

# Relapse Prevention: A Self-Management Approach

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Relapse prevention is a therapeutic approach designed to maintain quality recovery by reducing risk in daily living and strengthening cognitive behaviour skills in the decision-making process.

All addicts, especially in early recovery, will experience irrational and unwanted thoughts, feelings and urges, especially when in high-risk situations. Most relapses occur because the recovering individual either forgets, or chooses not to use, effective coping strategies. One phenomenon that is predictable in relapse is the desire to test one's limits and control. When addicts slip back to the illusions of control, they are slipping away from recovery. While the addict may not always have control over how or when addictive thoughts might strike, he/she has the choice to find ways to not let that thought become an obsession.

Addiction is both a life threatening and a life-long disease. Chemical dependency, gambling, sexual acting out, eating disorders, etc. are all characterized by loss of control. The self-defeating behaviors associated with addiction create a ripple effect that has consequences in virtually all other areas of life. These behaviors affect not only the addict, but those around them as well.

Many addicts are troubled so much by the lack of a final "cure," that perfectionistic and 'all or nothing' thinking actually leads them to relapse. Quite often the individual experiences a sense of powerlessness over their life. Statements such as: "What's the use I can't do anything right anyway" or, "I don't care" or, "I've been like this my whole life, I can't change now", support the belief system that one does not have choices in life. In other words, life happens around me and to me and I have no option or choice but to let it happen. Such beliefs make it not only difficult for an addicted person to enter treatment, but also create an illusion that recovery is impossible. As such, return to alcohol/drug use or other addictive behaviour is almost inevitable.

Relapse is a frightening word and one has good reason to be frightened, especially if you or someone you care for has had a relapse. Although the fear of relapse is most understandable, "acceptance" of relapse potential in recovery is very important if one is to avoid relapse and maintain quality recovery. A person cannot relapse unless he/she is in recovery. Recovery begins when the addicted person becomes aware and gains some recognition that the negative consequences of their compulsive addictive behaviour far outweigh the positive consequences and then, makes a commitment to healthy lifestyle choices. Basically, recovery is making healthy lifestyle choices for oneself. The exciting aspect of relapse prevention is knowing that one *does* have choices and *can* make changes in their life.

The relapse prevention approach is based on the cognitive-behaviour model of treatment. The recovering individual is assisted to identify chains of cognition's, emotions, environmental cues and patterns that constitute the addictive behaviour. High-risk situation is the term used to conceptualize the factors which precede the individual's addictive or compulsive behaviour. High-risk situations are those conditions which threaten or jeopardize the addict's sense of control over their addictive behaviour and increase the likelihood of their engaging in irrational thoughts or actions. Relapses are not isolated events for addicts; rather, they are the end result of a series of thoughts and actions which lead the individual to become dysfunctional in recovery. When that happens, the use of addictive behaviour *seems* to be the reasonable choice.

The relapse prevention approach involves five basic strategies (Laws, 1980; Barbaree & Seto, 1997). The first is to identify high-risk situations that place the individual at risk of relapse. The second task is to educate the addicted person about their own high-risk situations, risk factors and the cycle of these factors that lead to a relapse. The third task is to equip the individual with various coping strategies in order to intervene and interrupt their relapse cycle or 'chains' of risk factors and thereby avoid a relapse. The fourth strategy requires the addicted person to engage in self-monitoring of their own relapse cycle and to identify "lapses". Lapses are episodes in which the addict enters their relapse cycle but does not engage in addictive behaviour. The final task involves skill building and the development of appropriate coping strategies to allow the recovering person to be an active participant in identifying both lapses and potential relapses and, to utilize alternative ways to cope with and handle high risk situations. By knowing they can change their behaviour and thought processes in high-risk situations, addicts become empowered to make healthy choices for themselves.

Although the commitment to recovery must be made by the recovering person alone, an effective relapse prevention plan must include good support systems, i.e. sponsor, support person, 12 step groups and therapy as needed. The addict must make a commitment to discuss any lapses or relapses with their support persons so that he/she can quickly return to abstinence. A relapse is not a total failure. However, it is important to immediately gain the support necessary to get back on track.

Recovery is a long-term process. It is not easy, but it is possible for those who are committed to recovering from self-defeating behaviour to move toward full physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health.

### **Hints for Managing "Slips"**

- Make a detailed plan and rehearse it. Be able to go on automatic when faced with an emergency "slip" situation.
- Think positive. Mistakes can be corrected. Guilt and negative thinking only make the situation worse.
- Get off the substance as early as possible. Recovering from a "slip" is an achievement not a failure. Renewal of your goal is only a decision away.

- Refocus on the gains made so far in recovery rather than on the losses. Think through the negative consequences.
- Learn from your mistake.
- Be honest with your sponsor and other support systems.

*“To live with great wisdom and compassion is possible for anyone who genuinely undertakes a training of their heart and mind.”*

*Jack Kornfield*