

Relapse Prevention / Controlling Cravings

Patient Education Module

Understanding Relapse Warning Signs

In some cases, relapse can occur suddenly, and individuals struggling with drug or alcohol cravings can give in without reaching out for help. The best way to prevent sudden relapse is to understand warning signs of addiction and factors that commonly lead to relapse. Factors vary for each person and situation, but relapse causes include: emotional triggers, social situations and physical changes. Some specific situations that can lead to relapse include: loss of a loved one, major financial changes, change in employment, social pressures or conflicts, change in marital status, boredom with life, and health issues.

Developing a Plan of Action for Addiction Relapse Prevention

An important factor in planning for relapse prevention is to understand that you cannot control everything. You can't dictate what other people will do and say, you can't control what you might see on the television and you can't hide in the safety of your home forever. While you can make positive decisions to minimize relapse triggers in your life, there may be times when you must deal with strong cravings.

The Stages of Relapse

Relapse is a process, it's not an event. In order to understand relapse prevention you have to understand the stages of relapse. Relapse starts weeks or even months before the event of physical relapse. In this handout you will learn how to use specific relapse prevention techniques for each stage of relapse. *There are three stages of relapse: 1. emotional relapse, 2. mental relapse, and 3. physical relapse*

1. Emotional Relapse

In emotional relapse, you're not thinking about using. But your emotions and behaviors are setting you up for a possible relapse in the future. *The signs of emotional relapse are: anxiety, intolerance, anger, defensiveness, mood swings, isolation, not asking for help, not going to meetings or seeing a counselor, poor eating habits, and poor sleep habits.*

The signs of emotional relapse are also the symptoms of post-acute withdrawal. If you understand post-acute withdrawal it's easier to avoid relapse, because the early stage of relapse is easiest to pull back from. In the later stages of relapse the pull of relapse gets stronger and the sequence of events moves faster.

Early relapse prevention. Relapse prevention at this stage means recognizing that you're in emotional relapse and changing your behavior. Recognize that you are isolating and remind yourself to ask for help. Recognize that you are anxious and practice relaxation techniques. Recognize that your sleep and eating habits are slipping and practice self-care. If you don't change your behavior at this stage and you live too long in the stage of emotional relapse, you will become exhausted. When you're exhausted you will want to escape, which will move you into mental relapse.

Practice self-care. The most important thing you can do to prevent relapse at this stage is take better care of yourself. Think about why you use. You use drugs or alcohol to escape, relax, reduce stress, or reward yourself. Therefore, you relapse when you do not take care of yourself and create situations that are mentally and emotionally draining that make you want to escape. For example, if you don't take care of yourself and

eat poorly or have poor sleep habits, you'll feel exhausted and want to escape. If you don't let go of your resentments and fears through some form of relaxation, they will build to the point where you will feel uncomfortable in your own skin. If you do not ask for help, you will feel isolated. If any of these situations continues for too long, you will begin to think about using. But if you practice self-care, you can prevent those feelings from growing and avoid relapse.

2. Mental Relapse

In mental relapse there's a war going on in your mind. Part of you wants to use, but part of you doesn't. In the early phase of mental relapse you're just idly thinking about using. But in the later phase you're definitely *thinking* about using. The signs of mental relapse are: thinking about people, places, and things you used with, glamorizing your past use, lying, hanging out with old using friends who are users, fantasizing about using, thinking about relapsing, and planning your relapse around other people's schedules. It gets harder to make the right choice as the pull of addiction grows stronger.

3. Physical Relapse

Once you start thinking about relapse, if you don't use some of the techniques mentioned below, it doesn't take long to go from mental relapse to physical relapse. Driving to the liquor store. Driving to your dealer. It's hard to stop the process of relapse at that point. That's not where you should focus your efforts in recovery. That's achieving abstinence through brute force. But it is not recovery. If you recognize the early warning signs of relapse, and understand the symptoms of post-acute withdrawal, you'll be able to catch yourself before it's too late.

10 Techniques to Deal with Cravings and Urges

Cravings are normal. Everyone who's engaged in addictive behavior will experience uncomfortable cravings ("I want it badly") and urges ("I have to do it now"). They are normal. And fortunately, they always pass with time. At the outset of recovery, they can be pretty intense, but each one will subside if you can wait it out and have a plan for relapse prevention. Cravings and urges will decrease in strength and frequency over time. You can make this happen by adopting some coping strategies that work best for you. Learning to say NO to these intense, ingrained desires is one of the biggest challenges in recovery. The good news is that you can understand these desires and learn to resist them. Listed below are 10 techniques that will help you overcome cravings and urges.

1. Avoidance

It is easier to avoid temptation, then to resist temptation. According to a study published in The American Journal on Addictions, avoidance behavior is one of the most successful addiction-relapse prevention tools. Although it is not healthy to avoid issues related to finances, relationships or physical health, avoiding what some refer to as "slippery situations" can help reduce the chance that you will experience cravings or pressures to use drugs or alcohol. If possible, avoid locations where your chemical of choice is prevalent or easy to access. For some, this means avoiding bars or clubs. For others, it might mean avoiding the homes of certain friends or family members. Choosing not to hang out with anyone who abuses drugs or alcohol is also a good idea. If you cannot avoid a situation where temptation may arise, consider using a buddy system by asking a close friend, family member or sponsor to attend the event with you.

2. Escape. Just leave or get away from the urge provoking situation. Run away from it. Get out of the environment that is making you want to use drugs. Just the act of escaping the trigger will focus your mind on something new – which will quickly lessen the urge.

3. Accept. Put your urges and cravings into perspective by understanding that they are normal and will pass. It's important in the recovery process to learn to accept discomfort. It won't "kill" you and will be gone pretty quickly. You'll feel good about what you're learning and achieving.

4. Substitute. When you get an urge, quickly substitute a thought or activity that's more beneficial or fun. Take a walk or any other form of exercise. Pick up something new to read or turn on something to listen to. The possibilities to substitute (and lessen the craving more quickly) are endless. Think about and write down some possibilities to have a list on hand when an urge occurs. Then just pick one to employ an effective response.

5. Play the tape through. When you think about using, the fantasy is that you'll be able to control your use this time. You'll just have one drink or pill. But play the tape through. One drink or pill usually leads to more drinks or pills. You will wake up the next morning feeling disappointed in yourself. You may not be able to stop using the next day, and you will get caught in the same vicious cycle. When you play the tape through to its logical conclusion, using does not seem so appealing. A common mental urge is that you can get away with using, because no one will know if you relapse. Perhaps your significant other is away for the weekend, or you're away on a trip. That's when your addiction will try to convince you that you do not have a big problem, and that you are really doing your recovery to please your significant other or your work. Play the tape through. Remind yourself of the *negative consequences* you have already suffered, and the *potential consequences* that lie around the corner if you relapse again. If you could control your use, you would have done it by now.

6. Delay. The mental activities of cravings and urges disappear over time unless you actively maintain them with your attention. Given time, they will run their course and disappear. If they are not gone in 10-15 minutes, then chances are you are still exposed to the stimulus that cued the urge in the first place. Just do not give in no matter how bad the urge is and it will pass. All the urges you have ever had have passed. Once you have denied an urge, you know you can do it again and again. And after a short time, there will be fewer cravings and the ones you have will diminish in intensity. Waiting them out is a great step to recovery. When you are in an urge, it feels like an eternity. But if you can keep yourself busy and do the things you're supposed to do, it will quickly be gone.

7. Tell someone that you're having urges to use. Call a friend, a support, or someone in recovery. Share with them what you are going through. The magic of sharing is that the minute you start to talk about what you're thinking and feeling, your urges begin to disappear. They do not seem quite as big and you do not feel as alone.

8. Distract yourself. When you think about using, do something to occupy yourself. Call a friend. Go to a meeting. Get up and go for a walk. If you just sit there with your urge and do not do anything, you are giving your mental relapse room to grow.

9. Do your recovery one day at a time. Do not think about whether you can stay in recovery forever. That is a paralyzing thought. It is overwhelming even for people who have been in recovery for a long time. One day at a time, means you should match your goals to your emotional strength. When you feel strong and you are motivated to not use, then tell yourself that you will not use for the next week or the next month. But when you are struggling and having lots of urges, and those times will happen often, tell yourself that you will not use for today or for the next 30 minutes. Do your recovery in bite-sized chunks and do not sabotage yourself by thinking too far ahead.

10. Make relaxation part of your recovery. Relaxation is an important part of relapse prevention, because when you are tense you tend to do what is familiar and wrong, instead of what is new and right. When you are tense you tend to repeat the same mistakes you made before. When you are relaxed you are more open to change.