

Relapsing

Know Your Triggers

Relapse can be common for recovering alcoholics due to how the brain has been permanently altered. Don't let this intimidate you, though. If you can understand what leads to a relapse, you can take the necessary steps to avoid or minimize the thing that makes you want to drink. Different people will be triggered to relapse by different things, but there are some common emotions that can lead to a relapse. Fear, frustration, depression, stress or anxiety can lead to a relapse when alcohol has been previously used to deal with those emotions. Being aware of these emotions and learning different ways to cope with them can keep you from using alcohol as a coping mechanism.

People can also trigger you to drink, especially people who used to drink with you or encourage your abuse. It may be necessary to remove them from your life if it puts your sobriety at stake. Avoid going to places like bars, clubs or parties where alcohol is served if it will tempt you to drink while you're still trying to recover.

It Happened...

But It's Time to Move On

Relapsing as a drug or alcohol addict is pretty common, but it is not a lack of willpower or determination on your part! It happened, so now it's time to get back on track. As with any chronic illness like asthma or diabetes, a relapse just means it's time to get back to treatment—whether that's back to seeing your doctor for a different prescription or (more likely) returning to therapy sessions. If you've avoided going to a support group, ask a friend or family member to come with you to hold you accountable. Talk to someone about what you think caused your relapse so you can learn how to resist it better next time.

Whatever you do, please know that relapse doesn't mean failure; it's an opportunity for growth. You may feel like you failed, but you need to forgive yourself. Relapse may be a part of your recovering journey, but it's not a reason to give up on your sobriety.

Here are a few more tips for staying sober:

- **Live in the now.** You can't change what happened in the past or control what will happen in the future. Just do your best right now.
- **Don't test your willpower.** Get rid of all of the alcohol, even the special occasion bottles or those reserved for guests.
- **Embrace change.** Change can be good, especially when you're becoming a better person because of it.
- **Let go of resentment.** This includes resentment of yourself and of anyone else. Forgive.
- **Don't live in fear of relapsing.** Worrying and getting anxious about slipping into bad habits is just as dangerous for your sobriety as actually relapsing. Focus on your strength.

STAYING SOBER



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Recovery is Possible

How Hard Can It Be?

If you've ever suffered from a drug or alcohol addiction and are currently clean or even on your way to get clean, congratulations! Cleansing all of the drugs or alcohol from your system and detoxing your body can be an arduous task by itself. Staying sober is a tremendous effort that takes time, determination, and a desire for a better life—otherwise you'd never commit to getting sober in the first place. On a deeper level, it also requires you to know that addiction is a legitimate, physical disease, so if you slip up, know that you're not alone and that you can have a whole system of support ready for you.

In addition to any sort of medication therapy your doctor may prescribe to help you stay sober, many treatment centers recommend behavioral or group therapy—usually to help treat the underlying causes of addiction. Most professionals agree that in order to be effective, pharmacological treatments have to be integrated with other forms of addiction rehabilitation like behavioral therapy, individual or group psychotherapy, behavior-modification strategies, twelve-step programs, or residential treatment facilities. Many people turn to alcohol when they're depressed or angry, and without dealing with those deeper psychological issues, medication alone isn't always going to be the most effective way to stay sober.

What to Do?

What are My Treatment Options?

Because things like alcohol or drugs directly affect your brain, there's no such thing as "just getting over it" or "willing the addiction away."

If you or your doctor thinks you could benefit from substance abuse treatment, there are plenty of options for you. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a helpline to get some advice on how to proceed: 1-800-622-HELP (4357).



What is Addiction?

Addiction is a valid disease, not a lack of self-discipline or resolve. Characterized by compulsive involvement with a rewarding stimulus—like alcohol, drugs, gambling or sex—despite any adverse consequences, addiction is a complex issue that many people deal with. Alcohol is the most commonly abused addictive substance in the United States, with approximately 17.6 million people suffering with alcohol addiction.



Why does this happen?

Referred to as the nucleus accumbens, the reward center is the portion of the brain in which addiction occurs. When a person does a pleasurable activity like spending time with friends or exercising, their brain releases dopamine—which makes them feel happy. The reason you don't become physically addicted to simple pleasurable activities like spending time with friends is because your brain isn't chemically altered as is the case with drugs or alcohol.

"Maybe it Won't be So Bad Next Time"

Alcohol floods the brain's reward center with dopamine, which is how people who may have become violently ill when they tried alcohol for the first time can still become addicted. The influx of dopamine motivates that person to repeat the action, and the overstimulation of the nucleus accumbens causes an intense, gratifying feeling that can lead to compulsively consuming alcohol. Soon, the brain adjusts to the extra levels of dopamine by making less of it on its own or by reducing the cell's ability to respond to it.

"It Just Doesn't Affect Me Like it Used to..."

This is how people become tolerant to alcohol, and why the same amount that may have gotten them drunk the first time may not have the same effect weeks or months down the line. Eventually, they may try drinks with higher alcohol contents to get the same effect, and before they know it, they are physically addicted to alcohol.

Don't Worry Be Happy!

Being happy—truly happy with your life—may seem impossible at first. Maybe that's the reason you started drinking in the first place. Or why you feel that alcohol is the only thing that makes life seem better. Studies show, however, that people who are happier tend to stay sober longer. Here are some things that will strengthen your chances for remaining sober:

- **Meaningful Relationships and Commitment.** Having hundreds of friends doesn't matter as much as having close, personal, deep relationships with other people.
- **Giving and Serving Others.** Make time to give back and to do things for others with nothing expected in return. Volunteering is a great way to connect to other people and your community.
- **Staying Healthy.** Regular exercise, eating healthier food and sleeping better all contribute to a healthier lifestyle, which is great for your sobriety.
- **Reaching for a Goal or Trying a New Hobby.** Find something that you can work at and try to master. Whether it is a creative outlet like learning to play an instrument, or it's a physical activity like riding a horse, it should be something that challenges you but doesn't overwhelm you.
- **Spirituality, Religion or a Higher Power.** There have been studies that show people who are a part of an organized religion or show commitment to a higher power consider themselves to be happier than people who don't have any spiritual connection. Furthermore, many different traditions of faith—Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and more—all demonstrate some sort of meditation, which is linked with feelings of well-being and happiness.
- **Sharing Your Strengths and Best Qualities.** Happiness is strongly linked to self-knowledge, not self-criticism. Don't be your harshest critic.
- **Be Optimistic and Grateful.** Feelings like sadness, anger, and disappointment are all normal human emotions. However, people who are generally happier manage to find opportunities in difficult or negative situations.

