

Addiction and Recovery: Preventing Relapse By Making Good Choices

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Relapse unfolds over time, intertwined with "seemingly insignificant decisions." Many individuals experiencing relapse report that drinking or using substances was the last thing on their minds just before consumption. However, in reality, relapse often begins before using the substance and is characterized by a return to previous thought patterns, emotions, and behaviors.

For those struggling with addiction, the consumption of their chosen mood-altering substance becomes nearly automatic, deeply ingrained, and somewhat unconscious—an action akin to "first nature." The behavior of addiction mirrors driving on a familiar superhighway, where the route is well-worn and routine, with thoughts drifting elsewhere while the journey seems to progress effortlessly.

Routine actions, such as smoking cannabis in the morning or stopping at a convenience store for a six-pack, become ingrained habits rather than conscious decisions. Deciding to pursue sobriety is akin to veering onto a less familiar, unpaved utility road from this superhighway. It demands close attention to avoid pitfalls, navigate obstacles, and stay on course. Every action requires conscious consideration, from speed to steering, marking a self-awareness that contrasts with the automatic nature of addiction.

Maintaining sobriety necessitates daily conscious decisions, where individuals must confront their feelings and thoughts to ensure their behavior aligns with recovery goals. Over time, with consistent effort and abstinence, navigating this path becomes smoother, and recovery becomes second nature, reducing the need for hyper-vigilance.

In the early stages of recovery, hyper-vigilance remains crucial, as seemingly insignificant decisions can profoundly impact the risk of relapse. Scrutinizing usage patterns and identifying vulnerabilities is essential to prevent relapse. To identify your vulnerabilities, ask yourself these questions, letting your answers inform your routine daily decisions:

What substances did you use?

Where did you obtain them?

When did you get them? What time of the day or week?

When did you use them? What time of the day or week?

Who were you with when you used them?

What activities were associated with usage? What did you do? Bars/
shopping/driving around/playing video games?

Answering these questions provides valuable insights into maintaining abstinence during early recovery.

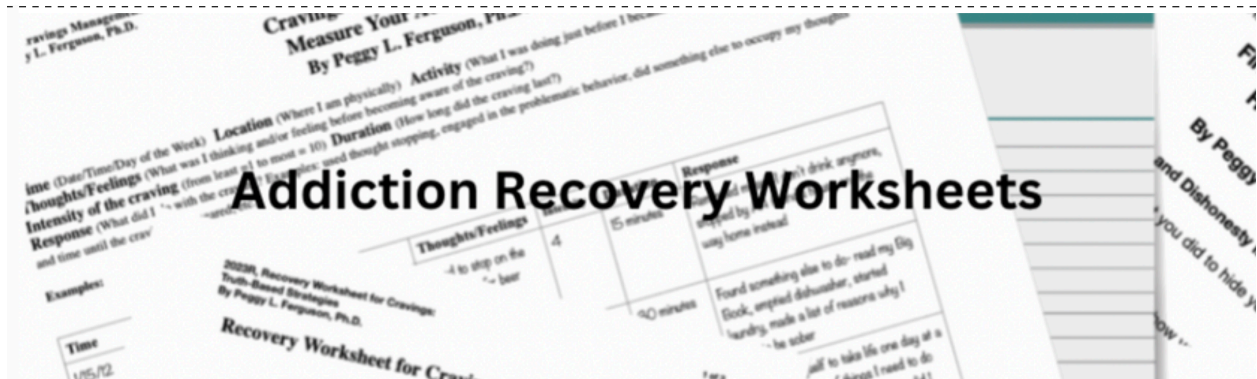
Consider a scenario where an someone with an alcohol use disorder consumes beer alone, purchases it from a convenience store on the way home from work, and drinks while watching television after dinner. To reduce vulnerability to relapse in this pattern, one could employ simple cue avoidance techniques, such as:

- a. Removing alcohol from the house.
- b. Take an alternative route home to avoid passing the familiar convenience store.
- c. Engaging in activities after dinner that do not involve television.

Cues encompass visual, environmental, and emotional reminders of substance use. By replacing relapse cues with alternative stimuli, individuals make conscious choices that directly impact the likelihood of relapse. These pro-recovery decisions become more natural with consistent practice, gradually integrating into daily life.

Initially, these conscious choices may feel awkward or forced. However, adhering to the axiom "if it feels right, don't do it" underscores the transformative journey of adopting a new way of life characterized by fresh

perspectives, emotions, and behaviors. Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.



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using the insights of this article, which underscores the significance of conscious choices and self-awareness in steering clear of relapse triggers, you can build upon your relapse prevention skills by gaining a deeper comprehension of the complexities of addiction and the hidden vulnerabilities of cross-addiction relapse. By synthesizing these insights, you can fortify their recovery tools, equipping yourself with the knowledge and strategies necessary to navigate the challenges ahead and achieve sustained sobriety.

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