

Chapter 15

***R*elapse: How to Prevent it
From Happening to You**

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*We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit.*

-Aristotle

Early Recovery focuses not only on becoming abstinent from all mood-altering substances, but developing the skills necessary to protect you from a relapse. It's important that you understand that relapse is a *process*. It does not occur once you ingest a mood-altering substance—that is merely the endpoint in the process.

Relapse begins with subtle shifts in your thinking, feelings, beliefs, and behavior. This shift begins the slow and subtle erosion of the attitudes, emotions, beliefs, and behaviors that you developed in regards to abstinence, long-term sobriety, and the overall implications of having a chronic, progressive, primary, oftentimes fatal disease of the mind, body, and soul prone to relapse.

As this slow and subtle shift occurs within, the mindset you've developed to remain abstinent from all mood-altering substances begins to erode. As this erosion takes place, you become vulnerable to ignoring the preventive measures you've learned to follow when your desire to return to consuming alcohol and other drugs intensifies. So let's take some time to understand the changes in emotions, beliefs, and behaviors you might exhibit prior to returning to consuming alcohol and other drugs.

No matter what you believe to be true about yourself, everybody who has the disease of chemical dependency is susceptible to relapse. This vulnerability to relapse is especially heightened in early Recovery. In early Recovery you're hit with many stressful circumstances. Your mind, emotions, and body are experiencing big changes. These changes occur prior to the development of new coping mechanisms to help you navigate the rocky roads these changes can create. This makes you particularly vulnerable to being overwhelmed by experiencing life without

your alcohol and other drugs to help you get by.

The other problem in early Recovery is that you can easily become a victim of your own success. The more successful you are with abstinence, the more vulnerable you are to becoming complacent about what you need to do to remain sober. With success comes the danger of minimizing the severity of your disease and the effort it takes to remain abstinent. You may begin believing you can control your consumption and use in moderation.

Some people in early Recovery can easily become victims of not taking their disease seriously enough. They go back and forth about whether they're truly addicted. They have yet to fully accept that they're powerless over alcohol and other drugs. Somewhere deep inside still lives the belief that they can eventually control their use.

That is why it's important for you to be able to identify dangerous situations. You need to have planted clearly in your mind what a dangerous situation is and what your plan for coping with that situation is. If you'll recall, we discussed in Chapter 6, *Identifying the People, Places and Situations That Are A Danger to Your Recovery*, dangerous situations as being:

- 1) Any person, place or circumstance connected with consuming alcohol and other drugs.
- 2) Any time that you're near alcohol and other drugs.
- 3) Any circumstance that is stressful for you.

It's helpful to have in mind a list of ideas and behaviors that are warning signs that you're in a dangerous situation. Use the following list to help you identify specific situations in your life that may be warning signs that you're in trouble.

Pathfinder's Checklist



Warning signs that one is vulnerable to relapse.

- 1) Visiting or thoughts of visiting people and places that were a part of your using life.
- 2) Behavior that is dishonest and leads to compartmentalizing your life and keeping secrets.
- 3) Behavior that is associated with excessive control.
- 4) Carrying around anger and resentments without working to resolve them.
- 5) Emotionally charged and/or volatile relationships.
- 6) Cutting yourself off from a support system.
- 7) Experiencing H.A.L.T.—Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired.
- 8) Refusing to learn from others with more experience.
- 9) Having your emotional buttons continually pushed without having a support system to help you work through what is provoking you.

Take the time to carefully consider and write out the answers to the following questions.

Pathfinder's Exercise



- 1) What negative attitudes do you need to be mind-

ful of that may make you vulnerable to relapse if they remain unacknowledged and not worked through?

- 2) What emotional states (fear, shame, loneliness, anger) do you need to be mindful of that may make you vulnerable to relapse if they remain unacknowledged and not worked through?
- 3) What behaviors (lying, secrecy, self-destructive behaviors, relationships, compulsive behaviors) do you need to be mindful of that may make you vulnerable to relapse if they remain unacknowledged and not worked through?
- 4) What relationships are potential relapse triggers?
- 5) What circumstances are potential relapse triggers?
- 6) What irrational beliefs or “should’s” and “must’s” in your life are potential relapse triggers?
- 7) What work situations are potential relapse triggers?
- 8) What social situations are potential relapse triggers?

Next, carefully consider and write out the answers to the following questions about your relapse trigger(s).

Pathfinder's Exercise



- 1) Identified trigger: write in great detail about the trigger and the affect it has on you.
- 2) Write in great detail every choice (using and non-using) you have in dealing with the trigger.
- 3) Write in great detail the dangers of trying to cope

with this trigger by yourself.

- 4) Write in great detail the steps you need to take to get support in coping with this specific trigger.
- 5) Write in great detail what you've learned from writing this plan.

As you no doubt know by now, stress is a critical factor that makes you vulnerable to relapse. If you're unable to acknowledge to yourself when you're experiencing stress and, once identified, take positive action to reduce that stress, your life can become unmanageable very quickly. Let me provide you with a list of general situations that can make you feel stressed.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Stressful situations

- 1) Any situation in which you are exposed to change.
- 2) Illness, fatigue, or pain.
- 3) Any situation in which you are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and/or Tired.
- 4) Any situation in which you feel out of control.
- 5) Any situation that evokes feelings of worthlessness or shame.
- 6) Any situation that evokes feelings of anger or resentments.
- 7) Any situation that evokes feelings of fear.
- 8) Any situation that provokes interpersonal conflict.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Identify the stressful scenarios of your life—work, play, love, spiritual, relationships with your Self, family, friends. Create a detailed plan for dealing with each stressful scenario you've identified as follows:

- 1) Identified stressful situation: write in detail about the stressful situation and the affect it has on you.
- 2) Write down every choice (using and non-using) you have in dealing with the stressful situation.
- 3) Write down the dangers of trying to cope with this stressful situation by yourself.
- 4) Write down the steps you need to take to find support in coping with this specific situation.
- 5) Write what you've learned from writing this plan.

A question often asked is, "What should I do once I recognize that my beliefs, feelings, or behaviors towards Recovery are changing?"

Rule of thumb number one in regards to this question is that it's likely you'll be the last to know if something has changed. You'll discover that something is changing only if you're open to listening to others (remember our friend HOW) who are more likely to notice subtle and obvious changes. No matter how you figure it out, once you acknowledge that things are shifting, here are steps to take to get things back on track.

Pathfinder's Checklist



- 1) Lower your defensiveness, accept that things are changing, and take time to review where you're at.
- 2) Talk to others about how you can get clean in your thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors.
- 3) Double the number of meetings you're attending.
- 4) Learn more about the specifics of whatever issue(s) may be the precipitant(s) for the changes.
- 5) Get professional help if you need to begin working through unresolved emotional issues.

As I said at the beginning of the chapter, relapse will sneak up on you. It's a slow, insidious process that is most easily understood only after it has happened. No matter what your best intentions have been, no matter how hard you've worked to insure that you don't relapse, it still may happen. So the obvious question is, "What should I do if I relapse?"

Pathfinder's Checklist



Steps to take when you relapse

- 1) If you relapse, STOP immediately!
- 2) If you relapse, GO to a support meeting!

- 3) If you relapse, TELL your sponsor or other Recovering person.
- 4) If you relapse, ASK for help in stopping the relapse from spinning out of control.
- 5) If your relapse is part of a chronic pattern, SEEK the help of a professional.
- 6) If you relapse, LEARN as much as you can from how and why it happened, and what you can do differently to insure that it does not happen again.

You know the Boy Scout's credo, "Always be prepared!" In that spirit, I encourage the people I work with to prepare an emergency relapse plan. This will enable you to have a choice, if and when you are in the grip of relapse and don't know what to do but use. A good outline for an emergency plan is as follows:

- 1) Write down the names and phone numbers of at least three people to call when you're in trouble.
- 2) Write down the at least three places you can go to when you're in trouble.
- 3) Write down at least three inspirational thoughts that will inspire you to not use and reach out to others for help.
- 4) Write the following at the bottom of your list: If I can't choose to take the above steps, then I agree that it's time for me to take at least three action steps (name the action steps).

It's a good idea to sign this plan, post it in places you can easily get to. It's also a good idea to give a copy of your plan to your sponsor, close Recovering friends, and others who support your efforts to remain sober.