

Relapse to Addiction

Put simply, a relapse is the worsening of a medical condition that had previously improved. Since addiction is a medical condition, a relapse to addiction is when the person with the past addiction starts doing his or her addictive behavior again after a period of not doing it.

For example, someone who had completely stopped drinking alcohol for a period of time, say six months, would be experiencing a relapse if they began drinking in an unhealthy manner. However, if they had just one drink and a pattern of behaviour had not yet set in, this might be considered having 'a slip', not a full relapse.

Relapse also happens when the aim was not to eliminate the behaviour entirely but to manage or limit it to a healthy level, but the behaviour returns in an unhealthy or unmanageable manner.

Causes of relapse

It can be hard to understand why an addict would choose to return to their addiction, but an important first step is to acknowledge that addiction is a medical problem and something incredibly difficult to treat or 'cure'. When a friend or loved-one is struggling with addiction, it's vital that we don't become judgmental about their motives or commitment to beating their addiction.

While many people who are treating or managing their addictions will experience and understand the benefits of sobriety, it's impossible to guarantee they won't relapse.

Those who do relapse may be full of remorse, regret and feelings of disappointment in themselves.

They will usually be unable to provide a justifiable reason for why they decided to return to substance abuse.

Those who fail to adjust to life in sobriety are the most likely to relapse.

Often, a person managing or treating an addiction needs to make more changes to their life than just practicing abstinence from the alcohol or drug they're addicted to. These changes will be part of an ongoing process. However, people can get stuck and fail to progress.

Those who are not moving forward in recovery can become disillusioned, and are therefore more likely to return to addiction.

In many cases, the relapse could have been avoided if the individual made use of prevention techniques.

The three most common causes of relapse are:

- Emotional causes, where the individual returns to addiction because they cannot cope with their thoughts and emotions.
- Behavioural causes, where the individual may develop or return to unhealthy patterns of behaviour, and this makes them more prone to relapse. This could be as simple as a smoker returning to nicotine because it is something they associate with having a beer or two at the pub.
- External factors can also increase the likelihood of a relapse. An example of this is when the individual continues to spend a lot of time with substance abusers or they experience a sudden trauma or distressing situation that overwhelms their ability to continue practicing abstinence from the drug or alcohol they're addicted to.

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Relapse Triggers

Different triggers have been identified as possible precursors for relapse. By identifying these triggers, people who are managing an addiction to drugs or alcohol can use prevention techniques to help avoid or control a relapse.

The most common relapse triggers include:

- **Overconfidence.** This can mean that the person is not fully prepared for when things get hard.
- **Self-pity.** Life in recovery is hard and takes a lot of adjustment. Some people may experience periods of self-pity. This is a dangerous emotion because it can sap motivation and set off feelings of despair or hopelessness.
- **Unrealistic expectations.** People recovering from addiction need to be aware of the difficulties, challenges and ongoing work required to avoid or refuse a substance they're addicted to. Having unrealistic expectations can lead to a person becoming disappointed or disillusioned with the process of beating addiction.
- **Dishonesty.** If the individual behaves dishonestly, either with themselves or the people around them, it can lead them right back to addiction.
- **Depression.** Occasionally, people in recovery will experience periods of depression. Not only does this mean an addict might seek to 'treat' their depression with the very substance they were addicted to, periods of depression, sadness or unhappiness can take a lot of the satisfaction out of sobriety.
- **Other substance dependencies.** Those who continue other types of substance use or abuse will be increasing their chances of relapse with the substance they struggle most with.
- **Complacency.** Taking recovery for granted leads to complacency. This means that the individual is no longer doing or paying attention to those things they need to in order to manage their addiction.

Different Stages of Relapse

Relapse doesn't always happen all at once, and the fact that it is often gradual is what makes it most difficult to arrest. It is possible to break most relapses down in to three separate stages:

• Emotional Stage

During the emotional stage the individual will be struggling with recovery, but not actually thinking about a return to substance abuse. The most appropriate relapse prevention tools here would be those that can restore emotional equilibrium and support good mental health and wellbeing.

• Mental Stage

At this point, the person is thinking about drinking or using drugs again. The urge to return to addiction can be incredibly strong. Relapse prevention techniques which target the mental or intellectual processes which are underway at this stage are needed before relapse sets in completely.

• Relapse Stage

At the point where relapse has occurred, all is not lost. Much of the good work done to achieve sobriety in the past must now be leveraged to manage the addiction once again. With the right support, an addict can return to the path of recovery straight away; they don't need to let the relapse set in over the medium term.



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Relapse Prevention Toolbox

It can be helpful to think of relapse prevention techniques as items in a toolbox. The more tools the individual has in the toolbox, the more likely they will be to have the right tool when the need arises.

The early months and years in recovery tend to be full of unexpected twists and turns. Preparation can make the journey a lot smoother. The individual can learn to spot the different relapse triggers and use the right tool to get themselves back on track.

- **12 Step meetings.**

These are a good option because attendance can provide the individual with support as well as new strategies. This type of group can be of value at almost any stage of the relapse process.

- **Counselling sessions**

This can help the individual commit to continued development in recovery. Putting down drink or drugs is usually not enough by itself to make life fully satisfying.

- **Meditation**

This can be useful for dealing with emotional upheaval in recovery. This does not have to be a sitting practice or even solitary, but could be an active or group-based practice such as Tai Chi or yoga.

- **Group therapy**

These sessions can be a venue for problem solving and support in much the same way as the 12 Step meetings, but it is usually facilitated by a professional counsellor or accredited psychologist.

- **Sponsorship**

This popular in groups like AA. This means that the newly sober person benefits from the knowledge of someone who has more experience in recovery. The sponsor is a good resource to turn to when things get difficult. It's also an accountability measure that can keep you on the path to recovery.

- **Exercise**

It's helpful to burn off excess energy and improve physical as well as mental health. Those who are new to recovery can overdo it with exercise, but it is a good technique when done in moderation. It is also something you can measure and improve on and then see tangible results from.

- **Hobbies**

These are important as a source of stress relief. It is vital that people in recovery find new interests to fill up the time they used to spend drinking or doing drugs.

- **Writing and journal-keeping**

Problems often seem more manageable when they are written down and not just floating around in our heads. Reading back on old entries in a journal can increase motivation by reminding the individual of how far they have come.

What Hunterlink can do

We know it can be a daunting process to pick up the phone when you are already dealing with addiction or relapse, but please know that we are here for you 24/7 with our fully qualified and registered counsellors ready to help you anytime of the day or night.

We provide confidential telephone or face-to-face support sessions, as well as access to these services for immediate family members.

Remember, you don't have to be in a crisis situation to contact Hunterlink.

