

Living Sober

50+ Practical Tips for Thriving in Recovery

By Shaun Critzer

Introduction

This is not a theory book. This is a field guide.

Fifty-plus practical tips I wish someone had given me when I got sober. Real strategies that work in real life. No fluff. No platitudes. Just honest, actionable advice from someone who's been there.

Some of these tips will resonate. Some won't. Take what works. Leave the rest.

But try them. Because staying sober is hard. And you need every tool you can get.

— Shaun Critzer

13+ years sober

Part 1: Daily Life in Early Recovery

1. The First 90 Days Are Survival Mode

Don't try to fix your whole life in the first 90 days. Just don't drink.

Your only job is to stay sober. Everything else can wait.

Don't start a new business. Don't get into a relationship. Don't make major life decisions.

Just. Don't. Drink.

2. HALT Is Your Best Friend

Never let yourself get too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired.

These four states make you vulnerable to cravings. Check in with yourself multiple times a day:

- **Hungry?** Eat something.

- **Angry?** Journal, exercise, talk it out.
- **Lonely?** Call someone, go to a meeting.
- **Tired?** Rest. Nap. Go to bed early.

HALT prevents most relapses.

3. Eat Like a Normal Human

Your body is healing. Feed it.

In early recovery, your blood sugar is all over the place. You're craving sugar because alcohol is sugar.

Eat regular meals. Protein. Vegetables. Complex carbs. Don't skip breakfast.

And yes, it's okay to eat ice cream every night for the first month. You're not drinking. That's what matters.

4. Sleep Is Non-Negotiable

You can't recover if you're not sleeping.

Insomnia is common in early recovery. Your brain is recalibrating.

Tips:

- No screens an hour before bed
- Same bedtime every night
- Dark, cool room
- White noise or earplugs
- Melatonin or magnesium (ask your doctor)
- No caffeine after 2pm

If insomnia persists, see a doctor. Sleep deprivation will make you relapse.

5. Move Your Body Every Day

Exercise is the closest thing to a magic pill in recovery.

It reduces cravings, improves mood, regulates sleep, and releases trapped trauma.

You don't have to run marathons. Just move:

- Walk 30 minutes
- Lift weights
- Do yoga
- Dance in your living room
- Anything that gets your heart rate up

Make it non-negotiable.

6. Hydrate Like Your Life Depends On It

Because it does.

Alcohol dehydrates you. Your body is trying to heal.

Drink water. A lot of it. Aim for half your body weight in ounces per day.

Keep a water bottle with you. Drink it before coffee. Drink it when you have a craving.

7. Sugar Cravings Are Normal

Your brain is looking for dopamine.

Alcohol floods your brain with dopamine. Now it's gone, and your brain is screaming for a replacement.

Sugar works. It's not ideal long-term, but in early recovery, it's fine.

Eat the ice cream. Drink the soda. Don't beat yourself up.

Once you're stable, you can work on cutting back.

8. Caffeine Can Be a Trigger

Too much caffeine = anxiety = cravings.

If you're drinking 6 cups of coffee a day and feeling jittery and anxious, cut back.

Anxiety makes you want to use. Calm your nervous system.

9. Create a Morning Routine

How you start your day sets the tone.

My morning routine:

- Wake up at the same time
- Drink water
- Journal for 10 minutes
- Meditate or pray
- Exercise
- Eat breakfast
- Review my goals for the day

Find what works for you. But have a routine. Structure prevents chaos.

10. Create an Evening Routine

The witching hour is real.

For most people, 5pm-9pm is the danger zone. That's when you used to drink.

Replace the habit:

- Go to a meeting
- Exercise
- Cook dinner
- Call your sponsor
- Watch a recovery video
- Read
- Anything but sitting on the couch bored

Have a plan for the evening. Every single night.

Part 2: Emotional Sobriety

11. You're Going to Feel Everything

And it's going to suck.

For years, you numbed your feelings. Now they're back. All of them.

Anger. Sadness. Fear. Shame. Grief. Joy. All at once.

This is normal. This is part of healing.

Feel it. Don't run from it. Don't numb it. Just feel it.

It will pass.

12. Cry When You Need To

Tears are not weakness. They're release.

I cried more in my first year sober than I had in the previous 20 years combined.

Let it out. In the shower. In your car. In therapy. Wherever.

Crying releases cortisol (stress hormone) and endorphins (feel-good chemicals). It's literally healing.

13. Anger Is Okay—Acting On It Isn't

Feel the anger. Don't throw the punch.

Anger is a normal emotion. It's what you do with it that matters.

Healthy ways to process anger:

- Hit a punching bag
- Go for a hard run
- Scream into a pillow
- Journal
- Talk to someone

Unhealthy ways:

- Yelling at people
 - Breaking things
 - Drinking
-

14. Boredom Is a Relapse Trigger

Idle hands are the devil's workshop.

Boredom was one of my biggest triggers. I didn't know what to do with myself.

Fill your time:

- Hobbies

- Exercise
- Meetings
- Volunteering
- Learning something new
- Building something
- Creating something

Stay busy. Especially in early recovery.

15. Loneliness Will Try to Kill You

Connection is the opposite of addiction.

Isolation is dangerous. When you're alone too long, the voice in your head gets louder.

Combat loneliness:

- Go to meetings
- Call a friend
- Join a recovery community
- Volunteer
- Go to a coffee shop (just being around people helps)

Don't isolate.

16. Gratitude Is a Superpower

You can't be grateful and miserable at the same time.

Every night, write down three things you're grateful for.

They don't have to be big:

- I didn't drink today
- I had a good meal
- My dog loves me
- The sun was out
- I'm alive

Gratitude rewires your brain.

17. Meditation Doesn't Have to Be Woo-Woo

It's just sitting still and breathing.

You don't have to chant. You don't have to sit cross-legged. You don't have to clear your mind.

Just sit. Breathe. Notice your thoughts. Let them pass.

Start with 5 minutes. Use an app if it helps (Headspace, Calm, Insight Timer).

Meditation calms your nervous system and reduces cravings.

18. Journaling Saves Lives

Get the thoughts out of your head and onto paper.

When I'm spiraling, I journal. I dump everything onto the page—the cravings, the anger, the fear, the shame.

And then it's not in my head anymore. It's on paper. And I can see it for what it is.

Journal prompts:

- How do I feel right now?
 - What am I grateful for?
 - What triggered me today?
 - What do I need?
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19. Therapy Is Not Optional

You can't heal trauma on your own.

Find a therapist who specializes in addiction and trauma. Preferably someone who does EMDR, IFS, or somatic work.

Therapy is expensive. I know. But it's worth it.

If you can't afford it:

- Sliding scale therapists
- Community mental health centers
- Online therapy (BetterHelp, Talkspace)
- Support groups (free)

Do whatever you can. But get help.

20. You Don't Have to Forgive Everyone

Forgiveness is not required for healing.

Some people say you have to forgive to move on. I disagree.

You have to process the pain. You have to release the anger. But you don't have to forgive the person who hurt you.

Especially if they're not sorry. Especially if they're still hurting you.

Protect yourself first. Forgiveness can come later—or not at all.

Part 3: Relationships and Boundaries

21. Cut Out Toxic People

You can't recover in a toxic environment.

If someone is actively using, enabling your addiction, or abusing you, they have to go.

I know it's hard. Especially if it's family.

But your sobriety comes first. Always.

22. Not Everyone Will Support Your Recovery

Some people liked you better when you were drinking.

When you get sober, you change. And some people don't like that.

They'll pressure you to drink. They'll mock your recovery. They'll tell you you're overreacting.

Those people are not your friends.

Let them go.

23. Boundaries Are Self-Care, Not Selfishness

You have to protect your recovery.

Boundaries are not walls. They're guidelines for how people can treat you.

Examples:

- "I can't be around you when you're drinking."
- "I need you to stop offering me alcohol."
- "I can't talk about this topic—it's triggering."

Set them. Enforce them. Don't apologize.

24. Don't Date in the First Year

You're not ready.

I know you're lonely. I know you want connection. But you're not stable yet.

Early recovery is emotional chaos. Adding a relationship to that is a recipe for disaster.

Focus on yourself. Build your foundation. Date later.

(If you're already in a healthy relationship, that's different. But don't start a new one.)

25. Your Family Might Not Trust You Yet

And that's fair.

You broke their trust. Repeatedly. For years.

They don't owe you forgiveness. They don't owe you a second chance.

Your job is to show up. Consistently. Over time.

Trust is rebuilt through action, not words.

26. Make Amends, But Don't Expect Forgiveness

Amends are about you taking responsibility—not them forgiving you.

A proper amend:

1. Acknowledge what you did
2. Take full responsibility
3. Explain how you're changing
4. Don't ask for forgiveness

They might forgive you. They might not. That's not your business.

Your business is to make it right and move forward.

27. Find Your People

You need a recovery community.

AA, NA, SMART Recovery, Refuge Recovery, online communities—find your people.

People who get it. People who've been there. People who won't judge you.

Recovery is hard. Don't do it alone.

28. Get a Sponsor (Or Accountability Partner)

You need someone you can call at 2am.

A sponsor is someone further along in recovery who can guide you.

They're not a therapist. They're not a friend. They're someone who will tell you the truth and hold you accountable.

If you're in AA/NA, get a sponsor. If you're not, find an accountability partner.

29. Service Keeps You Sober

Help someone else.

When you help another person in recovery, you remember why you're sober. You remember how bad it was. You remember what's at stake.

And you give them hope.

Service can be:

- Sponsoring someone
- Volunteering
- Sharing your story
- Showing up for your family

Find a way to give back.

30. You Can't Save Everyone

Some people aren't ready.

You'll meet people in recovery who relapse. Who give up. Who die.

It's heartbreaking. But you can't save them.

You can show up. You can offer support. But you can't make them choose recovery.

Focus on your own sobriety. That's the best thing you can do.

Part 4: Mindset and Mental Health

31. One Day at a Time Is Not a Cliché

It's a survival strategy.

Thinking about "never drinking again" is overwhelming.

But can you not drink today? Just today?

Yes. You can.

That's all you have to do.

32. Cravings Are Temporary

They peak and pass.

A craving lasts 10-20 minutes on average. It feels like forever, but it's not.

Ride it out. Distract yourself. Call someone. Move your body.

It will pass.

33. Play the Tape Forward

What happens if you pick up?

When you're craving, your brain romanticizes using. It remembers the high, not the consequences.

Play the tape forward:

- You take the first drink
- Then the second, third, tenth
- You wake up hungover, ashamed
- You've lost your sobriety
- You've let everyone down

- You're back at day one

Is it worth it?

34. You're Not "Cured" After 30 Days

Recovery is lifelong.

Some people think they can do 30 days and then moderate. They can't.

If you're an addict, you're an addict. That doesn't change.

You can be in recovery. You can be sober. But you're not cured.

Stay humble. Stay vigilant.

35. Relapse Doesn't Mean Failure

It means you're human.

Relapse is common. It doesn't mean you failed. It means you need to adjust your plan.

If you relapse:

- Don't beat yourself up
- Reach out for help immediately
- Figure out what led to it
- Start again

The only real failure is giving up.

36. Your Brain Is Healing

It takes time.

Your brain has been flooded with dopamine from substances for years. It's going to take months—sometimes years—for it to recalibrate.

That's why you feel depressed, anxious, foggy, and unmotivated in early recovery.

It gets better. But it takes time.

Be patient with yourself.

37. Medication Is Not Cheating

If you need it, take it.

Some people need antidepressants. Or anti-anxiety meds. Or medication-assisted treatment (MAT) like Suboxone or naltrexone.

That's not cheating. That's healthcare.

Talk to a doctor. Get the help you need.

38. Comparison Is Toxic

Your recovery is your own.

Don't compare your progress to someone else's.

Some people are thriving at 30 days. Some people are still struggling at a year.

Everyone's journey is different.

Focus on your own path.

39. Celebrate Your Wins

Every day sober is a victory.

30 days. 90 days. A year. Five years.

Celebrate them. Get a cake. Get a chip. Tell people.

You earned it.

40. You're Allowed to Be Happy

Sobriety is not punishment.

Some people think recovery means suffering. It doesn't.

You're allowed to have fun. To laugh. To enjoy life. To feel joy.

In fact, that's the whole point.

Part 5: Practical Life Skills

41. Learn to Cook

It's cheaper, healthier, and therapeutic.

Cooking gives you something to do with your hands. It's creative. It's satisfying.

Start simple:

- Eggs
- Chicken and rice
- Pasta
- Stir-fry

You don't have to be a chef. Just learn a few basic meals.

42. Get Your Finances in Order

Addiction is expensive.

Now that you're sober, you have money. Use it wisely.

Steps:

1. Track your spending
2. Pay off debt
3. Build an emergency fund
4. Budget for essentials
5. Save for the future

Financial stress is a relapse trigger. Get ahead of it.

43. Clean Your Space

Your environment affects your mental health.

A cluttered space = a cluttered mind.

Clean your room. Do your dishes. Make your bed.

It sounds small, but it matters.

44. Avoid Bars and Parties (At Least at First)

You're not missing anything.

I know you want to feel normal. I know you don't want to be "that guy" who can't hang.

But you're in early recovery. You're vulnerable.

Avoid high-risk situations. At least for the first year.

There will be time for parties later. Right now, protect your sobriety.

45. Have a Plan for Social Events

If you have to go, have an exit strategy.

Sometimes you can't avoid social events (weddings, work parties, family gatherings).

Plan ahead:

- Bring your own non-alcoholic drinks
- Have an excuse to leave early
- Bring a sober friend
- Park your own car (so you can leave anytime)
- Call your sponsor before and after

Don't wing it.

46. Find New Hobbies

You need something to do besides drink.

What did you used to enjoy before addiction took over?

Or what have you always wanted to try?

Ideas:

- Music
- Art
- Writing
- Woodworking
- Gardening
- Hiking
- Photography
- Cooking
- Reading

Find something that brings you joy.

47. Read Recovery Literature

Learn from people who've been there.

Books that helped me:

- *The Big Book* (AA)
- *The Body Keeps the Score* (Bessel van der Kolk)
- *No Bad Parts* (Richard Schwartz)
- *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (Gabor Maté)
- *Recovery* (Russell Brand)

Read. Learn. Grow.

48. Limit Social Media

It's a comparison trap and a time suck.

Social media can trigger cravings (everyone's drinking and having fun!), feed comparison (everyone's life is better than mine!), and waste time (scroll for 3 hours, feel worse).

Limit it. Or delete it.

Your mental health will thank you.

49. Have a Relapse Prevention Plan

Hope for the best, plan for the worst.

Write it down:

- Your triggers
- Your warning signs
- Your coping skills
- Your emergency contacts
- What to do if you're in crisis

Keep it somewhere you can access it when you need it.

50. Know Your Emergency Numbers

Save them in your phone right now.

- Sponsor/accountability partner: _____
- Therapist: _____
- Crisis hotline: 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline)
- SAMHSA helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- Local hospital: _____

When you're in crisis, you won't remember these. Save them now.

Part 6: Relapse Prevention

51. Relapse Starts Before You Pick Up

Watch for warning signs.

Emotional relapse:

- Isolating
- Skipping meetings
- Poor self-care
- Bottling up emotions

Mental relapse:

- Thinking about using
- Romanticizing the past
- Lying
- Planning how you could use

Physical relapse:

- Picking up

Catch it early.

52. Have a Sober Toolbox

Things you can do instead of using.

My toolbox:

- Call my sponsor
- Go to a meeting
- Exercise
- Journal
- Pray
- Watch a recovery video
- Take a cold shower
- Do 50 pushups
- Go for a drive
- Call a friend

What's in yours?

53. Avoid "Just One"

There's no such thing.

Your brain will try to convince you: "Just one drink. You can handle it. You've been sober for months."

You can't. You're an addict. One leads to ten.

Don't negotiate with your addiction.

54. Change People, Places, and Things

If it's a trigger, it has to go.

Old drinking buddies? Gone.

Favorite bar? Avoid it.

Stressful job that makes you want to use? Find a new one.

I know it's hard. But your sobriety comes first.

55. Don't Get Complacent

The moment you think you've got it figured out, you're in danger.

I've seen people with 10 years sober relapse because they stopped going to meetings, stopped working on themselves, stopped taking it seriously.

Recovery is lifelong. Stay humble. Stay vigilant.

Conclusion: You've Got This

Recovery is hard. It's messy. It's uncomfortable.

But it's worth it.

Every single day sober is a victory. Every craving you don't act on is a win. Every time you choose recovery over your addiction, you're building a life worth living.

You're not broken. You're healing.

And healing is beautiful.

Keep going. One day at a time.

— Shaun Critzer

Resources

Crisis Support:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988
- **SAMHSA National Helpline:** 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741

Recovery Communities:

- **Alcoholics Anonymous:** www.aa.org
- **Narcotics Anonymous:** www.na.org
- **SMART Recovery:** www.smartrecovery.org
- **Refuge Recovery:** www.refugerecovery.org

Continue Your Journey:

- **7-Day Reset Workbook** - Foundation for early recovery
- **From Broken to Whole** - 30-day course on trauma, shame, and healing
- **Bent Not Broken Circle** - Monthly membership community
- **www.shauncritzer.com** - Blog, videos, and resources

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