

WHAT ABOUT RELAPSE?

WHAT ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF RELAPSE?

Relapse is one of the most feared words to those in recovery. Defined by Webster, relapse “*is to slip back into a former state, especially into illness after apparent recovery.*” To individuals working a program of recovery, relapse can diminish any hope of permanent change in their lives. Relapse can overwhelm the recovering addict with feelings of failure, self-doubt, guilt, and discouragement. Addicts may attempt to avoid relapse by switching their focus to an alternate addiction, which may not be as devastating as the prior addiction, but nevertheless, carries with it many of the consequences attached to addiction.

For the family and friends of the addict, relapse suggests that the addict isn’t truly sincere in their recovery, while the devastating effects of anger, betrayal and hopelessness intensifies as regained trust is lost. Friends and family who have little experience with the helpless state of addiction may view them as simply suffering from poor impulse control and determine that the addict need only to exercise more “self-control” to overcome the problem.

While there are some few that are able to set aside long time habits and behaviors, generally they are the exception, not the rule. As difficult as it is to accept, ***Relapse is often part of recovery.***

IS OUR OWN AGENCY PART OF THE PROCESS?

Both the addict and their friends and family need to acknowledge that in regard to the law of agency (the freedom to choose): God cannot stop the addict from choosing to relapse. God cannot interfere with His children’s agency, even though His children may want Him to. There are times when even God will find it necessary to let go and let the carnal nature of man take its destructive course. Sometimes the destructive consequences of the addict’s behavior are the addict’s only hope to find the desire for redemption.(See the story of the Prodigal Son: *Luke 15:11-32*)

*“For I know that [God] granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life.”
(Alma 29:4)*

WHAT ABOUT THE SITUATIONS THAT TRIGGER RELAPSE?

In addition to the physical craving, the mind can trigger thoughts of relapse as an escape from any number of troubled emotions caused by a wide variety of circumstances. Everyone varies in their individual emotional response to common obstacles that challenge their sobriety, depending on their knowledge base, skill level, past and present environment, as well as experiences.

There are many forms of troubled emotions, such as fear, anger, stress, discouragement, boredom, self-doubt, self-loathing, feelings of being worthless or inferior, feeling deprived of love or fulfillment, painful memories, a burdened conscience from past transgressions, or the adverse affects of past actions. There are times when these emotions become so overwhelming that escape into a former compulsive behavior may be triggered.

To the addict, relapse represents a temporary escape which will relieve these emotional burdens by means of altering the thought processes. This alteration can be achieved by either partaking of chemical substances or by exposure to other methods of stimulation which have similar effects in altering brain chemistry. The temptation for the addict to become numb, disconnected, distracted, comforted, self-validated, or to escape from these troubled emotions may become so irresistible that surrendering to the temporary relief of a compulsive behavior will appear to outweigh the consequences of the relapse.

DOES RELAPSE BEGIN BEFORE THE ACTUAL EVENT OF RELAPSE?

The process of relapse often starts long before the addict acts out in an addictive behavior. Thoughts and plans for relapse occur prior to the physical action. Anxiety over out-of-control emotions and the mounting pressure to escape into a former addiction continues to build until thought patterns may become irrational. It may seem to the addict that it is impossible to permanently avoid addictive behaviors, causing loss of all hope of recovery. These irrational thoughts will ultimately deceive and blind the mind unto justifying the desire to relapse.

When carnal desires are combined with troubled emotions, and have been practiced for long periods of time, they become part of the addict’s nature. It is rare where willpower alone is enough to make positive changes in deep seeded emotions, out of control desires, and ingrained behaviors. The addict’s limited understanding of any solution to their problem is overshadowed by the obsession for their addiction.

The book of proverbs suggests to:

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths.” (Proverbs 3:5,6)

Thus, an essential skill in learning to deal with troubled emotions is the development of appropriate alternative positive thoughts. Another essential skill is the repeated practice of making the correct decisions base on Christ's teachings and the 12 Steps of Recovery, which will promote spiritual growth.

WHY IS FAITH AND TRUST IN GOD NECESSARY FOR RECOVERY?

When the addict recognizes that they haven't been able to abstain from their addiction by their own will-power, they become humble enough to admit that a power greater than themselves is needed for guidance and support. By the addict's humble admission that they do not fully understand their own troubled emotions and they may lack the ability to rationally resolve their compulsive addictive challenges, they gain the freedom to exercise a measure of trust in the Lord. The act of turning to God for His help in diverting relapse requires humility and faith. It is through attaining this new trust and humility that the power of the Holy Ghost can reveal and provide direction as to how to precede. Humility enhances the ability to be enlightened by God's will concerning the challenges the addict faces. Once the bigger picture of God's perspective and His purposes are understood, new options for ways to deal with life's challenges appear.

Orson F. Whitney, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, once said:

"No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It administers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God.....and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Heavenly Father...."

WHAT ARE THE SKILLS REQUIRED TO AVOID RELAPSE?

Humility:

The self defeating actions of self-centeredness make it difficult for the addict to find the humility that is required to ask God for help. A self-centered person wants only what their carnal desires dictate. Humility could be defined as *"our realization of our total dependence upon God."* Any noticeable change from self-centeredness to wanting to do God's will, will only come through that realization. The change of moving away from self-centered desires does not happen overnight and takes time and practice.

Recognition that the Savior is needed:

First comes the recognition that without the Savior's assistance, the addict may be overwhelmed by many of the emotions that trigger the desire for relapse.

Faith in Christ:

It is only through faith in Christ, and in his healing powers that the addict receives empowerment to avoid relapse permanently. Christ protects and strengthens those who reach out for him continually. The faith which is required in receiving God's help is explained as:

"Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith, ye hope for things which are not seen which are true." Alma 32:21

Even when miracles have not yet been witnessed, expressing hope in Christ will bring help. Feelings of hope are the beginnings of faith; and faith promotes a personal spiritual connection with the Savior. It is the development of a personal relationship with the Savior that heals and protects.

Power of prayer:

There will be moments when confusing circumstances lead the unsuspecting addict right up to the threshold of relapse where it seems there is little choice but to fall back into the addiction. This is the moment where God's miracle will come to pass if the addict takes immediate action by petitioning Him in humble prayer. There is empowerment through prayer that opens the windows of heaven to strengthen and support.

Knowledge through scriptures:

Pondering the words of the Prophets enhances personal knowledge and wisdom. By focusing on the written word of God, darkness and obsession are dispelled.

Service to others:

In addition to prayer, other worthwhile preventative measures may help to prevent relapse. One such activity is to change focus away from desires of relapse into finding activities which have a positive nature. By concentrating on things outside of selfish desires, the mind will naturally focus away from its emotional weaknesses. There are many activities which are wholesome or which can benefit mankind. Another activity is to be of service to others, which bring fulfillment and will help diminish self-obsessions. It is through love for our fellow man that we gain a measure of freedom from out-of-control passions, appetites, and carnal desires.

WHAT SHOULD THE ADDICT DO IF RELAPSE DOES OCCUR?

If relapse does occur, there will follow a tremendous amount of regret, self-hatred, sorrow, and feelings of worthlessness. Because of the act of relapse and the choice to turn away from the very source that made recovery possible, the addict carries the dismal feeling of being unworthy of God's love. By remaining in this state of post relapse for very long, the insatiable desire to escape through additional relapses will come flooding back. Allowing their emotions to stay in the post relapse state for an extended period of time only makes it more difficult to escape its powerful imprisonment. Therefore, when there is a slip into a former compulsive behavior, it is vital to practice recovery principles quickly and to do what is necessary to gain back spiritual balance.

Spiritual balance can be achieved by first reviewing the principals taught in Steps One, Two and Seven.

Step One is a reminder that without God the addict is powerless over certain areas in their lives and that by willpower alone the addict is unable to resist the powerful influence of addiction.

"I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me." 2 Nephi 4:18

Step Two verifies that coming to believe that God, through the power of the atonement, can restore anyone who has us gone astray. Step Two is also a reminder that (without God) as an active part of the addicts daily life, he or she will inevitably fail in their efforts to maintain sobriety for any extended period of time. The addict must acknowledge that their addictive desires will always be waiting to take control of their lives if they veer off the path that leads back to the presence of God.

"Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in His strength I can do all things..." Alma 26:12

Step Seven will testify that by simply humbling themselves and asking with a sincere heart for God's forgiveness, through His grace, He will bring peace to the mind and place the wayward heart back on the path that leads to joy and spiritual fulfillment.

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matt 11:28 28-30

In addition to asking for God's forgiveness, and seeking to make amends to others, it is vitally important for the addict to also forgive themselves. By forgiving themselves, the burden of guilt is decreased, as well as the troubled emotions associated with guilt. These actions can decrease the chance for further relapse and open the way to move forward in their recovery.

NOTE: If a grievous transgression was committed in relapse, it may be necessary to seek council from the Bishop on how to proceed.

WHAT SHOULD THE FAMILY DO IF RELAPSE OCCURS?

In spite of the heartfelt attempts at recovery, relapse remains an emotional struggle for family and friends who repeatedly rally and encourage the recovering loved one. Support of family and friends is very important to the recovering addict. It is also important to remember that only the addict has the ability to make decisions to change him or herself.

Christ would have us love one another as He has loved us. As God's children we have covenanted to bare one another's burdens, even when it may be agonizing to do so. This does not mean that family and loved ones should

accept bad behavior or enable the addict. It is the obligation of loved ones to stand kindly but firmly in their convictions of truth and righteousness. Passing judgment, demeaning or other discouraging acts which may invoke feelings of guilt will not help in the addict's struggle for sobriety.

The Savior would have each person, through the eternal principle of agency, focus on their own faults and trials and not focus on those of others. It may be impossible to fully understand the state of the addict's heart or their struggle with their addiction. Tolerance, understanding and long-suffering is the Savior's approach as He would love them, look for and encourage goodness in them.

For both the addict and those who care for them, studying the scriptures can bring better understanding of how to deal with the adversities of life. Scripture study brings enlightenment as to the Savior's roll in helping His children get through life's challenges.

Sometimes, difficult choices need to be made. Making decisions which have eternal consequences regarding the family should be done with wisdom and prayerful consideration. Loved ones should seek counsel from the Lord and from those in authority to give God's counsel. After the issues have been studied out, answers can be sought through prayer:

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." James 1:5.

Wisdom, answers to life choices, and peace of mind with those decisions, is found through prayer.

Summary:

Knowing that relapse is a part of recovery, it is essential for the addict to never con themselves into thinking that it is okay to relapse simply because it is part of recovery or that forgiveness may always come easily. An apathetic approach to the repentance process such as this is highly offensive to the Lord.

Even so, Heavenly Father's love is always there for addict. He will never fail the wayward when they humbly reach out to Him.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN PRINCIPLES TO RETURN THE ADDICT TO THE PATH OF RECOVERY IF RELAPSE OCCURS?

- ***Admission*** that the battle of will-power is all but lost and the Savior's assistance is needed.
- ***Humble acknowledgement of Father in Heaven***, and believing that know matter how bad things are, Heavenly Father's love, goodness and mercy is there for all His children, and always has been.
- ***Repent*** by humbly asking Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness.
- ***Faith with a sincere heart*** and the knowledge that the Savior will strengthen and support in times of weakness.
- ***Belief that the Savior's influence will empower*** the addict with the emotional and physical support that is needed to make the right choices.
- ***Pray*** for the Lord's power to bring relief from addictive cravings and the temptation to relapse.
- ***Study the scriptures*** to bring knowledge, wisdom, and to promote hope and faith in God.
- ***Unselfish Service*** to others to develop new skills and methods of dealing with self-centered compulsions.
- ***Continually forgive others, make amends to others, and actively seek to forgive ones self.***
- ***Begin again if relapse occurs.***

"Face the sunlight of truth so the shadow of temptation is cast behind you." Boyd K. Packard

In conclusion, there is hope for recovery. The miracle of the Lord's purifying process is there for everyone, if we but trust and have faith in Him. It is through our life's experiences and trials that we come to know Him, and to know of His infinite wisdom and love for all His children.