

Mindfulness: A Tool for Substance Use Disorder Recovery

Mindfulness can decrease the chance of substance use disorder relapse.

The No. 1 reason people use drugs and alcohol is to relax and to de-stress. Stress is also the No. 1 relapse trigger for those recovering from an addiction.

Here is why:

Life causes stress.→A person uses a substance to cope with stress and becomes addicted.→Her addiction causes problems.→She quits using the substance.→Life and recovery cause stress.→She uses a substance to de-stress..

We usually run “on autopilot,” not thinking about what we are doing. We rely on habits to make decisions. We do what we have done before even when it is not the best thing to do. What we need to do is stop the cycle and find other ways to cope with stress. Mindfulness can help.

About mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of being aware of the moment without judging. Mindfulness practices are actions that help us simply slow down and notice what is going on right now. They can give us time to consider our actions and choose our best response rather than reacting on autopilot.

Mindfulness can help relieve stress before it becomes a problem. Mindfulness practices have been scientifically proven to decrease stress and anxiety. This is true for everyone, not only those who deal with addiction.

Mindfulness techniques to try

Meditation is the most common activity. A basic meditation practice is sitting quietly and trying to quiet the mind. Thoughts and feelings might come up, but in meditation you simply notice them rather than react to them or judge them.

Other calm activities work, too. Examples are tai chi, yoga, walking, or biking. Over time, keeping a journal or diary can help you de-stress and think through your feelings and experiences.

Mindfulness practices can be used as you go through your day. Some useful on-the-go actions are breathing exercises, counting down from 10 to 1, or doing a quick mental scan of your body. Notice yourself, your environment, and the people around you before you move on.

Dealing with strong emotions

Strong emotions are relapse triggers. Emotions can feel too intense and uncomfortable. Many people who use substances use them to cover up strong emotions. Using helps them ignore the emotion or situations causing the emotions. This leads to problems that cause more stress.

A mindful reaction to a strong emotion is to focus on the present moment. Break out of autopilot and become aware of the present. Slow down and notice what you feel, before you react. Breathing exercises or counting backward can be useful for this.

Try not to judge your emotions. Take Erik, for example, who tends to be very negative. When he practices mindfulness he is able to examine his feelings. He asks, “What am I feeling? Will using drugs improve the situation? Is there a better course of action?”

People you used drugs with or situations and settings where you used can trigger the urge to use again. This is why experts say to avoid them. But this is not always possible. The situation may be at work. The people may be your relatives. The place may be your own home.



Relapse happens when you are unsure about your feelings or actions. You may want to use out of habit. You may think you can use just once. This is a big risk for people who are feeling better. It may also cause strong emotions and negative judgments. You may feel out of place or angry. You may even feel happy and want to celebrate. These feelings increase cravings. Mindfulness practices slow us down. They give us a chance to think about our response and any potential consequences before we react on autopilot.

Acceptance is a big part of substance use disorder recovery. When we are mindful, we notice without judging. We try to accept things we cannot control or change. This helps us make more logical decisions. Judging the present moment clouds that logic. It is not a problem-solving action.

Seeking professional help

Doctors and therapists use mindfulness in many types of therapy. Some examples are mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP) is a method used specifically with substance use disorder recovery. Another method used for substance use disorder recovery is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).
