

Relapse Prevention

Old patterns of behaviour can be returned to, especially at times of stress. This section is all about relapse prevention – how to prevent a relapse, and if you do slip, how to pick yourself up and get building again.

What is relapse?

A relapse is anything you do that is illegal, but it might not only be that – a relapse might be anything you know is wrong or anything you think is dangerous for you.

For example, looking at adult pornography might be legal but you know for yourself it's wrong – it just feels wrong or it brings you too close to the illegal behaviour you used to carry out. Or allowing yourself to have a sexual fantasy about a child; it may not involve direct harm to the child but it could lead you to other behaviours.

Relapse prevention is about recognising that difficult times can happen so it is important to be prepared for them.

When is relapse more likely?

Relapses often happen when you're experiencing negative thoughts and unpleasant feelings, for example, bored, anxious, depressed or lonely. And that can be risky – it's probably been risky in the past – because:

- you might want to do something exciting which will distract you from those unpleasant feelings or cover them up
- sometimes when you feel bad about yourself, you might even want to do something bad, almost as if to prove what a bad person you are

But you understand yourself better than anyone else. Think back to what you learned in [Recognising and dealing with feelings](#) or read it again if you need to. Just be aware of how things work for you and how they might have worked in the past when you've offended.

If you do give in to those bad feelings and end up doing something you know is wrong, you'll feel worse.

If you are able to manage the feelings or situations without relapse then you'll feel better.

Relapses are more likely if you're still around people who encourage your negative behaviour. This might be people you have met online who encourage you to share images of children or talk sexually about them. Or it could be people you know who use sexual language about a child.

These are people with problematic behaviour, which then can be problematic for you if they're encouraging you to do something wrong or illegal. It is important that you separate yourself from them; this is easier to do if they are online as you can block them. However, if they are work colleagues or family members this can be harder. In those situations, you can use some of the [self-talk section](#) to help you manage unhelpful thinking also known as cognitive distortions.

How might a relapse happen?

A relapse usually happens in a number of stages, sometimes in quick succession. Just being aware of how this can work will give you greater control. And with self-control and determination, you can stop a relapse even at the very last stage.

Look at the steps to relapse described below. Maybe you recognise them from the past. It's very likely you might experience some or all of them in the future. Being prepared and understanding what's going on and what could happen is your best defence against offending again.

Abstinence

At this stage, you're not doing anything illegal or having inappropriate thoughts. If you're lucky, this might come easily but, for some people or at some times, this might need quite a bit of self-control. But it's OK – you're coping and you know you're doing the right thing.

Small decisions

Maybe your previous behaviour happened when you were going online late at night and the rest of your family was in bed. Maybe you can't sleep and think you will watch some videos on YouTube to switch off. This might be taking you towards a risky situation.

Danger

Now let's look at the situation and your state of mind.

- Where are you? Perhaps you're on your own with time on your hands.
- How are you feeling? Are you feeling down? You might be more tempted to do something wrong.
- What is your self-talk? Are you making it easy to cross barriers you have put in place?

Giving up

The danger by this stage is that you believe you've failed already. You tell yourself nothing's changed – you're as bad as ever, and you still have the same feelings.

When you feel that way, it's really easy to think 'I might as well just do it'. Remember though, you still have a choice and you can still choose to do the right thing – right for you and right for others.

Lapse

You will know what a lapse involves for you – it is crossing boundaries that you put in place to keep yourself safe or starting illegal behaviours again.

You're here, reading this, so it's something you really don't want to do and something you feel bad about. So, use those feelings and learn from what went wrong. Continue to develop a relapse prevention plan and reduce the risk of returning to old ways.

Warning signs of relapse

Warning signs are the things that alert us and other people that something is wrong or that there is a potential danger or hazard. With regard to sexual offending, it includes physical, behavioural and emotional signs in children and adults.

- Physical warning signs could be noticing a person has stopped shaving and looking after themselves.
- Behavioural warning signs could be that a person is refusing to leave the house.
- Emotional warning signs could be that a person gets angry very quickly.

Here is a list of warning signs that a person might recognise in themselves.

- Experiencing sexual thoughts about children that are difficult to manage.
- Experiencing thoughts that justify sexual behaviour with children.
- Isolating themselves.
- Making excuses to be around children.
- Seeking out the company of children; particularly spending time alone with children.
- Making excuses not to see family or friends.
- Experiencing the urge to go online and view sexual material.
- Masturbating to fantasies about children.
- Engaging in increased masturbation.
- Feeling anxious about their thoughts and feelings.
- Experiencing unpleasant feelings for example, stress, loneliness, anxiety, depression, anger, hopelessness, among others.
- Not allowing a child sufficient privacy or to make their own decisions on personal matters.
- Insisting on physical affection such as kissing, hugging or wrestling even when the child clearly does not want it.
- Spending most of their spare time with children and having little interest in spending time with people their own age.
- Treating a particular child as a favourite, making them feel 'special' compared with others in the family.
- Becoming fixated on a particular child.
- Feeling depressed, sad, lonely, angry, isolated or even suicidal.

This list doesn't include every sign. The warning signs will be different for everyone so it is important that you consider what your personal warning signs are. There are likely to be other warning signs which are relevant for you.

Pleasant feelings also influence behaviour. It is not always obvious what people are feeling but there can be 'clues' based on body language and on what people say and do. It is important that you consider those 'clues' so that they can help you manage your thoughts and/or behaviour when needed.

Exercise 1: Warning signs

Write a list of your physical, behavioural and emotional warning signs and answer the following questions.

- What would you do if you recognised these?
- Who needs to be aware of these signs?
- What might others observe in you that could indicate a warning sign to them?
- How might others be able to help you?
- What are the benefits of someone in your support network knowing about your problematic behaviour?

No going back

The last section might have seemed a bit negative but it's important to be realistic – those risks and temptations do exist. But you still have the ability to build a good life without resuming past behaviours.

Practical steps and relapse prevention plan

Make sure you have made all the practical changes to reduce the risk of temptation. You can revisit these from previous section: [Understanding your online behaviour](#).

Complete the warning signs exercise on the previous page to make sure you have identified ways you are going to cope with risky thoughts, feelings, behaviours, people and places.

Talk to people

Is there anyone you feel close to who you might confide in? Sometimes just talking can make it feel much better. They might even be willing to be a support person for you – someone you can contact when things seem difficult. If you don't feel there's anyone you can talk to, remember you can talk to our Stop It Now [helpline](#). They will always be there and always willing to listen. And they're completely anonymous.

Build a good life

It's really important to understand that stopping offending isn't only about things you can't do or shouldn't do. You're here because you want to feel better and live better. The last section will give you some ideas on how to do that.

*Please return to the website and complete the **Reflection** questions at the end of this module.*