

Levels of Relapse Warning Signs

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Recovery from chemical dependence occurs at five levels – abstinence, situation change, behavior change, emotional change, and personal belief change.

Abstinence

The first level is **abstinence**. Chemical addicts must stop using alcohol and drugs and stabilize from withdrawal before they can begin to recover. At this level, we have to make a decision to stop drinking and drugging and reach out to get help.

Situational Change

Once abstinent, they move into the second level of recovery that focuses upon **situational change**. This level involves replacing an addiction-centered lifestyle with one that is sobriety-centered. To stop drinking and drugging we have to get away from people places and things that make us want to use alcohol and other drugs. Counselors call this “getting into an adequately controlled environment.” If you keep hanging out with people who are drinking and drugging your chances of staying abstinence are nearly zero. To break the cycle of destructive alcohol and drug use you need help. You need to put yourself around people, places, and things that will encourage and support your abstinence and help you to learn a set of specific skills to keep yourself from drinking and drugging even if you feel like it at that moment.

Behavior Change

The third level of recovery, is **behavior change**. Chemical addicts must learn to identify and interrupt addictive behaviors that give short term pleasure, create long term pain, and reactivate the urge use addictively. At this level, addictive behaviors must be replaced with sobriety-centered behaviors that produce pain free pleasure by resolving the problems that create the pain.

Change In Thinking

This leads to a fourth level of recovery, a **change in thinking**. Addictive thinking is based upon the irrational belief that addictive use can magically fix us, solve our problems, and make us something we are not. We are thinking addictively when we believe that we can never feel whole, complete, or have the good life unless we are using addictively. The antidote for addictively thinking is sober thinking that helps us recognize the destructive effects of addictive use and see the positive benefits and opportunities provided by sobriety.

Thinking about using alcohol and other drugs increases the risk of relapse. Thinking is a cognitive process controlled by the cerebral cortex or thinking part of the brain. There are three ways of thinking about alcohol and drug use that are particularly dangerous.

The first is called *euphoric recall*. You remember and exaggerating the good times that you had when using alcohol and other drugs while blocking out or minimizing the bad times.

A recovering person who called himself Jake the Snake used to tell the story of the great time he had when he got stoned on cocaine and stole \$150,000 worth of coke from his supplier and went off for a marvelous one week binge in Las Vegas. He forgot to mention that he caught a serious venereal disease from a prostitute, and was nearly killed when his supplier showed up to get his coke back. After being shot and taken to the emergency room, the police found a small bag of cocaine and some marijuana in Jake’s room and he ended up in jail and was serving a seven year sentence when I talked with him. He still argues that he had a good time.

The second relapse-prone way of thinking is called *Awfulizing Abstinence*. You think about all of the bad times associated with being alcohol and drug free while blocking out and minimizing all of the good times.

A woman named Jessie told me that nothing was working out for her since she got sober and she felt shw would be better off to start drinking and drugging again. When Jessie was drinking and drugging she was unemployed, earning money by drug dealing and prostitution, and was in a skid row cubicle hotel. Now she was physically healthy, working a