



Relapse Prevention Basics

Introduction

Welcome to the Relapse Prevention Basics session of the *Living in Balance* program. The session covers how triggers lead to relapse, different types of triggers, and defusing triggers. Next, the session provides techniques designed to avoid triggers and stop thoughts from leading to relapses.

What is in this session?

This session has two major parts: (1) Relapse and (2) Exercises for Relapse Prevention.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - understand how addiction affects people's thinking.
 - understand how triggers can lead to relapse.
 - identify different types of triggers.
 - understand how to defuse triggers.



**SESSION 12 HAS
TWO MAJOR PARTS:**

1. Relapse
2. Exercises for
Relapse Prevention

- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - understand how to avoid triggers.
 - understand visualization exercises.
 - understand how thought-stopping can help you prevent thoughts from becoming triggers.

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to review how triggers can lead to relapse, different types of triggers, and techniques to avoid and defuse triggers. Because triggers are personal and can be emotional issues, reviewing this information can be challenging. However, reviewing this information can help you learn one of the most important skills in recovery: stopping the triggers that lead to relapse.



Part 1: Relapse

As a reminder, addiction is a process that involves (1) compulsion to drink alcohol or use other drugs, (2) a loss of control over drinking alcohol or using drugs, and (3) continued drinking or drug use despite negative consequences.

In addition, addiction involves (1) obsessive thinking about drinking alcohol and using drugs and (2) *relapse*, or a return to alcohol or drug use after a period of not drinking or using.

Addiction affects people's thinking. For example, addiction can make people feel that if they don't drink alcohol or use drugs for a few days or weeks, their problems are over. However, stopping drinking alcohol and using drugs does not mean that the addiction is over. Rather, not drinking alcohol and using drugs is the beginning of the recovery process.



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:

You will

- understand how addiction affects people's thinking.
- understand how triggers can lead to relapse.
- identify different types of triggers.
- understand how to defuse triggers.

**EXERCISE 1**

Select yes or no for the following question:

In your opinion, is there a difference between (1) being alcohol- and drug-free and (2) being in recovery?

Yes No

Indeed, a healthy recovery requires people to change their lifestyles to avoid behaviors, people, places, and things that can trigger relapse. Making these changes in attitudes and lifestyles requires a lot of support and a lot of work.

Learning relapse-prevention techniques will help you learn new ways of coping with drug cravings and develop new skills to prevent relapse.

A healthy recovery requires people to change their lifestyles to avoid behaviors, people, places, and things that can trigger relapse.

**EXERCISE 2**

Please answer the following questions:

1. What in your life today will most likely lead you to relapse? Explain.

2. What are you doing to prevent that from happening?

3. Should you be doing more to prevent relapse from happening?

Yes No (If yes, please explain.)

Triggers

All recovering people have certain people, places, emotions, and things that are somehow associated with drinking alcohol or using drugs. These people, places, things, and feelings are so closely associated with substance use that they can trigger thoughts about using. These high-risk people, places, things, and feelings are called *triggers*.

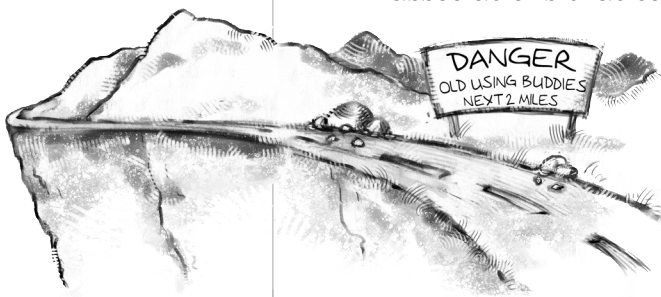
How do triggers lead to relapse?

- Triggers automatically lead to thoughts about substance use.
- Thoughts about alcohol or other drugs lead to craving.
- Craving can lead to relapse.

Remember that using alcohol or other drugs causes chemical changes in the brain. These changes may make you more vulnerable to relapse. These changes may be memories or associations that connect feelings, people, places, and things

with the urge to use substances. These are actual physical changes in the brain that make you more likely to relapse. Therefore, it is critical to put into place strategies to prevent relapse.

All recovering people have certain people, places, emotions, and things that are somehow associated with substance use.





EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following questions:

1. In your words, describe (1) how triggers lead to thoughts about substance use, (2) how these thoughts lead to cravings, and (3) how cravings lead to relapse.

2. What do you think are some ways that you can interrupt this cycle?

**It is critical to put
into place strategies
to prevent relapse.**

Internal triggers are emotional states that you might experience before, during, or after substance use.

External triggers include events, places, things, or specific times that you associate with substance use.

An ***internal trigger*** is an emotional state that you might experience before, during, or after substance use. You may have felt very happy, depressed, anxious, or sexually aroused while you were using. Later, these feelings can remind you of substance use.



EXERCISE 4

Please answer the following question:

What is one of your strong internal triggers?

External triggers include events, places, things, or specific times that you associate with substance use. For instance, these triggers might include the neighborhood where you drank alcohol or bought drugs, a bar, a dealer’s apartment, a payday, or weekend evenings. Items connected to substance use, such as a smoky room, injection equipment, or a crack pipe, are often strong triggers for substance thoughts and cravings. External triggers also include specific people who were involved in your substance use.



EXERCISE 5

Please answer the following question:

What is one of your strong external triggers?

Sensory triggers are related to the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These are sensations that remind you of drug use. Sensory triggers may include the look of white powders, a specific type of music, and certain smells and tastes.



EXERCISE 6

Please answer the following question:

What is one of your strong sensory triggers?



EXERCISE 7

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are some triggers that have been especially difficult for you to deal with in the past?

2. What are some triggers that are especially difficult for you to deal with now?

Sensory triggers are sensations—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—that remind you of a drug.

To maintain your sobriety, you need to be able to recognize and identify your personal triggers for drug use.

Defusing Triggers

Triggers automatically lead to drug thoughts, drug thoughts lead to drug cravings, and cravings lead to relapse. However, there are steps you can take to stop this chain of events.

Identify triggers. To maintain your sobriety, you need to be able to recognize and identify your personal triggers for drug use. You should be aware of what people, places, and things trigger thoughts of drugs and understand when these triggers occur and what makes them worse.



EXERCISE 8

Please do the following:

Quickly list one internal, one external, and one sensory trigger.

Avoid triggers. Triggers are signs of danger. Whenever possible, avoid all high-risk situations, high-risk people, and other triggers.



EXERCISE 9

Please do the following:

1. Name three situations you can simply avoid.

2. Name three people you can simply avoid.

Interrupt triggers. Some triggers, such as specific days of the week, certain times of the day, or specific feelings, cannot be avoided. These triggers can be interrupted, however, by engaging in a healthy activity to counter the effect of the trigger. For example, you can attend a self-help meeting on Fridays because that day is associated with using drugs.



EXERCISE 10

Please do the following:

Name three healthy activities you can engage in.

Talk about triggers. If you want to be able to stop triggers from causing a drug craving, you need to be able to talk about them. By talking about them, you can better understand what's going on and reduce their power. Triggers will remain powerful if you don't talk about them.



Triggers will remain powerful if you don't talk about them.

A trigger leads you to think about drugs, which will lead to cravings, and eventually to relapse.



EXERCISE 11

Please do the following:

Name three people you can talk to when you have cravings.

Thought-stopping. A trigger leads you to think about drugs. These thoughts will lead to craving and relapse if you continue to obsess about drugs. The good news is that these thoughts can be interrupted using relaxation and visualization exercises.



EXERCISE 12

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are some techniques that have helped you to avoid triggers? What are some techniques that did not work?

2. What are some techniques that have helped you to interrupt triggers you can't avoid? What are some techniques that did not work?



Part 2: Exercises for Relapse Prevention

Avoiding Triggers

What's the easiest way not to experience triggers? Avoid them!

When is it easiest to stop triggers from leading to cravings? Before you experience them!

The best time to stop a trigger from leading to relapse is either before you experience the trigger or before the trigger leads to a craving. Thus, one of the best relapse-prevention techniques is to avoid high-risk triggers entirely.

Sometimes this requires making dramatic changes in your environment or lifestyle. You may have to move to another place to live. You may even have to relocate—actually move to another town or city to avoid drug-using situations. Sometimes this is the only way to avoid high-risk situations.



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- understand how to avoid triggers.
- understand visualization exercises.
- understand how thought-stopping can help you prevent thoughts from becoming triggers.

**One of the best
relapse techniques
is to avoid high-risk
triggers entirely.**



**Ask yourself,
“Is this good for my
recovery, or is it bad
for my recovery?”**



EXERCISE 13

Please answer the following question:

What is the easiest way to avoid a trigger?

Every day you will make important decisions about your recovery. Many of these decisions may seem simple and unimportant, but they are often very important. As you make decisions, you may find it helpful to think, “Is this good for my recovery, or is it bad for my recovery?”



EXERCISE 14

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is a high-risk trigger for you?

2. What small decisions would ultimately lead you to face that trigger?

3. How might different decisions lead to avoiding this trigger?

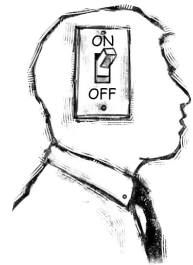
Relapse Prevention Exercise

The best way to stop a trigger from leading to relapse is to avoid the trigger in the first place. However, some people, places, things, and feelings may suddenly trigger drug thoughts. One way to stop these thoughts from developing into cravings is to interrupt or stop the thoughts as soon as they start.

Visualization is one way to interrupt or stop the thoughts, by imagining a light switch. When the switch is ON, you experience cravings. When you turn that switch OFF, you no longer have those cravings.

Imagine a large switch that looks like a light switch. This is your switch, and only you can turn this switch ON and OFF. Imagine that this switch can turn your thoughts about drinking and drugs ON and OFF.

Whenever you begin to think about drinking or using drugs, you can imagine this mental switch. You can imagine yourself switching it from ON to OFF, and stopping the alcohol or drug thoughts.





EXERCISE 15

Please answer the following questions:

1. Describe a situation in which something triggered the desire or urge to use.

2. How did you handle that situation?

3. How could you have used a thought-stopping technique in that situation?

4. When do you think would have been the best time to use it?

5. How do you think things may have turned out differently?



One way to stop thoughts about drugs from developing into cravings is to interrupt the thoughts as soon as they start.

It is important that you stop a relapse as soon as you can.

Avoiding relapse or stopping it while it is happening is extremely difficult. You will need help with this. That is why it is important to attend self-help groups or counseling sessions. That is why you need the support of your friends and family members. For people who have become addicted to alcohol or other drugs, relapse is a common experience.

It is important that you stop a relapse as soon as you can. The longer you let it go on, the harder it may be to stop. It is not helpful to put yourself down, to kick yourself, or to tell yourself that you are a failure. You have to take responsibility for your actions and stop the process. Sometimes this may mean checking into a hospital or residential treatment program. Get yourself back on track. Get yourself back into recovery.

Get your life back into balance.



Session 12 Summary

In this session, you have reviewed ways in which triggers can lead to relapse, different types of triggers, and techniques you can use to avoid and defuse triggers. Because triggers are personal and can be emotional issues, reviewing this information may have been challenging. However, working through this session was important because it taught you one of the most important skills that you will need for your recovery: stopping triggers from leading to relapse.



Role-Play Exercise: Social Support at Work

Preparation

Three volunteers from the group will play **Marcus, LaTroy, and Willie**. LaTroy and Willie drink and smoke marijuana every Friday night. Marcus participates for a while, but he begins to change.

Background and Scene

For the past two years, Marcus has been working at a warehouse, loading and unloading trucks. When he first started working at the warehouse, Marcus met LaTroy and Willie. Every Friday after work, Marcus would join LaTroy and Willie at the nearby bar for beer. LaTroy and Willie introduced Marcus to marijuana. Because Fridays were also paydays, the three of them would cash their paychecks at the bar and buy marijuana.

This week, Marcus joined a treatment program for his marijuana addiction. In addition to his treatment, he's begun attending meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

Shortly after beginning his job at the warehouse, Marcus noticed a sign near the water cooler that said, "Addiction Got You Down? Confidential support group meets after work every Friday evening at the union hall across the street." Marcus hadn't paid much attention to the sign until now, since he understands what it means. Although interested, Marcus has not yet gone to this meeting.

In addition, he has not informed LaTroy and Willie about his treatment and recovery efforts. It is Friday afternoon, and LaTroy and Willie assume that he will join them after work.

Version one. Begin the role-play exercise with LaTroy and Willie urging Marcus to join them at the bar after work. Marcus tries to explain to LaTroy and Willie (who are still drinking and smoking marijuana) that he is in recovery. They try to get him to join them for "old time's sake" or for "one last time." In this scene, Marcus tells himself that he will go to the bar, but he doesn't want to use alcohol and marijuana again.

Version two. Conduct the role-play exercise again, but in this situation, Marcus has decided to attend the support group at the union hall after work. Since Fridays are paydays, Marcus is scared about having money on a Friday night. He is also nervous that he might change his mind about the support group meeting once he gets his check. In this scene, LaTroy and Willie try to get Marcus to the bar, but Marcus refuses and is committed to going to the support group.

Suggested Questions

1. *What are some examples of how Marcus can work with people, not against them?*
2. *What are some ways in which Marcus can have more supportive relationships?*
3. *What are some specific ways in which Marcus can prioritize and plan aspects of his recovery?*