

The Importance of Wellness to Early Recovery and Relapse Prevention

In keeping with the basic 12-step principle “first things first,” let’s look at how you can use the tools of wellness to successfully navigate the treacherous waters of early recovery. Then we will look at how the many benefits associated with a wellness lifestyle can actively help safeguard you against relapse.

The Acute Withdrawal Process

If you are currently in recovery from alcoholism and/or drug addiction, you are intimately familiar with the range of uncomfortable symptoms associated with acute withdrawal. In reference to alcohol withdrawal, acute withdrawal symptoms typically begin when the blood alcohol concentration declines sharply—generally within four to twelve hours after alcohol

use has been discontinued. The acute withdrawal process typically runs its course over four to seven days. Throughout this period, the process of detoxifying your body is about as much fun as a root canal and IRS audit combined! By way of quick review, the following symptoms are generally associated with acute withdrawal:

- Sweating combined with tachycardia, or elevated heart rate
- Hand tremors
- Insomnia
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Anxiety, often accompanied by depression

In rare situations, visual, auditory or tactile hallucinations and grand mal seizures may also accompany the acute withdrawal process.

If you are actively drinking or drugging and feel that you are ready to quit, it would probably be advisable to link up with a treatment program to help you overcome the hurdles of acute withdrawal and get you started on the right track. Your local Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) Central Office can refer you to a variety of resources in line with your needs, preferences and financial limitations. If you have been a heavy drinker and/or drug user for over ten years, or if you are aware of any significant medical conditions that may complicate your withdrawal process, you may want to consider undergoing medically supervised detoxification.

Let's now look at how wellness tools can help you during acute withdrawal and early recovery.

Using Wellness Tools to Help You Through Acute Withdrawal and Early Recovery

- Ease your way over the humps of acute withdrawal by practicing deep breathing, listening to relaxation tapes and using other stress-management techniques.
- Reduce your cravings for addictive drugs by curbing your intake of caffeine and sugar—as well as by snacking on fresh fruits, veggies and other nutritious foods when cravings strike.
- Use nutritional supplements to help vitalize your bodily systems during detoxification, as well as during the post-acute withdrawal period of recovery. (Check with a physician or a nutritionist specializing in addictions for an appropriate vitamin/mineral/herbal formula.)
- Go for a jog, a fast walk or partake in any other form of vigorous exercise to stimulate the production of endorphins—giving you a totally free natural high!
- Begin to normalize your sleeping patterns by listening to relaxation tapes at bedtime or practicing self-hypnosis. (Also, try listening to relaxing music while taking a hot bath right before bedtime.)
- Use the wellness tools presented in this book—including exercise, learning to eat well, and meditation/other stress management tools—as *effective substitutes* for drinking and drugging. These will give you a helpful “boost” during early recovery through contributing to increased vitality and self-esteem.
- Learn to focus on your *unique purpose* for being on this planet—which will give you a powerful incentive for not returning to drinking and drugging! (More on this in chapter 9.)

Wellness Tools

Let's take a few moments to focus more specifically on some of the ways in which wellness tools can help smooth the transition through detoxification and the early stages of recovery.

Using the deep breathing exercises, meditation and the other stress management techniques described in chapter 7 can help you counteract the blahs and anxiety associated with acute withdrawal. They can also act as coping tools that may help safeguard you against relapse.

Chapters 4 and 5 will provide you with more details concerning the important role of sound nutrition in providing a solid biochemical foundation for your lifelong recovery process. During early recovery, you can effectively counteract the cravings for addictive substances by curbing your intake of caffeine and sugar, as well as by snacking on nutritious foods when cravings strike. Healthy "craving-busters" include carrot sticks, fresh or dried fruit and nuts. I also strongly recommend that you consider strengthening your system by making judicious use of nutritional supplements during the withdrawal and early recovery periods. Rather than self-prescribing, please consult a physician, naturopath or nutritionist with special training in addictive disorders to help you zero in on a vitamin/mineral/herbal formula that is most appropriate to your special needs.

Incidentally, if you are newly sober and attending meetings of AA, NA or any other recovery-focused support group, you may encounter "old-timers" guzzling coffee and eating candy bars, and encouraging you to do the same. From a wellness perspective, I do believe it's best to ease up on the caffeine and sugar during early sobriety. While you may choose to disagree with some of the "old-timers" in terms of their affinity for caffeine

THE IMPORTANCE OF WELLNESS

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Very often, the body's ability to produce endorphins—those lovely natural chemicals that trigger the pleasure centers of the brain—is impaired during the early stages of recovery. This can be particularly true if you are coming down from cocaine, amphetamines or other stimulants. You can help your body get back into full gear in the endorphin-production department by engaging in jogging, fast walking and other forms of vigorous exercise. (The role of exercise in wellness and recovery is discussed more fully in chapter 6.) It is also important to note that the wellness tools presented in this book—including exercise, learning to eat well and the various stress management techniques—work in synergistic fashion as effective substitutes for drinking and drugging.

You also need to take steps to normalize your sleeping patterns, which are typically disrupted during the early months of recovery. The deep breathing and self-hypnosis exercises presented below are designed to help you maximize your experience of serenity during the early months of recovery.

Stress-Buster Deep Breathing Exercise

One of the reasons Americans are so stressed out is that we are a nation of shallow breathers. The purpose of this exercise is to increase the flow of oxygen to your brain and body, simultaneously calming and energizing you. You can do this exercise either standing or sitting upright.

Place your left hand over your navel above your stomach and your right hand on your chest. Breathe in while slowly counting to four, and breathe out while counting to eight.

KEY: Focus on breathing from the bottom up—that is, on filling your lungs from the bottom to the top. You should feel your stomach moving in and out as you inhale and exhale, but feel little movement in your chest.

“Belly breathe” for a minute or two twice a day, or whenever you begin to feel overly stressed.

A Gentle Breathing Exercise for Relaxation

Try this exercise whenever you feel a need to be more calm and centered.

Place your hand over your navel and gently inhale, silently saying “I am” as you fill your chest.

As you exhale, silently say “relaxed.”

Repeat this gentle breathing process for a minute or two, allowing your breathing to gently relax you and bring you back to center.

A Simple Self-Hypnosis Exercise to Ease You into Relaxing Sleep

1. Note: You may find it helpful to tape-record this exercise and listen to it as you lie in bed preparing for sleep. Lie in bed with your eyes closed and focus your attention on your breathing. Become aware of the gentle rhythm of breathing in (taking in rich, fresh oxygen) and breathing out (releasing accumulated toxins along with your breath). Take several slow, deep breaths and experience yourself sinking into deeper relaxation with each breath.

2. Imagine that you are at the top of a stairway and slowly descending, counting down from twenty to one. Count down slowly, and allow yourself to feel more and more deeply relaxed with each downward step. (You may find that you drift off to sleep before you get down to the bottom of the staircase!)
3. At the bottom of the stairway, visualize yourself entering your own very special place of peace and relaxation. This might be a quiet beach, a lake high up in the mountains or perhaps a special place associated with your childhood. It really doesn't matter, as long as you choose a place of serenity and relaxation that holds special meaning for you.
4. Allow yourself to fully experience your special place's environment, noticing the temperature and other weather conditions, whether you are indoors or outdoors, the time of day, etc.
5. As you are experiencing the serenity of your special place, say a silent prayer to your higher power and turn over to him or her any distressing thoughts or feelings you may be carrying with you. Completely release them to your higher power for safe-keeping. You may also want to visualize these thoughts and feelings as helium-filled balloons that are drifting away, up into the sky, millions and millions of miles away.
6. Close your prayer by asking your higher power to guide you gently to a peaceful and relaxing sleep, so that you can begin the new day totally refreshed and energized.

Note: If you awaken during the night, simply repeat this exercise. With practice, it will become easier and easier to return to a deep and restful sleep.

Role of Wellness in Relapse Prevention

Relapse—the return to former patterns of addictive behavior—is the most frightening word in any recovering person's vocabulary. The prospect of relapse is doubly frightening if you are the recovering person's spouse. Invariably, you feel completely helpless and devastated when your partner falls off the wagon despite your best efforts to support his or her recovery process. This section focuses on action steps that you, the person in recovery, can take to minimize your personal risk of relapse, together with how a wellness lifestyle can assist you in that process.

First the Bad News

In reality, many recovering alcoholics and addicts relapse several times before achieving long-term sobriety. Follow-up studies consistently show that the rate of relapse following treatment is disturbingly high. Some studies report that 80 to 90 percent of alcoholics and addicts succumb to relapse, sometimes years after initiating their recovery process.

The recovery-relapse cycle becomes a vicious roller-coaster ride for far too many recovering people and their families—turning their lives completely upside down. As you may have experienced yourself, adverse consequences of relapse can include:

- Weakening of family ties due to erosion of trust as family members are let down again.
- Shattering of the recovering person's self-esteem and reinforcement of a negative self-image as a "hopeless failure."
- Loss of gainful employment and financial ruin.
- Domestic violence and family breakups.

- Devastation of the alcoholic/addict's health due to resumption of abusive drinking and drug use.

The 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill provides a chilling example of the heavy damage associated with relapse. This ecological tragedy, which caused severe damage to Alaska's coastline, resulted in court-imposed damages against Exxon of \$125 million. Investigations of this incident revealed that the freighter's captain, who had previously completed alcoholism treatment, had been seen drinking the day before the spill.

When are you, as a recovering alcoholic/addict, at greatest risk of succumbing to relapse? Terence Gorski, a leading authority in relapse prevention, states that recovering people are particularly vulnerable to relapse during the early stages of recovery. Many, if not most, relapses occur during what is called the post-acute withdrawal period, which typically runs anywhere from six months to up to two years following detoxification. According to Gorski, post-acute withdrawal is a physiological and neurological adjustment process that the body goes through in response to discontinuing use of addictive substances, following years of abusive drinking or drug usage. Brain functioning is affected during this adjustment process, with spells of confusion, difficulty in concentration and increased vulnerability to stressful situations.

Normally, post-acute withdrawal symptoms will subside as a result of the body's natural healing processes, which can take anywhere from six months to two years to run their course. During this period, as a recovering person you tend to be particularly vulnerable to relapse, especially if you are unaware of the dynamics associated with post-acute withdrawal. If you are attempting to navigate this vulnerable period in early recovery, you may want to

copy the chart on page 20 and carry it with you as a reminder of the powerful tools that a wellness lifestyle provides you.

In addition to your heightened susceptibility to relapse during early recovery, you are also at risk at any point in your life when you encounter high-risk factors that act as "trigger points" and target your greatest areas of vulnerability. Examples of high-risk situations that can trigger a relapse include:

- loss of a job
- excessive family problems (including divorce)
- death of a relative or close friend
- cumulative stress overload caused by juggling too many conflicting demands
- a life-threatening illness
- social pressures to return to drinking and/or drug use

Major catastrophic events can also be associated with increased likelihood of relapse. Terence Gorski reports that the tragic events of September 11, 2001, which claimed the lives of thousands of innocent Americans, were followed by an upward spike in alcohol and drug consumption (including a marked increase in consumption of antianxiety medications). Additionally, treatment centers and addictions professionals across the country reported increased rates of relapse.

Now the Good News

The good news is that relapse is preventable, and a wellness-oriented lifestyle can play a major role in reducing your personal risk of relapse.

In his bestsellers *Passages in Recovery* and *Counseling for Relapse*

Prevention. Terence Gorski emphasizes the importance of developing a personalized relapse prevention strategy, anticipating and tuning in to early warning signs of impending relapse, and involving family members and other key supportive people in your prevention plan. Warning signs of impending relapse often include:

- Increased irritability and strained social relationships
- Irregular eating habits
- Major disruption in sleeping patterns
- Periods of deep depression
- Irregular attendance at 12-step meetings or other recovery support groups
- Feeling overwhelmed by life's pressures
- Entertaining increasing thoughts of drinking and/or drug-ging as an escape

Significantly, Gorski underscores the critical importance of health-conducive lifestyle changes in relapse prevention, particularly in reference to the post-acute withdrawal process associated with the early stages of recovery. In his words, "[The recovering person] can learn to manage the symptoms of post-acute withdrawal through a program of education, stress management, diet, exercise, relaxation and life-management skills training." In particular, Gorski emphasizes that the relative severity of post-acute withdrawal symptoms tends to increase in direct proportion to the level of stress in the recovering person's life. Hence, any sound lifestyle measures designed to increase your tolerance to stressful situations will yield tangible dividends in terms of relapse prevention.

The following chart highlights how a wellness lifestyle can help you prevent relapse. Study this chart for pointers that you

can incorporate into your own relapse prevention program—we will “flesh out” the details in the chapters that lie ahead.

As previously mentioned, psychiatrist William Glasser advocates replacing chemical dependency and other negative

How Living Well Can Help Prevent Relapse

- Living well will help you manifest a strong sense of purpose in life and will reinforce your commitment to clean and sober living.
- You will learn to identify your relapse triggers—and defuse these triggers—by acquiring the skills to manage day-to-day stresses effectively.
- You will learn how to calm your mind by practicing meditation, yoga and/or other stress-reduction techniques. This will help you acquire the resiliency you need to deal with the ups and downs of living sober.
- Living well will help repair the damage to your central nervous system and other bodily systems. This will give you the strength and vitality to confront life’s challenges “head on,” without the need for any artificial crutches.
- Through learning how to follow a wholesome, nutritious diet, you will be able to combat the biochemical triggers that are frequently associated with relapse.
- As you follow your pathway to optimal health, living well will increasingly become a central focus of your life. You’ll be having so much fun that you will never want to go back to drinking and drugging!
- The life-affirming, health-conducive belief system associated with living well will enable you to work your recovery program even more effectively—providing a powerful safeguard against relapse.

addictions with positive addictions. He defines these as habitual activities that are intrinsically rewarding and serve to bolster your self-esteem. Examples of positive addictions include many of the behaviors associated with a wellness-oriented lifestyle, including running and other vigorous forms of exercise, training for competitive sports, learning a musical instrument, taking up meditation, and engaging in other creative and challenging pursuits.

How does Glasser's concept of "positive addictions" apply to our immediate concern with preventing relapse? In short, to the extent that you are able to replace your former self-destructive behaviors with positive addictions, you are at a substantially reduced risk of relapsing. Working a 12-step program and pursuing a wellness-oriented lifestyle are prime examples of positive addictions that can be intrinsically self-rewarding.

G. Alan Marlatt, director of the Addictive Behaviors Research Center at the University of Washington in Seattle, is an authority on relapse prevention who closely identifies with Glasser's concept of positive addictions. Marlatt advocates a strategic approach to relapse prevention that centers on lifestyle modification, coupled with learning to effectively respond to early warning signs of impending relapse and developing effective coping strategies to employ in high risk situations. According to Marlatt, a health-conducive lifestyle is an important component of an effective relapse prevention strategy because it provides a battery of lifestyle coping skills that foster improved physical, psychological and spiritual well-being. Simultaneously, this lifestyle also bolsters the recovering person's self-esteem and enables them to deal with high-risk situations or relapse triggers more effectively.

Sounds Great, But Does It Really Work?

In short, yes. However, if you or your partner have gone through the roller-coaster ride of treatment, relapse and resumption of treatment time and time again, you may be understandably skeptical of yet another approach that promises success provided you “work the program.” Fortunately, there is a growing body of research that focuses on whether the various shifts in behavior associated with a wellness-oriented lifestyle are, in fact, associated with reduced risk of relapse.

A classic study based in Canada focused on the effects of a physical conditioning program among subjects completing residential treatment for alcoholism. Fifty-eight subjects who underwent a daily conditioning program—consisting of one hour of progressively vigorous physical activity over the course of the six weeks—were compared with two groups of subjects who completed the treatment program without the exercise component. At the end of three months, following completion of treatment, all three groups were surveyed concerning whether they successfully maintained abstinence from drinking.

Significantly, the reported rate of abstinence among subjects participating in the fitness program (69.3 percent) was almost twice as high as the abstinence rate for subjects in the two control groups (38.0 percent and 36.9 percent, respectively).

As we will discuss more fully in chapter 7, learning and practicing effective stress-reduction techniques is also associated with reduced risk of relapse. In the early 1990s, a group of researchers conducted a comparative analysis of twenty-four studies focusing on the impact of daily meditation practice—a frequently advocated stress-management technique—on participants’ alcohol

and drug consumption. Findings of all twenty-four studies indicated significant positive benefits associated with regular practice of meditation in terms of increased abstinence from alcohol and drugs, and reduced incidence of relapse.

My own research, conducted in 1998, focused on examining the association between a wellness-oriented lifestyle and successful recovery, as indicated by freedom from relapse, among a group of fifty multiple substance abusers who had completed residential treatment. Study subjects were equally divided into two groups—the successful recovery group, who completed treatment and maintained sobriety for at least six months, and the relapse group, who completed treatment and subsequently relapsed. Each subject completed a Lifestyle Assessment Questionnaire designed to assess his or her standing in relation to eleven areas generally associated with a wellness-oriented lifestyle:

- level of physical exercise
- stress/stress management
- nutrition/weight control
- social supports
- sleep patterns
- smoking/smoking cessation
- caffeine consumption
- life satisfaction
- overall health status
- perceived control over matters relating to their health
- spirituality

The highest possible “wellness index” score, computed from subjects’ questionnaire responses, was 90. The higher the score, the healthier the subject’s lifestyle.

As a group, subjects in the recovery group registered significantly higher scores than those in the relapse group. Specifically, the twenty-five subjects in the recovery group registered an average score of 54.8, compared with an average score of only 39.1 for subjects in the relapse group. The likelihood of this association occurring by chance is less than one in 1,000. Furthermore, subjects in the recovery group registered higher average scores for virtually all component items in the wellness index.

Incidentally, while the average score of 54.8 registered by the clean and sober subjects is certainly far from optimal, remember that this represents a randomly chosen group of people who had no access to the wellness pointers presented in this book. The important point is that their scores suggest they were moving in the right direction, while enjoying the benefits of living clean and sober.

In addition to focusing on the subjects' involvement in a wellness-oriented lifestyle, my study also surveyed subjects regarding their participation in 12-step meetings. Significantly, 88 percent of subjects in the recovery group reported that they attended 12-step meetings at least once a week, compared with only 36 percent of subjects in the relapse group. Taken together, these findings suggest that a wellness-oriented lifestyle can be of significant benefit in safeguarding against relapse. These findings also strongly suggest that a wellness-oriented lifestyle and active participation in a 12-step program combine to strengthen your overall sobriety and minimize the prospect of relapse.

In summary, I believe that the following three-pronged strategy provides the best level of protection against relapse for recovering alcoholics/addicts:

- Actively work your chosen recovery program. If you are following a 12-step program, develop an ongoing relationship with your sponsor, go to meetings and work the 12 steps. If you are following a different path, be sure to take full advantage of available support from your chosen program.
- Develop an active relapse prevention strategy. This involves becoming familiar with the personal “trigger points” that heighten your risk of relapse, and implementing effective coping strategies.
- Assign a high priority to taking care of yourself, and actively embrace a wellness-oriented lifestyle. In particular, work on bringing your diet into balance to safeguard against excessive sugar consumption and other nutritional stressors that often trigger relapse. This book will give you the tools to chart your own pathway to optimal health, together with step-by-step guidance for implementing this process.

In addition to helping securely anchor you in your day-to-day sobriety, a wellness lifestyle offers major benefits in terms of enjoying increased health and vitality across the board, together with dramatic improvements in your overall quality of life. This forms the focus of the following chapter.