

Addiction Recovery Relapse



The Processes Of Addiction, Recovery And Relapse

In this module some of the concepts introduced in the other modules are brought together. The whole process could be considered as a movement through three processes of addiction, recovery and relapse (the last of which is optional and a choice we hope you don't make).

You have been in addiction a long time. You have attempted recovery in the past, only to relapse. You may even have been in the Bridge Program before, for the whole of it or part of it, but without doing the necessary work on yourself.

Your descent into addiction has been through a series of ever-diminishing circles, or ever-descending cycles. As addiction takes hold there may be periods during which you fight against it and achieve some measure of recovery.

However, you ultimately returned to active addiction, and when you did so, you went down further than the last time. This time we want you to break the cycle and stay in recovery.

The addiction process began in childhood for the majority of people that find themselves with an addiction and in a recovery centre. The use of alcohol, other drugs and gambling was a defence mechanism, a form of *response*.

It is one of a number of such defence mechanisms (*responses*) that you began using in childhood to protect you from something, someone or some circumstance that you experienced as either hurting you, or not enabling you to grow spiritually and emotionally. Your *responses* produced over-developed *shame* which has become too great for you to tolerate.

As a child you would have used many defence mechanisms before arriving at alcohol, other drugs and gambling.

Using defence mechanisms today (even unconsciously) is a barrier to your spiritual and emotional growth as when and while you defend, you stop growing. All your energy is spent on defence rather than growth. And when you stop defending, you need to apply the available energy to catch up on emotional and spiritual growth.

The problem with alcohol, drugs or gambling is that, as defence mechanisms, they worked (for a period of time) too well. They enabled you to change very significantly your *perception* of reality through escape into some form of oblivion or euphoria where you felt 'good'.

They were so effective that you began to use them, when they were available, to the exclusion of most other defence mechanisms and when they were not available, or when you were trying to abstain from their use, you tended to go back to the other defence mechanisms.



You will need to be vigilant with yourself so you don't fall into the trap of avoiding your 'stuff' by using some of these other defence mechanisms. Now the problem for you as an addict, is that for some reason (the precise nature of which is ultimately not important), you became addicted to alcohol, other drugs or gambling. This addiction showed itself in three ways:

Firstly, you needed increasingly large amounts of the substance or activity to get the result you wanted, i.e. the escape. Secondly, the nature of your escape changed in that you were no longer able to use the substance or activity in order to (temporarily) feel good, but just to stop feeling bad. Thirdly, your need for the substance or activity fitted itself hand-and-glove into your emotional and spiritual non-development.

This meant that no amount of intellectual knowledge about the harm you were doing to yourself could keep you away (for long) from the substance or activity. The end result was existence in a state of abject misery.

You started with shame, now you have more shame. And the more you drank, drugged or gambled, for temporary escape, the more you ended up feeling ever-increasing amounts of shame.

You can no longer tolerate yourself. You can no longer tolerate others, unless you can manipulate them into enabling you to continue in active addiction, or to cushion you from the effects of your addiction.

Then, for some reason and by some process, you make a personal choice to attempt permanent recovery.

Processes Of Recovery

After you have detoxed your greatest challenge is to rid yourself of your self-destructive shame. This can be achieved through a combination of different methods, but all require interaction between, and an integration of, the intellectual, physical, spiritual and emotional parts of your being.

Your 'de-shaming' will involve coming to terms with your experiences from childhood and your family-of-origin. The clues to where and when your *responses* turned from spiritual and emotional growth to defence mechanisms are probably in these areas.

It may involve facing specific trauma, such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse. It may involve facing loss (through death or separation or otherwise) and the necessity to grieve. It may involve awareness of the child within, and connecting for the first time with your *unmet* developmental needs.

There may be some obstacles in the way of whatever is necessary for the de-shaming process. One of the biggest obstacles will be your other defence mechanisms.

Remember that part of the addiction process involved dropping other defence mechanisms in favour of reliance on alcohol, other drugs and gambling. Therefore, in the Bridge Program, we often see people returning to these previously acquired defence mechanisms. The list of these defence mechanisms is almost endless.

Dropping all your defence mechanisms takes time. As you drop them you need to take positive action to develop your spiritual and emotional maturity.

Your emotional growth could cover anything from anger management, to processing grief, to 'moving on' from sexual abuse or other trauma, to recognising and appropriately expressing all your feelings.

Your spiritual growth could cover due recognition of God, accepting your own limitations, fulfilling your need to give and accept love, and developing other spiritual values in addition to love, such as serenity, courage, honesty, faith and hope.

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You need to be clear about the absolute fact that as a person with an addiction you cannot *just stop* using any of your defence mechanisms. You have demonstrated this in the past when you have tried to *just stop* using the particular defence mechanisms known as drinking, drugging and gambling.

Your recovery process *also* involves spiritual *and* emotional growth.

The recovery process involves the following **continuous cycle**:

1) Stop using all defence mechanisms as soon as you become aware of them.

2) Emotional growth through:

- Coming out of 'hiding' by interacting with other people who have started their recovery process and are wishing to continue it.
- Looking at yourself and your behaviour with new eyes by allowing others to give you their perception of you and your behaviour ("real discovery lies not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes." Goethe).
- Recognising and removing the child**ish** characteristics of your inner child that have been dominating you.
- Recognising and retaining the child**like** characteristics of your child within that have been enriching you.
- Challenging your family-of-origin shaming rules: 'No talking. No trusting. No feeling'.
- Learning the skills of recognising, owning, expressing and controlling your own feelings.
- Facing and processing trauma of the past (there and then), and then letting go and embracing the present (here and now).
- Accepting yourself as you are and thereby releasing your potential to grow.
- Working a 12 Step spiritual and emotional growth program.

3) Spiritual growth through:

- Making a spiritual decision that you want to love yourself.
- Clearing away all the barriers that prevent you loving yourself.
- Recognising that your journey of spiritual and emotional growth and your journey of discovery of God is one and the same thing.
- Accepting yourself as you are and thereby releasing your potential to grow.
- Working a 12 Step spiritual and emotional growth program.

Did you notice all those ‘...ing’ words? They emphasise the continuing process of recovery. Recovery is not a product or a possession. It is a process.

The issue of love tends to be a particularly significant hurdle in the recovery process. Genuine and appropriate self-love is the only antidote to self-destructive shame.

It is important that you understand that unless you as a recovering addict get a firm grip on love of self, others and God above all else, you may well exercise the option to relapse.

Processes Of Relapse

Remember relapse is optional. You might choose to relapse, but you do not need to. Relapse is a possibility to avoid, rather than a certainty to expect. Recovering addicts do not so much make a **big choice** to relapse; rather you may make a lot of little choices that lead to relapse.

There are many signs of an approaching relapse. Their common characteristic is some form of isolation. You may stop (or fail to start) developing and actively maintaining a nurturing environment in the form of supportive friends with whom you can, and need to, relate to.

You may isolate the spiritual and emotional parts of yourself by focussing on people, places and things outside of you to make you feel good, or stop you feeling bad. You need to distinguish between signs of relapse and its cause. Fundamentally the cause goes back to the original cause of addiction: *shame* in its excessive, self-destructive form.

More specifically the cause of relapse, if you do relapse, would lie in your failure to do the necessary spiritual and emotional work during what could have been your recovery. You would not have been sufficiently honest with yourself or with others; you would have put the time in on the program but not done the work on yourself necessary for a lasting recovery.

The result of this would be that you would not have come to *love* yourself. Self-loathing will be obvious to you and you will want to escape from that feeling by some method easier than spiritual and emotional growth. Or, at the opposite extreme, you will feel so happy that you develop a *doubt* about whether you deserve such happiness, and so you will sabotage it.

Conclusion

Here is the really tragic part of the addiction-recovery-relapse cycle or circle. As mentioned before, the cycle of addiction is ever-descending. Each time you relapse you add further *shame* to your existing over-developed shame. You feel much worse about yourself than ever

Your journey of recovery will seem even harder than it seemed to you last time, yet it is possible to recover. It will always be possible as long as you want it and are willing to put in the necessary spiritual, emotional, mental and physical effort required to counter the addictive/relapse process within you.

Some Points For Discussion

1. What defence mechanisms do you still use?
2. What spiritual decisions and commitments have you made?
3. In which areas are you pursuing further emotional growth?
4. What practical steps do you take to ensure your ongoing recovery?