



Relapse Intervention/Warning Signs

People in dual recovery learn to identify the *warning signs* that may lead to a lapse in their abstinence and take positive steps to stay sober. At the same time, they follow a practical plan that addresses their emotional and mental health challenges in a positive and constructive way. The quicker they learn to spot these signs and signals, the sooner they can take positive action for their own well-being and dual recovery.

Many factors can lead to a relapse or distressing experiences with our mental health. Distressing experiences can leave us more vulnerable to relapsing on substances. Substance use can lead to difficulty with taking care of our mental health. Alcohol and drugs can also change the effects of psychiatric medications with unpredictable results. Maintaining abstinence allows us the freedom to grow as individuals and manage our no-fault illnesses in the healthiest possible way.

In dual recovery, relapse is the act of taking that first drink or drug after being deliberately sober. It helps though to view relapse as a process that begins well in advanced of that act. People who have relapsed can usually point back to certain things that they thought and did long before they actually drank or used. They may have become complacent in their program of recovery in some way or refused to ask for help when they needed it. Each person's relapse factors are unique to them and their personal plan for recovery.

Relapse is usually caused by a combination of factors. Some possible factors and warning signs might be:

- Stopping medications on one's own or against the advice of medical professionals
- Hanging around old drinking haunts and drug using friends; slippery places
- Isolating, not attending meetings, not using the telephone for support
- Keeping alcohol, drugs, and paraphernalia around the house for any reason
- Obsessive thinking about using drugs or drinking
- Not following one's treatment plan; quitting therapy, skipping doctors' appointments, etc.
- Feeling overconfident, that you no longer need support
- Relationship difficulties; ongoing serious conflicts, a spouse who still uses
- Setting unrealistic goals, perfectionism, being too hard on ourselves
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns, personal hygiene, or energy levels
- Feeling overwhelmed, confused, stressed out
- Constant boredom, irritability, lack of routine and structure in life

- Sudden changes in our mental health
- Dwelling on resentments and past hurts, anger, unresolved conflicts
- Avoidance; refusing to deal with personal issues and other problems of daily living
- Engaging in obsessive behaviors; workaholism, gambling, sexual excess, acting out, etc.
- Major life changes; loss, grief, trauma, painful emotions, winning the lottery
- Ignoring relapse warning signs

Almost everyone in recovery has times when compelling thoughts of drinking or using drugs resurface. In early recovery, drinking or drugging dreams are not uncommon. It helps to remind ourselves that the reality of drinking and using has caused many problems in our lives. That no matter how bad things get, the benefits of staying abstinent will far outweigh any short-term relief that might be found in drugs or alcohol. Recovery takes time. Eventually the cravings, relapse dreams, and uncertainties of early recovery fade. When we are committed to dual recovery, we slowly but surely develop a new confidence in our new way of life without drugs and alcohol.

Staying sober and taking care of one's own mental health constructively is an ongoing process. Abstinence and dealing positively with a dual diagnosis go hand in hand. DRA members build a personal inventory of recovery tools that help them meet these goals by staying involved in the process of dual recovery. An individual is in dual recovery when they are actively following a program that focuses on the recovery needs for both their challenges with substance use and their mental health. People in dual recovery make sure to use some of their recovery tools each and every day. Their personal recovery tool kit serves as the best protection against a relapse.

By identifying things that put us at risk for relapse and using the various recovery tools on an ongoing basis, we try to prevent a relapse before it happens. We can periodically review our relapse prevention plans with our doctors, treatment professionals and sponsors and modify them as needed.

By becoming familiar with what upsets us and our warning signs, utilizing the various recovery tools, and having a practical plan of action, we greatly minimize the tendency to lapse back into our substance use. If and when lapses do happen, we do not judge or blame--we are not bad people. We seek progress, not perfection. We simply learn what we can from the situation and move on with our program of dual recovery. Sharing our relapse experience with our sponsor, group, and helping professionals is an important way to figure out what went wrong. Our experience may also help others in recovery.