



## Expect Obstacles and Prepare for Relapses

Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit.

– Napoleon Hill

“Fall seven times, stand up eight,” says an old Japanese proverb. In other words, obstacles and relapses are perfectly normal and should be expected during the process of making behavior changes. According to the book *Changing for Good*, the typical path of changing includes several slips backward (i.e., reverting to an earlier stage of change). For this reason, the process of making positive change has been described as a “spiral pathway” rather than a straight-line path from the precontemplation stage to the maintenance stage (see **Weigh the Costs and Benefits of Changing, Strategy 19**). Clinical research indicates that only one in five self-changers overcome a long-standing problem on the first try. Therefore, the vast majority of self-changers experience relapses. The most common cause of relapses is some type of distress (e.g., depression, loneliness, anxiety), especially if an unhealthy behavior (e.g., smoking, eating or shopping) makes you feel better, and the second major cause is social pressure (e.g., people in your social network who smoke, overeat or overspend).

Obstacles are things that block positive actions related to health and wealth goals or cause people to relapse (i.e., go back to unhealthy behavior patterns). Experts advise self-changers to clearly identify their obstacles to be able to develop specific plans to overcome them and “relapse prevention skills.” For example, if you are feeling stressed out, rather than smoking or shopping, develop a “Plan B.” You need to do something else right away that makes you feel as good as smoking, eating or shopping – talking with a friend, walking the dog or some other type of exercise, gardening, a bubble bath, positive self-talk or listening to music. Many plans to change fail because people don’t have a good “Plan B.”

People often feel stressed when they are pressed for time. Another good strategy related to health and wealth is to facilitate healthy choices, such as keeping pre-cut fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator to nibble on, not stocking empty-calorie “junk foods” and buying convenience food entrees and meal replacement drinks and snacks for busy days. This way, when you’re tempted to overeat, you’ll at least have something on hand that is nutritious and low in calories. One study found that hunger, as well as planned and unplanned meal events, were frequent obstacles that interfered with maintaining a diet plan. Similarly, when people are stressed, their finances often suffer. Freezing credit cards, if overspending is an issue, and automated investing strategies (e.g., mutual fund deposits) can keep financial plans on track.

Often, social pressures to repeat old habits are obstacles. Relapse prevention may require assertiveness in dealing with others so they can support, instead of sabotage, your efforts to change. Sometimes, when this is not possible, you may have to give up a relationship to eliminate an unhealthy habit. Plan in advance what you’ll say and do in order to “avoid temptation.”

Control everything that you can. For example, if you're going out to dinner, select a restaurant with light menu options, drink a nonalcoholic beverage, ask for baked or broiled entrees and dressings and sauces on the side and/or order junior-size portions. If you're trying to get out of an office gambling pool to free up money to invest, think up a reason that nobody could object to (e.g., saving for a child's wedding or college fund). Avoid family loans (as a borrower or lender) because they often leave people feeling indebted to others for years. Every time there is a crisis, family loans become an "emergency fund."

What happens if you stray from your health and wealth goals (e.g. "blow" your diet, overspend or stop saving)? You regroup and move on. The following quote by Ralph Blum, a cultural anthropologist, describes a benefit of obstacles: "Nothing is predestined. The obstacles of your past can become the gateways that lead to new beginnings." Experts in behavior change recommend the following strategies to deal with a relapse.

- **Balance and Compensate** – As an example, let's say you are trying to eat about 1,600 calories per day, and one day you eat 400 calories more than your daily allowance (2,000 calories total). To balance and compensate, consider those 400 extra calories part of your calorie intake "budget." Over the next two days, continue by eating 1,400 calories of the 1,600 calories that you normally consume. The total amount of calories for the three-day period is still 4,800 calories (2,000 + 1,400 + 1,400), the same as originally planned; so you really haven't slipped backwards at all. The same is true of financial actions, such as saving money. When you fall short of your target behavior one day, make it up later.
- **Learn a Lesson** – Relapses should be viewed as learning opportunities – not failure or evidence of a personal weakness. When a relapse occurs, ask yourself what you learned about the process of changing your behavior and what you would do differently the next time. Research indicates that relapses often occur because the pros and cons of changing weren't thought through clearly enough, a self-changer had a poor plan (e.g., unrealistic goals) or there were simply not enough resources (e.g., helping relationships, changes in environment) to support the person making a change. People also relapse frequently when there is a disruption to their routine schedule (e.g., unforeseen events, illness, changes in schedules, vacations, weddings and other social events and holidays) or due to overconfidence (e.g., thinking that a problem behavior is "licked" and that no further effort is needed).
- **Get Back on Track** – University of Washington professor G. Alan Marlatt, who has studied long-term behavior change for decades, used the following analogy to describe a relapse: "If you have a flat tire, it doesn't mean you're not going to finish a trip. It just means you've got to fix it up before you continue." Similarly, relapses should be viewed as a temporary stop along the path to your health and wealth goals. Often, it is less difficult to make positive changes after a relapse because you've already "been there and done that." Your next change experience will benefit from the insights and experiences gained from prior attempts, and you don't need to go back to "square one." Relapsing has been compared to falling off a horse. If you are firmly committed to riding again, the best thing that you can do is to get right back into the saddle and ride. Develop better coping strategies to deal with stress and temptation and better environmental controls and support systems.

- **Reframe the Relapse** – In a perfect world, everyone would do what health and financial experts advise and invest for the long term while living a healthy lifestyle. In the real world, positive behavior changes are rarely “all (i.e., healthy behavior) or nothing (i.e., poor behavior).” There are many shades of gray in between. If you’re not doing as well as you planned to do or once did but are still better off than before you attempted to make a change, you have not relapsed entirely and should not view yourself as a failure. Any small step (e.g., eating 100 fewer daily calories or saving \$2 a day plus pocket change) toward health and wealth is better than doing nothing.

Use the **Plan for Setbacks, Worksheet 39**, to anticipate potential barriers and develop a plan for what you’re going to do when setbacks occur.

## Plan for Setbacks

Question	Health Goal	Wealth Goal
State your goals in a sound bite (one short sentence).		
List up to three obstacles that can keep you from achieving your goal.		
List two strategies to overcome each obstacle.		
What factors have caused you to relapse (go back to poor health or financial practices) in the past?		
What can you do to address these factors in the future?		



## Action Steps

### Health

- Try to find a successful role model for your health behavior change (e.g., weight control) and learn about his or her obstacles, relapses and challenges.

### Wealth

- Try to find a successful role model for your financial behavior change (e.g., investing for retirement) and learn about his or her obstacles, relapses and challenges.

### Health and Wealth

- Make a list of “high-risk” people or situations that can sabotage your plans to change and try to limit or avoid them anyway that you can.
- Make a New Year’s resolution (or a resolution to change at any time) to improve your health and wealth and keep trying to achieve it, even if you relapse. According to research by psychologist Dr. John Norcross, while nearly 60 percent of people drop their resolutions within six months, those who make resolutions are 10 times more likely to successfully change than those who do not.

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