

Relapse Prevention – Dan Hitz

This article is adapted from a message Dan presented at a Celebrate Recovery at Woodside of Warren. Celebrate Recovery is a Christian step program to help those recovering from a wide variety of issues including substance abuse, sexual addiction, codependency, and much more. For more information on Celebrate Recovery, or meetings in your area, visit www.celebraterecovery.com.



A while back I was meditating on what recovery looked like five or more years down the road. I was asking the Lord how people were doing long after they had completed the Living Waters program. I wondered what made someone successful in their recovery and why others faced a much more tenacious battle. Those of us who have been bound by sin will be in recovery forever, but it will not always look the same. We will always need accountability. We will always need proper

boundaries to protect us. We will always be vulnerable. At the same time we can stand strong – strong in the Lord and the power of His might to keep us from falling (*Jude 24*). As I was thinking about these things the Lord spoke to my heart and said, “You went through Living Waters in 1999, look in the mirror. What makes you strong? What happened in those times when you became weak?” He began to show me some aspects of relapse prevention that we will need for the rest of our lives. My heart for the graduates of Living Waters is that they will move beyond their brokenness and take their rightful place in the Body of Christ. When we are done with our recovery groups, we will still need to practice what they have taught us. We will still need to implement relapse prevention. This article will cover three aspects of relapse prevention; the spiritual aspects, the recovery aspects, and the emotional aspects.

The Spiritual Aspects – The spiritual aspects of relapse prevention can often be the most overlooked ingredients of our recovery. It’s easy to spend a lot of time on our knees when the world around us is falling apart, but when things began to get better and we have so many demands on our time we seem to rely on God’s grace to carry us. We forget that He expects us to do our part. “God knows that I have so many appointments this week, so I’m sure that He’ll be fine with me praying while I’m driving to work and listening to praise music.” We seem to forget that it is in the intimate, uninterrupted times with the Lord that He can reach into those dark, protected areas of our hearts and set us free. There is simply no substitute for our personal devotion time with Him where we pour our hearts out to Him and wait in his presence for the touch we need. Bible reading, worshiping Him in song, and waiting on Him gives us the answers and strength we need for the battle (*Isaiah 40:31*).

Personal repentance and accountability are just as important. It’s easy to confess our sins or desires to God and take advantage of His grace, but it’s much more difficult to confess to someone who will look us in the eye the next time we see him and ask, “How’s it going?” Those of us with accountability partners always know what that means. One time I was struggling with thoughts and knew that I was in a vulnerable spot and the Lord told me to go to my accountability partner for prayer. “No, Lord, please... I’ve talked to him so many times in the last few months I feel like an idiot. I don’t want to tell him the same stinking things again.” Even though I knew the Lord was asking me if I wanted the thoughts to continue or be broken, I just didn’t want to talk about it any more. I was willing to embrace

the silence and keep the battle going. I was still arguing with the Lord as I was walking down the hallway towards my accountability partner's office just hoping that he would be gone or in a meeting. That way I could feel justified in holding on to my struggle. God had mercy. His door was wide open, he was sitting at his desk facing the door, and let out a loud, "Hi, Dan," as I walked by. It was hard to keep arguing with the Lord after that. I shared my heart with him, received prayer, and found victory in that season. Repentance and confession are both processes that bring life. They are a critical part of our relapse prevention.

Getting our minds off of ourselves by serving others, and attending church regularly are also important parts of our journey; (*Hebrews 10:24-25*) however, there is no more important part of our Christian lives than maintaining our relationship with Jesus Christ. When we find ourselves doing our "mourning obligations" rather than our morning devotions, or we find ourselves too busy "praying" to share our hearts with the Lord it's time for a change. Mechanical Christianity brings boredom and makes us weak. Opening our hearts to a living Savior makes us strong. We all need times of separation from our routines. Fasting and realignment with God helps us stay focused and alive in Him. I have a friend who has said to me many times, "God is far more interested in you, than He is in your ministry." Nothing is more important than our time and relationship with Jesus Christ (*Luke 10:38-42*).

The Recovery Aspects – The recovery aspects of relapse prevention are just as important six years after the program as they are in the middle of it. We must never forget that we are vulnerable (*1 Corinthians 10:9-14*). I often tell people that our struggle with sin can move from a place where it is no longer debilitating, but under our feet through the power of Jesus Christ; however, we must always keep our foot down. We will always need to maintain our emotional and physical boundaries to keep us away from the people and places that can cause us to stumble – or bring us back into those memories of our days of sin. I was on a bus riding back from an out of state men's event one time when the guys began giving their testimonies. The problem was that it quickly shifted from declaring the glorious things God had done in their lives to strolls down memory lane reliving the pleasures of their sinful past. When we find ourselves desiring the pleasures of sin, we must quickly reset our boundaries, find our accountability partners, and get prayer. There is a reason if we are still drawn to specific encounters and incidents in our lives. Those are the ones we must seek help for and ask the Lord to reveal the "bait" hidden in those memories.

Many of the recovery aspects are simply mechanical. *Every Man's Battle* by Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker (Water Brook Press, 2000) provides some good advice on "bouncing the eyes" and "bouncing the thoughts". This simply means that when we're tempted to check someone out that we move our eyes somewhere safe. We don't need to know what the person walking down the store aisle looks like; we just need to know they are there so we don't bump into him/her. When our thoughts drift to fallen memories or desires, we just bounce our thoughts back where they belong. It takes work to develop this habit, but it avoids a lot of struggling later on down the road. *Falling Forward* by Craig Lockwood (Desert Stream Press, 2000) provides some very good insight on managing the addictive cycle and dealing with one's emotional triggers. As we realize that we are heading into a period of vulnerability, we can put an action plan into effect to call trusted others into our relapse prevention and get back on the right path. Many of the triggers can

be processed by implementing the next aspects of relapse prevention, the emotional aspects.

The Emotional Aspects – The emotional aspects of relapse prevention, also called the inner healing aspects, deal with some of the issues that fueled our struggle with addiction in the first place. Through Living Waters and other recovery programs, we learn not to bury our emotional pain, but to “own the pain” and allow it to come to the surface so we can bring it to Jesus Christ for healing. Although the intensity of our painful feelings should subside over time, I thank God that He wants to heal us on a deeper level as we progress in our walk with Him. The Lord seems to work in stages. At times we are in the valleys and desperately hanging onto Him for our strength. Other times we are on the mountaintop where His blessings never seem to end. He also brings us to plateau seasons where we learn to walk out the healing that He has brought us so far. Plateau seasons seem rather mundane. We face routine challenges and gain some basic victories. We become stronger as we see the fruits of our recovery playing out in our relationships and emotions, but we may also be tempted to lessen our focus on recovery. Relapse prevention means that we continue and maintain our spiritual walk, boundaries, accountability, and bouncing the eyes and thoughts even during the plateau seasons.

Through the years, I have always maintained an accountability or prayer partner. With my accountability partner, I can discuss my status with the spiritual and recovery aspects of my walk. I can receive help in the emotional aspects of my walk and the issues that may be increasing my vulnerability to the “self-medication” of the past. When my unhealed pain gets triggered, I can go to this person and ask him for help casting my burden on the Lord (*Galatians 6:1-2; Romans 12:15-16*). It is important that you have an accountability partner who can assist you with discipleship, talking about your victories and battles, and seeking help through prayer.

“Praying beyond the temptation” is an important ingredient in the emotional aspects of relapse prevention. We all have seasons when our temptation is higher than usual. It is during those seasons that we can confess our specific temptation to the Lord and ask Him what the root issue is that is causing us to be more vulnerable today than we were last week. Sometimes He will show us that we’ve let our boundaries down and have checked out everyone who came into our field of vision. Other times we may simply have not gotten enough sleep or personal care and it’s affecting our resistance to sin. There will also be times when we are being triggered and are defaulting back to our old sinful habits to avoid the emotional pain. We can then confess our struggle to the Lord and ask Him for the answer to our pain. The Lord is faithful to speak to our hearts and provide an answer that will solve our problems far better than our sinful escapes.

A few years ago I was battling some images of aggressive encounters. This was not my usual struggle and I felt rather condemned by them. Instead of going to my accountability partner for help, I tried to fight the thoughts on my own with little success. After battling the thoughts for about two weeks I finally had enough. I asked the Lord what the issue was and why I was fighting with these specific types of images. He began to show me that I was overwhelmed with the daily stress of trying to run the ministry, I was worried about some family issues that I was facing, and we were going through some financial challenges both personally and in the ministry. The root issue was my feeling overwhelmed and looking for someone else’s masculine strength to solve my problems for me. I was broken and repented for not bouncing my thoughts like I should have and asked the Lord for His

answer. He showed me that He would be my masculine strength to teach me how to deal with the stress. Once I carried my struggle to Jesus and received His answer, the images that I had battled for two weeks dissipated in about twenty minutes. Years later, it is still the image of God as my masculine strength to deal with the challenges of life that carries me through the tough times and helps me to keep my thoughts fixed on Him. This is how praying beyond the temptation helps in our recovery and in our relapse prevention.

If have been in recovery for a number of years and feel like keeping yourself pure just isn't as easy as it once was, remember the steps that you took to walk away from your struggle in the first place. Talk to someone on your church leadership team and let them know where you are at. Ask the Lord to bring you an accountability partner that can help you in your walk. Reconciliation Ministries also provides individual pastoral care for those who find themselves in need of a "recovery tune-up". Call 586.739.5114 to schedule an appointment and get yourself back on the right track. Help is available.

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