

## **How can you make a Relapse Prevention Plan?**

It's not possible to predict who will have only one or two acute episodes of the symptoms of mental illness and who will have more. Making a Relapse Prevention Plan can help you avoid relapses and minimize the severity of episodes that do occur.

In developing a Relapse Prevention Plan, you may find it helpful to consult with the supportive people in your life. Peers, practitioners, family members, and others can help you remember details about what helped in past situations and can make suggestions about possible steps to take if early warning signs appear.

Support persons can also have a part in the plan itself, if you want them to. For example, you might ask family members to let you know if they notice early warning signs or ask them to help you reduce stress by taking walk with you. Of course, you make the final decision about what you want in your plan and whom you want involved.

Plans for preventing relapses are most effective if they contain the following:

- *Reminders of past triggers*
- *Reminders of past early warning signs*
- *What helps you when you're having an early warning sign*
- *Who you would like to assist you*
- *Who you would like contacted in an emergency*

The following pages contain an example of a Relapse Prevention Plan completed by Alberto.

<b><i>Relapse Prevention Plan: Alberto's Example</i></b>
<b>Reminder of events or situations that triggered episodes in the past:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broke up with my girlfriend</li> <li>• smoked marijuana</li> </ul>
<b>Reminder of early warning signs that I experienced in the past:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• felt tense, irritable</li> <li>• thought people were picking on me, didn't like me</li> <li>• couldn't concentrate on TV</li> </ul>
<b>What I think would help me if I am experiencing an early warning sign:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If I'm smoking marijuana again, I need to stop, and maybe go back to my "Double Trouble" group.</li> <li>• If I'm upset about something that happened, I need to talk to my friend Juan or to my brother Martin.</li> <li>• If I'm feeling stressed out, I need to make sure I'm doing something to relax me every day, like listening to music or biking.</li> <li>• If I start to feel like people are picking on me or I can't concentrate, I need to talk to my counselor.</li> <li>• If I still don't feel better, I need to consider more medication—at least for a short time.</li> </ul>
<b>Who I would like to help me, and what I would like them to do:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Juan or Martin could tell me if they think I'm starting to get irritable. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Juan could go biking with me.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• My counselor could help me think of ways to relax.</li> <li>• My doctor could help me decide if I need more medicine.</li> </ul>
<b>Who I would like to be contacted in case of an emergency:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Martin, my brother, ###-####</li> <li>• Maria Rodriguez, my counselor, ###-####</li> <li>• Dr. Rose, my doctor, ###-####</li> </ul>

Before developing his Relapse Prevention Plan, Alberto talked with the supportive people in his life (his friend, his brother, his counselor, and his doctor). He asked them what they had observed before his last relapse and included some of their observations in his list of early warning signs. He also asked for their suggestions in making a plan for responding to an early warning sign and asked them whether they would be willing to play a specific part in carrying out the plan.

After writing up his Relapse Prevention Plan, Alberto asked his friend, his brother, his counselor and his doctor to read it. He then gave copies to each of them. Alberto keeps a copy of his Relapse Prevention Plan in his desk drawer, where he also keeps his checkbook. Whenever he writes a check, he makes a point of looking over his plan.

*A Relapse Prevention Plan can help you in case early warning signs appear. The plan should contain:*

- *Reminders of past triggers*
- *Reminders of past early warning signs*
- *What helps you when you're having an early warning sign*
- *Who you would like to assist you*
- *Who you would like contacted in an emergency*

*It can be very helpful to have friends, family members, practitioners and other supporters involved in making the Relapse Prevention Plan and helping to carry it out.*

Questions: What would you include in your Relapse Prevention Plan?  
You can use the following planning sheet to record your answer.

<b><i>Relapse Prevention Plan</i></b>
<p>Reminder of events or situations that triggered relapses in the past:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol>
<p>Reminder of early warning signs that I experienced in the past:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol>
<p>What I think would help me if I am experiencing an early warning sign:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol>
<p>Who I would like to assist me, and what I would like them to do:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol>
<p>Who would I like to be contacted in case of an emergency?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol>

**Examples of people who have been able to prevent or reduce the number of relapses they experience**

David

“My strongest early warning signs are having vivid, bizarre dreams and not being able to sleep. When that happens, I start doing things to keep myself calm, like taking walks and listening to music. I give my checkbook and credit card to my parents because then I won’t be able to go on spending sprees and buy things I don’t need. Doing artwork helps, but I try not to work on projects late at night, because that makes it harder to go to sleep. If I need to, I call my doctor. Sometimes having some extra medication has helped me avoid a relapse. These things might not work for everyone, but they have kept me well.”

Tamika

“I’ve noticed that I start to feel down about myself. I can’t think of anything good about the present, and I keep dwelling on the past. I don’t understand why, but I start thinking about a boy I dated in high school, even though that was over 15 years ago. I’ve found that it helps to talk to someone, like my sister, about what I’m feeling, instead of keeping it to myself. It also helps me to schedule something every day that gets me out of the house. Even if it’s just going to the post office to mail a letter, it’s better than staying inside those four walls at home. Going to support

groups helps, because they understand what I'm feeling. If it gets to the point I'm thinking about life not being worth living, I know it's gotten very serious. I call my doctor right away. For over two years I've been able to avoid a relapse."

*A Relapse Prevention Plan can help you avoid having relapses of your symptoms.*

Question: What do you think will help you most in reducing the risk of relapse?

### **Summary of main points about preventing or reducing relapses**

- *Mental illnesses tend to be episodic, with symptoms varying in intensity over time.*
- *Different strategies can be used to prevent or reduce relapses.*
- *Identifying situations and events that triggered relapses in the past can help you reduce the risk of future relapses.*
- *Early warning signs are the subtle changes in a person's inner experience and behavior that signal that a relapse may be starting.*
- *Common early warning signs include:*
  - *Feeling tense or nervous*
  - *Eating less or eating more*
  - *Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much*
  - *Decreased need for sleep*
  - *Feeling depressed or low*
  - *Feeling like not being around people*
  - *Feeling irritable*
  - *Stopping treatment*
  - *Trouble concentrating*
  - *Thinking that people are against you*
  - *Drug or alcohol use or abuse*
  - *Increased spending or shopping*
  - *Being overconfident about your abilities*



- *Some people have early warning signs that are unique.*
- *Family members, friends, mental health practitioners and other supporters can help you recognize early warning signs of relapse.*
- *The more quickly you act on early warning signs, the more likely you can avoid a full relapse*
- *A Relapse Prevention Plan can help you in case early warning signs appear. The plan should contain:*
  - *Reminders of past triggers*
  - *Reminders of past early warning signs*
  - *What helps you when you're having an early warning sign*
  - *Who you would like to assist you*
  - *Who you would like contacted in an emergency*
- *Friends, family members, practitioners and other supportive people can be helpful in developing your Relapse Prevention Plan and carrying it out.*
- *A Relapse Prevention Plan can help you avoid having relapses of your symptoms.*