



Lapse vs. Relapse

What is a lapse?

A lapse is a temporary set-back in the process of changing your behavior. It is an occasion, or number of occasions, when you have been unable to stick to your goals for change and have gone back to your habitual way(s) of responding to your loved one's addictive behaviors.

Examples:

Self-Care: If you have committed to adding a 30-minute walk to your day as a part of your self-care plan and find yourself distracted by other things and "forgetting" about the walk, that would be considered a lapse.

Communication: If you have committed to using a positive communication style when talking to your Loved One about a problem and then find yourself getting into a heated argument about the problem, that would be considered a lapse.

Boundaries: As a part of developing healthy boundaries for yourself, you may have committed to removing yourself when your Loved One comes home intoxicated. If your Loved One comes home intoxicated and instead of following your boundary plan and removing yourself, you instead get angry and yell at your loved one, that would be considered a lapse.

What is a relapse?

Unlike a lapse, which is temporary, a relapse is when we lose sight of our goals for change and return to our old habits. Relapse involves a change in our state of mind. Sometimes we give up on the changes we were trying to make because it seems too hard to keep going. We may eventually give up completely on the new behavior, especially if we aren't seeing any significant positive results of our efforts. Consequently, a relapse lasts much longer than a lapse.

If we have an occasion or occasions of resorting to reacting/behaving in old, unhelpful ways - but we are still committed to trying to develop new, more helpful behaviors - this would be considered a lapse rather than a relapse.

However, repeated or prolonged lapses tend to lead to relapses, so it is important to take steps early to get back on track following a lapse.

What does it mean if I have a lapse? Am I doomed to a relapse?

Often lapses occur when we encounter a situation that we cannot manage using our new strategies. This may happen because:

- We planned for a situation, but the situation didn't end up being as we expected it, or we were unable to put our plan into action.
- We couldn't plan for a situation, because the situation was unexpected.
- We didn't plan for a situation, because we have been doing well for a while and thought we'd be okay.

Having a lapse doesn't mean we have failed. It's simply a signal that we need to be prepared to handle the situation better the next time it occurs.

Managing lapses

If you should have a lapse, remember to watch your self-talk/inner dialogue. Beating yourself up over the incident tends to be counter-productive and may lead to further lapses. If you feel so angry or disappointed in yourself that you start saying things like "*I'm hopeless, I might as well give up*" this will probably make it more difficult to move forward and get back on track. Remember, you are human and therefore not 100% perfect, so why would your behavior be?!

Lapses are learning opportunities

Instead of beating yourself up, you might choose to view a lapse as a learning experience. First, accept what happened, and then work out why it happened and what you could do differently next time. Some of the skills and strategies you have been working on may be of assistance with this.

It is not possible to guarantee that you will never experience a lapse. Lapses are a natural part of the process of changing. One of the best things you can do is to plan for what to do if you do have a lapse. People who have a plan for dealing with a lapse are much less likely for it to result in a full-blown relapse.