

# **How to Stay Sober: 13 Tips for Your Recovery**

If you're in recovery from a substance use disorder, you already know how much work it took to achieve sobriety, and you'll want to do everything possible to avoid having a relapse. It may seem that relapse is the last thing that could happen to you, but the truth is they are very common for people new to recovery. This document discusses what sobriety means and describes strategies that can support your long-term recovery. It also covers tips on how to deal with the challenges you'll face on your journey to sobriety.

## **What Is Sobriety?**

Sobriety means not being under the influence of a substance. However, the word is often used in different ways in different contexts. Many 12-step programs suggest that sobriety means total abstinence—never using the substance ever again. Other definitions, however, often focus on the process of recovery and developing coping mechanisms and habits that support health and wellness over the long term. Total abstinence may be the goal, but the reality is that setbacks are common. It is estimated that up to 80% of those who find long-term sobriety had at least one relapse along the way.<sup>1</sup> Some people experience many setbacks before they find lasting recovery. Your intentions may be good, but it takes more than willpower to avoid having a relapse.

## **How Do You Become Sober?**

There are a variety of tools available. It may help to pick a quit date or a day when you choose to discontinue the use of alcohol or drugs. It's also helpful to change your environment—for instance, avoid going to bars. There are also resources such as 12-step groups and recovery groups.

However, research suggests that while 12-step groups are effective, people often don't continue their involvement at beneficial levels over the long term. One study found that mutual support groups can be as effective as 12-step programs and may help improve the odds of success for people who are committed to maintaining a lifetime of total abstinence.

## Recap

Some definitions of sobriety call for complete lifelong abstinence while others focus on developing coping mechanisms that can reduce harm with the understanding that setbacks are common.

## How to Stay Sober

Some say the best advice for newcomers to recovery on how to stay sober is simple: "Don't drink or use, and go to meetings." If that formula works for you, then by all means, do it. But for most people, staying sober isn't that straightforward. The more strategies you learn to identify triggers, cope with stress, and manage your new sober life, the easier it is to prevent relapse.

## Identify Your Triggers

A big part of preventing relapse is understanding your external triggers, or the people, places, things, and situations that elicit thoughts or cravings associated with substance use, as well as your internal triggers like feelings, thoughts, or emotions associated with substance use. Once you identify your biggest risks, you can create a plan to prepare for or avoid them. Some common triggers may include:

1. Stress
2. Emotional distress
3. Environmental cues
4. People who are still using drugs or drinking
5. Relationship troubles

6. Job or financial problems
7. Recognize Relapse Warning Signs

A relapse can sneak up on you, usually because you don't recognize the warning signs. A relapse begins long before you pick up a drink or a drug and involves three phases: emotional relapse, mental relapse, and physical relapse.

### **Warning signs of relapse include...**

1. Returning to addictive thinking patterns
2. Engaging in compulsive, self-defeating behaviors
3. Seeking out situations involving people who use alcohol and drugs.
4. Thinking less rationally and behaving less responsibly.
5. Finding yourself in a situation in which drug or alcohol use seems like a logical escape from pain.

### **Prepare for PAWS**

Post-acute withdrawal syndrome (PAWS) involves experiencing withdrawal symptoms that persist past the detox period. Such symptoms are often related to mood and may include irritability, anxiety, depression, sleep problems, and fatigue. Depending on the type of dependency, PAWS can last from six months to two years after you stop using drugs or alcohol. The symptoms involved in PAWS can be a barrier to recovery if you're not careful. In addition to being able to recognize them, it's important to know when to seek help. If PAWS is severe or if you're experiencing prolonged symptoms, a medical professional can help you work through them and remain in recovery without relapse.

### **Avoid Old Routines and Habits**

It stands to reason that if you quit your drug of choice but continue with

your same routine, hanging around the same people and places, and not making any changes in your circumstances, it will be much easier to slip back into your old behaviors and habits. Some of the immediate changes you will need to make will be obvious—like not hanging around the people that you used with or obtained drugs from. After all, you can't hang around your drug dealer or old drinking buddies and expect to remain sober for very long. You may also need to change your route to work or home to avoid any triggers, or people, places, or things that make you want to use drugs or drink again.

### **Build Healthy Relationships**

Now that you are sober, you may have discovered that some of your past relationships were not only unhealthy but downright toxic. It's not just your drinking buddies and drug dealers who can get you into trouble—sometimes those who are closest to you can contribute to a relapse. For example, you may have developed a co-dependent relationship, or a family member, friend, or employer may have been enabling you without even knowing it. Research shows that if you maintain these types of toxic relationships, your chances of relapsing are greater. To avoid relapse and remain sober, it's important to develop healthy relationships.

### **Get Support**

If you find it difficult to make new, sober friends, try joining a support group. Spending more time with supportive loved ones and planning activities for the entire family can also help you develop a healthier lifestyle and avoid situations in which you would normally drink or use drugs. It is also important to seek help from a therapist. A mental health professional can help you cope with some of the challenges you'll face on your path to sobriety. A therapist can help you learn new coping skills, develop new thinking patterns, and address any co-occurring mental health conditions that may make recovery more difficult. You may also

experience what is commonly called sobriety fatigue, which refers to the overall exhaustion that may occur as a result of the emotional and physical stress of staying sober. So, it's extra helpful to have a support network available to you when you need it.

## **Develop a Structured Schedule**

Having a chaotic or disorganized lifestyle can also hinder your recovery. It's important to develop a structured daily and weekly schedule and stick to it. A structured routine will help you achieve other goals in your life, whether they are short-term (like being on time for work) or long-term (like going back to school and changing careers). Staying sober is a high priority, but developing and pursuing other goals can help you maintain that sobriety.

## **Practice Healthy Living**

Chronically misusing drugs and/or alcohol can take a major toll on your physical and emotional health, and now that you're in recovery, you'll want to prioritize self-care and ensure you have the fortitude to remain sober. Keys to a healthy lifestyle include:

### **Exercising Regularly**

1. Making time for recreational activities and hobbies
1. Eating regular, well-balanced meals
2. Getting ample, good-quality sleep
3. Practicing relaxation strategies, like mindfulness meditation and yoga
4. Focus on Your Finances
5. People in recovery from a substance use disorder frequently have problems meeting work-related responsibilities, maintaining employment, and managing money. If you were active in your addiction for some time, you may have developed financial problems.

6. Financial troubles and problems finding and keeping employment are major triggers for relapse, but it is possible to take baby steps and get your finances in order. Just keep in mind that your improvements won't happen overnight.
7. Consider reaching out to a vocational rehabilitation counselor or career coach to help you update your resume, practice job interview skills, and locate jobs that match your skills and experience.
8. Once you do return to work, it's important to create a budget and take steps to safeguard yourself as work stress can be a relapse trigger.

### **Stay Cool and Calm**

Many people who misuse alcohol or drugs have trouble dealing with anger. If left unchecked, anger can harm your health and your lasting sobriety. Anger is a normal and natural emotion, but how you deal with it will make a difference in maintaining your recovery. For many people with a substance use disorder, it's simply a matter of never having learned the appropriate way to manage anger. Talk to your therapist, other healthcare provider, or sponsor about how to deal with your anger in ways that won't cause you to harm yourself or others or turn to alcohol or drugs.

### **Deal With Past Mistakes**

Most people who make their way into recovery have left a lot of pain and suffering in their wake. Feeling guilty or ashamed of past behavior or actions during active addiction is natural and healthy. Shame is having negative beliefs about yourself and your self-worth. Guilt is having negative feelings about your past behavior. People in recovery can experience a lot of shame simply for having become addicted in the first place. If these emotions become excessive, they can hold you back from recovery. If you are trying to maintain a sober lifestyle, those feelings can become toxic and contribute to relapse if you don't deal with them

properly. Most who find recovery also find that they have emotionally damaged friends and loved ones and have many regrets about their past decisions. To avoid relapse and stay sober, you must take the necessary steps to learn from your past mistakes and begin to live life more responsibly.

### **Find Balance in Your Life**

One common mistake for those who are new to alcohol and drug recovery is substituting a new compulsive behavior for their old one. People new to recovery can find themselves approaching their new diet, exercise program, job, and even participation in support groups with a compulsion that echoes addiction. Although these new activities are healthy and productive, they can be a stumbling block to lasting recovery if they become a transfer addiction to fill the void left by the original addiction. The secret is to find a healthy balance. Learn that you have choices and that you can maintain control. If any area of your life is out of control, it will not help you maintain lasting sobriety.

### **Celebrate Milestones**

If you're involved in a 12-step program, you likely already know the importance of milestones. In these programs, it's customary to receive plastic chips as you progress to the one-year mark, at which time you receive a bronze coin. Acknowledging and celebrating the hard work of recovery helps keep you motivated and reminds you why you took this brave step toward sobriety in the first place. Just be sure that your rewards don't involve drugs or alcohol. Instead, focus on things, experiences, and activities that will support your new, healthy lifestyle.

Sobriety is a process and setbacks are common. The best way forward for your recovery from alcohol or substance use is to incorporate a wide variety of strategies that will help foster success. Remember to care for

yourself, seek supportive relationships, and consider seeking help from a therapist. It depends on what substance you are recovering from, how long you've been using it, and how much you used it. Sobriety fatigue can last a few weeks to a few months. However, in severe cases of post-acute withdrawal, symptoms can last up to two years.

A sobriety date is the date that you stop using a substance—for instance, the day you quit drinking or quit using drugs. Congratulate someone on their sobriety by expressing your support. You might say, "I'm proud of you," or "I'm so happy to see you succeed." Avoid asking questions that are too personal or focusing on the negative aspects of their substance use.

Long-term sobriety is a relative term—it means different things to different people. But many people consider long-term sobriety to be sobriety that has lasted at least one year.