

Understanding Relapses

This activity sheet contains a number of exercises and tips for you to use when ready. You are welcome to save and print these as a collection or simply print individual exercises as needed.

Challenges to the Change Journey

Take a look at some of these situations that can cause people to want to return to drinking and see if you can relate to any of them. Select all the ones that are affecting you right now.

Common challenges in reducing alcohol (0-30 days)

- Friends inviting you out for drinks
- There is still a lot of alcohol and drinking around you (alcohol in the house, others drinking around you, situations that trigger you to want to drink)
- The places you go remind you of drinking (e.g. bars, social events, sports clubs)
- Withdrawal symptoms like headaches, anxiety and bad sleep are difficult to get through
- Stress (at work, parenting, in relationships)
- Having thoughts of doubt and wondering whether you can actually do this
- Not enough support from friends and family

Common challenges in reducing alcohol (1- 3 months)

- Friends think this is just a phase and still want you to come out drinking
- There is alcohol and drinking around you (alcohol in the house, others drinking around you)

- ❑ Creeping thoughts (Thoughts like “one drink won't hurt, I know I can stop now”)
- ❑ Stress and Life pressures (relationship conflict, work stress, parenting difficulties)
- ❑ Beginning to forget the reasons for deciding to reduce
- ❑ Now having to decide whether you want to go completely alcohol free or just moderate going forward
- ❑ Realising that you are not actually able to drink in moderation. Alcohol has a stronger hold on you than you thought.

Common challenges in reducing alcohol (6-12 months)

- ❑ Deciding what to do next and what that means for you
- ❑ Now having to decide whether you want to go completely alcohol free or just moderate going forward
- ❑ Realising that you are not actually able to drink in moderation. It seems to be all or nothing.
- ❑ Realising that you have changed and what you value in life has changed
- ❑ Making the changes in life that move you away from old habits, friends, workplaces and living situations

Most people going through this journey find that their relationship with alcohol changes the further they get down the path of alcohol reduction.

No matter what stage of your alcohol reduction journey, there will be challenges along the way. It helps if you are aware of what they are so you can better prepare for them.

It also helps to know specifically what things are tripping you up right now.

Warning Signs

An essential part of understanding lapses and relapse is to plan ahead. This involves knowing what people, situations, feelings and thoughts trigger you to want to drink and then making a plan for those tricky times. Having a solid plan for the ‘worst case’ scenario gives you a better chance of avoiding another lapse or relapse.

Research into alcohol use tells us that we are most likely to experience lapses or relapses when our emotional and physical resources are low. For example when we are run down, stressed, grieving, lonely or bored. The acronym HALT (standing for Hungry, Angry/Anxious, Lonely and Tired) is used to remind people of what to look out for when they are making changes. You can read more about it in the Understanding Relapses Activity Sheet. We are much better at maintaining behavioral change when we are well rested, have eaten, slept properly and have had a good week. It is the trigger times that we need to look out for.

Starting to keep alcohol in the house	Looking for opportunities to drink e.g. lunch at the pub
Drinking during the week	Planning events with alcohol
Spending time with friends who are heavy drinkers	Having a number of days drinking alcohol in a row
Reducing other health behaviours (e.g. exercise, eating well, thinking about alcohol)	Wanting to ‘test’ yourself
Walking purposely past the bottle shop to test resilience	Mood changes
Avoiding or forgetting the strategies that have been working for you to stay alcohol free	Isolating from support systems. Withdrawing from open and honest communications

Beginning to fantasise and glamorise alcohol	Forgetting about the big picture and how badly things often ended up
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You might like to write down some of your own personal warning

signs:

(Keep this handy as you start to notice more)

Leading up to Lapse Situations (LULS)

Noticing what happens in the lead up to a lapse can really help in the long run to prevent a full blown relapse. This involves looking into what situations, thoughts, feelings and even which people trigger you to want to drink. When you know better, you are much more prepared for the next time you are triggered to want to drink.

To improve your understanding of what led up to a recent lapse, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What happened the day(s) before?

(i.e. were you sick, lacking sleep, ceased taking medication, cancelled health appointment, celebrating, involved in a stressful family gathering, stressed at work, did you have an argument with someone, was more pressure placed on you with duties?)

2. Where were you?

(i.e. were you driving past a pub, at home alone, at a sporting event where you used to drink, around friends who drink etc)

3. What happened just before?

(i.e. long day at work, exams, decided to stay in bed, called an old drinking buddy, someone criticised you)

4. What were you thinking?

(i.e. I can just have one drink and then stop, I need a drink to feel better, It's never going to change, so I may as well have a drink")

5. What were you feeling?

(i.e. confident, angry, lonely, tired, stressed, anxious, depressed)

6. What time was it?

(evening, morning, midday, weekend, weekday, time of day)

7. What ELSE was I doing?

(watching footy, socialising with work colleagues, cleaning the house, preparing for a big presentation)

“Fall down 7 times, stand up 8” Japanese Proverb

If you lapse... don't lose the lesson

The lesson from this lapse is...

When I am in this kind of situation

I tend to feel _____

I tend to think _____

I do this _____

Write down the things you could do next time here (e.g. phone a friend, take a walk, make a different choice by thinking long term instead of short-term, etc):

Give Yourself a Break

Once you've been able to sustain being alcohol free for a period of time, it can feel disheartening to find yourself going back to drinking again. The first reaction people may have is to criticise themselves and get stuck in negative stories about why you might have gone back. We've prepared two things you might like to use when you find yourself in this negative slump.

This information is adapted from the work of Kristen Neff on self-compassion.

Be kind to yourself

How would you treat a friend? When you have mucked up in life, or disappointed yourself in some way, the best thing you can do for yourself is try to be the friend you need right now. Have a go at this and see what happens?

Why not try writing down 3 things you need to hear from a friend. Imagine they were talking to you right now. What would a GOOD friend say about what is happening for you?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Self Compassion break

When you are dealing with an ongoing struggle, it helps to do a daily practice. Set aside some time for yourself each day to give yourself a mental hug. During this time you can notice what is going on for you, and intentionally say a few helpful things to yourself.

Now say to yourself:

1. “This is a moment of suffering”

Mindfully notice how it feels for a minute or two. You might say..

“this hurts”

“ouch”

“this is stress”

2. “Suffering is a part of life”

“Other people feel this way”

“I am not alone”

“We all struggle in our lives sometimes”

Now put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch of your hands on your chest. Or adopt the soothing touch you discovered felt right for you.

Say to yourself:

3. “May I be kind to myself”

You can ask yourself, “What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself? Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- May I give myself the compassion that I need
- May I learn to accept myself as I am
- May I forgive myself
- May I be strong
- May I be patient

This practice can be used any time of day or night, and will help you remember to evoke the three aspects of self-compassion when you need it most.

How to deal with Guilt

1. Accept the feeling

Accept that guilt is normal if you've violated your own standards or have behaved in a way that you don't feel comfortable with. Talk it through with your supports and start to understand what kinds of things contributed to this.

2. Practice self compassion

Remind yourself: 'I'm doing the best I can', and 'Now is the time to focus on what I can do about the situation, rather than beating myself up'.

3. Look at the facts

It can help to take a look at what really happened and check your thinking about it. Often the way we tell the story is a lot more negative than it really is. Give yourself a reality check by asking:

- What really happened?
- What might you have done differently if you had that time again?
- Where do you feel you might have let yourself down - and how can this guide you in the future?

4. Check in with what is important to you

Often we feel the most guilty and awful when we have acted in a way that we are not proud of. Essentially we feel the most guilty when we have not acted in a way that we want to - in ways that are important to us. Our values tell us what is important to us. It can help to remind yourself at this stage:

What is important to you right now? What values are important to you right now?

5. Clarify what changes you may need to make

We know that often we experience the same situations in life, repeated over and over again. What values are going to guide you? What risk factors are you going to manage? What are the

people and situations you might have to move away from, in order to get closer to living those values?

6. Plan

Moving on from guilt also involves accepting responsibility for our own roles in our lives and behavior. How can we give ourselves the best opportunity for success in the future? Sometimes we might not get there, but a solid intention can give us a great chance of getting closer to where we want to be.

Plan for When I'm Tempted

Having a plan for when you are tempted to drink can really help you stick to what you're aiming for in terms of your drinking. It is a work in progress and you might like to review it regularly and make the changes that you've noticed you need or add the things that are working for you.

When I get tempted to drink I will do these 3 things:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

If doing any of these exercises brings up tough stuff for you, please talk to a trusted family member, friend, GP or one of the services there to support you. You can find some of these contacts on our Get Help page. For additional support, we encourage you to follow the recommendations provided to you in your Personal Snapshot Report.