

How To Recover After Relapse by Steven C. Hayes, PhD

Relapse never feels good - at least not for long.

After the initial pleasure of breaking our commitment wears off, we are faced with a feeling of failure and defeat. It feels as if we let ourselves down, and those who believed in us. The progress we have made was seemingly in vain and we are back from where we started.

Whether you wish to make a change yourself, or want to empower somebody else - relapse is a real possibility that needs to be accounted for.

Most people take relapse as a sign of failure. They have given it their all, but it just wasn't enough, and now they are back to square one

However, commitment is not about never slipping.

I recall watching a therapy session by my friend and colleague Kelly Wilson, back when he was a student in training with me. He was in session with a client who had relapsed into using drugs. The client described his struggles while Kelly patiently listened. And after he was done, Kelly simply asked, "Which of your values have changed?"

After a stunned silence he affirmed "None of them."

"Then it seems to me," said Kelly, "you have a choice about which pattern of behavior you want to strengthen. Will it be commit – slip - quit, or will it be commit – slip – commit? I see only those two alternatives."

The client sat for a moment in silence, before recommitting to sobriety.

Commitment is not a one-time action. It's not a decision you make once-and-for-all, and hope to never slip up.

Instead, commitment is an ongoing process that asks you again-and-again to choose what is true and meaningful for you, and to step again in that direction. The "commitment" is to that very process as a way of building larger and larger habits of values-based action.

On some days it will be hard to follow through, and on other days you may even relapse, and abandon your commitment altogether.

That's okay.

It's your task then to choose how you wish to proceed.

Is your slip going to mean that your previous efforts were in vain, and that you are incapable of change? Or is your slip going to be a valuable learning experience, a stepping stone on your bigger path to success?

Progress almost never happens in a straight line, but in various degrees of zig zags. And whenever we relapse, we are wise to remember this and get back on our way.

Peace, love, and life.

Steven C. Hayes.

P.S. Do you want to learn how to set commitments that stick? In my latest article I write about the two big reasons why most resolutions fail, and why the principle of "Just Cuz" empowered me to quit desserts for one whole year! [Click here to read the full story.](#)