

Relapse

What is a relapse?

People often think of a relapse as a tangible event, such as taking a drink or snorting cocaine. However, a relapse is actually a process of becoming unable to cope with life in sobriety. It begins with predictable and identifiable warning signs that start to snowball long before a return to use or collapse occurs. If you are aware of these warning signs, you'll be able to get help before the relapse process can lead to a return to alcohol or other drug use.

Not all recovering people relapse. Some achieve permanent abstinence from their first serious attempt at recovery. Many others have a period of brief relapse episodes but eventually achieve long-term abstinence. Then still others will have chronic relapses that result in an eventual return to alcohol or other drug use.

What factors lead to a relapse?

Research has shown that immediate factors, such as putting yourself in high-risk situations, lacking coping skills, and “stinking thinking” (thinking you are powerful enough to control your use) all can lead to a relapse. Other factors may include lifestyle habits, urges, and cravings.

The truth is that you are especially susceptible to relapse in early recovery. Your stress levels are high as you go through intense emotional and physical changes. You have not had time to develop reliable coping skills for dealing with the emotional roller coaster of life, causing you to be easily overwhelmed. And your brain is still clouded by years of intoxication.

In addition, it's easy to become complacent. You start to feel good about your abstinence from alcohol and other drugs. You may minimize the severity of your addiction and the effort needed to stay in recovery. Then you gradually forget that addiction is an illness that is hardwired into your brain. You start to believe that just because you know you can't use, you will be able to make intelligent decisions about your use. Soon, however, you find that it doesn't take much to push you back to using again. Because you think you have some control, you mistakenly put yourself at risk.

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Why should you avoid high-risk situations?

Research has shown that, especially in early recovery, certain situations or events pose a direct threat to a person's sense of control. Often these situations result in a relapse and an eventual return to use.

High-risk situations that all recovering people should be aware of and plan for include the following:

- negative emotional states, such as anger, anxiety, depression, frustrations, and boredom
- situations that involve conflict with another person or a group of people, such as arguments with friends, co-workers, or family members
- events with social pressure, such as being around others who are drinking or using
- positive emotional events, such as celebrations
- exposure to alcohol or other drug-related stimuli, including advertisements and driving by a bar
- a test of one's "willpower" by attempting limited use of substances

How can you avoid a relapse?

Identify and plan for high-risk situations

It's important for you to identify the high-risk situations that you may experience. Work with your sponsor to create a plan to deal with these situations. Your sponsor might want to interview you to find out about past relapses or episodes where you had difficulty coping with urges to drink or use.

Use coping strategies

Of course you can't avoid all high-risk situations. It's your response to the situation that determines whether you will experience a relapse. If you practice and execute coping strategies, such as leaving a "sticky" situation or engaging in positive self-talk, you are much less likely to relapse.

As you gain more and more experience successfully using coping strategies, you'll gain more and more self-efficacy. This means that you'll start to see yourself differently. You will see yourself as a confident being who is able to manage these situations powerfully and with intention.

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Engage in straight talk

Research has shown that people who relapse often focus on the immediate positive benefits of drinking or using other drugs. When exposed to conflict or stress, you will find it easy to think of how these substances will help you deal with pain, anger, or guilt right now. Instead remember how far you have come in recovery and how powerful your life has become personally and spiritually. Remember the negative consequences of drinking or using. You could lose your family, friends, career, or children. Don't let the idea of the instant gratification of alcohol or other drugs cause you to compromise all the things you want for your life. Call your sponsor immediately.

How can you deal with a relapse?

Don't focus on failures

Just because you relapse doesn't mean you should get down on yourself and consider your recovery a failure. A relapse doesn't have to lead to a return to use or a life of chronic addiction. It isn't the end of the world. Focusing on the negative will only cause you to feel guilt, blame, and resentment toward yourself, which is a surefire way to destroy the recovery you've built. If you relapse, look at it as a temporary setback. Allow yourself to be human and make mistakes, but get right back to your recovery by getting immediate help from your sponsor or recovery support group. These people will help you get back on track, back to an abundant, liberating life guided by your Higher Power. And if you need additional help from a treatment center or outpatient program, don't hesitate to call.

Research shows that individuals who view their relapse as a serious mistake that can be turned around with a stronger recovery program and do not fall deep into shame are more likely to restart their sobriety and abstinence sooner.

You can survive a relapse without losing all the ground you've gained in your recovery. But remember to stay aware; a relapse is serious territory, so don't get complacent. Stay away from triggers and high-risk situations, practice coping skills, and continue to work the Steps. These actions will help protect and strengthen your recovery.

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Recovery Action Steps

1. Make a list of the high-risk situations most likely to trigger a relapse for you. These could include any person, place, feeling, or situation connected with using alcohol or other drugs. It could also include anything that causes you stress.
2. Pair each situation with a coping strategy.
3. 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.
4. Ask your sponsor or recovery support group for help and discuss your answers with them.

Write down a personal emergency relapse plan and give copies to your sponsor and family members or friends who support your recovery.

Be sure to include the following:

1. The people or places you can call for help (sponsor, supportive family members and friends, treatment center)
2. The places you can go for help (meetings, sponsor's house, treatment center, physician's office)
3. Thoughts that will motivate you to stop the relapse (loss of family, friends, career, health)
4. A "last resort" agreement. For example, if I am unwilling to follow this plan, I agree that I will (check into a treatment center, move out of the house, go to detox, etc.).

How can you deal with a return to use?

Regardless of your best intentions, some of you may return to use. If this happens, set aside any feelings of failure, immediately stop use, and get help from your sponsor or recovery support group. If you have been using for a while, you may need professional help for withdrawal. An unsupervised detoxification could be dangerous. You could experience seizures or hallucinations. Consult a reputable addiction treatment center for help. Never try to handle a relapse or return to use alone.