

Relapse: What Contributes to It? From the Addiction Perspective

Overcoming addiction is not easy. It may be one of the hardest things we do. Time and time 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 sober (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 needed to get through stressful times or effectively handle day-to-day responsibilities.

We may have compensated for this often-hidden struggle with drugs and alcohol. Then we remove the drugs or alcohol without learning the necessary life skills, and 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 self-condemnation, we can evaluate. This is the premise behind non-judgmental relapse.

How to Prevent Relapse

By knowing where we stand on the developmental curve and taking measures to acquire the life skills we missed, we are better equipped to avoid relapse. For these purposes, we can break emotional growth down into four developmental stages of life:

- 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. For example:

- Work: Handle money appropriately - Make a living - Pay bills
- Family: Maintaining healthy boundaries and appropriately asserting needs/wants
- Love: Maintain a healthy relationship with a significant other

Once we identify which stage we are in, we can take corrective action, grow to the next level, and learn to deal with our life problems without the need of substances. If we are mistaken about what stage we are 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 lost 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, gaining the skills needed to move on to the next stage.

Level 2: Grade School Stage of Life

Safe. Dependent living
 Living at in-patient rehab center

Able to learn lessons in survival situations to prepare for grade school, 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 are not ready yet. Stress and responsibility are minimized at this stage as you focus on learning more basic skills. If you relapse at this stage, it is 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 maintaining a full-time, high-stress job. To help you learn the life skills you are 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 is a sign that you need lessons available in Levels 2 or 1.

Level 4: College Stage of Life

Sober and in recovery
 Fully independent living

Able to live and learn lessons at college stage of life without needing mind-altering substances.

This is the highest level of adult functioning. You have acquired enough independent living skills to handle what life throws at you. You can manage the responsibilities of work, family, and love relationships. 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 can live on your own. You may not have all the life skills all the time, but you have enough to be able to learn and grow without falling back into using substances. If you do return to drugs or alcohol - if you relapse - you evaluate. You can identify skills obtainable through Levels 3, 2, or 1.