



Getting
BACK ON THE
horse...



People waging a weight-loss campaign are understandably fearful of lapses in behaviour. However, these are normal road-blocks on the path to achieving any goal successfully and maintaining healthy habits, says Dr Alice Boyes

Imagine this scenario: Amanda is overweight and has been trying to tackle this by eating a sensible diet and exercising regularly. Last Friday, there was an office shout for someone's birthday. Amanda treated herself to a piece of cake and then went back for a second slice later in the afternoon. Afterwards, she experienced a flood of bad memories about all those previous weight-loss attempts that had started well, but just got too hard. She began to see all her hard work unraveling in front of her. She now feels out of control, angry, ashamed and anxious, and has doubts about whether she'll be able to get back on track.

Such a reaction is common when people experience this kind of lapse or minor slip-up. So, what strategies can we use to prevent lapses from turning into relapses or sustained returns to old patterns?

THREE STEPS FOR SUCCESSFULLY DEALING WITH A LAPSE

When you experience a lapse related to an eating or exercise plan, whether it will have significant consequences is likely to be more related to how you deal with it than to the lapse itself. Success on this front consists of three main components:

- 1) Acknowledging the lapse is occurring.
- 2) Minimising the extent of the lapse.
- 3) Problem-solving to lessen the likelihood of the same kind of lapse happening again in the future.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledging that a lapse is occurring is a straightforward process. Just think "I'm having a lapse", and recognise that during that moment and immediately afterwards, you're going to be vulnerable to impulsive decision-making.

Harm minimisation

Psychologists use the term 'The Abstinence Violation Effect' to describe what occurs when someone breaks a self-imposed rule. It's colloquially known as the 'Oh, Bugger It Effect' – that reaction when you think you've already blown it, so you may as well blow it bigger! For example: "I over-ate, so I may as well eat whatever I feel like the rest of the day and skip my usual exercise". This is the 'I'll start again tomorrow/on Monday' approach.

The second important aspect of the Abstinence Violation Effect is that your next reaction to a lapse is usually to vow never to do it again. The not-so-

obvious psychological implication of this process is that it relieves some of the negative emotions you feel about having broken your rules. However, in reality it does nothing to prevent the lapse from happening again, because no real problem-solving was undertaken. We're going to cover problem-solving further on, but let's look at how to prevent the Abstinence Violation Effect overall.

1 CHOOSE SENSIBLE PLANS THAT ARE NOT OVERLY RESTRICTIVE IN THE FIRST PLACE

One suggestion that I love, when you're starting diet or exercise plans, is to choose two options: Your Plan A and a backup plan for if the first one isn't working out for you. Both these plans should be realistic and reasonable, and something you can feel confident and positive about. The idea comes from *The Beck Diet Solution*, a book written by psychologist Dr Judith Beck. If deciding on two reasonable plans sounds like a lot of work, remind yourself about why your goal is important to you.

2 WHEN A LAPSE HAPPENS, PUT A TEMPORARY STOP ON YOUR DECISION-MAKING

When you know you're having a lapse, delay any further decision-making. Let's say Amanda acknowledged she was having a lapse in the middle of eating the second slice of cake. At that point, she should have put off any decisions about whether she wanted to eat the rest of the slice.

3 REPLACE UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS WITH BALANCED THOUGHTS

One sort of unhelpful thinking is catastrophising in response to a lapse. This comes about when you predict that the transgression will inevitably lead to a full relapse. In other words, you end up making pessimistic predictions about the future.

Another common type of unhelpful thinking is fostering negative thoughts about yourself. These are ideas such as: "I have no self control" or "I'm a loser".

The solution to such unhelpful thinking is to replace those unhelpful thoughts with more balanced ones. After the first piece of cake, Amanda might've thought: "Food enjoyment and my health goals are both important to me. Right now, I'm mainly thinking about how good the cake tasted, so I need to remind myself why my health goals are important to me". If she didn't catch the lapse until after the second piece of cake, she might've thought: "I screwed up, but I'm going to feel super-good about myself if I get back on track".

Balanced thinking helps to reduce the negative emotions that accompany a lapse, such as anxiety or fear, shame, guilt and anger. It also helps to increase your confidence in your ability to achieve your long-term goals.

After a lapse, it's usually better to get back into your normal routine, rather than doing anything extreme. And sometimes you'll miss the first opportunities to turn things around. For example, Amanda might've felt so glum that she skipped her Friday night gym session and then

cancelled a planned weekend walk with a friend because she didn't want to talk to anyone. She might've avoided weighing herself as she normally would, due to fear of weight-gain. However, while it's certainly true that the earlier you get back on track the better, you should give yourself plenty of credit for interrupting the cycle at any point at all.

Problem-solving

After a lapse, try to understand why it happened. And there will often be multiple factors. Was part of the problem a 'food pusher', who encouraged you to eat something you hadn't planned to try? Were you under extra stress or were you extra tired? Had you grown bored with your food or exercise routine? Were you angry or lonely? Had you become over-hungry and therefore more vulnerable to over-eating? Was there any conflict at home or work in the last few days? Had you been having issues with physical pain that had worn down your resolve?

Once you've figured out what caused the problem, it's usually not too difficult to think of logical ways to reduce the chance of it happening again. After a lapse, people usually want to forget it and move on, and that's understandable because thinking about failure isn't pleasant. However, avoiding thinking about it is a trap – work on it first and then move on. For example, if a food pusher was involved, role-play with someone what you would've said to them if you could have the opportunity again. And whatever problem-solving ideas you come up with, they should be ones you feel confident will actually work for you.

Distinguishing between a lapse and a relapse

It's helpful to recognise the difference between a lapse and a sustained return to your old patterns, and to know how you plan to deal with each. What might be your personal signs of a relapse? For example, not exercising for two weeks, not weighing



yourself for a month, wearing clothing that hides your body, or eating in secret. What constitutes a lapse or a relapse for you is something that you need to assess for yourself.

If you miss dealing with lapses and are experiencing a relapse to old behaviours, what do you plan to do about it? Possible ideas include seeing a psychologist or personal trainer to address the issue of getting back on track; re-reading *The Beck Diet Solution*; or finding a way to use social support to help you, such as joining a sports team or initiating a weekly squash date with a friend.

The way I see it, a relapse is a sign that you need extra support. If you'd been able to solve the problem on your own, you probably would have done so when it was still at the level of a lapse. «



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