

## **Relapse – ‘have the fire extinguisher on the ready’:**

During these challenging and uncertain times, people can find ways to strengthen their recovery and further refine and develop their coping skills. This time can be used as an opportunity to learn how to be as creative and resilient as possible in the face of adversity. We must remember that as human beings we are naturally adaptive, it is our resistance to change and the tendency to isolate (‘do it alone’) that further complicates it. In fact the only constant in life is change itself. Whether in recovery or not we all have to learn how to surf the wave of change and the discomfort that comes with it. When life changes there is always a transition to be made; from our life before as we knew it, to the new life that confronts us. Transitions, no matter how big or small, always contain a degree of discomfort and it is essential we learn how to manage discomfort and engage with practical support to help us through.

From my experience of working in addiction relapse is a ‘dirty’ word. It is feared and the more we fear something the more disempowered we are. We have to realise there is no shame in relapse and it is a natural part of the process for many people. In fact, for most people who are brave enough to engage in recovery, relapse is a reality and in order to create a full proof recovery it must be viewed as an opportunity to strengthen the recovery process. How many times have you attempted to break a habit, any habit? For those of who persevere, it usually takes about 13 tries, attempting different strategies each time until we get it. I believe we all know how difficult it is to break a habit and to then maintain the changes we have implemented. The journey is rarely linear. It usually looks like this; three steps forwards -- two steps back -- one to the side....and back on track. Mistakes and set backs are always a great opportunity for learning and progress, if approached with the right attitude, support and guidance.

Here I have outlined a relapse strategy to follow in the case of either a slip or a full relapse. It is a bit like having a fire extinguisher in the corner of the hallway – you hope never to have to use it but if necessary you have it there on the ready.

If you or a loved one relapses:

First of all deny the drama; extract the drama and judgement out of it – you are not the first person to relapse and nor will you be the last.

**Reach out** – expose the addiction, this weakens it. The more you hide it the stronger the addiction is. So this means talk to someone (ideally professionally) about the addiction: the addiction cravings, thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Bring those you can rely on onto your team to help you against the addiction. Be honest with family and reassure them you are getting support.

**Self-care** - back to basics. Sleep, diet and exercise. This stage is about stabilisation for mind and body. So keep it practical. Most relapses are because self-care has been neglected, leaving a person without the energy to cope. For the first seven days after a relapse follow a few simple ‘tonic tasks’ each day. Tonic tasks are tasks that will settle the nervous system and help you to recover your logical mind. For example create healthy morning and evening routine, drink plenty of water and eat nourishing food – dehydration causes anxiety – an no tea and coffee are not good supplements for water. Structure this with a counsellor at Bushypark.

**Take a bit of time** – anyone who has struggled with addiction knows how caught up you become in everything needing to be immediate and done in a rush. I need to feel better now! Who says? Follow your structure of tonic tasks for seven days; self-care & mind-body relaxation, and there will be a promise of relief and a sense of control at the end of it. Although it is a challenge to take time to slow

down, attempt to do things with more gentleness and attention to breathing and relaxing the body. Remember the more relaxed our body and mind are, the more reasonable we are and the better we are at making decisions.

**Examine the relapse** – in order to understand the relapse, it must be examined – however much you ‘want to put it behind you and move on’ or however trivial it seems, this is an essential step. Relapse is rich with useful information. – When examining the relapse do so with a professional counsellor. This will help you be able to view things more objectively and with more clarity.

**Begin again** – every day we have the opportunity to begin our life again in a way that is healthier, richer and more satisfying. It is important to not get caught in a cycle of self-loathing or self-pity – these are disempowering and futile states of being. Empower yourself to take responsibility – ask yourself – *what is the reality of my situation? how can I best cope with it? and what support do I need?*

**Family & loved ones** – relapse is naturally a very concerning time for family members and creates distrust and suspicion. They also need to be heard, their feelings acknowledged and validated and to be supported. If you are struggling with family or loved ones call a counsellor for guidance and support.

On a final note, just think..... when a baby is learning how to walk, they don’t fall twenty times, feel ashamed and give up – they fall twenty times, reach out and continue with determination and the supportive and patient hands of their parents. We as professionals are those supportive and patient hands for those who are committed to their recovery journey.

Here is a very useful and informative link explaining the process of relapse and how to continue in recovery:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmjxdDwOlc>