



Setbacks Prevention Skills for Success

Optional Opening Exercise – “The Setback Game”

Directions: Take turns doing the following: When it is your turn, you should select one of the topics in the grid below. Then, tell a brief story about a setback (an occurrence when your progress got stalled or halted altogether) based on the topic you chose. If possible, tell a real story, but if not, it is okay to make up a hypothetical one if you cannot think of a real story. Make sure to include in the story how the setback specifically happened. Then, when done, as a group discuss the following:

- **Brainstorm: What could help prevent this type of setback in the future?**

EXAMPLE: Someone goes first and selects “I don’t care” from the grid and tells a story like this:

“The last time I had a setback I thought that everything was going well. I had stayed away from drugs for a few months, and I really felt better - and I was happier! Then one day, for some reason I suddenly just felt like “I don’t care” what happens anymore. I probably should have talked to someone, but I kept my feelings to myself and soon I was saying to myself “I am going to get high, and I don’t care what happens, I will just deal with it later” – As expected I then had a major setback and I was getting high for several weeks until I overdosed and found myself in the hospital and then back in detox”.

- Group discussion (based on above story) - *What could help prevent this type of setback in the future?*
 - *Some group member suggestions:*
 - *“Like you said, the next time you feel like you don’t care you could call someone who does care and talk it out”*
 - *“I would try to figure out what caused that feeling of not caring. Maybe it was depression or frustration. If you can figure out the cause of those feelings earlier, before you start using again, then you might be able to prevent a negative outcome in the future*

Hopefully now everyone gets the gist of the activity – Now try it as a group:

Topic List:

Craving	Old “Friend” calls	Depression	Stress	Anxiety
Loss	Unemployment	Fear	Temptation	Bad relationship
Embarrassment	Pressure	Overwhelmed	I don’t care	Lying to self
Poor decision	Financial problem	Boredom	Frustration	Miss the old days
Too much freedom	Negative thinking	Can’t take the pain	Resentful	Triggered
Painful memories	Impulsive	Wrong place to go	Overconfident	Misleading advice
Lonely	Payday \$\$	Hurt	Discouraged	Confused and lost



Setbacks Prevention Skills for Success – Education and Discussion

Background: For some who have done previous [Taking the Escalator](#) worksheets focused on “Setbacks”, this may be a review. The Taking the Escalator methodology is a harm reduction-based, motivational and self-awareness focused philosophy. In the process of learning to recover and change from substance use disorders and other co-existing issues, it is not uncommon that there are many challenges along the way. Abstinence based models, such as the 12 Step Model, usually refer to these challenging periods in recovery as “**Relapse**”. By contrast, Taking the Escalator prefers the term “**Setbacks**”. Here is why:

Comparing Relapse and Setbacks (Side by Side)

Relapse	Setback
<p>Relapse defined: “A relapse is when the person with the past addiction starts doing his or her addictive behavior again after a period of not doing it, known as abstinence.” (<i>verywellmind.org</i>)</p> <p>Relapse Illustration: If a car was driving on a trip to a destination, a relapse would be similar to that car completely breaking down on the road, or else just stopping and turning around to start driving back where it came from</p> <p>Focus of Relapse Prevention – Identify relapse triggers and relapse warning signs to take precautions so as to avoid losing abstinence</p> <p>Goal – Return to abstinence after period of substance use has ended.</p> <p>All relapses are setbacks: A relapse can be a specific type of setback. Abstinence is a choice, some people who choose this path return to use in spite of their efforts. Others may choose abstinence from one substance but not another, so relapse may only apply to one drug</p> <p><u>Important Note</u> – Many find abstinence to be the best path for them, however others may try other paths toward positive change. If a person has chosen the goal of abstinence, they may choose to use the term relapse if it suits their situation personally.</p>	<p>Setback defined: Something that happens that delays or prevents a process from developing. (<i>Cambridge Dictionary</i>)</p> <p>Setback Illustration: If a car was going on a trip, a setback would be something like running into traffic, hitting an unexpected detour, getting a flat tire, etc. The car would be delayed and possible have to change directions, <u>but it would keep on traveling toward its destination</u></p> <p>Focus of Setback Prevention – Identify potential obstacles and other possible challenges. Develop coping skills and routines to circumvent these challenges and obstacles. Maintain and sustain motivation and insight to avoid negative decisions and choices</p> <p>Goal – Overcome obstacles by changing course, adapting strategies, making adjustments in lifestyle, trying new ideas, and rebuilding insight and motivation to keep moving forward in a positive direction in spite of challenges</p> <p>Not all Setbacks are Relapses – Someone may just be struggling with life or experience challenges in sustaining progress. The term “setback” includes a wider variety of situations than simply just “getting high again”</p> <p><u>Important Note:</u> For many who are attempting to make positive changes using a harm reduction model, the term setbacks may be less stigmatizing than relapse. (See article: “DiClemente Advocates Rethinking Road to Recovery”)</p>
<p>What is most important is that everyone, regardless of their path: 1) Consider the safety and health of all choices made in this area especially related to substance use and mental health and other risks - 2) Embrace the process of working toward self-improvement and positive change by building insight and motivation for inspiration and progress – 3) Keep moving forward and upward each and every day (like and escalator) - <i>If you take a few steps back, just keep moving forward and upward – It is a philosophy of life!</i></p>	



Setback Prevention – Tools for preventing setbacks before they happen

Keep in mind that **setbacks happen**, and some things come up in life that are unpreventable. Life is unpredictable and often things can spring up that can throw us off course unexpectedly. It can (and often does) happen to anyone and everyone. Setback prevention is focused more on avoiding setbacks that you can see coming as well as preparing to cope successfully with the unexpected challenges and obstacles of life.

Setback Prevention Skills List: Review the following and rate yourself with the following codes:

- A – Active:** This is a setback prevention skill that you are actively applying in your life with some success
- W – Working:** You are working on this skill and starting to make progress, but some improvement needed
- N – Need** to increase focus and effort in this area to increase ability to prevent and manage potential setbacks

- **Watch associations and environment:** Who we spend time with, communicate with as well as our daily surroundings can have a huge impact on staying on a positive course. Negative associations and environments tend to lead us toward negative consequences sooner or later.
- **Remain self-aware:** How do you know if you are being self-aware? Are you asking yourself searching and honest questions every day in order to find honest answers? Do you make excuses for your behavior or accept responsibility? Are you willing to listen to the viewpoints of others whom you respect and trust and then make adjustments? Can you look in the proverbial “mirror” and examine yourself honestly without running from the truth? – Lying to ourselves will often result in setbacks
- **Keep the fires of motivation burning** – Are you making sure to work toward pushing yourself to get better each day or at least on most days? Do you talk to people who encourage you, support you and build you up to motivate you? Do you read or view motivational and inspirational material? Are you actively focusing on what is important in your life to stay inspired? - Motivation is essential each day to prevent setbacks
- **Care for coexisting issues** – Substance use disorders rarely exist alone in a vacuum. Quite often there may be other issues of concern such as mental health issues, trauma, unemployment, financial issues, housing concerns, physical health issues. These other issues in life, when ignored can lead toward setbacks in progress. Caring for coexisting issues is a must for setback prevention
- **Nurture your “spirit”** – Someone may read this and say “I can’t do this: I’m an atheist or an agnostic” or one may say “This doesn’t apply, I am not religious” – The truth is that regardless of what you believe or do not believe in, there is a spiritual aspect of life that all humans share: *Everyone eventually needs some sense of purpose and meaning in life in order to thrive.* Whatever your beliefs may be, are you searching for meaning and purpose in life? Do you feel a sense of belonging? If not, are you working on this personal quest in your life? Living life day to day without care for these concerns can lead to setbacks.
- **Healthy decision making and ethics:** Nothing shapes our lives more than our choices. Making honest and ethical decisions is one sure fire way to stay out of trouble and prevent setbacks. Lying and deceiving is a sure-fire way to bring chaos and instability into our lives and setbacks are sure to follow. Thinking things through before acting and using our support system to make healthy and beneficial decisions is one of the best things that we can do stay on a positive course and prevent setbacks.
- **Coping with cravings:** Cravings (strong desires to use a substance or engage in a harmful behavior) can be very sneaky and can come without warning. It may be impossible to avoid setbacks without having an array of skills and supports needed to conquer cravings rather than continuously giving in to them, which fuels setbacks. Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) may be an option if available (Talk to counselor)



- **Manage thoughts, feelings, attitude and behaviors** – Thoughts and feelings can have a powerful influence on our behaviors. Therefore, learning to manage negative thinking and challenging feelings is essential when it comes to preventing setbacks. Having emotional and behavioral coping skills that work consistently is critical in this area. Learning to maintain a positive attitude and avoid harmful behaviors takes practice but can be achieved with time and effort and is a key aspect of preventing setbacks
 - **Healthy Routines and Interests:** There are very few (if any) stories of people who sustained progress without major setbacks who failed to develop positive daily routines and healthy interests. Idle time can be disastrous when it comes to preventing setbacks so having some structure throughout each day and each week can be a remedy to the dangers of having nothing productive to do. This counts not only for essential day-to-day activities like work, chores and responsibilities but also applies to free time and recreation, where satisfying hobbies and interests can be so important for preventing setbacks
 - **Grit and determination:** People who eventually learn to successfully prevent setbacks on a long-term basis develop the ability to keep moving forward and upward in spite of life's challenges. As stated, earlier setbacks happen, as life throws some unexpected punches toward all of us. The question is however: If life knocks you down, are you going to get up and keep fighting? If you are running in the race for life and you fall down, how long does it take you to get up and keep running toward the finish line? Grit and determination are needed to sustain fight the good fight (win or lose) and to keep running the race for life
 - **Other? Can the group think of other things that are needed in life to prevent setbacks?**
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Closing Discussion: IF - A Framework for Moving Forward:

Change is challenging and there is no denying it. If you can develop the ability to successfully prevent and manage setbacks on a consistent basis, then you have attained an excellent achievement. However, if you are someone who is still experiencing occasional setbacks, that does not mean that you are not making progress. Remember the acronym **IF**, which stands for **Intensity and Frequency**. With that in mind, if you are still experiencing setbacks, ask yourself the following two questions:

1. **Intensity** – If I am still experiencing an occasional setback, overall are they less intense? (For example, am I using less each time on average, with fewer consequences, bouncing back quicker, using less harmful substances, smaller amounts, etc.)
2. **Frequency** – If I am still experiencing setbacks, are they happening less frequently than in the past? (For example, in the past going from getting high on average once or twice per week but now only experiencing a setback every month or so – that's progress!)

If your setbacks are decreasing in intensity and frequency and you have not given up trying, then you are making progress. Keep on moving forward and upward!

One day
You will
thank yourself
for never
giving up.