

Dealing with and learning from slips/setbacks



Recycling through the stages of change

As you work to achieve your vision of well-being, you will likely need to set some goals and make some changes in your life. Ideally, you will begin by thinking about the change, then preparing a plan and committing to it, and finally, beginning the new behavior and working to maintain it. In reality, most people will experience slips or setbacks at one or more points along the way toward goal achievement. They will go back to previous stages, maybe even all the way back to where they started.

For long-term success, it is important to have a plan for getting back on track and starting again as soon as possible. This process of getting back on track after a slip is sometimes called “recycling” rather than relapse, since the focus is on repurposing, recovery, resilience, success and goal achievement.¹

Preventing slips before they happen²

Most slips don’t just happen. They usually begin with a high-risk situation and a series of events or behaviors that could have been stopped, changed or prevented. You can learn to identify the risky situations that are likely to cause problems related to your goal. In many cases, just being aware of the situation is all you need to help prevent the slip.

Activity: What are your risky situations?

List your risky situations for a goal that you are working to achieve.

My risky situations for (list goal here)

Tips for preventing slips²

- Think ahead over the next month. Identify times that are likely to present problems related to pursuing your goal. Mark them on your calendar so they don’t catch you by surprise.
- Identify the series of events that could lead up to the specific situation you’re facing and put you at risk for a slip. Plan strategies to acknowledge, intervene and alter the series of events as early as possible.
- Rehearse the strategies you will use to prevent the slip in your mind or ask someone to role play the situation with you.

If you slip (and you will!)

Slips provide an opportunity for you to learn about skills and habits you need to work on. Think back to a slip that you've experienced related to a goal you are trying to achieve. Answer the questions below.

Activity: Evaluating a slip³

What factors contributed to the slip?

Think about how, when and where, instead of why, the slip happened.

How? _____

When? _____

Where? _____

What did you do or not do?

Before the slip _____

During the slip _____

After the slip _____

What did you learn from this slip?

How will you handle this situation if it occurs again in the future?

What will you do differently?

Before the slip _____

During the slip _____

After the slip _____

Tips for preventing slips³

- Don't dwell on the slip.
- Re-commit to your goal and start again immediately.
- Consider if you are still internally motivated to pursue your goal.
- Review your "pros" or advantages related to the goal. Try to add more "pros" to your list.
- Re-evaluate the importance of this goal to you at this time. Adjust the goal to be more realistic if needed.
- Stay in touch with your helpers for support and encouragement. If you are a member of a support group, be sure to attend meetings.

Urges⁴

You may experience an urge to engage in a behavior that you are attempting to change. Research shows that most urges last only a few minutes at a time. Think of the urge as a wave that builds, crests and then drops off suddenly. If you ride the wave (the urge) for a few minutes, it will go away. Focus on avoiding the trigger and resisting the urge for at least five minutes at a time. After three or four five-minute periods, the urge will go away. The next urge will last for an even shorter time period. For the first month or so, be aware of the number of minutes it takes for the urge to go away. Think about whether the urge is physical (such as nicotine or alcohol withdrawal) or behavioral (due to a trigger such as boredom or loneliness).



Encouragement:

What you do after a slip is more important than the slip itself.³

Sources:

1. Prochaska, JO and Norcross, JC. *Systems of Psychotherapy: A Transtheoretical Analysis – Ninth Edition*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.
2. INTERVENT International. Lifestyle management program: Dealing with slips, 2020.
3. INTERVENT International. Lifestyle management program: Learning from slips, 2020.
4. INTERVENT International. Tobacco cessation program: Quitting for good (smoking), 2020.

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