Handling Slips and Relapses

Looking for and thinking about warning signs help to prevent a slip. However, even people who work hard to remain abstinent may find themselves in an overwhelming situation. While you should work hard and expect to not take another drink, we believe you should be prepared for the possibility of a slip.

If you should take a drink, you have choices. As discussed previously, there are three different ways to think about the drink. You could think of it as a mistake (a slip), a mistake from which you learn something (a prolapse), or as a hopeless disaster (a relapse). The goal is never to have a relapse.

A drink does not have to become a relapse. If you ever have a drink, you should try to make it turn out to be a slip or prolapse. If you have a drink, remember the following:

1. **Don’t panic.** One drink does not have to lead to an extended binge or a return to uncontrolled drinking.

2. **Stop, look, and listen.** Stop the ongoing flow of events and look and listen to what is happening. The lapse should be seen as a warning signal that you are in trouble. The lapse is like a flat tire—it is time to pull off the road to deal with the situation.

3. **Be aware of the abstinence violation effect.** Once you have a drink, you may have thoughts such as “I blew it,” or “All our efforts were a waste,” or “As long as I’ve blown it, I might as well keep drinking,” or “My willpower has failed, I have no control,” or “I’m addicted, and once I drink my body will take over.” These thoughts might be accompanied by feelings of anger or guilt. It is crucial to dispute these thoughts immediately.

4. **Renew your commitment.** After a lapse, it is easy to feel discouraged and to want to give up. Think back over the reasons why you decided to change your drinking in the first place; look at your decisional matrix and think about all the positive long-term benefits of abstinence and the long-term problems associated with continued drinking.

5. **Decide on a course of action.** At a minimum, this should include:
   - Getting out of the drinking situation.
   - Waiting at least 2 h before having a second drink.
   - Engaging in some activity during those 2 h that would help avoid continued drinking. The activity might be a pleasurable one, or reviewing materials from treatment, or talking over the lapse with someone who could be helpful, or calling your therapist.

6. **Review the situation leading up to the lapse.** Don’t blame yourself for what happened. By focusing on your own failings, you will feel guiltier and blame yourself more. Ask yourself, what events led up to the slip? What were the main triggers? Were there any early warning signs? Did you try to deal with these constructively? If not, why not? Was your motivation weakened by fatigue, social pressure, or depression? Once you have analyzed the slip, think about what changes you need to make to avoid future slips.

7. **Ask for help.** Make it easier on yourself by asking someone to help you either by encouraging you, giving you advice, distracting you, or engaging in some alternative activity with you. If you had a flat tire and your spare tire was also flat, you’d have to get help—a slip is the same situation.