

Barriers to Recovery

What are some of the major barriers to recovery?

Barriers to recovery can consist of internal factors, such as character defects and negative emotional states, and external factors such as high-risk situations and events. Whether internal or external, these barriers can trigger relapse. Once you understand your personal triggers, you can plan how you will respond to them—and thereby protect your recovery.

Unchecked character defects are prime barriers. Rationalization, denial, minimizing, and the need for instant gratification—cravings—chip away at your spiritual fitness and diminish your ability to resist substance use when you are in high-risk situations. In Step One you learned to identify that you had a problem; you have the disease of addiction. Your brain chemistry is as powerless against alcohol and/or drugs as a diabetic's body is against diabetes.

To defuse potential triggers we must take our defects, such as perfectionism, rigid thinking, resentments, grandiosity, and controlling thoughts and behavior, and turn them over to our Higher Power. Embracing Step One is often the most challenging barrier to recovery because it is often difficult to overcome this denial.

External factors that could threaten your recovery include high-risk events or situations such as conflicts with others, social or peer pressure, or being in environments where alcohol or drugs are used. Our emotions can also present barriers. Stress, anxiety, and boredom are just a few examples. And don't forget HALT—hungry, angry, lonely, and tired. Even celebrations can trigger relapse if those celebrations are associated with drinking or using.

What particular barriers do women face?

For many women alcohol and other drug use is intertwined with experiences of partner violence, rape, sexual abuse, depression, and anxiety disorders. Sometimes these issues are not adequately addressed during treatment and can become barriers for women who struggle to maintain successful recovery.

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How can you avoid or overcome recovery barriers?

First and foremost, work your Twelve Step program and rely on the support of your Higher Power and the fellowship. No one can do recovery alone. Then start understanding your specific triggers. You'll also need to develop your communication skills, new ways of thinking, and a plan to keep your life in balance.

Recovery Action Step

Make a list of the potential barrier situations most likely to set you up for relapse. Then pair each problem with a solution, a coping strategy for that high-risk situation. When your list is finished, make plans to learn new skills, develop new ways of thinking, and take concrete steps to keep your life in balance.

To develop new abilities, you might work on conversation skills to increase your comfort in social situations or practice ways to handle activities that involve drinking (such as skipping events where alcohol or drugs will be present). How can you prevent HALT? Counteract hunger by teaching yourself to cook, handle anger by finding alternatives to acting out frustrations, avoid loneliness by cultivating new friends, and prevent tiredness by establishing a sleep routine.

Keeping your life in balance is possible by keeping needs and wants on an even keel. Prayer and meditation, relaxation routines, and exercise are additional ways to stay centered.

Start practicing new ways of thinking. Give yourself positive feedback when you've worked hard on your recovery, and understand that if you slip and use alcohol or chemicals again, it doesn't have to lead to a full-blown relapse. There's still time for you to step right back into your recovery. Don't minimize all the progress you've made, just go right back to the Twelve Steps and start again. It's as simple as that. Don't give up on yourself and your chance at a healthy, happy life just because you made a mistake. Simply learn from your mistakes and plan to avoid them in the future.

Each time you overcome a barrier to your recovery, you will gain confidence. You will understand that you can face high-risk situations, you can cope, and you can resist relapse.

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Web resources

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

A branch of the National Institutes of Health, the NIAAA supports and conducts research on the impact of alcohol use on human health and well-being. Its website offers many articles about alcohol, addiction, treatment, and co-occurring disorders.