



TRANSITIONING BACK INTO LIFE:

WHAT TO DO AFTER REHAB

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The National Institute on Drug Abuse, or NIDA, estimates that annually, 23.5 million Americans age 12 years or older need treatment for drug abuse. Getting into a high-quality treatment facility and completing the appropriate programs are critical for individuals who suffer from drug or alcohol addictions.

Despite this, only 2.6 million, or 11.2 percent, seek and receive treatment at a specialty facility. Completing a treatment program can help individuals regain their sobriety, but the treatment program is only the beginning. In fact, 60 percent of individuals who complete treatment for drug abuse relapse, and 90 percent of those who abuse alcohol return to using it.

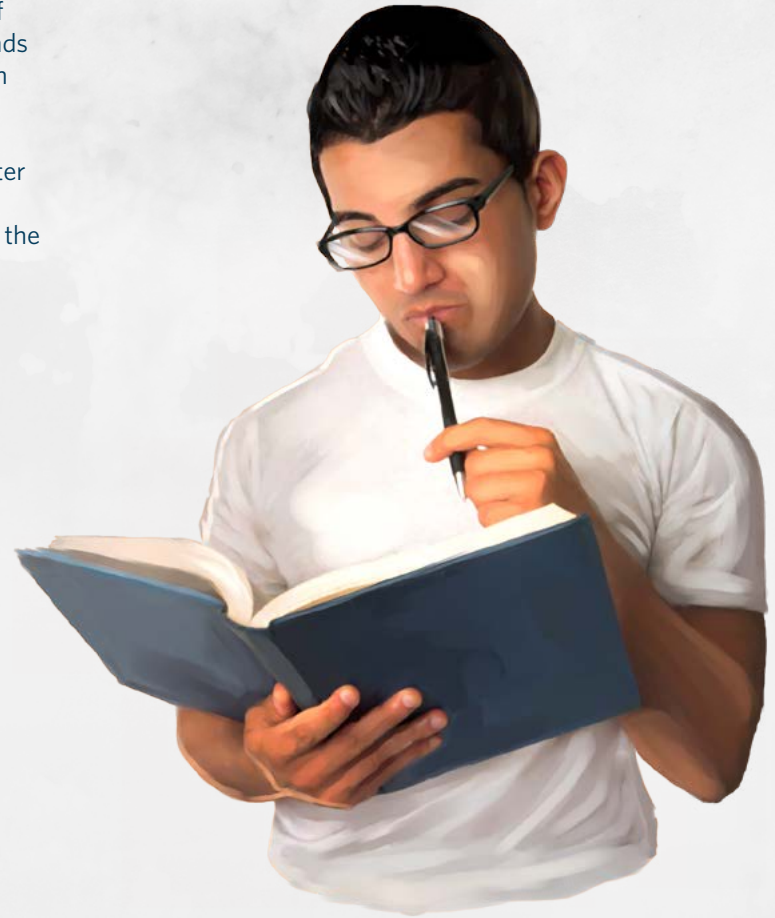
If individuals are to remain abstinent, the recovery from substance abuse cannot end when they complete the inpatient residential or outpatient treatment programs. Individuals must have a plan for transitioning back into real life so that they do not fall back into old habits. Treatment programs should include strategies for the transition back into life and the continued lifestyle of abstinence. A comprehensive plan and aftercare program are essential for long-term recovery after completion of treatment.

Planning for Life After Rehab Should Begin During Rehab

Treatment programs should address the transition back into life before completion of the program. Early integration of strategies for transitioning back to regular life reminds individuals that they will eventually complete treatment and be in charge of their own decisions in the real world.

Planting these ideas while in the controlled and safe environment of a treatment center allows individuals to grow accustomed to the idea that they will be on their own and that they can remain abstinent after rehab. Treatment programs can include some of the following strategies to help individuals remain sober after treatment:

- Education, so individuals can identify warning signs of relapse and what to do about them.
- Strategies on how to react to cravings or external cues that could trigger alcohol or drug use.
- Inclusion of close family members and/or friends in some therapy and educational opportunities.
- Exercises to build confidence that long-term recovery is possible and that individuals can overcome obstacles on their own or with the help of professionals, family, or friends.



Having Daily Structure Can Ease the Transition from Rehab to Life

Whether it is a residential inpatient program or an outpatient program, treatment programs for drug and alcohol abuse offer highly structured schedules. Each day may include group and individual therapy sessions, educational sessions, scheduled meals, and recreational activities to fill up any spare time. Individuals are supervised, cues and triggers to use alcohol and drugs are removed, and no substances are permitted on the treatment facility's grounds.

Naturally, the home environment is not as controlled as that of a treatment center, but it can be modified to promote sobriety. A defined structure can increase the individual's confidence in the ability to stay sober. Daily activities should be planned to prevent boredom and reduce stress. The planning can begin during treatment to facilitate the transition back to home life upon completion. These are some of the activities that a typical day can include:

- **Exercise.** Aerobic exercise can reduce cravings and the risk of relapse by increasing levels of dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is a chemical in the brain that gives a pleasurable sensation. Levels of dopamine also increase when drugs are used, and the increase in dopamine due to exercise likely leads to an individual's perceptions of reward and pleasure without using drugs.

Exercise also reduces levels of certain addiction-associated proteins, called extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) 1 and 2, by 32 to 42 percent. Aerobic exercise also improves mood and self-confidence. Examples of aerobic activities include brisk walking, swimming, bicycling, and playing tennis.



- **Time for reflection.** Time for reflection should include reminders of reasons to stay sober, since motivated individuals are less likely to experience relapse. Reasons that can help prevent relapse include legal reasons, desire for social acceptability, improved health, increased self-image and self-confidence, and the drive to have better interpersonal relationships.

Reflection time can also help reduce stress to allow better decisions when faced with possible triggers to abuse substances. Daily reflection should include positive reinforcement as individuals consciously praise themselves for things that they have done well within the past day.

- **Faith-based activities.** Individuals can continue their journeys to health by deepening their relationships with a higher power. 12-step recovery programs and other faith-based treatment programs are based on the premise that a relationship with a higher power, whatever the individual determines that higher power to be, facilitates recovery. After completion of the program, individuals can continue to deepen their spirituality.

Even after completion of non-spiritual rehab programs, individuals can establish or cultivate relationships with a higher power. Faith-based activities can be carried out alone, such as through daily meditation, in one-on-one counseling with pastors or other religious leaders, or in group settings, such as attending religious services or religious group meetings.

- **Work and chores.** Staying occupied and being productive can help prevent relapse after treatment. Productivity allows individuals to have better self-esteem and a feeling of purpose so that the temptation to return to abusive behaviors decreases.

Staying occupied limits spare time in which individuals could potentially experience cravings. It also limits the time in which individuals could seek a source for drugs or alcohol.



- **Alternative activities.** Making a list of alternative activities can help individuals stay sober instead of giving in to cues, cravings, or boredom. Action plans can include responses such as taking a walk, phoning a friend, cooking a meal, or journaling. Practicing these reactions can make them seem more natural, so that when a stressful situation arises and there is a temptation to relapse, individuals automatically choose their healthy alternative activities.
- **Follow-up care,** or aftercare, should include appointments weekly, monthly, or as frequently as determined necessary by the treatment center, the individual, and any involved physicians or psychiatrists. Aftercare can include one-on-one or group counseling and therapy. It may also include regular assessments to evaluate mental health and to detect any possible need for medications to prevent relapse.

When planning the daily schedule at home, make sure it's not too stressful. Those who experience high levels of anxiety are 50 percent more likely to relapse within 5 years of completing treatment. Overly full schedules and high expectations can lead to stress anxiety, particularly among individuals whose addictions were deep-rooted and long-lasting.

Years may have passed since these individuals were able to participate fully in their regular work, home, and social lives. Time for relaxation should be included and expectations should be realistic when planning the transition to home life.



Learn from gender differences

In one study, men were more likely than women to relapse in the six months following completion of treatment for drug dependence. In the study, 32 percent of men reported drug use after completion of treatment, compared to 22 percent of women.

Possible reasons for this may be greater use of group therapy among women than men. Also, the average woman who enters treatment may be more motivated than the average man, as they face more obstacles than a man. These may include barriers such as social pressure and stigma, finding childcare while they are in treatment, and fearing a treatment center dominated by male staff.

On the other hand, women are quicker to be impulsive in their return to drug use. After completing treatment, 56 percent of women reporting using drugs when the thought first occurred to them, while only 17 percent of men acted on their first craving.

Individuals and loved ones can learn from these findings on gender differences and take steps to prevent relapse:

- Awareness of possible gender influences can help guide an individual's treatment and transition back to regular life.
- Men can consider strategies to prevent over-confidence when they feel good, because over-confidence can lead to letting down a person's guard, increasing the risk of relapse.
- Women can learn strategies to recognize and manage negative situations and feelings, because these negative feelings can lead to relapse.
- Both genders should consider group therapy sessions.
- Both men and women should work to stay motivated and sober.

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Recognize and Address Warning Signs of Relapse

Recovery can require effort for months or years beyond completion of treatment. Most patients experience one or more warning signs of relapse multiple times after completing treatment. The keys to preventing relapse are to recognize the warning signs and react to them. Treatment programs should include education on recognizing warning signs. These are some of the signs of a potential relapse:

- Exceptional fatigue from being overburdened with responsibilities, such as family, school, work and social life.
- Being dishonest. Such as lying to others or oneself about accomplishments or how time or money was spent.
- Being unreasonable about what others should do or think, or frequently being aggressive without good cause.
- Feelings of being down or incapable that do not go away may be signs of depression, which can lead to relapse.
- Overconfidence in the ability to stay in recovery without continuing to work to stay sober.
- Unrealistically high expectations that can lead only to failure, which can trigger a return to substance abuse.

Signs of relapse are likely to occur, and relapse is relatively common among individuals who complete substance abuse treatment programs. However, full-blown relapse is preventable. Furthermore, individuals can draw motivation from knowing that sobriety becomes easier with time.



According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 36 percent of individuals who complete treatment remain abstinent in first 12 months; that is, the relapse rate is 64 percent. In 1 to 3 years, the abstinence rate is 66 percent while the relapse rate drops to 34 percent. After 3 years, the abstinence rate is 86 percent, showing that relapse is less likely with time.

Once warning signs are detected, action should be taken to prevent them from progressing. Treatment programs should include counseling on appropriate responses to warning signs, as well as practice in reacting to these signs.

They should also provide a list of resources for individuals to use. Resources can include a contact list of professionals at the treatment center, religious or other trusted community members, or medical or psychiatric professionals. Knowing that warning signs are normal and that help is available can bolster self-confidence in the ability to stop the signs from progressing to abusive behaviors.



of individuals who complete treatment for drug abuse **RELAPSE**

Build a Support System

A multi-layer support system can ease the transition back into real life after substance abuse rehabilitation and help the individual maintain sobriety. The treatment center can assist individuals in building their networks. Other members, such as friends, spouses and parents, can actively participate in plans for supporting the individual at home.

In addition to including trusted mentors and professionals, the support system can include close family members and friends.

- Individuals Post-Treatment should see themselves as strong and reliable. Therapy during treatment and follow-up care can help build self-confidence in the ability to maintain abstinence. Furthermore, individuals can accept that abuse is a problem, that it takes a lifelong commitment to recover, and that they are crucial to their own recovery.
- Spouses and other close family members and friends can ask treatment centers and individuals what they can do to help. Some family members or friends may provide the best support simply by letting the individual know that they are there for them. Others may be better in more participatory roles, such as reminding the individual about upcoming appointments and watching for warning signs of relapse.

Family members can remove triggers for substance abuse, since these cravings can be very strong. In a study among former smokers, cravings were twice as strong after 35 days of abstinence compared to after 1 week when a trigger was involved. However, when those cues aren't present, the cravings were weaker with time.

- Parents can be the most influential figures in teenagers' lives. Individuals age 12 to 20 consume 11 percent of all alcohol in the United States, and 90 percent of this consumption is through binge drinking. Illicit drug use is also widespread, with 36 percent of twelfth-graders reporting marijuana use in the past year and 7 percent misusing the prescription drug Adderall.



Parents should take an active role in their children's recovery by participating in the treatment process and planning for the transition back into every day life. They can help by making sure their children keep up with schoolwork, finding out what their children do outside of school, and meeting their children's friends.

They can also be sure to remove triggers from the house, and encourage teens to continue aftercare. In one poll among teens, 96 percent of those who completed a treatment program for substance abuse said that lifestyle improvement activities were valuable in preventing relapse.



Plan Early and Take a Long-Term Approach

Individuals, family, and friends need to understand that recovery from substance abuse is a long-term process that requires ongoing effort. Like caring for chronic conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, recovery requires daily attention. Relapse rates are 40 to 60 percent, but swift action and careful preparation can help maintain the gains made in treatment and prevent the dire consequences of a severe relapse. Individuals and loved ones have much to gain from being proactive and seeking more information about the transition back into every day life.

To get the information you need on substance abuse, please contact Alternatives In Treatment. We can help you make the right decision about treatment options. The call is free and confidential.



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