

Chapter 16

**People, Places, and Circumstances
to Avoid**

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*No medicine is more valuable, none more efficacious,
none better suited to the cure of all our temporal ills
than a friend to whom we may turn for consolation
in time of trouble, and with whom we may share our
happiness in time of joy.*

-Saint Ailred of Rivaulx

Chaos, crisis oriented living, lack of structure in your day-to-day life, and living, working, and playing in the same environment(s) in which you consumed alcohol and other drugs are all set-ups for relapse. Therefore, it will be necessary for you to critically evaluate every aspect of your lifestyle—where you live, with whom you live, how you structure the events of your day, the places you go to, and the places you should avoid.

The reason for this is simple. The lifestyle that you lead when you were consuming alcohol and other drugs was developed with one aim in mind—enabling your continued consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Habits developed, patterns of behavior became firmly entrenched, and choices were made without regard to what the consequences of those choices were. Where you lived, with whom you lived, and how you lived were constructions of your need to consume alcohol and other drugs with as little opposition as possible.

Your consumption of alcohol and other drugs was cultivated in an environment of chaos and instability. Relapse prevention must be practiced in an environment in which the three *S's*—Stability, Support, and Simplicity form and shape your day-to-day life. Just remember that no matter how self-destructive your lifestyle may have been, it was your lifestyle. It's what you did. It's what you've known. It's what's been most familiar. You'll give up very little of it willingly but give it up you must if you're serious about relapse prevention.

With that said, below are five stressors that may adversely affect your social well-being.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Stressors that may adversely affect your social well-being.

- 1) Neglecting the upkeep of your living space
- 2) Unmanageable circumstances of your life
- 3) Unstructured day-to-day living routine
- 4) Toxic relationships
- 5) Isolation

The first stressor we'll discuss is *neglect of your living environment*. A neglected living space can adversely affect your Recovery-based lifestyle. Your home should be a buffer between you and the toxic elements that you encounter on a daily basis. It's critical that you maintain your home as if it were a sanctuary, a holy refuge from the stress and strain of day-to-day life.

In practical terms, this means that you should keep your house in a clean and livable condition—not once a quarter, not once a month, not once a week, but on a daily basis. Get in the habit of keeping your home clean and well maintained. Maintain the rooms in your home in a neat and orderly fashion. Maintain the types and level of sounds that soothe rather than incite your spirit.

Make sure that the people who enter your home are able and willing to honor your home and the tone that you're attempting to create. You shouldn't have to lock yourself up in your bedroom while friends and family members are in the living room smoking crack and playing loud music until 3:00 in the morning. Set in your mind what your bottom line is for acceptable behavior. Communicate that bottom line to your friends and family members. Speak up when you experience your bottom

line being violated.

Make a special place in your home for quiet contemplation. Assemble candles, craftwork, pillows, inspirational readings, pictures—whatever makes you feel relaxed and comforted. Maintain this area. Keep it clean. Don't allow lights, sounds, or people to pollute it.

Lastly, should your home have alcohol and other drugs in it? This is a no-brainer. It's black and white. No matter who you live with. No matter how many people you live with. No matter what your entertaining practices are. No matter what your discomfort is with asking others to forgo a day, a night, a week, or a lifetime of alcohol and other drugs—THERE SHOULD BE NO ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS IN YOUR HOME UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES AT ANY TIME!

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Identify what behaviors in your living space are acceptable and unacceptable and enforce your bottom lines.
- 2) Identify what substances in your living space are acceptable and unacceptable and enforce your bottom lines.
- 3) Identify what paraphernalia in your living space is acceptable and unacceptable and enforce your bottom lines.
- 4) Identify a part of your living space you'll use for quiet contemplation. Construct it and maintain it.
- 5) Identify what you need to remove, upgrade, and/or clean in your living space and remove, upgrade, and/or clean it.

- 6) Identify the tasks you need to do to maintain the quality of your living space and maintain it.

The second stressor that I want to discuss with you is *unmanageability*. Chemical dependency is a disease in which you're not only powerless over alcohol and other drugs but your life has become unmanageable. The root causes of unmanageability run deep but for the sake of this discussion, we'll focus on three sources of unmanageability that you can easily control.

The first source of unmanageability is *living an imbalanced lifestyle*. We discussed the importance of balance as an element of your Recovery-based lifestyle in chapter 1, *What is a Recovery-based Lifestyle?* So as not to repeat myself, I'll focus on the need for balance as it pertains to integrating the changes that you need to make in your day-to-day living.

This book has focused on the many changes that you need to make in order to stay clean and sober. In order to make the changes necessary to alter your lifestyle, there's much about your life that you'll need to prioritize and reprioritize. Simply put, unless you take the time to prioritize how you're going to live each day of your life, you'll be confronted with the unenviable task of trying to live a twenty-seven hour day in twenty-four hours.

People, places, and events will need to be let go of. New people, places, and events will need to be incorporated into your day-to-day practices. Some responsibilities will need to be maintained while others you'll either need to ask for help with or relinquish altogether.

There are only twenty-four hours in a day. In those twenty-four hours, you must sleep, eat, exercise, practice

spirituality, and practice Recovery. Now, notice, I didn't include in the above list running a family, work, school, and play. You do the math. Life can get out of control very quickly if you don't set and reset your priorities—trim the fat where you can, out with the old in with the new where you must, and ask for support and help when and where you need it the most.

Don't take this on by yourself. You'll never be realistic about what needs to be let go of and what must be newly incorporated. You'll cut corners wherever you can—and those corners will tend to be what you need to do but don't want to do to stay clean and sober. So sit down with your support system. Go over the responsibilities and circumstances of your life. Review with your support system what your Recovery needs are and what your responsibilities are. Identify what has to go and prioritize what must stay. Identify what you need help with, when you need help, and who can help you.

The second source of unmanageability is *the adverse consequences* that have accumulated as a result of either your chemical dependency and/or out and out neglect of those accumulating consequences. Inevitably, chemical dependency will adversely affect the financial, occupational, legal, and/or interpersonal aspects of your life. Until those matters get resolved, they'll hang over your abstinence like a guillotine, dripping with stress, beckoning you to use as a way of making your problems go away.

So what to do? Start getting real about the problems that you're confronted with and the solutions that these problems require. Again, sit down with your Recovery-based support system. Turn your life inside out. What are the problems that you've shoved into the background?

What are the circumstances that are ticking time bombs ready to explode at any moment? What are the bills that you owe? What are the legal problems that you've accumulated? How much damage has been done at work? Who have you pushed away and alienated yourself from?

What are the bridges that you've burned and the ones that you can repair? How can you slowly but surely clean up all that is hanging over your head? How can you do so in a way that doesn't pose a danger to your Recovery?

Again, my advice to you is don't take on the solution to your consequences all by yourself. Turn to the wisdom of those who have had to deal with much of what awaits you and have done so clean and sober. Ask your Recovery-based support system for help.

The third source of unmanageability is *your unwillingness to set and/or honor those limits that you set for yourself*. Your unwillingness to set limits for yourself is what has led to much of your self-destructive behavior. Look at the financial problems you may have. People look at me stunned and confused about how it is that they have accumulated the debt that they have. It tends to occur because an individual was unwilling to honor the limits of their income. Extramarital affairs? Again, an individual has crossed the line. Do you continue to visit old using hangouts with old using buddies? Just another example of your unwillingness to honor those limits that Recovery imposes on you.

To succeed at Recovery you must be able to identify and honor limits. Stop consuming ALL alcohol and other drugs. Prohibit ALL alcohol and other drugs in your living space. Stop blowing off your Recovery-based support system. Stop blowing off meetings. Stop committing

criminal acts. Stop going to bars. Stop calling your dealer. Stop hanging out with those people that you used to consume alcohol and other drugs with.

The secret to honoring limits is to be accountable to others for your behavior. This is one more area where you need the active input of your Recovery-based support system. When it comes to making an inventory of limits that you must honor, you must be willing to listen to others. When it comes to setting and honoring limits, the application of HOW—Honesty—Openness—Willingness is the only tool that you'll require.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Identify those financial circumstances that have made or have the potential to make your life unmanageable.
- 2) Identify those legal circumstances that have made or have the potential to make your life unmanageable.
- 3) Identify those interpersonal circumstances that have made or have the potential to make your life unmanageable.
- 4) Identify those occupational circumstances that have made or have the potential to make your life unmanageable.
- 5) Discuss with your Recovery-based support system what threat each circumstance identified in steps #1 through #4 poses to your abstinence.
- 6) Discuss with your Recovery-based support system what action steps you need to take to solve each circumstance identified in steps #1 through #4 of

this exercise.

- 7) Ask for help from your Recovery-based support system to execute the action steps that you identified in step #6 of this exercise.

The third stressor I want to discuss with you is *an unstructured day*. We discussed the importance of structure in chapter 1, *What is a Recovery-based Lifestyle?*

I told you then and I'll tell you now—structure is a critical element of protecting and preserving your abstinence. Specific to this chapter, I'll simply reiterate two specific aspects of structuring your day—active daily involvement with Recovery-based practices and self-care.

The integration of the daily practice of Recovery requires action. Set aside time for prayer and/or meditation. Read daily passages of inspiration. Practice yoga and/or Aikido. Make daily phone calls to members of your Recovery-based support system. Develop a working relationship with a Recovery-based mentor known as a sponsor. Attend meetings. Schedule time in your week to perform service work.

As for self-care, we're talking about eating regularly and nutritionally, and sleeping regularly and sufficiently. We're talking about exercising regularly and in proper moderation. We're talking about taking care of your emotional and physical well-being by taking appropriately prescribed medications, keeping doctor appointments, and participating in psychotherapy if necessary.

Structuring your day requires discipline, the willingness to prioritize, and the openness to new ways of living your life. You can't approach the execution of these practices in a haphazard *catch is as catch can* fashion. You must

plan. You must use your time wisely. You must be accountable to others for the execution of your daily activities.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Identify those Recovery activities that you must do today and do them.
- 2) Identify the time frame within which you will complete those activities.
- 3) Identify those people whom you're willing to be accountable to for the execution of those activities identified in step #1 of this exercise.

The fourth stressor I want to discuss with you is *toxic relationships*. The first toxic relationship that you'll need to critically evaluate is *those relationships that were intertwined with your consumption of alcohol and other drugs*. There were people who you purchased alcohol and other drugs from. There were people with whom you consumed alcohol and other drugs. There were people who helped you hide your acquisition and consumption of alcohol and other drugs. There were people who enabled you to acquire, consume, and/or hide your consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

You need to carefully assess how safe each of these people are for you to maintain contact with. If you choose to continue contact with any of those individuals that were involved in your consumption of alcohol and other drugs you need to carefully determine under what conditions you can and can't maintain contact with them. Of course the hardest part of all is communicating and

enforcing those conditions. Rest assured, everyone will test you. Everyone!

The second type of relationship that's toxic to your Recovery-based lifestyle is *those relationships that are organized around blaming and shaming you*. It's difficult to remain abstinent when you're continually involved with people who make you feel bad about yourself. These may be people who need to control you through a bond of blame and shame. These may be people who are not accepting of chemical dependency as a disease and so therefore blame and shame you for being weak and having no willpower. These may be people who are unnerved by the thought of you changing so they sabotage your abstinence by blaming and shaming. These may be people who have no hidden agenda other than they act-out on other people by blaming and shaming.

Whatever the reason or combinations of reasons that you're involved in relationships in which you're the target of another person's blame and shame, and believe me you are, you need to either transform or eliminate those relationships.

I know exactly what you're thinking. It's likely that the people who are closest to you participate in blaming and shaming you. It's unlikely that you can just walk away from them. To the degree that you can transform these relationships through your own efforts, do so. To the extent that the dynamics of blame and shame are so embedded in the fabric of the relationship, either seek the help of a qualified psychotherapist to help you transform the relationship or terminate the relationship.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Identify those people in your life that pose a danger to your abstinence.
- 2) Identify specific dangers that each person identified in step #1 pose to your abstinence.
- 3) Identify the specific conditions under which you can no longer maintain a relationship with each individual identified in step #1 of this exercise.
- 4) Identify the specific conditions that must exist and be honored in order to continue a relationship with each individual identified in step #1.
- 5) Identify the specific role you play in changing the dangerous conditions identified in step #2 and #3.
- 6) Identify what you need to communicate about yourself, about chemical dependency, about long-term abstinence, and about Recovery to each individual identified in step #1 that you want to remain in relationship with.
- 7) Identify the action steps you need to take in order to transform your relationship with each person identified in step #1.
- 8) Identify the actions steps you need to take in order to eliminate your relationship with those individuals identified in step #1 that you determine you need to eliminate.

The fifth stressor I want to discuss with you is *isolation*. There's an old saying, *When you're home by yourself, you're behind enemy lines*. Relapse thrives in an environment of isolation. For isolation is the breeding ground for slippery behavior. Although you may achieve abstinence

for a period of time, if you revert back to slippery behavior, acting secretly, lying, cheating, and scamming, you'll eventually activate the process of relapse.

Isolation is also the breeding ground for the activation of feelings such as loneliness, anger, resentment, self-pity, and loss. As we discussed in chapter 15, *Awakening Feelings That Can Sabotage Your Abstinence*, these emotions can be especially toxic to your Recovery-based lifestyle if not worked through properly. Although these emotions and more will eventually surface, experiencing these emotions by yourself without others to help you work through them can be especially dangerous. If you're unable to work through these feelings, you'll eventually become overwhelmed by these unresolved feelings. The more overwhelmed you become, the more vulnerable you are to act-out rather than work through these activated feelings. Equally problematic, once these feelings overwhelm you, you'll be much more vulnerable to act in an impulsive manner to relieve yourself of feeling so overwhelmed. As we've discussed, acting impulsively is equally dangerous to your Recovery-based lifestyle.

When you isolate, you're vulnerable to living in your head. Without contact with other people, you can become easily disconnected from Recovery and lose contact with your Recovery-based belief system and Recovery-based thinking. As you lose grounding with your Recovery-based belief system and Recovery-based thinking, you're much more vulnerable to slipping back into old using-based beliefs and thinking. As we've already discussed, without the reality check provided by continual contact with your Recovery-based support system, your choices and actions are more prone to be influ-

enced by your using-based beliefs and thinking. This, of course, can only lead to activating the process of relapse.

It's not difficult to imagine what the preventive measures are for isolation. I've said it before—*people, people, people*.

More specifically, you must be actively involved in a Recovery-based support system. You must make yourself known to the people in your Recovery-based support system. You must make yourself accountable for your actions and inactions to your Recovery-based support system.

If you find yourself isolating, use it as a cue that you're slipping away from the practices of Recovery. Use isolation as a cue that things are going on within you that you may not be aware of. Use isolation as a cue that you need to uncover why it is that you push people away.

Pathfinder's Compass

- 1) Write about or discuss at least three circumstances that you cope with by isolating.
- 2) Write about or discuss at least three activated feelings that you cope with by isolating.
- 3) Write about or discuss at least three benefits that you derive by using isolation as a method of coping.
- 4) Write about or discuss at least three ways that isolation, as a method of coping, harms you.
- 5) Write about or discuss at least three benefits that you can derive by relying on your Recovery-based support system as a coping mechanism for the circumstances identified in step #1 of this exercise.
- 6) Write about or discuss at least three benefits that

you can derive by relying on your Recovery-based support system as a coping mechanism for the feelings identified in step #2 of this exercise.

I limited the discussion in this chapter to those areas of your life that you have the most control. Although I didn't specifically mention your work environment or those places that you spend your leisure time, it's equally important that you be mindful of how safe those environments are for you.

Clearly, you may have less control over the condition of those environments, the people who are in those environments, and the substances that are in those environments. At the same time, you still have choices about where you go, who you go there with, and how you react to what is going on in any specific location at any specific time. It will be up to you to accurately assess how safe any circumstance is, what you have to do in any circumstance to protect yourself, and what actions you can take to remove yourself from a circumstance that poses a substantial threat to your abstinence.

I'll end this chapter by reminding you that I cannot overstate how important it is that you treat your living space as a sanctuary and that you communicate to the people who spend time in your living space how important it is to your well-being that they honor your living space. As scary as that thought may be, you'd be amazed at how willing most people will be to honor your needs.

Beyond your living space, it's critical that your life become manageable. To do so, you must put an end to the drama that your life has become. Use the following checklist as a helpful reminder of those circumstances that

you need to make right and at the same time avoid have happening to you in the future. Life is infinitely easier to live when you get these six hundred pound gorillas off of your chest.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Social stressors that can create unmanageability in your life.

- 1) Being in debt
- 2) Chaotic or out of control lifestyle
- 3) Continued habitation and/or spending time at places in which you consumed alcohol and other drugs
- 4) Continued habitation and/or spending time at places in which others consume alcohol and other drugs
- 5) Continued involvement with using friends
- 6) Infrequent and/or no contact with Recovery-based support system (meetings, sponsor, people on phone list, therapist)
- 7) Interpersonal dynamics: conflict, intimacy, and trust
- 8) Isolation
- 9) Participation in illegal activities
- 10) Participation in personal, social, and/or business events where alcohol and other drugs are consumed
- 11) Physical environment not cleared of ALL alcohol and other drugs
- 12) Spending money that you don't have
- 13) Unemployment

- 14) Unstable relationships
- 15) Unresolved legal issues