

Educational Handout #7:
Reducing Relapses

“My dreams seemed to get more intense before a relapse was coming, and I would find myself getting up earlier. Racing thoughts were another sign. They seemed to come on rapidly. I would think of new things to produce, such as sculptures or a story. Not everything about it was bad, but I needed to treat it swiftly or it would get out of hand.”

David Kime, artist, writer, floral designer

Introduction

This handout discusses strategies for reducing symptom relapses or minimizing the severity of any relapses that occur. In order to reduce relapses it is helpful to identify stressful situations that have contributed to relapses in the past. It is also helpful to identify your own personal warning signs of an impending relapse. This information can be combined to develop a relapse prevention plan. This plan can be even more effective by including a significant other, such as a relative or friend.

Why do people have relapses?

The symptoms of mental illness tend to vary in intensity over time. Sometimes the symptoms may be absent; sometimes they may be mild or moderate; sometimes they may be strong.

When psychiatric symptoms become severe, it is usually referred to as a “relapse” or an “acute episode of the illness.” Some relapses can be managed at home, but other relapses require hospitalization to protect the person or other people.

Mental illness affects people in very different ways. Some people have a milder form of their illness and only have an episode once or a few times in their lives. Other people have stronger forms of their illness and have several episodes, some of which require hospitalization. Some people constantly experience symptoms, but do not have severe episodes that require hospitalization.

Scientists have not been able to identify all the reasons that people have relapses of their symptoms. Research has shown, however, that relapses are more likely to occur when:

- People are under more stress
- People stop taking their medications
- People use alcohol or drugs

Mental illnesses tend to be episodic, with symptoms varying in intensity over time.

Preventing and reducing relapses

There are many things you can do to prevent or reduce relapses. You have already learned some important relapse reduction strategies in the earlier educational handouts, including the following:

- Learn as much as possible about your illness.
- Be aware of your own individual symptoms.
- Be conscious of when you are under stress and develop strategies for coping with stress.
- Participate in treatments that help you recover.
- Build social supports.
- Use medication effectively.

In this handout you will learn some additional helpful strategies for staying well:

- Recognize events or situations that contributed to relapses in the past.
- Recognize the early warning signs that you might be starting to have a relapse.
- Develop your own relapse prevention plan to respond to early warning signs.
- Use the help of other people, such as family members, professionals, and friends, to prevent early warning signs from becoming full-blown relapses.

Different strategies can be used to prevent or reduce relapses.

What are common events or situations that can “trigger” relapses?

Some people can identify certain events or situations that appear to have led to relapses in the past. The events or situations that seemed to contribute to relapses can be thought of as “triggering” relapses.

The following chart lists some examples of common triggers. Please check off the examples that reflect an experience you have had.

Examples of Common Triggers

Personal Descriptions of Triggers	I experienced something like this
"I noticed that when I started staying out late, and not getting enough rest, I tended to relapse."	
"When I'm under more stress at work, like having strict deadlines, I'm likely to start having symptoms again."	
"Every time I go back to drinking beers every night, I end up needing to go back to the hospital."	
"When there's a change in my life, even a good change like moving into a better apartment, I tend to feel stressed out. Then the symptoms seem to come back."	
"If I have arguments with my boyfriend, it really brings me down. Sometimes the symptoms get worse then."	
"The biggest problem for me is when I stop taking medicine. I decide that I'm feeling better and there's no need to take medicine any more. Before long, the symptoms start again."	
Other:	
Other:	

Once you have identified a situation that appeared to trigger a relapse in the past, it is helpful to think about how you might handle the situation differently if it were to occur again. For example, if you noticed that drinking beers with your friends tends to trigger an episode, you could plan some activities with them that do not involve drinking. If you noticed that being under stress tends to trigger an episode, you could plan to use a specific relaxation technique, such as deep breathing, the next time you encounter another stressful situation.

Identifying situations and events that triggered relapses in the past can help you reduce the risk of future relapses.

Questions: Have you experienced any relapses of symptoms?
Are you able to identify situations or events that triggered relapses in the past?
If so, what could you do to handle the situation differently?