

Five Key Things to Understand About Relapse

People in recovery and their families are often, and understandably, terrified of relapse. But did you know that relapse is usually mis-defined?

Relapse means a significant “return to symptoms” after a period of recovery. This return to the symptoms may go on for a while before a person drinks or uses again. In this way of understanding relapse, a person may be in relapse for a period of time, and be able to successfully prevent a return to chemical use, and return to recovery.

If you are terrified of relapse, what that really means is that you are terrified of actually drinking or using again. The terror is misplaced. Certainly, there is a need to anticipate and manage the struggles in recovery, including any significant return to symptoms that might arise. This is where being vigilant is so critical – being very aware of *the relapse process* before use begins again.

Understanding these 5 points can help:

1. Relapse is common. Although relapses are not inevitable, they are common. Many people have one or more relapses before achieving long-lasting sobriety or abstinence. This does not mean the end of efforts toward abstinence and recovery. It is important to get back into treatment and the family needs to continue attending a support group, professional counseling, or both.

The “addict” or “alcoholic” inside us makes sure to take full advantage of even a limited slip back to use, by telling us that all our efforts and recovery have been in vain, and that now we might as well throw in the towel and simply go all the way back to active addiction. As if we have by a small slip lost all of our knowledge, and strengths, and hope, and connections in the fellowship. This is our addict talking and this is false. We know what to do – we get back to the next right actions in our program, and in our community of recovery.

2. Work together to prevent relapse. People in recovery may have frequent urges to drink or use drugs, and feel guilty about it, even though these urges are a normal part of recovery. It’s important to work together to anticipate high-risk situations (such as a party where alcohol will be served) and plan ways to prevent them. The key ingredients here are two: structure and accountability. For the family system to recover, everyone needs to consider themselves as in recovery, and work their own program of personal recovery and healing, and to do so within their own family roles – rather than try to police each other’s program.
3. Relapse can happen even when you feel well. You feel confident, and/or “cured” and you believe that you can go back to casual, regular or “controlled” use of drugs or alcohol. You may remember the honeymoon period of your alcohol or drug use, even though it may have been long ago and you have thoughts about returning to that period in your life. But this is often impossible since addiction changes the physical makeup of the brain and the person in recovery is no longer able to use drugs or alcohol in a controlled fashion.

Relapse does not happen when are truly doing well, but it can happen when you “feel good” rather than only when you feel bad. Winning the lottery, for example, might mean losing the war. 100 years ago the main problem in medicine was figuring out how to care for the patient. We have come a long way in understanding health and health care. By comparison, today the main problem in medicine is figuring out how to maximize patient adherence to the plan. Today, we know that the level of patient adherence to a care plan tends to be the same across disorders. Keep taking your medicine, even when you feel good. You feel good because you are taking it and it is working. This is the reason to keep taking it – don’t listen to your addict tell you it’s ok to stop taking it.

4. If relapse occurs: Medical professionals, particularly those who specialize in substance use disorders, are an extremely important asset during a time of relapse. They can help you learn techniques for containing feelings, focusing on the present, and making use of support from others. Relying on group support from Twelve Step programs, engaging in prayer or meditation, and finding other ways to stay on an even keel can also be extremely helpful.
5. Learn from relapse. Experts have found that a relapse can serve as an important opportunity for the recovering person and other family members to identify what triggered the relapse in the first place — and find ways to avoid it in the future.

Your Pavillon team is always one phone call or email away. If you’re feeling afraid of relapse or just need someone to talk to, please get in touch with us.