



MANAGING SETBACKS

Background: At this point, just about everyone is familiar with the concept of **Relapse**:

- *to slip back into a former state, practice, etc.*
- *to fall back into vice, wrongdoing, or error; backslide*

Relapse is often seen as the antithesis of recovery. The most common example of a “relapse” occurs when someone uses again after a reasonable period of abstinence and progress. However there are often many more subtle mistakes, slip-ups, obstacles and problems that can come up along the way in the change process. Therefore it can be helpful to consider a broader, more inclusive term in addition to just relapse. That term is *setback*.

Setback – an unfortunate happening that hinders or impedes; something that is thwarting or frustrating. *Some examples:*

Mishap

Bad Break

Mistake

Difficulty

Impediment

Misfortune

Hazard

Miscue

Stumbling Block

Slowdown

Regression

Hardship

Predicament

Letdown

Frustration

Disturbance

Dilemma



Understanding Setbacks in the Change Process: People regress toward negative behaviors for a variety of reasons, many of which cannot easily be considered “relapse”. Referring to these periods of digression as *setbacks* takes into account the complex array of daily ups and downs most people experience when struggling to overcome a substance abuse issue. A situation that can be explained as a setback can include many types of situations. To understand this better, consider a few examples of setbacks in the change process:

Discuss each of the following. *Does the term “relapse” apply or is this better explained as a setback?*

- Tim is addicted to IV heroin shooting 20 bags per day but goes to detox and then stays drug free for 60 days. Tim’s old college buddy visits from out of town and Tim spends the weekend smoking marijuana with him but it does not go any further than that. Tim realizes afterward that his counselor and family might not like what he did but he is open to being honest about it and discussing it further.
- Linda suffers from depression and alcohol abuse. She is 6 months sober and doing great as she has not had a depressive episode in months. Suddenly, Linda’s boyfriend leaves her and she experiences a return of depression. Linda tells you she is frequently thinking about going on a bender to escape the pain but she has not done so yet. She then tells you she drank two glasses of wine over the weekend.
- Jacob hasn’t used cocaine in 3 weeks but he used to smoke crack several times per week. Tim tells you that he missed the train and got stuck in a bad neighborhood over the weekend and he smoked \$10 worth of crack but immediately felt guilty and called his sister to come pick him up. Tim later confesses that he definitely would have used more but he only had \$10 and was not able to find more money. Now he is back on track as he has been clean and back in his sober routine for the past 5 days.
- Lana had been addicted to pain medication for years but finally stopped for a year after a long struggle with opiate addiction. Lana tells you she broke her arm in an accident and they gave her opiate pain medication in the emergency room. Lana confesses to you she has been taking the medication at night for pain so she can sleep but she has not ran out of pills yet because she has her mother holding the bottle for her.

These are just a few examples to put the concept in perspective. Not every situation where there is a “lapse backward” ends up going back to square one, so to speak, especially if the person involved is willing to discuss their issues and get back on track.

Discuss – Can anyone in the group come up with any other examples that would be considered to be more of a “setback” than an all-out “relapse”?



COPING WITH SETBACKS– The Key Principles:

(What to do if you have experienced a setback)

0- Get Honest (This is also known as “**Principle Zero**”) – The challenging question to ask yourself for *principle zero* is:

Are you really experiencing setbacks?

Or is it that you really just don't want to change?

You have to be honest with yourself in order to get a real answer to this question. The real reason why someone keeps going backwards is not because of mistakes, or accidents or other negative situations but rather the real issue at the core of it all could be stated as simply as ***“I really don't want to stop right now”***. If this is the main issue for you right now then working on setbacks right now is not the answer. Working on increasing motivation is.

Discuss as a Group: Can anyone come up with a real life example of this? (Perhaps from your past) If not, can anyone make up an example of a situation where this would apply?

1- Do not give up: This is the single most important principle for eventual success. If you find yourself experiencing setbacks that does not mean you are not succeeding overall. The change process involves learning from mistakes. Never forget that quite often patience is involved and ***if you do not give up eventually you will succeed***. (No one who is willing to keep on trying is doomed to failure)

Discuss as a Group: Share an example of when you did not give up and it paid off

What do the following quotes mean to you?

- ***A man must be big enough to admit his mistakes, smart enough to profit from them, and strong enough to correct them.- John C. Maxwell***
- ***Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving. - Albert Einstein***
- ***"Courage is not defined by those who fought and did not fall. It is defined by those who fought, fell, and rose again."- Unknown***



2- There is no room for discouragement: Discouragement is never good when it comes to achieving our goals. Instead, hope and courage must prevail in the change process. It is normal to feel a little guilt and remorse after a setback but then it critical to allow our feelings of hope to renew our desire to overcome setbacks rather than allowing them to weigh us down.

Discuss as a Group: What do you do to stay hopeful even when things don't seem to be going well or if you feel yourself getting down?

3- Setbacks Happen: This should not be used as an excuse as in the case where someone chooses to get high and then just say's "Oh well, Setbacks Happen!" Nevertheless, even when someone may be trying to change for the better there are often unintended mistakes along the way. A good analogy is to compare this with learning to ride a bicycle which often involves falling a few times before getting it right. Setbacks happen, so it is important to remember to get up and keep going.

In fact, just because there may be repeated setbacks does not necessarily mean that there is no progress. Sometimes it is important to consider:

- Are the setbacks gradually getting less frequent (Is the time between setbacks increasing?)
- Are setbacks getting shorter or less intense? (Is it becoming easier to "bounce back" from a setback)
- Is there distinct learning going on in response to setbacks? Sometimes the cliché "two steps forward, one step back" can apply to the change process. What is important is that the response to each setback involves learning from mistakes.

Discuss as a Group – What examples from your own life did you experience success, but you first had to overcome some setbacks along the way?



4- Did you “Give yourself permission” to have the setback? This is a critical question that may require some soul-searching and introspection about your true desire to change. Were you really trying as hard as you could have been not to slip or did you just end up deciding to *allow yourself* to use one more time? It may take time to figure this question out but quite often this is an area that can be important to look at.

Discuss as a Group: What kinds of negative thoughts might go through someone’s mind before “giving themselves permission” to use again? (For example – “I am pretty sure I can still get away with this” or “Everyone will give me one more chance if I just say I’m sorry afterward”)

5- Setbacks are not just about “people, places and things” – Understanding the concept of triggers is critical to the change process. One of the first things people learn in 12 Step programs is to change “people, places and things” which makes sense, but is often a lot easier said than done, depending upon your personal situation. Beyond that, however there are things that can trigger a setback that are not so easy to define such as events (such as the anniversary of the loss of a loved one), thoughts, feelings, attitudes, moods, conditions (such as mental health issues and medical problems), as well as difficulty with impulse control.

Discuss as a Group – What are some real life examples that could trigger a setback for you, beyond people, places and things? (For example: “When my anxiety or stress level gets really bad I get such strong urges to get high” or “When my parents won’t get off my case for a long enough time, I feel like I can’t help but use again”)

6. The best way to learn about overcoming setbacks is ongoing honest motivational self-assessment:

“Why did I use?” – Obviously asking “why?” about almost anything is a difficult question that can be even extremely hard to answer. However, the honest search for the answer to this question can reveal a lot about our motivation. When you truly know what is at the heart of your motivation, you can improve your focus with regard to what areas you need to work on in order to make improvements and increase your overall progress.

Discuss as a Group – At the heart of our motivation is our inner desires. Being honest about why you are working on this right now, what do think that you really want to get out of all of this?



WHAT TO DO WHEN THERE IS A SETBACK:

1 – First, define and understand the setback: In order to start the process of working toward overcoming setbacks, it is important to *define* exactly what has happened. Tell the “story” of the setback and be detailed including not only what happened but also your thoughts and feelings.

2 - Review Risk and Treatment Analysis: Safety should always be first. When there was a setback, what potential harm or risks are present? Are you at risk for harm if you don't get necessary professional help? Always consider safety factors such as overdose (or potential overdose), suicidal thoughts, plans or attempts, aggression or violence associated with the setback, life threatening decisions related to the setback (such as intoxicated driving), health risks (such as a heart condition) as well as potential harm to others (especially children). The greater the risk and safety issue, the more serious the setback. For any life-threatening situations, always seek professional help immediately.

3- When you are ready to specifically get to work on the setback itself, go to:

The Setback-Motivation Guide to determine some of your choices with regard to what to work on.