

Relapse Prevention



What Is Relapse?

To understand the basics behind relapse prevention, you must first understand relapse itself. A relapse is best described as a regression in one's condition after a period of recovery... returning to a specific behaviour after a period of abstinence from that behaviour.

Research has demonstrated that a relapse does not just happen by itself. There are many outside influences and contributing factors. After proper education and training anyone can identify significant warning signs that an individual may be in danger of returning to the self-destructive patterns of addiction.

There is one fact pertaining to relapse that stands out above all others and that is that relapse does not come on suddenly and without warning, it is a process that takes place over time. In almost every case, it began with the thought process which was followed by behaviours to support that thought and resulted in the person discontinuing recovery related activities.

The Basics of Relapse Prevention

There are some basic principals worth following to reduce the possibility of relapse:

Initially, you must be stabilised medically and psychiatrically. With alcohol dependency this generally takes place in a detox program, or alcohol rehab capable of managing the symptoms associated with withdrawal.

From there each person needs time to recuperate from the depression, anxiety, stress and hopelessness they have been experiencing during their years of addiction.

Once detox is completed, it is important to establish daily structure. You might find this structure by finding employment, doing voluntary work, taking up learning opportunities, taking up new hobbies and interests, attending self help groups, exercising regularly and establishing a healthy eating plan. In addition, it is highly recommended you maintain a relationship with your treatment provider, GP and a relapse prevention group like GOAL.

Preventing Relapse

Alcohol addiction is influenced by social, environmental, psychological and medical factors. Unfortunately, these do not just "go away" because we or others want them to. There is no exact prescription for preventing relapse, but there are certain guidelines, that if followed, increase the odds greatly of achieving and maintaining long term health and freedom from alcohol. No addiction treatment program, drug rehab or alcoholism treatment program can claim a 100% success rate...the key is that a program which incorporates a relapse prevention plan as a significant part of its aftercare service greatly enhances the chance of a quality long term outcome.

An Overview of the Relapse Prevention Model used at GOAL

The following is based on an article entitled 'Relapse Prevention - An Overview Of Marlatt & Gordon's Cognitive Behavioural Model' by Mary E. Larimer, Rebekka Palmer and G. Alan Marlatt.

Marlatt & Gordon's Relapse Prevention model (1985) classifies factors or situations that can cause or contribute to a relapse episode. In general, it argues that these factors fall into two categories: immediate causes and underlying causes.

Immediate causes include: high risk situations, lack of coping skills, expectations of the outcome of an action (like having a drink) and the effect of experiencing a lapse.

Underlying causes include: lifestyle imbalances, concentrating too much on one thing to the detriment of all others, sudden urges and cravings.

We will look at these factors involved in relapse more closely to give you an idea of the way we work in the weekly GOAL meetings.

Immediate Causes of Relapse

When you have started to make changes to your behaviour, such as giving up alcohol you will probably feel a growing sense of 'being in control', becoming more effective in dealing with things. This can be threatened in certain high risk situations, leading to a possible relapse.

Negative emotional states such as anger, anxiety, depression, frustration and boredom cause the highest rates of relapse.

Situations involving another person or group of people (arguments with friends, your partner or your family) also result in negative emotions and can lead to a relapse. They are reported as factors in half of all relapses.

Social pressure from other people, old 'drinking pals', whether direct ("go on, one drink won't hurt you") or indirect (just being around other people who are drinking) contribute to about 20% of relapses.

Positive emotional states, like feeling in the mood to celebrate, can also cause a relapse.

Trying to 'test your willpower' by putting yourself in high risk situations without an adequate 'escape route' or attempting to control your drinking are likely to lead to a relapse.

It is often the person's response to a high risk situation which determines whether or not a lapse / relapse will occur. A person with effective 'coping strategies' (such as leaving the situation or 'positive self-talk') is less likely to relapse than a person lacking these skills. People who have learnt to 'cope' and 'feel more capable' can use these skills to expand the situations they feel comfortable with. People without coping strategies see themselves as lacking the motivation or ability to resist drinking in high risk situations.

A very significant difference exists between taking the first drink (a lapse) and a return to uncontrolled drinking (a full blown relapse). Although a lapse greatly increases the inevitability of a relapse, the progression is not inevitable. People who tend to 'beat themselves up', experience guilt and negative emotions, or attribute the lapse to things beyond their control are likely to go on to relapse. People who recognise the lapse as a single incident they were unprepared for, and unable to cope with, often regard it as a learning experience from which they can develop more effective ways to cope in the future.

Less Obvious Causes of Relapse

These include lifestyle factors such as your overall stress levels, and negative thoughts that might 'set up' a relapse (rationalising your desire for a drink, denial that things are going wrong, urges and cravings).

These factors often go unnoticed, so the relapse comes from out of the blue. However, it is possible to look for the small thoughts and choices which seemed inconsequential but eventually led to the overwhelmingly high risk situation. These are sometimes called Apparently Irrelevant Decisions. Buying drink to have in the house "for when people come round" could be an AID.

People who feel their lives are full of external demands (things they 'should do') are more likely to relapse than people who feel their lives are full of choices or enjoyable activities (things they 'want to do'). In the absence of non-drinking pleasures the person might view drinking as the only way of having a good time or avoiding pain.

Specific Intervention Strategies

What follows will give you some idea of the things you will be learning to do at GOAL, you might also like to do further work in one-to-one sessions with your counsellor.

You could think of the process of change, to cope with 'lapse' and avoid 'relapse', as a long journey along a road that has both easy and difficult stretches with various 'warning signs' to give you guidance.

Learning to anticipate and plan for high-risk situations is the equivalent of having a good road map, a well equipped toolbox, a spare tyre and a full tank of fuel in preparation for the journey.

The first part of your preparation requires you to identify your high-risk situations. What's a risk for someone else might not be a risk for you. Any situation in which you would previously have drunk heavily is likely to be risky until you have coping strategies in place.

Once the high-risk situations have been identified you can start looking at the warning signs leading to them. This might include 'apparently irrelevant decisions', stress, anxiety, depression, poor appetite, disrupted sleep, boredom, anger, guilt, frustration, impatience, loneliness, lifestyle imbalances, negative thinking and high expectations that a drink will 'fix things'. Phew!

Not all of this will apply all of the time, and the process of learning to recognise it, adopt coping strategies and new behaviours is a gradual one - you cannot sort out everything at once.

In the early stages of becoming free from alcohol the simplest way of preventing relapse is to avoid high-risk situations entirely - or as far as is possible.

The second strategy looks at improving your motivation and ability to cope with risky situations - helping you learn and practice more effective skills. This might mean altering your behaviour, the way you are thinking or both. You might need to be more assertive, or less angry, more relaxed or less demanding of yourself.

Increasing your 'self-efficacy' - your ability to take responsibility and control of your own life is an important skill to learn. You will learn how to become an objective observer of your own behaviour and thought processes as you take control of your life and put the necessary changes into place.

Instead of concentrating on large and distant goals, learn to break things down into small manageable steps. This boosts your self confidence and encourages you to take on greater challenges. You will find that you receive a lot of support and encouragement in GOAL meetings to help you with all these steps.

An important part of relapse prevention is 'lapse management' - working out in advance what to do if you have another drink *before* it turns into a full blown relapse. If you do 'lapse' it can be viewed as a learning experience rather than a catastrophic personal failure.

A Balanced Lifestyle

As a dependent drinker you probably gave up doing a lot of things you used to enjoy: hobbies, social events with family and friends, sports activities.

Reconnecting with these pleasures is an important part of achieving a balanced life.

Ideally, you will be filling your day with more and more of the things you *want to do* and less of the things you think you *should do*.

And Finally...

We hope that this explains how avoiding relapse and maintaining your new, positive changes is a learning process. It took a long time for you to acquire all the behaviours, thoughts and feelings that surrounded your old drinking habits....it will take time to change, but the process of change is rewarding .

There may be times when it all feels like hard work and you contemplate throwing the towel in.

Just remember that an *urge* to drink is not the same as a *desire* to drink.

With time, perseverance, understanding and support you can achieve ...freedom from alcohol.

