

# RELAPSE WARNING SIGNS

From "The Phases and Warning Signs of Relapse" by Terence T. Gorski

**Phase I: Internal Change:** During this phase I look good on the outside, but I start using old addictive ways of thinking and managing feelings that make me feel bad on the inside. The most common relapse warning signs are:

1-1. Increased Stress: I begin to feel more stress than usual. Sometimes this is the result of a problem or situation that is easy to see. At other times it is the result of little problems that cause stress to build up slowly over time.

1-2. Change in Thinking: I begin to think my recovery program is not as important as it used to be. Sometimes things are going so well that I don't believe I need to put a lot of effort into my program. At other times I have problems that my recovery program doesn't seem to help and I ask myself, "why bother?"

1-3. Change in Feeling: I start having unpleasant feelings that I don't like. Sometimes I feel euphoric, like everything is going my way when I know that it really is not. At other times I feel depressed, like nothing is working out. I know that these mood swings are not good for me.

1-4. Change in Behavior: I start acting different. I still look good on the outside, but I know deep inside that I am not practicing my program the way I used to. Deep inside I know something is going wrong.

**Phase II: Denial:** During this phase, I stop paying attention to or honestly telling others what I am thinking and feeling. The most common relapse warning signs are:

2-1 Worrying about Myself: I feel uneasy about the changes in my thinking, feelings and behavior. This uneasiness comes and goes and usually lasts only a short time. Sometimes I feel afraid that I won't be able to stay

sober, but I don't want to think about it.

2-2 Denying that I'm Worried: I deal with this uneasiness in the same way I used to deal with my addiction - I go into denial and try to persuade myself that everything is okay when it really isn't. Sometimes my denial works and I can forget my problems and feel better for a little while. I usually don't know that I am using denial when I am doing it. It is only when I think about the situation later that I am able to recognize how bad I was feeling and how I denied those feelings.

**Phase III: Avoidance and Defensiveness:** During this phase, I try to avoid anyone or anything that will force me to be honest about how my thinking, feelings, and behavior have changed. If I am confronted directly, I get defensive and can't hear what others are trying to tell me. The most common relapse warning signs are:

3-1. Believing I'll Never Use Alcohol or Drugs: I convince myself that I don't need to put a lot of energy into my recovery program today because I will probably never go back to alcohol or drug use. I tend to keep this belief to myself. Sometimes I am afraid to tell my counselor or other recovering people about this belief for fear of being confronted. At other times I think it is none of their business.

3-2 Worrying About Others Instead of Self: I take the focus off myself by becoming more concerned about the sobriety of others than about my personal recovery. I privately judge the drinking or using of my friends and spouse and the recovery programs of other recovering people. I keep these private judgments to myself and don't talk about them. This is often called "working the other guy's program."

3-3 Defensiveness: I feel reluctant to discuss personal problems and what I am doing in my recovery because I am afraid I will be criticized or confronted. I feel scared, angry, and defensive when other people ask me questions about my recovery program or point things out about my recovery that I don't want to see. I tend to get defensive even when no defense is necessary.

3-4 Compulsive Behavior: I start using compulsive behaviors to keep my

mind off how uncomfortable I am feeling. I get stuck in old, rigid, and self-defeating ways of thinking and acting. I tend to control conversations either by talking too much or not talking at all. I start working more than I need to and get involved in many activities. Other people think I am the model of recovery because of my heavy involvement in Twelve-Step work and chairing meetings. I become active in my therapy group by "playing therapist" but am reluctant to talk about my personal problems. I avoid casual or informal involvement with people unless I can be in control.

3-5 Impulsive Behavior: I start creating problems for myself by using poor judgment and impulsively doing things without thinking them through. This usually happens at times of high stress. Sometimes I privately feel bad, but I tend to make excuses and blame others for the problems.

3-6 Tendencies Toward Loneliness: I start feeling uncomfortable around others and start spending more time alone. I usually have good reasons and excuses for staying away from other people. I start feeling lonely. Instead of dealing with the loneliness by trying to meet and be around other people, I get more compulsive about doing things alone

**Phase IV: Crisis Building:** During this phase, I start having problems in sobriety I don't understand. Even though I want to solve these problems and work hard at it, two new problems pop up to replace every problem that I solve. The most common warning signs are:

4-1 Tunnel Vision: I start to think my life is made up of separate and unrelated parts. I focus on one small part of my life and block out everything else. Sometimes I focus only on the good things and block out or ignore the bad. In this way I can mistakenly believe everything is fine when it really isn't. At other times I see only what is going wrong and blow that out of proportion. This causes me to feel like nothing is going my way even when there are many good things happening in my life. As a result I can't see "the big picture" or figure out how what I do in one part of my life can cause problems in other parts of my life. When problems arise, I don't know why. I believe that life is unfair and that I have no power to do anything about it.

4-2 Minor Depression: I start to feel depressed down, blue, listless, and

empty of feelings. I lack energy, tend to sleep too much, and rarely feel good or full of life. I am able to distract myself from these moods by getting busy with the other things and not talking about the depression.

4-3 Loss of Constructive Planning: I stop planning ahead and thinking about what I am going to do next. I begin to think that the slogan, "One Day at a Time," means that I should not plan ahead or think about what I am going to do. I pay less and less attention to details. I become listless.

My plans are based more on wishful thinking (how I wish they would be) than reality (how things actually are). As a result I make plans that are not realistic and stop paying attention to the details of implementing those plans.

4-4 Plans Begin to Fail: My plans begin to fail and each failure causes new problems. I tend to overreact to or mismanage each problem in a way that creates a new and bigger problem. I start having the same kind of problems with work, friends, family, and money that I used to have when I was using addictively. I feel guilty and remorseful when I have these problems. I work hard trying to solve them, but something always seems to go wrong that creates an even bigger or more depressing problem.

**Phase V: Immobilization:** During this phase, I feel trapped in an endless stream of unmanageable problems and feel like giving up. I can't seem to get started or make myself do the things that I know I need to do.

5-1 Daydreaming and Wishful Thinking: It becomes more difficult to concentrate or figure things out. I have fantasies of escaping or "being rescued from it all" by an event unlikely to happen. The "if only" syndrome becomes more common in conversation. I start daydreaming and wishing for things that I want without doing anything to try to get them.

5-2 Feelings that Nothing Can Be Solved: I begin to feel like a failure who will never be able to get anything right. The failures may be real or imagined. I exaggerate small problems and blow them out of proportion while failing to notice anything that I do right. I start to believe that "I've tried my best and recovery isn't working out."

5-3 Immature Wish to Be Happy: I have a vague desire "to be happy" or to have "things work out," but I don't set up any plans to make those things happen. I want to be happy but I have no idea what I can do to make myself

happy. I am not willing to work hard or pay the price for the happiness that I want. I start wishing that something magical would happen to rescue me from my problems.

**Phase VI: Confusion and Overreaction:** During this phase I have trouble thinking clearly and managing my thoughts, feelings, and actions. I am irritable and tend to overreact to small things.

The most common relapse warning signs are:

6-1 Difficulty in Thinking Clearly: I start to have trouble thinking clearly and solving usually simple problems. Sometimes my mind races and I can't shut it off while at other times it seems to shut off or go blank. My mind tends to wander and I have difficulty thinking about something for more than a few minutes. I get confused and have trouble figuring out how one thing relates to or affects other things. I also have difficulty deciding what to do next in order to manage my life and recovery. As a result I tend to make bad decisions that I would not have made if I were thinking clearly.

6-2 Difficulty in Managing Feelings and Emotions: I start to have difficulty managing my feelings and emotions. Sometimes I overreact emotionally and feel too much. At other times I become emotionally numb and can't figure out what I am feeling. Sometimes I feel strange or have "crazy feelings" for no apparent reason. I start to think I might be going crazy. I have strong mood swings and periodically feel depressed, anxious, and scared. As a result, I don't trust my feelings and emotions and often try to ignore, stuff or forget about them. My mood swings start causing me new problems.

6-3 Difficulty in Remembering Things: At times I have problems remembering things and learning new information and skills. Things I want to remember seem to dissolve or evaporate from my mind within minutes. I also have problems remembering key events from my childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. At times I remember things clearly, but at other times these same memories will not come to mind. I feel blocked, stuck, or cut off from these memories. At times, the inability to remember things causes me to make bad decisions that I would not have made if my memory were working properly.

6-4 Periods of Confusion: I start getting confused more often, and the confusion is more severe and lasts longer. I'm not sure what is right or wrong. I don't know what to do to solve my problems because everything I try seems to make them worse. I get angry at myself because I can't solve my problems and just keep making things worse.

6-5 Difficulty in Managing Stress: I start having trouble dealing with stress. Sometimes I feel numb and can't recognize the minor signs of daily stress. At other times I seem overwhelmed by severe stress for no real reason. When I feel stressed out I cannot relax no matter what I do. The things other people do to relax either don't work for me or they make the stress worse. It seems I get so tense that I am not in control. The stress starts to get so bad that I can't do the things I normally do. I get afraid that I will collapse physically or emotionally.

6-6 Irritation with Friends: My relationships with friends, family, counselors, and other recovering people become strained. Sometimes I feel threatened when others talk about the changes they are noticing in my behavior. At other times I just don't care about what they say. The arguments and conflicts get worse despite my efforts to resolve them. I start to feel guilty.

6-7 Easily Angered: I feel irritable and frustrated. I start losing my temper for no real reason and feeling guilty afterward. I often overreact to small things that really shouldn't make any difference. I start avoiding people because I am afraid I might lose control and get violent. The effort to control myself adds to the stress and tension.

**Phase VII: Depression:** During this phase I become so depressed that I can't do the things I normally do. At time I feel life is not worth living, and sometimes I think about killing myself or using alcohol or other drugs as a way to end the depression. I am so depressed that I can't hide it from others. The most common relapse warning signs are:

7-1 Irregular Eating Habits: I either start to overeat or I lose my appetite and eat very little. As a result I start gaining or losing weight. I skip meals and stop eating at regular times. I replace a well-balanced,

nourishing diet with "junk food."

7-2 Lack of Desire to Take Action: I can't get started or get anything done. At those times I am unable to concentrate, feel anxious, fearful, uneasy, and often feel trapped with no way out.

7-3 Difficulty Sleeping Restfully: I cannot fall asleep. When I do sleep, I have unusual or disturbing dreams, awaken many times, and have difficulty falling back to sleep. I sleep fitfully and rarely experience a deep relaxing sleep. I awaken from a night of sleep feeling tired. The times of day during which I sleep change. At times I stay up late due to an inability to fall asleep and then oversleep because I am too tired to get up in the morning. At other times I become so exhausted that I sleep for extremely long periods, sometimes sleeping around the clock for one or more days.

7-4 Loss of Daily Structure: My daily routine becomes haphazard. I stop getting up and going to bed at regular times. I start skipping meals and eating at unusual times. I find it hard to keep appointments and plan social events. I feel rushed and overburdened at times and have nothing to do at other times. I am unable to follow through on plans and decisions and experience tension, frustration, fear, or anxiety which keeps me from doing what I know needs to be done.

7-5 Periods of Deep Depression: I feel depressed more often. The depression becomes worse, lasts longer, and interferes with living. The depression is so bad it is noticed by others and cannot easily be denied. The depression is most severe during unplanned or unstructured periods of times. Fatigue, hunger, and loneliness make the depression worse. When I feel depressed I separate from other people, become irritable and angry with others, and often complain that nobody cares or understands what I am going through.

**Phase VIII: Behavioral Loss of Control:** During this phase I can't control my thoughts, feelings, and behavior. I can't stick to a productive daily schedule. I am still denying how dysfunctional I have become, and I am not willing to admit that I am out of control even though my life is chaotic and I have serious problems. The most common warning signs are:

8-1 Irregular attendance at AA and Treatment Meetings: I start finding excuses to miss therapy and self-help group meetings. I find excuses to justify this and don't recognize the importance of AA and treatment. I develop the attitude that "AA and counseling aren't making me feel better, so why should I make them a number-one priority? Other things are more important."

8-2 An "I Don't Care" Attitude: I try to act as if I don't care about the problems that are occurring. This is to hide feelings of helplessness and a growing lack of self-respect and self-confidence.

8-3 Open Rejection of Help: I cut myself off from people who can help. I may do this by having fits of anger that drive others away, by criticizing and putting others down, or by quietly withdrawing from others.

8-4 Dissatisfaction with Life: Things seem so bad that I begin to think I might as well go back to alcohol or drug use because things couldn't get worse. Life seems to have become unmanageable even though I am sober and not using addictively.

8-5 Feelings of Powerlessness and Helplessness: I have trouble "getting started." I have difficulty thinking clearly, concentrating, and thinking abstractly. I feel that I can't do anything and begin to believe there is no way out.

**Phase IX: Recognition of Loss of Control:** During this phase my denial breaks and I suddenly recognize how severe my problems are, how unmanageable life has become, and how little power and control I have to solve any of the problems. This awareness is very painful and frightening. By this time I have become so isolated that it seems that there is no one to turn to for help. The most common warning signs are:

9-1 Difficulty with Physical Coordination and Accidents: I start having difficulty with physical coordination that results in dizziness, poor balance, difficulty with hand-eye coordination, or slow reflexes. These problems cause me to feel clumsy and become accident prone.

9-2 Self-pity: I begin to feel sorry for myself and may use self-pity to



get attention at AA or from family members. I feel ashamed because I think I must be crazy, emotionally disturbed, defective as a person, or incapable of being or feeling normal. I also feel guilty because I believe I am doing things wrong or failing to work a proper recovery program. The shame and guilt cause me to hide the warning signs and stop talking honestly with others about what I am experiencing. The longer I keep the warning signs hidden, the stronger they become. I try to manage the warning signs and find that I can't do it. As a result I begin to believe that I must be hopeless and I feel sorry for myself.

9-3 Thoughts of Social Use: I start to think that alcohol or drug use will help me feel better. I start hoping that I can one day return to social drinking and recreational drug use. I think I might really be able to control it next time. Sometimes I am able to put these things out of my mind, but often the thoughts are so strong that they cannot be stopped. I may begin to feel that alcohol or drug use is the only alternative to going crazy or committing suicide. Using alcohol and drugs actually looks like a sane and rational alternative.

9-4 Conscious Lying: I know that I am lying, using denial and making excuses for my behavior, but I can't stop myself. I feel out of control. I start doing things on a regular basis that I normally would not do that violate my values. I just can't seem to stop myself or control my behavior.

9-5 Complete Loss of Self-confidence: I feel trapped and overwhelmed because I can't think clearly or do the things I know I need to do to solve my problems. I feel powerless and hopeless. I start to believe that I am useless, incompetent, and will never be able to manage my life.

**Phase X: Option Reduction:** During this phase I feel trapped by the pain and inability to manage my life. I start to believe that there are only three ways out - insanity, suicide, or self-medication with alcohol or drugs. I no longer believe anyone or anything can help me. The most common warning signs that occur during this phase are:

10-1 Unreasonable Resentment: I feel angry because of the inability to behave the way I want to. Sometimes the anger is with the world in general, sometimes with someone or something in particular, and sometimes with myself.

10-2 Discontinues All Treatment and AA: I stop attending all AA meetings. If I am taking Antabuse, I may forget to take it or deliberately avoid taking it regularly. If a sponsor or helping person is part of treatment, tension and conflict develop and become so severe that the relationship usually ends. I may drop out of professional counseling even though I need help and I know it.

10-3 Overwhelming Loneliness, Frustration, Anger, and Tension: I feel completely overwhelmed. I believe there is no way out except drinking, suicide, or insanity. I feel like I am helpless, desperate, and about to go crazy.

10-4 Loss of Behavioral Control: I experience more and more difficulty in controlling thoughts, emotions, judgments, and behaviors. This progressive and disabling loss of control begins to cause serious problems in all areas of life, including my health. No matter how hard I try to regain control, I am unable to do so.

**Phase XI: Alcohol and Drug Use:** During this phase I return to alcohol or drug use, try to control it, lose control, and realize that my addiction is once again destroying my life.

11-1 Attempting Controlled Use: I convince myself that I have no choice but to use alcohol or drugs and that using will somehow make my problems better or allow me to escape from them for a little while. I plan to try either social use or a short-term binge. If I try to be a controlled social or recreational user, I start using a little bit on a regular basis. If I decide to go out on a sort-term binge, I plan a chemical-use episode that will be a "one-time only, time-limited, controlled binge."

11-12 Disappointment, Shame, and Guilt: I feel disappointed because alcohol and drugs don't do for me what I thought they would. I feel guilty because I believe I have done something wrong by using addictively. I feel

ashamed because I start to believe I am defective and worthless as a person, and my relapse proves it.

11-13 Loss of Control: My alcohol or drug use spirals out of control. Sometimes I lose control slowly. At other times, the loss of control is very rapid. I begin using as often and as much as before.

11-14 Life and Health Problems: I start having severe problems with my life and health. Marriage, jobs, and friendships are seriously damaged. Eventually, my physical health suffers and I become so ill that I need professional treatment.