

## The 3 Stages Of Relapse: Early Warning Signs And How To Move Forward

<https://www.palmerlakerecovery.com/blog/three-stages-of-relapse/>

There's a common misconception that relapse is a single moment when someone with a substance use disorder returns to their drug of choice for the first time after becoming sober. However, relapse is a process, and it often takes a long time before someone finally gives into the triggers.

For many people recovering from drug or alcohol use, relapse is part of the process. In fact, [according to drugabuse.gov](#), 40 to 60 percent of people relapse at least once during their recovery.

This isn't to say that everyone relapses, but it's important to understand that a relapse does not mean you've failed at recovery. And it certainly doesn't mean you should give up altogether. Take the situation as a learning experience and use it as what not to do throughout your recovery.

Although many people see relapse as impulsive, there are many warning signs that signal the danger of a possible drug or alcohol relapse. Relapse is often thought to have three stages—emotional, mental, and physical. Let's take a look at each stage, as well as the warning signs involved.

### Emotional Relapse

During this stage, a person is not actively thinking about using drugs or alcohol. They remember the last time they used (or relapsed) and don't want to repeat it. But their emotions and behaviors may be setting them up for a relapse down the road.

Some warning signs of emotional relapse include:

- Bottling up emotions.
- Isolating yourself from others.
- Not going to recovery meetings.
- Going to meetings but not sharing.
- Focusing on others and their problems.
- Poor eating and sleeping habits.

### Mental Relapse

The transition between emotional and mental relapse is a natural consequence of poor self-care for long periods of time. They start to feel restless, irritable and discontent. The longer they feel this way, the more they think about using again.

During this stage, the mind is going back and forth between using and not using. Part of them wants to use, while the other part wants to remain sober. Often, a person in recovery is the only one who can pinpoint the symptoms of relapse, as some of these warning signs include:

- A craving for drugs or alcohol.
- Thinking about people, places and things associated with past use.
- Minimizing the consequences of or glamorizing past use.
- Bargaining.
- Lying.
- Thinking of ways to control using.
- Looking for relapse opportunities.
- Planning a relapse.

## **4 Ways to Prevent a Mental Relapse**

When you enter the process of mental relapse, there are some techniques you can use to regain control of your drug use:

### **Call Someone**

Whether it's a friend, family member, or your sponsor, talk through your urges with another person. It may bring you some clarity as to why you want to use again.

### **Wait 30 Minutes**

Before acting impulsively, force yourself to wait 30 minutes. Re-evaluate your urges and *why* you want to use again. Passing time may help clear things up for you and "talk you down," so to speak.

### **Think About What Would Happen**

You know better than anyone that using once doesn't really mean once, and eventually, you'll find yourself at rock bottom again. Sometimes, thinking about the consequences of your actions can help curb drug or alcohol use.

### **Focus On Today**

Don't worry about tomorrow, next week or next month. Just focus on getting through today. Thinking about your sobriety in terms of forever is intimidating, but breaking it down into manageable pieces is often helpful.

### **Physical Relapse**

When the techniques above don't work, some people act on their urges. This leads to the third and final stage of relapse: physical relapse.

Some people only use once, realize they made a mistake, and choose to focus on moving forward in recovery, while others continue using for months. If you or someone you know relapses, just know it's not the end of the world. There are steps you can take to get yourself back on track.

## **What to Do If You've Relapsed**

If you've found yourself in a situation where you've relapsed, you're probably feeling many different emotions including shame, guilt, anger, frustration, depression and more. Instead of sinking deeper into these negative feelings, it's important that you pull yourself back up and find ways to move forward. Some ways to do this include:

### **Talk To Someone**

Spend time with people who are positive for your sobriety, such as a sponsor or other sober friend. When you're ready, talk through the reasons why you relapsed and learn what you can do differently in the future to avoid relapsing again.

### **Allow Yourself To Feel Your Emotions**

Don't feel as though you need to hide your emotions, as burying your emotions will only make the

situation worse. However, it's important that you understand *why* you're feeling them.

### **Don't Isolate Yourself**

Although you're feeling shame and guilt, it's essential that you don't isolate yourself from others. Spending time alone only makes the situation worse. Go out and make plans with friends, and do your best to move forward.

### **Evaluate Your Tools**

There are plenty of [tools to help you stay sober](#). For some, it might be using [daily AA affirmations](#). For others, it might be finding a way to give back. As you continue your recovery journey, your recovery toolbox will continue to grow with people and hobbies that encourage you to stay sober and [ways to avoid relapse](#) in the future.

### **Relapse Doesn't Mean Failure**

Relapse is daunting, overwhelming, and disappointing, but it doesn't mean you've failed in your recovery. It's what you decide immediately following a relapse that matters most. Surround yourself with positive influences, practice self-care, and seek additional treatment if needed. By picking yourself up and moving forward, you can come back from a relapse stronger than ever.

#### **Sources:**

How effective is drug addiction treatment? Retrieved October 18, 2016, from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-drug-addiction-treatment-research-based-guide-third-edition/frequently-asked-questions/how-effective-drug-addiction-treatment>