. Those of us new to recovery frequently lack daily disciplines. You need to feel good about your accomplishments on a daily basis. You will build self-esteem by practicing esteemable acts.

Stay away from alcohol and other drugs

Stay away from people, places, or situations connected with using alcohol or other drugs. Using friends or using situations can bring on urges, some of which can be severe. If you find yourself in a place where you've used before, you can never be sure that you won't be overwhelmed by sudden urges. Old thoughts and emotions can come back in a moment. Your brain still has many automatic, unhealthy responses just waiting to be triggered.

Engage in prayer and meditation

Prayer or meditation will give you time to sit back and gain perspective on what you are here for and how you are conducting yourself in your daily life. This reflection and introspection (looking inside) will bring you a sense of calm and well-being—a sense that you are part of a greater whole. It's difficult to use alcohol or other drugs when you feel spiritually connected to your Higher Power and other people. But it's easy to use substances when your heart is full of anger and fear.

Take care with relationships

Very few things can spur emotional upheaval and stress more quickly than romantic relationships. Your relationship with a spouse or significant other can

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send you to terrific heights or incredible emotional lows. Both extremes can be dangerous in early sobriety.

Avoid emotional distress

Emotional triggers can be especially dangerous since they can seem overwhelming. When feeling overwhelmed, you may seek a quick, reliable solution in returning to using alcohol or other drugs.

Remember

Relapse starts with a subtle change in attitude and thinking.

Relapse ends when we start using chemicals again.

You can lay out a plan that may be as simple as deciding not to associate with certain people or not to attend certain events. Remember that no attitude, person, or event is worth a return to chemical use.

Recovery Action Step

1. What are high-stress areas in your life? List situations or people that make you feel stressed.
2. Develop a plan to handle these high-stress areas. Give copies of your plan to your sponsor, supportive family members, and recovering friends. Give them permission to intervene if you begin to act in ways that may cause you to return to chemical use. They will be your first line of defense in identifying early relapse warning signs. Listen to them. You will need them if you return to chemical use. You cannot achieve recovery by yourself.