The Four Stages of Growth in Recovery

A working model for why we relapse and how not to

Why we relapse

Overcoming addiction is not easy. It may be one of the hardest things we do. Time and again we vow to stay away from drugs and/or alcohol only to pick up again. Amazed, we go to 12-step programs, check ourselves into treatment, "white-knuckle" it on our own. We fall on our knees and cry to God to give us strength to give it up, then drive straight to the liquor store or our drug dealer's house. We relapse.

How on earth do we beat our addiction and live a sober, happy life? If we keep trying and failing to stay clean, even after working a 12-step program or going to treatment, there is something else going on. Something is keeping us from the spiritual solution behind all healthy recovery.

That something just might be: Delayed Emotional Growth. When we passed through the school of life we may have missed out on some basic life-skills and stopped developing, or developed in un-healthy ways. Maybe we didn't have the best teachers. Maybe we skipped class, didn't listen, got by on our personality or looks. Whatever the reason, we didn't learn the life skills we need to get through stressful times or effectively handle day-to-day responsibilities.

If we compensate for this (often hidden) handicap with drugs and/or alcohol, then remove the drugs or alcohol without putting ourselves in a position to learn the necessary life-skills, we relapse. This is a sign that we are simply not able to cope in our present life situation with our present level of life-skills. Instead of condemnation, we can do some evaluation.

This is the premise behind non-judgmental relapse.

How to not relapse

By knowing where we stand on the developmental curve and taking measures to acquire the life-skills we missed out on, we're better equipped to avoid relapse. For these purposes we can break Emotional Growth down into four developmental stages:

- Living and Learning at the College stage of Life
- Living and Learning at the High School stage of Life
- Living and Learning at the Grade School stage of Life
- Living and Learning at the Pre-School stage of Life

To identify our present stage of development we can look at how well we are able to learn from experience. Do we keep making the same mistakes? We can also look at how we react to stress and handle responsibility, primarily:

- Work: Handling money, making a living, and paying our bills.
- Family: keeping relatives somewhat happy or satisfied.
- Love: maintaining a healthy relationship with a significant other.

Once we identify which stage we're in, we can take corrective action, grow to the next level, and learn to deal with our problems, without the need of our addictions. If we're mistaken about what stage we're in and relapse, it serves as an indicator. Then, without judgment, we can back up a stage and try again. Next, is a detailed description of each stage:
Level 4: College Stage of Life  Living “At Home” (Clean & Sober Fully-Independent Living)

Able to live and learn at the College stage of life, without needing mood-altering substances.

This is the highest level of adult functioning. You’ve acquired enough independent living skills to handle what life throws at you. You can manage the responsibilities of work, family, and love relationships. For the most part, among other things, you are able to: (Circle the Skills you need to build)

- Manage your anger
- Be honest (even when it costs you)
- Practice patience and delay gratification
- Calm your mind
- Confront others in a non-attacking way
- Take full responsibility for your decisions
- Set boundaries
- Learn from your mistakes
- Ask for help
- Nurture yourself
- Create your own structure
- Handle your freedom responsibly

At this stage of life, you’re capable of living on your own, with family, or with friends. You may not have all these life-skills, all the time, but you have enough to be able to learn and grow without having to go back to your addiction(s). If you do return to drugs or alcohol, if you relapse, you know you’re missing skills obtainable through Levels 3, 2 or 1.

“There is no learning other than experience.” - Aristotle

Level 3: High-School Stage of Life  Living at a Half-Way House (SEMI-Independent Living)

Able to Live and Learn at this High-School Stage of Life to prepare for the College Stage of Life.

At this level you have less responsibility and less stress. For example, you may be responsible for making a living and paying bills but not for keeping loved-ones happy (since you don’t live with them). To help you learn the life-skills you’re missing, you temporarily surrender some of your freedom and rely on others to create your structure. In this less stressful environment you can grow and gain the independent living skills you need to deal with the challenging problems at the College stage of life. If you relapse at this level, it’s a sign you need skills available in Levels 2 or 1.

Level 2: Grade-School Stage of Life  Living at an In-patient Re-hab (Safe, Dependent Living)

Able to Live and Learn at this Grade-School Stage of Life to prepare for High-School and College of life.

Here you give up even more freedom, and have less responsibility. You accept more rules and more structure temporarily imposed on you by others. There are many life-skills to learn before you can live at the College stage of life. You may have tried living at Levels 4 or 3 only to return to drugs or alcohol. This is a sign that you’re not quite ready yet. You need someone to take you by the hand and teach you how to care for yourself. Stress and responsibility are minimized as you focus on learning more basic skills. If you relapse at this stage, it’s a sign you need some Level 1 training.

Level 1. Pre-School Stage of Life  Living in Jail, Prison, or the Streets (Un-Safe, Dependent Living)

Able to Learn Lessons, in Survival Situations, to Prepare for Grade-School, High-School, and College of Life.

This is maximum confinement. You have forsaken your freedom and most of your rights. You have few, if any, responsibilities. Not for others, not for yourself. You have given over control to others as you learn basic Pre-School Life-lessons. All is not lost. You must simply work your way through this stage and on to the next one.

Dave's Story: “I was a four-time loser before I realized I was in the wrong game. 15 years in prison is a pretty tough way to find oneself, but I have no regrets. This time around, I took advantage of all those long and lonely days by practicing my guitar, exercising, and getting to know myself –without drugs. To my utter amazement, I started liking what I was seeing. It's been said adversity introduces a man to himself and I found this to be true. If I had not suffered, I can safely assure you that you would not be reading the label on a loaf of my Killer Bread. A whole lot of suffering has transformed an ex-con into an honest man who is doing his best to make the world a better place...one loaf of bread at a time”. -Dave’s story at: www.daveskillerbread.com.