



Substance Use Prevention Toolkit | *Article*

# Re-Thinking Sobriety and Relapse

For many years, people thought about sobriety in simple terms: a person was either sober or not. Today, we know recovery is more complex than that. Recovery is a process, and like many health journeys, it can include setbacks along the way.

Because of this, many experts now use the term “return to use” instead of “relapse.” The phrase “return to use” is less judgmental and reminds us that one setback does not erase the progress a person has made.

## Why Language Matters

The words we use can affect how people feel about themselves and their recovery. Terms like “relapse” may make people feel ashamed, embarrassed or discouraged. These feelings can make it harder for someone to ask for help or get back on track.

A return to use should not be seen as a failure. Instead, it can be viewed as a sign that additional support or changes in treatment may be needed. When people feel supported rather than judged, they are often more willing to continue their recovery journey.

## Understanding Recovery

Many people in recovery experience a return to use at some point. This does not mean recovery has failed. Other long-term health conditions, such as asthma or diabetes, may also require ongoing treatment and adjustments over time.

Think of recovery like learning a new skill. If you make a mistake, you do not lose everything you have learned. The knowledge, strategies and strengths you gained are still there. A setback does not erase your progress. It simply means it is time to learn from the experience and keep moving forward.

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**Shame** is linked to depression and return to use in people recovering from **addiction**.

Addictive Behaviors

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## Different Approaches Work for Different People

Recovery looks different for every person. What works well for one person may not work for another.

Some people benefit from counseling or therapy. Others find support through peer groups, recovery programs or medication for addiction treatment (MAT). Many people use a combination of approaches.

The most effective recovery plan is often the one that meets a person's individual needs, goals and circumstances. Treatment plans may also change over time as a person's needs change.

## Treating the Whole Person

Many health care professionals take a whole-person approach to recovery. This means looking at factors such as physical health, mental health, relationships, living situation and personal goals.

By understanding the full picture, treatment providers can create a plan that fits each person's unique situation. Regular check-ins can help make sure the plan continues to meet the person's needs.

## Every Step Forward Matters

Recovery is a lifelong process for many people. There may be challenges along the way, but needing more support does not mean someone is weak or failing.

If a person returns to use, it does not erase the progress they have made. Every healthy choice, every lesson learned and every step forward still counts. Recovery is about continuing to move toward a healthier life, one step at a time.

## #SupportSobriety #RealRecovery

If you or someone you know is struggling with substance use or addiction, call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357.

*Reviewed by Medical Director, Doctor of Medicine.*

