

The Truth About Relapse
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Relapse is often a controversial word among recovering people. I find the myths and mistaken beliefs about relapse continue to cause pain to the relapser. Relapse makes some people angry. Relapsers can often find themselves harshly judged by peers as well as professionals. The judgment and/or criticism relapsers experience only complicates an already difficult situation.

Many people believe relapse happens to people “who don’t really want to be sober,” “haven’t finished using yet,” or “aren’t working a good AA program.” The above statements describe an addict who is still struggling with control aspects of their addiction. They haven’t completed the First Step. Addicts who go through treatment in order to satisfy someone else but do not internally commit to recovery, often plan to return to alcohol/drug use when the consequences disappear. When an addict who doesn’t believe they are drug addicted or believes they can stay sober on their own returns to alcohol and drug use, this is not a relapse. It is more aptly described as a period of forced abstinence. **You can not relapse from something unless you have first experienced recovery.** Relapsers on the other hand understand that they are chemically dependent, work a program and actually want to stay sober. In spite of their desire to be clean and sober, they find themselves using. Relapse is a threat in major illnesses, and addiction is no exception.

Relapsers have trouble staying sober for a variety of reasons. The most common reasons for relapse in recovering people are:

1. Inability to fully accept their addiction. This is about resolving the inner conflict about being an addict. In particular, working through guilt, shame, and remorse.
2. Unmanaged and/or untreated secondary disorders. Depression, bi-polar, post traumatic stress, and personality disorders complicate recovery for addicts and contribute to relapse.
3. Unresolved family of origin issues can cause some recovering people to continue to engage in unhealthy relationship patterns. These patterns can become so dysfunctional that it triggers a relapse.

Psychological core issues. Mistaken beliefs about one’s self that cause irrational thought patterns, unmanageable feelings, and self-defeating behavior patterns. Core issue triggers cause addicts to become dysfunctional. Unattended, this dysfunction (also known as the relapse dynamic) can end in alcohol and drug use.

Most relapsers have a pattern to their relapse. Unfortunately, often they aren’t aware of this pattern until they are so deep into it they can’t recover. For example, most relapsers will tell you that they stopped going to AA/NA meetings before they relapsed. The problem is, if a recovering addict has stopped going to AA/NA meetings, they have probably passed the point of no return. Stopping meetings is so deep into the relapse dynamic it isn’t helpful. Stopping AA meetings is the end of the relapse dynamic. It is crucial that the relapser recognize early stages of their relapse dynamic before this dysfunction gets the better of them.

If you know of someone struggling with relapse, they need your support. Their relapse doesn’t mean AA doesn’t work, nor does it mean they are failing to work a program. Criticisms won’t be helpful now. Encourage your friend to be evaluated for additional treatment that will address issues complicating their recovery.