

GDC Session #10

Warning Signs of Relapse

Objectives of Session

1. Define cocaine relapse as both a “process” and an “event.”
2. Review both subtle and common warning signs associated with relapse.
3. Encourage group members to have a plan to manage their warning signs before they use substances.
4. Encourage those who have had one or more episodes of relapse to use relapse as a learning experience to help their future recovery.

Methods/Points for Group Discussion

- 1 Use a discussion format to review the clients’ answers to the handouts and the educational material for this session. Write the major points on a chalkboard or flip chart, if desired.
2. Ask group members to share their own experiences related to this material, as it is reviewed.
3. Ask the group members to define relapse and to share their relapse experiences. Define relapse as both a process and an event.
4. State that both obvious and subtle warning signs usually precede an actual relapse. Then, ask the group to give examples of relapse warning signs from their past experiences. Elicit examples of obvious and subtle warning signs from group members.

A few common examples of obvious relapse warning signs include:

- Attending fewer or stopping going to counseling sessions without first discussing this with a counselor.
- Attending fewer or quitting going to AA, NA, CA, or other self-help group meetings without first discussing this with a counselor, sponsor, or friend in the program.
- Socializing with others with whom the addicted person used to get high or party.
- Experiencing increased boredom with sobriety or the discipline of recovery.
- Having a significant increase in thoughts of using drugs or the desire to “use socially” or have “just a few” (drinks, pills, tokes, etc.).

A few examples of subtle or idiosyncratic relapse warning signs include:

- An increase in dishonesty.
 - An increase in generosity to kids and spouse.
 - A decrease in church attendance.
 - An increase in episodes of snapping at others or starting arguments.
 - A tendency to criticize a counselor, a sponsor, or various aspects of self-help programs.
5. Ask group members to come up with coping strategies for several select warning signs. Focus on a range of coping strategies: cognitive (e.g., self-talk, reviewing slogans), behavioral (e.g., specific actions to take such as planning “safe” weekend leisure activities, participating in physical activity), and interpersonal (e.g., asking a friend to join in a drug-free activity, asking a sponsor or AA/NA/CA friend for support). Also mention that some people in recovery use medications such as disulfiram (Antabuse®) or naltrexone (ReVia®) that reduce cravings or provide an extra incentive to stay sober.
 6. Use this information to emphasize the importance of being aware of warning signs and having a plan to cope with them.
 7. State that getting support from others may help with coping with relapse warning signs. People from whom group members can get support may include:
 - AA/NA friends.
 - AA/NA sponsors.
 - Counselor.
 - Friends.
 - Family.

GDC Session #10 Handouts

1. “Understanding the Relapse Process.” Adapted from *Group Drug Counseling Participant Recovery Workbook*. Holmes Beach, FL: Learning Publications, Inc., pp. 22-33.
2. “HALT (Hungry Angry Lonely Tired).”

Suggested Educational Videos

1. Living Sober Video G: *Coping with Relapse Warning Signs*. Gerald T. Rogers Productions, 1000 Skokie Blvd., Suite 575, Wilmette, IL 60091, 1-800-227-9100.

GDC Session #10, Sample Handout #1

Understanding the Relapse Process

Relapse refers to the **process** of returning to the use of cocaine or other drugs after a period of abstinence. Relapse is a possibility regardless of how long you have been clean. Part of your recovery plan should include learning about the relapse process and devising a plan to help prevent you from relapsing should early warning signs occur.

You can be in a relapse before you actually use substances. It is possible to build up to a relapse over a period of hours, days, weeks, or even months. Many who have reviewed their relapse experiences have been able to identify **clues** that preceded their relapse. Sometimes, these clues were present long before these individuals used cocaine or other drugs.

Relapse clues, or warning signs, can relate to changes in your behavior, attitudes, feelings, thoughts, or a combination of these. This does not necessarily mean that changes you experience are an indication that you may be in a relapse. It simply means that you should be on the alert when changes occur and examine whether these indicate that you may be headed for a relapse. The following are examples of relapse clues that people in recovery have experienced before they relapse.

1. **Behavior Changes:** having an increasing number of episodes of arguing with others for no apparent reasons, attending fewer or no longer going to AA, NA, or other self-help meetings, stopping at a bar to socialize and drink soda, displaying increased stress symptoms such as smoking more cigarettes or eating more food than usual.
2. **Attitude Changes:** not caring about sobriety, not caring what happens, becoming too negative about life and how things are going.
3. **Thought Changes:** thinking drugs are deserved as a reward for being clean 6 months, thinking it wouldn't be harmful to substitute one drug for another (for example, giving up cocaine, but continuing to smoke marijuana, abstaining from alcohol but continuing to use uppers), thinking the drug problem was "cured" because no substances were used for a period of weeks or months.
4. **Changes in Feelings or Moods:** experiencing increased moodiness or depression, strong feelings of anger at oneself or another person, increased feelings of boredom, or sudden feelings of euphoria.

These are just a few examples of more common warning signs of relapse to drug use. Other warning signs may be more subtle and individual. The important point to remember is that changes in your behaviors, attitudes, feelings, thoughts, or a combination of these could indicate that your relapse process has been set in motion. The earlier you catch it and take action, the greater your chance of staying sober.

If you have experienced a period of recovery in the past prior to a relapse, answer the following questions:

1. What specific behaviors and other warning signs preceded your relapse?

I criticized people at NA meetings and got tired of going.

I created reasons to work late so I could skip NA meetings.

I avoided my wife's questions about my recovery status.

I started talking to Dan about betting on sports events, and he invited me to the bar.

I lied to my dad when he asked how I was doing.

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2. How much time elapsed between the emergence of your relapse clues and when you actually used cocaine or other drugs?

About 2 to 3 weeks.

3. Where did your relapse occur, and who were you with at the time?

At a bar with old drinking buddies from my company. After a few drinks, I called my dealer and got cocaine, which I used alone.

4. If you spot relapse warning signs in the future, what could you do to prevent a relapse?

Bring them out in the open to discuss them with my sponsor.

Never go to the bar for any reason, and don't drink alcohol.

Ask my wife for support and help.

Remember what I put my family through.

Remember that getting sober saved my business.

GDC Session #10, Sample Handout #2

H A L T (Hungry Angry Lonely Tired)

HALT is an acronym used in NA and AA that stands for feelings that can distract us from our recovery. HALT encourages us not to become too:

- HUNGRY:** When we dislike ourselves, we neglect and deprive our bodies of the balanced diet we need. Food is a source of nurturing. Our bodies are ours to keep and care for so that we may understand and carry out God's will for us. When our bodies cry for attention, we no longer have time for the spiritual program necessary for recovery.
- ANGRY:** When we choose not to deal with a situation immediately, there is a possibility that those feelings we are afraid to express will become resentments that we may later use as an excuse to drink or use drugs.
- LONELY:** When we believe that we are either better or worse than other people, we dig ourselves into a hole of self-pity, feeling unique in our differences. We soon begin to feel the loneliness of such isolation, and we tell ourselves that it is a good reason to drink or use drugs.
- TIRED:** When we can't make sense out of anything and life overwhelms us, it is possible we have run ourselves into a screeching HALT. We have filled our lives with so many activities that we have no time for reflection.