

Relapse: Plan on It

What to do if your loved one relapses?

Is Relapse Part of Recovery?

Addiction has been called a *chronic relapsing disease*. Relapse is when the person in recovery chooses to try some controlled using again after attempting to remain abstinent. We know that addicts/alcoholics can't control substance use. If they could, they wouldn't be in this situation in the first place. Relapse is one more failed attempt at trying to control how much they are able to use.

Using a substance occasionally and in moderation isn't a problem for social drinkers. But once someone crosses over to habitual and uncontrolled use, there is no going back. Attempts to regain control—to use alcohol or drugs socially and occasionally—are common, and these attempts lead to relapses. Statistics show that approximately 90 percent of those who complete treatment will have a relapse—sometimes referred to as a *slip*.

Five months after leaving treatment in April, I tried just one more time to see if I could control my using. I went out with an old friend and drank.

I don't remember if I called Gary or he called me. Gary and I used to take drugs together. He was a good friend. We had known each other since high school. He knew I had quit, but he didn't know much about recovery. We hadn't seen each other for months, since before I had gone to the treatment center. We went out to a bar. I don't think I had any intention of drinking. After an hour or two of playing pool and being in the midst of

a crowd of people who were drinking, I ordered a beer. To this day, I don't know what I was thinking. After five or six beers, I knew I had screwed up. I wasn't nearly as wasted as I wanted to be. What now? Because of everything I had heard in recovery groups, I now felt a tremendous sense of guilt. Why did I let this happen?

Looking back on it, I can see that it was a chain of events. Talking with Gary, meeting him at a bar, staying and playing pool—all the

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sights, sounds and smells were too much for me in the beginning of my sobriety. A bad idea. Those few drinks did not give me the effect I craved. I realized that it was going to take much more than a few drinks. I didn't want that old life back and it became obvious to me that I had to make an *all or nothing* choice.

It was just one night, but that one night motivated me to get right back to working on my recovery. This would fall into the category of a *slip*—one stupid decision that was brief and over quickly. I guess I just had to test the water one more time. What this experience did was confirm to me that my addiction was *real*. I felt like an idiot. I had just blown one hundred fifty days of sobriety, and I didn't even enjoy it.

Having a few drinks had always been the start of trouble for me. I knew I had to come to my senses right away, or I would soon be looking for drugs as well. This *small slip* would end up as a complete return to full-blown using, or I could end it that night. By this time in my recovery, I had learned enough to know what was happening and what the consequences could be. I must have had a moment of clarity. Nobody needed to tell me that I'd screwed up. Going back to the old life was the last thing I wanted.

I wasn't sure what to do, so I decided to go back to my treatment center for a couple of days to sort this out.

“A few months after leaving Valley Hope, Joe went out drinking with an old friend. He called and asked us to drive him back to Valley Hope. While he was there, he got back on track over the weekend and came home again.”

—Gladys Herzanek

I have heard similar stories from others who have relapsed. Many of them remember that exact, pivotal moment when they were faced with the decision of what to do. Here are the two different trains of thought that can occur to an addict after a relapse. *I've blown it anyway, so I may as well keep using for a while.* Or, *This was a dumb idea. I'd better get right back to recovery before it gets much worse.* Thankfully, the latter was my thinking.

Ways to Avoid Relapse

Developing relationships with others who are facing the same challenges are very important. A couple of close friends, a sponsor, a mentor—any one of these—can help hold a person accountable. I knew I had let some people down. But these same people were able to encourage me to keep moving forward.

One of the results of an addict spending time with people in recovery is that it will ruin their once seemingly gratifying relationship with alcohol and drug use. Those in recovery learn about the disease, and from that point on they know too much about its power to ever enjoy it the way they used to. They know that there's no going back. If someone *slips*, they often feel the way I did—like an idiot for even trying to enjoy it again. But this is all okay, as we all learn from mistakes like this. Family and friends shouldn't get too discouraged when someone slips, because it's common in early recovery. Look at it as one more opportunity for your loved one to become convinced that the addiction is indeed real.

Recovery is often like a series of stairs—and landings in-between the flights. The addict or alcoholic might be up three flights and two landings when they relapse. They don't fall into the basement; they only go down one floor.

***Success seems to be connected to action.
Successful people keep moving.
They make mistakes but they don't quit.***

—Conrad Hilton

Is there a difference between a slip and a relapse?

Sort of. The difference lies in how a person handles it. A slip is when someone goes back out to drink or use drugs, screws up, realizes it, and gets right back to working on their recovery. A full-blown relapse would be when a person goes back to using and *stays gone* for a period of time, which is tragically long enough to get right back to the bottom of the pit they climbed out of.

I am in no way suggesting that anyone should slip or relapse to test his addiction for even one night. One night can easily turn into one thousand nights; some may never return. What I am saying is that a person who has slipped shouldn't beat himself up over it. And families need to help the addict move forward and keep trying. As a concerned loved one, you may experience heart-wrenching disappointment when you see a user fall. But remember, all hope is not lost. The addict should just return to attending groups or meetings, learn the lesson, and move on.

**... one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind
and straining toward what is ahead,
I press on toward the goal to win the prize
for which God has called me ...**

—Philippians 3:13-14

Why does relapse happen and what are the triggers?

The number one reason for a slip or relapse is stress, stress that is building to a seemingly uncontrollable level. Webster's Dictionary defines stress as *physical, mental, or emotional tension or strain*. A little stress is a normal part of life and can even be good for us. The problem, of course, occurs when stress builds to an unmanageable level.

People learn to cope with stress in different ways. What works best for me is exercise and communication. Talking things through with other users, and with my family, makes all the difference. Exercise helps to eliminate the effects of stress on my body and talking works the same way for my mind. As a person in recovery, I know how I used to handle the stress of life—with some form of medication. This method never solved anything.

I've heard it said that the only people who never experience stress are in cemeteries. Connecting with others who have had similar stressors is one good way to lighten your burdens. To know you are not alone, that you're not the only one struggling, is comforting. This is especially true for a person in recovery. But the *cause* of a person's stress is not the issue. Life will always have its problems. Rather, how someone chooses to deal with the challenges of life is what matters. Family and friends need to know that not properly handling these inevitable frustrations is the number one cause for relapse.

Understanding Relapse

Even after reading this chapter, you may still have trouble understanding why a relapse may happen. I'm a recovering addict, it happened to me, and it's hard for me to completely understand as well. The truth is that a recovering addict may relapse several times. The best thing to do is to try to remain hopeful, and encourage the person to keep on fighting the battle, though you may feel anger, frustration, and disappointment. Getting some support from others in the family, and from groups such as Al-Anon, will be helpful. And try to remember that the recovering person will feel these feelings as intensely as you do.

I would recommend going to some "open" AA meetings. This is a superb resource for families. Open meetings are for anyone interested in this topic. Just sit and listen as others share what it was like for them and how they got sober.

Relapse is similar to a cancer that comes out of remission. It doesn't do any good to get mad at the cancer or the person. The same is true for the disease of addiction. Instead, try to focus on the solution, which is to get your loved one sober and drug-free. Eventually, with the help of family and the right support, those in recovery will stop relapsing, regardless if they've had one relapse or a dozen.

Relapse Happens

Some who are reading this may have already observed several relapses. You may be asking, *When will it ever stop?* You can take comfort in knowing that a majority of people in recovery will have a few relapses. For a small minority, it could be much worse, and additional long-term treatment may be necessary.

A very good friend of mine works in the recovery field. Nick has abstained from drugs and alcohol for almost twenty years. His life is good, his marriage is solid, and he has a teenage son who is doing great. But years ago, I don't know of anyone who appeared to be more hopeless. I can only imagine what it must have been like for his family, going

through relapse after relapse after relapse. Nick went through eight different treatment centers before he finally *got it*.

The day of his last relapse was very stressful for him. He was living in a halfway house at the time. Halfway houses usually have many rules and everyone is assigned different chores, such as cooking and cleaning. After lunch Nick skipped his cleanup assignment, walked two blocks, and bought a half-pint of vodka. Before the bottle was gone, he was on the phone buying crack. This crack binge lasted a few days and he soon had another warrant out for his arrest. He was offered the choice of going through another treatment program or returning to prison. That was twenty years ago.

***Patience, persistence and perspiration
make an unbeatable combination for success.***

—Napoleon Hill

Since then, he has helped hundreds of other men, women, and their families battle this same addiction. Nick is now highly respected in his field, loves his work, and will continue to be an inspiration for countless others in the future. He is just one more example to me of how anyone can overcome addiction.

A Bad Combination

The combination of stress and “triggers” can be a real problem. We have all heard about Dr. Pavlov and his experiment with dogs. He fed his dogs and at the same time rang a bell. He did this over and over, and eventually the dogs would salivate every time he rang the bell—whether there was food around or not. Looking back on my own drug use, I remember experiencing similar feelings of anticipation. Knowing my drug dealer was coming over, seeing a mirror with a razor blade on it, smelling the

drug—all these things excited my brain. With no real conscious effort, I would start to mentally drool, knowing what was coming next. I learned, just like Dr. Pavlov, that once this subconscious change has taken place, a person can't just turn it off. *There is no on/off switch.* These things become imprinted on the brain. Over time they will fade and can eventually go away.

This is true for many things in life. A particular song, smell, or place can trigger memories that a person hasn't thought of for years. The brain is very powerful, and potentially life-threatening triggers should not be taken lightly. Socializing with people who drink and use drugs can be a trigger. Going to a bar, with all its familiar sights, sounds, and smells, can be a trigger. Mirrors, razor blades, rolling papers, certain music—any or all of these things—can trigger a relapse.

People often ask about the dangers of ingesting seemingly harmless food and drink, such as cough syrup, food cooked with wine or liqueurs or drinking a small amount of wine during communion. Should a recovering person stay away from such things? Yes. Even these items can be invitations for relapse.

***To go against the dominant thinking
of your friends,
of most of the people you see every day,
is perhaps the most difficult
act of heroism you can perform.***

—Theodore White

When I quit using, I had to go through my apartment and get rid of all kinds of things that could be triggers to me. I looked for anything that had to do with my drug use: rolling papers, pipes, small vials for

coke, pictures of drugs, baggies with any residue in them, scales—you name it. I also knew that I couldn't hang around with any of my old friends who were mostly drug dealers or heavy drug users. That wasn't easy. Though they were not good for me, I still felt a camaraderie with some of them. A few didn't believe the change in me would last. Several times they tried to get together with me to party. I had to say "no" and explain why. This time of letting go was difficult and awkward, but I found it wasn't impossible to leave these relationships behind. After a while, I began to see that many of these friendships were pretty lame anyway.

***Being in recovery
and hanging out with old friends
wasn't going to work.
It would be like going to a crack house
and asking for a seat in non-smoking.***

—Barry W.

In the case of a recovering teen, saying *no* to these things needs to come from deep within—not from a command from Mom, Dad or spouse. When parents try pulling their children away from other troubled peers, it is never as effective as when teenagers make the decision themselves. In fact, the parental control can often have the reverse effect—with the teen adamantly resolving, *You can't tell me who my friends can be!*

I had to learn new ways to handle both stress and triggers. For me, triggers (people, places, and things) were easier to cope with than stress. Triggers were avoidable, whereas stress wasn't. Today, I continue to work on and improve my response to daily stress. Time and experience are wonderful teachers, which over the years have helped to mellow my response to everyday stress.

“We couldn’t visit him during the first week. The second week we went to see him, and he was really doing good. He had a smile and that was so great to see. The third week he came home for the weekend. He called one evening during that weekend while I was at work and said, ‘Mom there is a half bottle of Vodka here, and I wondered if I could pour it down the sink.’ I said of course!”

—*Gladys Herzanek*

Once a person has had several years in recovery, all these issues lessen in intensity. I’m thankful that today my relationships with people are much healthier. I don’t have any friends who abuse alcohol or use drugs. I no longer have anything in common with substance abusers, alcoholics/addicts. They are as uncomfortable around me as I am around them.

Looking back to when alcohol and drugs controlled me, I can see that my old way of living bred a level of stress that stemmed mainly from heavy using. Although I have been sober now for over thirty years, stressful times are still part of my life, but now I am able to handle them in healthy ways. What has changed is my attitude.

***So let’s not get tired of doing what is good.
At just the right time we will reap
a harvest of blessing if we don’t give up.***

—*Galatians 6:9 (NLT)*

DON'T QUIT

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must, but don't you quit.

Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about,
He might have won had he stuck it out;
Don't give up though the pace seems slow—
You may succeed with another blow.

Success is failure turned inside out—
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems so far,
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit—
It's when things seem worst that you must not quit.

—*Author unknown*