

Guidelines for a Great Recovery

By Martha Ruske, MFT and Recovery Life Coach

Congratulations! You've just gotten clean and sober, or stopped some other addiction, with the help of a treatment center, a self-help group, or on your own. That's a real accomplishment. It feels like the hardest part of overcoming an addiction is done, and to an extent it is. Now you face the challenge of how to live your life in recovery.

A recovering addict can navigate the remainder of the path to full recovery more effectively with specialized help from a therapist. It might be helpful to look at the recovery process as a series of stages.

Day-to-day abstinence

In the first stage, the recovering addict's primary goal is to maintain abstinence. There are a number of day-to-day situations one must face for the first time as a sober or drug-free person.

- What do you do with all the free time you suddenly have?
- What healthy adjustments need to be made in your lifestyle?
- How do you mend relationships with family, friends, and work colleagues?
- What safeguards need to be put in place to protect your sobriety?

A recovering addict can obtain various means of support from an aftercare group at a treatment center, a 12-step group, or some other self-help program. A sponsor also can assist with answers to many day-to-day questions.

However, you might consider seeing a therapist at this point. A therapist can coordinate support efforts by making referrals to other professionals for nutritional counseling, financial advice, and can act as the lifeline you need to put one foot in front of the other to stay on track.

Emotional Recovery

After a few months, when you are feeling stronger in your day-to-day recovery, you might find that you need a different type of help in order to continue healing. Your addictive use was probably masking a lot of pain. What you'll most likely experience during the second stage of recovery is:

- Depression, low energy, hopelessness, or a feeling of being overwhelmed
- Painful memories of past family issues or abuse
- Strong feelings of anger you don't know how to deal with
- Low self-esteem

It's crucial to obtain professional help if you are in this sort of pain. A sponsor or a friend, despite his/her best intentions, is not equipped to handle these issues. In the second stage, psychotherapy is a key tool for healing your pain and gaining a better understanding of how the family environment in which you were raised may have contributed to your addiction. It can help you to identify the specific causes of your drinking or drug use. You'll also learn new skills for living and making relationships work better.

Overcoming old fears and attitudes

By now your new patterns of living are more firmly in place. Your life is better in many ways. You're living day by day, but also looking toward the future because you want a better life than you had before. You might feel like

you want to make up for lost time, or fulfill the goals and dreams you had before your addiction spiraled out of control. But you may have trouble moving forward if you can't let go of old beliefs and attitudes.

- Maybe you want to get a better job or start a new career, but you're afraid of failing, or afraid it's too late.
- You may have unfinished business that keeps you mired in the past.
- Your life may feel out of balance because you'd like to try new things, but don't know where or how to fit them in.
- You'd like to set realistic goals, but don't know where to start.

In this third stage of your recovery, your therapist can use coaching techniques to help you build the kind of life you want. Actively creating a better life for yourself is the best recourse you have against relapse.

Getting the professional help you need at each of these three stages of recovery can make the difference between living an "okay" life and enjoying a great one.

About the Author

Martha Ruske is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Marin County, with a Master's degree in clinical psychology from JFK University. Her specialization in alcohol and chemical dependency treatment was influenced by her own recovery in the early eighties. In 2002 she started a life coaching business called Intentional Path to help people in recovery step out into the fuller life they deserve. Learn more about Martha Ruske at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/MarthaRuske>