

Dealing With Relapse: What to Say, What to Do

Introduction: Understanding Relapse as Part of Recovery

Relapse—the return to substance use after a period of abstinence—is one of the most challenging and misunderstood aspects of the recovery journey. Whether you're the person experiencing the relapse, a family member, friend, or professional support, how you respond in these critical moments can significantly impact what happens next.

At Aspire Impact Network, we believe that relapse, while never desired, represents an opportunity for deepened understanding and renewed commitment to recovery rather than a failure or moral weakness. Research consistently shows that relapse is common in recovery from substance use disorders, with rates similar to those of other chronic conditions like diabetes, hypertension, or asthma.

This article offers practical guidance on responding to relapse in ways that maintain dignity, foster hope, and create pathways back to recovery. We'll explore what to say, what to do, and how to move forward with compassion and purpose.

The Science of Relapse: Beyond Choice and Willpower

Before discussing how to respond to relapse, it's essential to understand what's happening in the brain and body during this process.

Substance use disorders create lasting changes in brain structure and function, particularly in areas responsible for:

- Decision-making and impulse control
- Stress response and emotional regulation
- Reward and motivation systems
- Memory and learning processes

These changes don't immediately reverse when someone stops using substances. Recovery involves the gradual healing of these brain systems, which takes time and can leave people vulnerable to relapse, especially during periods of:

- High stress or emotional distress
- Environmental triggers or cues

- Social pressure
- Co-occurring mental health symptoms
- Physical pain or discomfort
- Major life transitions

Understanding relapse as a complex neurobiological event rather than simply a "bad choice" helps us respond with greater compassion and effectiveness. As one recovery specialist at Alcohol and Drug Solutions notes, "When we stop seeing relapse as a moral failing and start seeing it as a treatable medical event, we open the door to actually helpful responses."

The ASPIRE Approach to Relapse Response

At Aspire Impact Network, we use our ASPIRE framework to guide effective responses to relapse situations:

A - Assess the Situation

When relapse occurs, take time to understand what's happening before responding:

For the person in recovery:

- Acknowledge the relapse without shame or denial
- Consider the extent and context of the substance use
- Identify any immediate safety concerns
- Recognize emotional responses without being controlled by them

For family members/supporters:

- Focus on safety first, especially if the person is intoxicated
- Gather essential information without interrogation
- Consider your own emotional state before responding
- Remember that this moment doesn't define the entire recovery journey

Key Assessment Questions:

- Is anyone in immediate danger?
- What level of care or intervention is needed right now?
- What factors may have contributed to this relapse?
- What supports are already in place that can be activated?

S - Support with Boundaries

Effective support during relapse balances compassion with clear boundaries:

For the person in recovery:

- Reach out to trusted supports instead of isolating
- Be honest about what happened
- Accept support without expecting others to abandon their boundaries
- Focus on immediate next steps rather than shame about the past

For family members/supporters:

- Express care for the person while being clear about boundaries
- Use "I" statements rather than accusatory language
- Maintain previously established boundaries about substance use
- Offer specific, realistic forms of support

Supportive Statements:

- "I care about you and I'm concerned about what's happening."
- "I'm here to support your recovery, though I can't support active substance use."
- "This doesn't erase the progress you've made."
- "What kind of support would be helpful for you right now?"
- "I believe you can get back on track with the right support."

Statements to Avoid:

- "How could you do this to us?"
- "I knew you couldn't stay sober."
- "After all we've done for you..."
- "You've thrown everything away."
- Any statements made while you're highly emotional or angry

P - Plan for Re-engagement

Relapse requires thoughtful planning to re-establish recovery:

For the person in recovery:

- Contact treatment providers or recovery supports promptly
- Evaluate whether current recovery plan needs adjustment
- Identify specific triggers or vulnerabilities that contributed
- Create a more detailed plan for high-risk situations
- Consider whether additional treatment or support is needed

For family members/supporters:

- Encourage prompt connection with professional help
- Focus on concrete next steps rather than recriminations
- Help research options if additional treatment is needed
- Participate in planning if appropriate and invited
- Reconnect with your own support systems

Elements of Effective Re-engagement Plans:

- Immediate safety planning
- Prompt return to recovery meetings/community
- Follow-up with treatment providers
- Addressing any co-occurring mental health needs
- Review and revision of relapse prevention strategies
- Clear, specific action steps with timelines

I - Implement Recovery Reinforcement

Taking concrete actions to strengthen recovery after relapse:

For the person in recovery:

- Return to recovery activities immediately
- Increase support temporarily (more meetings, sessions, check-ins)
- Practice rigorous honesty about what happened
- Engage in structured reflection on relapse triggers and responses
- Recommit to fundamental recovery practices

For family members/supporters:

- Acknowledge and encourage positive steps toward recovery
- Help remove barriers to treatment engagement
- Participate in family education or therapy if appropriate
- Follow through on stated boundaries
- Practice your own self-care consistently

Recovery Reinforcement Strategies:

- Structured daily schedule
- Environmental modifications to reduce triggers
- Enhanced accountability measures
- Reconnection with recovery community
- Addressing underlying factors (mental health, trauma, etc.)
- Physical self-care (sleep, nutrition, exercise)

R - Review and Learn

Relapse offers important information when approached with curiosity rather than judgment:

For the person in recovery:

- Examine the relapse process from early warning signs to actual use
- Identify what did and didn't work in your previous recovery plan
- Consider what the relapse reveals about unmet needs or unaddressed issues
- Look for patterns across previous relapses if applicable
- Use this information to strengthen your recovery foundation

For family members/supporters:

- Reflect on your own responses and their effectiveness
- Identify any enabling patterns that may need changing
- Consider what you've learned about supporting recovery
- Explore any family dynamics that may impact recovery
- Use this experience to enhance your understanding of addiction

Structured Review Questions:

- What were the earliest warning signs before the relapse?
- What coping strategies were tried? Which helped or didn't help?
- What thoughts or beliefs made it harder to maintain recovery?
- What additional skills or supports might be needed going forward?
- What can be done differently next time similar challenges arise?

E - Empower Through Growth

Relapse, while difficult, can ultimately strengthen recovery when approached as a learning opportunity:

For the person in recovery:

- Integrate insights from relapse into a stronger recovery plan
- Build confidence through consistent action despite setbacks
- Share your experience to help others when appropriate
- Recognize that vulnerability and honesty take courage
- Focus on progress rather than perfection

For family members/supporters:

- Acknowledge the courage it takes to return to recovery after relapse
- Recognize and reinforce positive changes
- Support growing independence in recovery management
- Continue your own learning about substance use disorders
- Share hope based on the reality that many people achieve stable recovery after relapse

Empowerment Statements:

- "What you've learned from this experience matters."
- "I've noticed your commitment to trying new approaches."
- "Each day you're building evidence that you can handle challenges."
- "Your honesty about what happened shows courage."
- "Recovery isn't about never falling; it's about getting back up each time."

Special Considerations

When Multiple Relapses Occur

Repeated relapses may indicate:

- Need for a higher level of care
- Undiagnosed or undertreated co-occurring disorders
- Significant triggers in the person's environment
- Need for medication-assisted treatment
- Gaps in the recovery support system

Recommendations for Chronic Relapse:

- Comprehensive professional assessment
- Consider different treatment approaches or modalities
- Evaluate need for more structured living environment
- Address any underlying trauma or mental health issues
- Develop more intensive monitoring and support plans
- Focus on harm reduction strategies when needed

Supporting Young People Through Relapse

Adolescents and young adults have unique needs during relapse:

- Their brains are still developing, particularly in areas of impulse control
- Peer relationships play a more significant role
- Identity formation is a central developmental task
- They may have less insight into consequences
- School and family dynamics are primary concerns

Youth-Specific Approaches:

- Maintain connection and communication
- Focus on safety and harm reduction
- Involve the young person in planning next steps
- Consider developmental stage in expectations
- Address family dynamics that may contribute
- Connect with specialized youth recovery supports
- Balance consequences with opportunities to rebuild trust

Supporting Someone Who Doesn't Want Help

Sometimes, a person may relapse and resist returning to recovery efforts:

Constructive Approaches:

- Focus on harm reduction when abstinence is rejected
- Maintain appropriate boundaries to avoid enabling
- Express concern without lectures or threats
- Provide information about options when they're receptive

- Remember that motivation often fluctuates
- Continue your own self-care and support
- Be ready to offer help when they become more receptive

When to Consider Intervention:

- Danger to self or others
- Severe health complications
- Cognitive impairment affecting decision-making
- Legal consequences that could be mitigated by treatment
- Responsibilities for minor children that aren't being met

What Families Need During Relapse

When a loved one relapses, family members need their own support:

Essential Family Supports:

- Education about the nature of addiction and relapse
- Permission to experience difficult emotions
- Guidance on setting appropriate boundaries
- Connection with others who understand the experience
- Self-care practices and stress management
- Clear information about available resources
- Hope based on accurate information

Family Recovery Resources:

- Al-Anon, Nar-Anon, or other family support groups
- Family therapy or counseling
- Educational programs about substance use disorders
- Respite care when needed
- Crisis support services
- Connections with experienced family mentors

Relapse Prevention: Looking Ahead

While this article focuses on responding to relapse, prevention remains the ideal:

Evidence-Based Prevention Strategies:

- Consistent engagement with recovery support
- Development of comprehensive coping skills
- Treatment of co-occurring mental health conditions
- Lifestyle changes that support overall wellbeing
- Regular review and updating of recovery plans
- Building meaningful activities and relationships
- Addressing underlying trauma when present

The Role of Professional Support:

- Outpatient treatment programs
- Recovery coaching
- Therapy for underlying issues
- Medication management when appropriate
- Regular check-ins and accountability
- Skills training and practice

Hope and Reality: The Recovery Journey

The reality of recovery is both challenging and hopeful. Research shows that:

- Many people achieve stable, long-term recovery despite initial relapses
- Recovery skills strengthen over time
- Each recovery attempt increases the likelihood of eventual success
- Quality of life improves with sustained recovery efforts
- Recovery affects all dimensions of wellbeing—physical, emotional, social, and spiritual

As one participant in our recovery program shared: "My recovery journey included several relapses early on. Each time, I learned something important about myself and what I needed to do differently. Now I've been in continuous recovery for eight years. The relapses were painful, but they were part of my path to where I am today."

Conclusion: Compassion, Boundaries, and Perseverance

Dealing with relapse effectively requires balancing compassion with clear boundaries, honest assessment with hopeful planning, and immediate response with long-term perspective. By using the ASPIRE approach—Assess, Support, Plan, Implement, Review, and Empower—we can transform relapse from a devastating setback into an opportunity for deeper healing and stronger recovery.

Whether you're the person experiencing relapse or someone providing support, remember that recovery is not a straight line but a journey of growth and healing. With appropriate response and support, relapse can become not the end of recovery, but a turning point toward a more sustainable path forward.

If you or someone you care about is struggling with substance use or relapse, Aspire Impact Network offers support services, referrals, and

recovery programs throughout Nebraska. Contact us at (402) 759-2210 or visit www.aspireimpactnetwork.com to learn more about how we can help.

This article is for informational purposes and is not a substitute for professional medical or mental health advice. If you're concerned about immediate safety or severe withdrawal symptoms, please seek emergency medical care.

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