

Relapse: What Contributes to It? *An Addict's Perspective*

Overcoming addiction is not easy. It may be one of the hardest things we do. Time and again, we vow to stay away from drugs and alcohol only to pick it up again. Amazed, we go to 12-step programs, check ourselves into treatment, and “white-knuckle” it on our own. We fall on our knees and cry to God to give us strength to give it up, then drive straight to the liquor store or to our drug dealer’s house. We relapse.

How on earth do we beat our addiction and live a sober, happy life? If we keep trying and failing to stay clean (even after working a 12-step program or going to treatment), there is something else going on. Something is keeping us from the solution behind all healthy recovery.

That something just might be **d** _____ **e** _____ **g** _____. When we passed through the *school of life*, we may have missed out on some basic life skills and stopped developing...or developed in unhealthy ways. Perhaps in our *school of life* we didn’t have the best “teachers,” didn’t listen or just “skipped class.” Maybe we depended on getting by on a great personality or good looks. Whatever the reason, we didn’t learn the life skills we need to get through stressful times or effectively handle day-to-day responsibilities.

We may have compensated for this often-hidden handicap with drugs and alcohol. Then when we remove the drugs or alcohol without learning the necessary life skills, we relapse. This is a sign that we are simply not able to cope in our present life situation with our present level of life skills. Instead of condemnation, we can do some evaluation. This is the premise behind non-judgmental relapse.

How to Prevent Relapse

By knowing where we stand on the developmental curve and making measures to acquire the life skills we missed out on, we’re better equipped to avoid relapse. For these purposes we can break emotional growth down into four development stages—living and learning at the:

- **Pre-School** Stage of Life
- **Grade School** Stage of Life
- **High School** Stage of Life
- **College** Stage of Life

To identify our present stage of development, we can look at how well we are able to learn from experience. Do we keep making the same mistakes? We can also evaluate how we react to stress and how we handle responsibility.

- **Work:** Handle money - Make a living - Pay bills
- **Family:** Keep relatives somewhat happy or satisfied
- **Love:** Maintain a healthy relationship with a significant other

Once we identify which stage we’re in, we can take corrective action, grow to the next level, and learn to deal with our problems *without* the need of our addictions. If we’re mistaken about what stage we’re in and relapse, it serves as an indicator. Then, without judgment, we can back up a stage and try again.

Level 1: Pre-School Stage of Life: Un-safe. Dependent living
Living in jail, prison, or on the streets
Able to learn lessons in survival situations to prepare for grade school, high school and college stage of life

This is maximum confinement. You have forsaken your freedom and most of your rights. You have few, if any, responsibilities. Not for others. Not for yourself. You have given over control to others as you learn basic Preschool Life Lessons. **All is not lost.** You simply work your way through this stage and on to the next one.

Level 2: Grade School Stage of Life: Safe. Dependent living
Living at in-patient rehab center
Able to live and learn at grade school stage of life to prepare for high school and college stage of life

Here you accept a very limited amount of freedom and responsibility. You accept rules and structure temporarily imposed on you by others. There are many life skills to learn before you can live at the College Stage of Life. You may have tried living at Levels 3 or 4 only to return to drugs or alcohol. This is a sign that you're not quite ready yet. You need someone to take you by the hand and teach you how to care for yourself. Stress and responsibility are minimized at this stage as you focus on learning more basic skills. If you relapse at this stage, it's a sign that Level 1 lessons are required.

Level 3: High School Stage of Life: Safe, semi-dependent living
Living at sober living or "half-way" housing
Able to live and learn at high school stage of life to prepare for college stage of life

At this level you have a bit more responsibility and limited stress. For example, you may be responsible for making a living and paying bills but not for keeping loved-ones happy (since you don't live with them). To help you learn the life skills you're missing, you temporarily surrender some of your freedom and rely on others to create your structure. In this less stressful environment you can grow and gain the independent living skills you need to deal with the challenging circumstances at the College Stage of Life. If you relapse at this level, it's a sign that you need lessons available in Levels 2 or 1.

Level 4: College Stage of Life: Clean and sober. Fully independent living
Able to live and learn lessons at college stage of life without needing mood-altering substances

This is the highest level of adult functioning. You've acquired enough independent living skills to handle what life throws at you. You can manage the responsibilities of work, family and love relationships. For the most part, among other things, you are able to:

- ◇ Manage your anger
- ◇ Be honest (even when it costs you)
- ◇ Practice patience and delay gratification
- ◇ Calm your mind
- ◇ Confront others in a non-attacking way
- ◇ Take full responsibility for your decisions
- ◇ Set boundaries
- ◇ Learn from your mistakes
- ◇ Ask for help
- ◇ Nurture yourself
- ◇ Create your own structure
- ◇ Handle your freedom responsibly

At this stage of life, you're capable of living on your own or with family or with friends. You may not have all these life skills all of the time, but you have enough to be able to learn and grow without falling back into your addictions. If you do return to drugs or alcohol - if you relapse - you evaluate. You can identify skills obtainable through Levels 3, 2, or 1.