

Break The Chain Before It Breaks You - Learning Relapse Prevention

**Ghost written article with facts and research provided by the Dr. Aaronson*

You wake up on the cold bathroom floor, head throbbing and a sour taste in your mouth. Suddenly you remember the thought that came to you the night before *"One drink won't hurt."*

Nobody purposefully plans to relapse, for most people it kind of sneaks up on them.

It may start with a bad day at work. Or a fight with your spouse. Or loneliness on a Saturday night. Sometimes it begins with something good and worth celebrating, like a promotion, a great date, a vacation, a big sale, or an unexpected bonus check.

The lie "I can handle this" is what people who are addicted tell themselves. This has probably caused more relapses than most addicts want to admit, whether it be alcohol or drugs.

The good news is that relapse is rarely a single event. It is usually a **process, a chain of linked behaviors, thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, and decisions**. And if you can learn to recognize the links, you can break the chain before you reach for that bottle or pill.

Relapse Begins Before the Relapse

Imagine a man named Jack. He has been sober for eight months. He's doing well. He works hard, exercises, attends AA meetings, and has begun to trust himself again.

Then a terrible Tuesday happens. His boss criticizes him harshly in front of two coworkers. Jack smiles, says nothing, and walks back to his office.

That's Link #1: The Event.

Sitting at his desk, Jack starts thinking. *That guy has never respected me. Nothing I do is good enough.* He then wrongfully concludes: *I'm probably going nowhere in this job.*

Link #2: The Physical Reaction

Jack's body joins the conversation. His shoulders tighten. His stomach knots. His breathing becomes shallow. His body is crying out for a tranquilizer.

Link #3: The Thoughts and Feelings

Now come the feelings. Anger. Embarrassment. Anxiety. Resentment.

Link #4: The "Solution" to his Discomfort.

Just after five o'clock, Jack gets into his car. Instead of driving straight home, he begins thinking about the little sports bar he used to visit. He isn't planning to drink, he's just thinking about the bar.

This is an important distinction—at least according to Jack.

Link #5: Moving Toward the Old Behavior.

Then the brain's justification department opens for business. Jack's thought patterns edge him closer to having a drink.

"I could just stop in and watch the game. I'll order a Coke."

"Eight months sober. I've got this under control."

And finally: *"Hell, one beer isn't going to destroy my life."*

Link #6: Permission.

Notice something important? Jack didn't suddenly relapse, **he walked toward it one link at a time.**

Event → Thoughts → Physical tension → Painful emotions → Old associations → Craving → Permission → Action in the form of a drug that makes him temporarily feel better.

Now I feel fine. Jack's brain notes: That worked, let's do *that* again. A neurological chain gets formed in his brain. Do it enough times and it creates a Neural Superhighway that makes the connections automatic.

This is called **chain-linked behavior**.

The final behavior may look sudden from the outside. Inside the person's brain, however, there was often a trail of breadcrumbs leading right to it. Relapse prevention teaches you to find those breadcrumbs. Better yet, it teaches you to stop dropping them.

Break the Chain Early

Jack has many places on his person chain where he can break past behavior. He can recognize what happened after the negative meeting with his boss and say, *"I'm pissed. This is exactly the kind of situation that used to make me wanna drink"*. He can challenge the thought, *"Nothing I do is good enough."*

His boss criticized one piece of work. Jack's brain has somehow converted this encounter into a sweeping review of his entire existence. Our brains tend to do that. They're efficient powerhouses in many ways, but occasionally bring on the dramatic.

Jack could redirect his frustration and take a walk after work. Go work out at the gym. Call his sponsor. Call a trusted friend. Go to a meeting. Drive home on a different street, one that doesn't take him past the bar.

The earlier Jack interrupts the chain, the easier it will be. That's one of the most useful lessons in relapse prevention: **Don't wait until you're sitting three feet from a bottle to begin using your coping skills.**

Your Brain Remembers More Than You Think

Alcohol and drug use become connected with people, places, emotions, sights, sounds, smells, and routines. Some positive connections like the friendly neighborhood bar. Fridays after a good work week. A particular friend. A special song. Negative feelings like a fight with your spouse, loneliness, loss of a loved one and illness can also awaken an old association.

These are **conditioned cues**. Your brain has learned to connect them with drinking or drug use. This can feel strange. You can be minding your own business, driving home, when suddenly your brain says, *"Remember what fun you had with cocaine?"*

Thanks, brain. But the appearance of a craving doesn't mean you have to obey it. It means you've discovered a trigger. Knowing your triggers gives you power to change.

Some Triggers Should Simply Be Avoided

People sometimes make recovery harder than necessary because they want to prove they can handle temptation.

A man who repeatedly drank at a certain sports bar decides to go there with friends to prove he can drink club soda. Why?

Recovery isn't an Olympic event. You don't receive extra points for difficulty. If a person, place, or situation repeatedly threatens your sobriety and you can reasonably avoid it, you should.

You wouldn't try to cure a peanut allergy by spending more time eating bags full of peanuts.

Other triggers can't be avoided. There will still be arguments, rejection, financial problems, loneliness, bad news, difficult relatives, and bosses who occasionally forget to be more empathetic as managers.

That's where coping skills become essential.

Beware of the Salesman in Your Head

One of the final links before relapse is often a **permission-giving thought**.

These thoughts are dangerous because they don't sound crazy. They sound reasonable. *I've been sober long enough. One time won't hurt. Everybody else is doing it. I deserve it, I'm on vacation. Nobody will know. I'll start being sober again tomorrow.*

Your addicted brain can become a remarkably talented defense attorney when it wants something. Don't debate it for an hour.

Break the Behavior: Prepare your answers in advance.

One drink has never stayed one drink for me.

I've been down this road before.

This craving will pass.

Tomorrow morning matters more than the next twenty minutes.

And sometimes the most sophisticated psychological intervention available is:

Get the hell out of here.

Then leave!

Cravings Are Waves, Not Commands

A craving can feel enormous while you're experiencing it, but cravings change.

They rise, peak, and eventually fall.

Your job isn't necessarily to make the craving disappear. Your job is to avoid acting on it while it's there. Instead of saying, *I need a drink*, learn to say: *I'm having a strong urge to drink*.

Those sentences sound similar, but psychologically they're very different. The first is a command. The second is an observation. You can observe an urge without obeying it.

That's an important recovery skill: Put a little space between **what you feel** and **what you do**.

Change Something

When you're moving down the relapse chain, don't just sit there thinking harder.

Change something.

It might sound very basic, but a good distraction can be very helpful. Take a walk. Exercise at the gym. Take a nice long shower. Go to a meeting. Call somebody. Drive somewhere safe. Put on music. Get outside in the fresh air.

The alternative activity doesn't need to be profound it just has to interrupt the chain. Sometimes twenty minutes of different behavior is enough to allow the craving to weaken and the rational part of your brain to return from wherever it went.

Look Underneath the Craving

With practice, you can learn to move backward through the chain. Suppose rejection triggers a craving. Ask yourself: *What am I feeling?*

Hurt.

What was I thinking just before I felt hurt? She doesn't want me.

Go deeper. *What does that mean to me?*

Deeper still: *I'm not lovable.*

Now you're getting somewhere, identifying a belief that isn't necessarily true.

The craving may be the most visible part of the problem, but underneath it may be an old belief about failure, rejection, worth, safety, control, or love. These deeper beliefs can turn ordinary disappointments into emotional emergencies.

The goal isn't positive thinking. If your boss fires you, repeating *I am an incredibly successful person* forty times in the parking lot probably won't help.

The goal is **accurate thinking**.

This hurts, but I can handle it.

I failed at something. I am not a failure.

One person rejected me. Humanity has not voted.

Something went wrong. What do I do next?

That kind of thinking breaks another link in the chain.

Build Something Better Than Sobriety

Long-term recovery eventually has to become about more than not drinking or not using.

You need a life.

If recovery becomes nothing more than spending every day thinking about how you're not supposed to drink, alcohol is still running a remarkable amount of your life. The larger goal is to build a new routine you don't constantly want to escape from.

That's when recovery starts becoming something more than abstinence.

It becomes freedom.

If You Slip, Break the Next Link

Suppose you do drink or use. One of the most dangerous thoughts comes immediately afterward: *I blew it. I've ruined my sobriety. Might as well keep going.*

There's the chain again. Break it!

A lapse does not have to become a full relapse. One drink doesn't require ten more. One night doesn't require a week. One mistake doesn't require you to abandon everything you've worked for.

Call someone, get away from the substance and talk honestly about what happened. Then study the chain by asking questions like: Where did it begin? What was the first warning sign? What did you think? What were you feeling?

Use this experience to turn a lapse into information so it doesn't become another disaster.

Stay Ahead of the Chain

Good relapse prevention isn't based on having superhuman willpower. It's based on becoming a better observer of yourself. You will begin recognizing your patterns sooner.

There's my anger. There's that old thought. There's the craving. There's my brain starting to negotiate. And there's the exit.

With awareness, practice and support, you can learn your triggers. You recognize your thoughts. You notice what happens in your body. You interrupt old behaviors. You reach out to other people before you convince yourself you don't need them. Most of all, you learn that you don't have to wait until the final link.

Break one link and you can break the chain.

Recovery doesn't require perfection!