

What Are the Most Common Causes of an Alcohol Relapse?



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Key takeaways:

- Alcohol relapse is a dangerous behavior as it can restart addiction and result in overdose and alcohol poisoning.
- Certain people, places, things, and feelings can trigger strong cravings and urges for alcohol that can lead to relapse.
- By acknowledging your triggers, understanding their connection to cravings, and taking action, you can limit the risk of relapse and continue your sober life.

Reviewed by [Mera Goodman, MD, FAAP](#)

Intensely powerful cravings for alcohol and other drugs is common in [addiction](#). You could find yourself craving alcohol weeks, months, or even years after your last drink. Some of these urges may be random, but many will come from the triggers you experience in your daily life.

Keep reading to learn more about the most common causes of alcohol relapse and how to avoid relapse by controlling triggers.

What are triggers for alcohol use, and how do they form?

A [trigger](#) is anything that reminds you of drinking and anything that makes you want a drink of alcohol. Triggers could be significant and symbolic, or they could be a completely random item connected to your past drinking.

Triggers form because substance use trains your brain to pay close attention to all things connected to alcohol. It does this by releasing a chemical called [dopamine](#). Because alcohol creates a very powerful and [rewarding impact](#), the brain is always on the lookout for opportunities to get another drink. This occurs even if you are in recovery and drinking is going to end with negative outcomes.

Triggers lead to [cravings](#), and cravings can [lead to relapse](#). By knowing what your triggers are, you can extend your [recovery](#).

What are the most common triggers that drive people back to drinking?

Triggers for alcohol use are often separated into several categories. This is done to help you reflect on your issues and build a complete database. The most common triggers of alcohol use are the [people, places, and things](#) associated with your past drinking. Certain moods and emotional states can also spark a strong desire to drink.

People: Can people trigger a relapse?

The people you drank with will likely be major triggers of a relapse. If your relationship with a friend or family member often involved drinking alcohol, a craving could develop anytime you see them.

Some people that could trigger an urge to drink are:

- Your parents, grandparents, and siblings
- Your children
- Your classmates
- Your co-workers and boss
- People you know from the bar
- Random intoxicated people
- Those that spark a strong emotional reaction

Some people may understand the connection they have with alcohol. Others, though, could be completely unaware of this. Also, not all people will be a trigger all of the time. It may take a combination of factors to experience the trigger.

Places: What places could trigger me to drink?

The places that are most likely to trigger an alcohol craving are the places you drank at the most. If you always had a drink when you visited your friends' houses or when you went to a certain restaurant, these places will likely be triggers for you. Bars and liquor stores are some of the most common places that trigger alcohol cravings. Even just passing by these places can trigger a craving.

Places could be limited to a certain room in a house or part of a building. For other people, a neighborhood or entire city could make them want to drink. Triggers are flexible in relation to area.

Things: What other things can make me want a drink?

Almost anything can make you want to drink if your brain has formed an association. Some things that could trigger an urge to drink are:

- Seeing a bottle of alcohol
- A certain day of the week or time of the day
- A hot summer day or a cold winter night
- An important anniversary or event
- Having money or getting paid
- Disagreements and arguments
- Watching a sporting event
- Substances like cannabis (marijuana), cocaine, or tobacco

The connection between the thing and your alcohol use may not always be clear. The trigger does not have to make sense to create the urge.

Feelings: How does my mood or stress level contribute to alcohol relapse?

The way you feel could trigger an urge to drink alcohol. Negative emotions and periods of high stress could all cause the desire to use alcohol as a form of self-medication. Alcohol causes pleasurable sensations that reduce the intensity of these negative emotions.

You may experience an urge to drink if you feel:

- Angry
- Sad
- Annoyed or irritated
- Anxious
- Bored
- Lonely

It turns out that [positive emotional states](#) are also linked to relapse. If you feel happy, excited, or feel the need to celebrate, the desire to use alcohol could be triggered.

Sometimes alcohol may seem like the only way to manage intense or changing moods. In reality, though, alcohol takes away your ability to develop healthy coping skills.

What can I do about relapse triggers?

Identifying, listing, and understanding your alcohol use triggers is extremely important, but it is only the first step. Now, you must decide how you can make these triggers less frequent and less powerful.

For most people, dealing with triggers comes down to two clear options:

- 1) You can either avoid the triggers at all costs.
- 2) Or you can confront them with a solid relapse prevention plan.

How can you avoid triggers and not relapse?

Avoiding risky people, places, things, and moods is [sometimes the easiest way](#) to manage triggers. If you can avoid a certain person, part of town, or situation, it could greatly reduce your cravings for alcohol.

The issue here is that some triggers are unavoidable. You must come in contact with some people, places, and things. There may be no getting around some triggers like holidays, anniversaries, or areas. You also can't avoid certain emotions, like anger or sadness. Everyone experiences these feelings from time to time.

To find out what you can avoid, inspect all of your triggers and separate them into "avoidable" and "unavoidable" columns. Avoid what you can, and focus your energies toward the others.

How can you plan to respond to triggers for drinking?

Preventing relapse is a major part of recovery from alcohol. Though there are many ways to stay sober, not all options will work for all people. Feel free to experiment with many different plans to see which ones work best for you.

Some of the best ways to [respond to triggers](#) are:

- Calling a loved one, mental health professional, or a sponsor
- Attending a self-help meeting
- Practicing relaxation skills
- Focusing on the negatives linked to substance use
- "Playing the tape" by thinking through the consequences of acting on your triggers
- Exercising
- Watching a movie or listening to music
- Eating a healthy snack

The best part about these options is that you can perform several at the same time. You don't have to only choose one. [Relapse prevention plans](#) are highly unique, so spend time thinking about and creating your plan before your next cravings emerge.

What are the best ways to recover from an alcohol relapse?

Addiction to alcohol is a chronic condition, so experiencing a relapse at some point in your recovery is possible. It doesn't mean you failed or that your treatment didn't work. It only means that you need to reassess your overall treatment and relapse prevention plan.

To [recover from an alcohol relapse](#):

- Be kind to yourself. These things happen and feelings of [guilt and shame](#) will only make it worse.
- Restart or increase your professional treatments.
- Talk to sober supports with honesty and openness.
- Attend a support group meeting.
- Find a positive and sober hobby or activity.
- Talk with your doctor about [medication options](#) to help manage cravings and triggers.

Relapses are never good. But they can give you an opportunity to reflect on your addiction and find new ways to maintain sobriety. [Learn from your setback](#) and break the cycle of alcohol use.

The bottom line

You may not be able to stop all cravings and urges for alcohol. But, by understanding your triggers, you can take steps to avoid or plan for them. When triggers carry less power, you have more control over your recovery and sobriety.

References

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