

## Recovery Strategies and Coping Skills



### The First Rule of Recovery

**You don't recover from an addiction by stopping using. You recover by creating a new life where it is easier to not use.** If you don't create a new life, then all the factors that brought you to your addiction will eventually catch up with you again.

You don't have to change everything in your life. But there are a few things and behaviors that have been getting you into trouble, and they will continue to get you into trouble until you let them go. The more you try to hold onto your old life in recovery, the less well you will do.

Here are the three most common things that people need to change in order to achieve recovery.

#### **Avoid High-Risk Situations**

Some common high-risk situations are described by the acronym, HALT:

- Hungry
- Angry
- Lonely
- Tired

**How do you feel at the end of the day?** You're probably hungry because you haven't eaten well. You're probably angry because you've had a tough day at work or a tough commute home. You may feel lonely because you're isolated. You don't have to be physically alone to feel lonely. And you're tired. That's why your strongest cravings usually occur at the end of the day. Here's another way of looking at high-risk situations:

- People. (People who you use with or who are related to your use. People who you have conflicts with, and who make you want to use. People who you celebrate with by using. People who encourage you to use either directly or indirectly.)
- Places. (Places where you use or where you get your drugs or alcohol.)
- Things. (Things that remind you of your using.)

**How can you avoid high-risk situations?** Of course, you can't always avoid these situations. But if you're aware of them, they won't catch you off guard, and you can prevent little craving from turning into major urges.

Take better care of yourself. Eat a healthier lunch so you're not as hungry at the end of the day. Join a 12 step group so that you don't feel isolated. Learn how to relax so that you can let go of your anger and resentments. Develop better sleep habits so that you're less tired.

Avoid your drinking friends, your favorite bar, and having alcohol in the house. Avoid people who you used cocaine with, driving by your dealer's neighborhood, and cocaine paraphernalia.

Recovery isn't about one big change. It's about lots of little changes. Avoiding those high-risk situations helps you create a new life where it's easier to not use.

**Make a list of your high-risk situations.** Addiction is sneaky. Sometimes you won't see your high-risk situations until you're right in the middle of one. That's why it's important that you learn to look for them. Make a list of your high-risk situations and to keep it with you. Go over the list with someone in recovery so that can spot any situations that you might have missed. Make the list and keep it with you. Some day that list may save your life.

## **Learn to Relax**

**There are only a few reasons why people use drugs and alcohol.** They use to escape, relax, and reward themselves. In other words, people use drugs and alcohol to relieve tension.

The first rule of recovery is that you must change your life. What do you need to change? If you understood the previous paragraph, then you need to change the way you relieve tension. Everyone needs to escape, relax, and reward themselves. Those are essential coping skills for a happy life. But addicts don't know how to do those things without using.

If you manage to stop using for a while, but don't learn how to relax, your tension will build until you'll have to relapse just to escape again. Tension and the inability to relax are the most common causes of relapse.

**I know relaxation will help.** I have treated thousands of patients. Many of them have told me that relaxation has changed their life. There is only one reason why people don't relax – because they think they're too busy to relax. It goes something like this, "I know it makes sense, but I've got so many other things I have to do."

Ask yourself how much time you spend on your addiction. If you add up all the time it takes to get your drug, use it, deal with its consequences, and plan your next relapse, you'll realize that relaxing for twenty to forty minutes a day is a bargain.

**Relaxation is not an optional part of recovery. It's essential to recovery.** There are many ways to relax. They range from simple techniques like going for a walk, to more structured techniques like meditation. Meditation is an important part of that mix because the simple techniques don't always work. If you're under a lot of stress, you may need something more reliable like meditation. Use any of these techniques, or any combination. But do something every day to relax, escape, reward yourself, and turn off the chatter in your mind.

Numerous studies have proven that relaxation reduces the use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana.[\(1, 2\)](#)

## **Be Honest**

**An addiction requires lying.** You have to lie about getting your drug, using it, hiding its consequences, and planning your next relapse. An addiction is full of lying. By the time you've developed an addiction, lying comes easily to you. After a while you get so good at lying that you end up lying to yourself. That's why addicts don't know who they are or what they believe in.

The other problem with lying is that you can't like yourself when you lie. You can't look yourself in the mirror. Lying traps you in your addiction. The more you lie, the less you like yourself, which makes you want to escape, which leads to more using and more lying.

**Nothing changes, if nothing changes.** Ask yourself this: will more lying, more isolating, and more of the same make you feel better? The expression in AA is – nothing changes if nothing changes. If you don't change your life, then why would this time be any different? You need to create a new life where it's easier to not use.

**Recovery requires complete honesty.** You must be one-hundred percent completely honest with the people who are your supports: your family, your doctor, your therapist, the people in your 12 step group, and your sponsor. If you can't be completely honest with them, you won't do well in recovery.

When you're completely honest you don't give your addiction room to hide. When you lie you leave the door open to relapse.

One mistake people make in the early stages of recovery is they think that honesty means being honest about other people. They think they should share what's "wrong" with other people. But recovery isn't about fixing other people. It's about fixing yourself. Stick with your own recovery. Focusing on what you don't like about others is easy because it deflects attention from yourself.

Honesty won't come naturally in the beginning. You've spent so much time learning how to lie that telling the truth, no matter how good it is for you, won't feel natural. You'll have to practice telling the truth a few hundred times before it comes a little easier. In the beginning, you'll have to stop yourself as you're telling a story, and say, "now that I think about it, it was more like this..."

**Show common sense.** Not everybody is your best friend. And not everybody will be glad to know that you have an addiction or that you're doing something about it. There may be some people who you don't want to tell about your recovery. But don't be reluctant to tell the people close to you about your recovery. You should never feel ashamed that you're doing something about your addiction.

ADDICTION RECOVERY IN SOUTH AFRICA