

Understanding Relapse

By Jean Kirkpatrick, Ph.D., WFS Founder

At a recent workshop we discussed a 'slip' versus relapse and I mentioned how much I dislike the use of the word 'slip'. The connotation, for me, seems to be just some merry little-ole vacation from sobriety, kind of a no real value attached. *"Whoops, I slipped!"*

Almost all agreed that this word is a very poor choice of a word for something so serious and a better word was suggested – lapse. This better describes the serious condition we are talking about and trying to deal with. And RELAPSE indicates a condition of a much longer duration.

The most interesting part of the discussion came from the observation that most of the lapses occurred when the alcoholic woman doubted that she was an alcoholic and then 'tested' to see if it were really true. And, sadly enough for her, she discovered not only was it true, but she had put a blotch on her record of sobriety, to say nothing of a hangover and overwhelming remorse and guilt.

But the real question is – why do we lapse? More seriously, why do we relapse for longer periods of time?

Surely it happens when we are back into our negative feelings about ourselves, which have thrown us back into self-destructive behavior. When we have an emotional upset that we can't handle, we get back into the "What's the use" feeling and, for us, that is devastating unless we have taught ourselves how to combat disappointments and emotional upsets.

But something more happens, and it is when we feel deprived. Over and over again in our discussion, I heard that word used... "I felt deprived."

I suppose to that we can also add, "I felt rejected" or "I was left out" or "I was not included."

These feelings of not being appreciated or not being included seem to follow us into recovery but, obviously, they are feelings that we must begin to deal with at a very early point in our sobriety or we will be right back again, back into the soup... so to speak!

These are very negative feelings that are hard to overcome, since they are feelings we have probably experienced all of our lifetime. Breaking that pattern is tough. No matter how much we tell ourselves that we won't be affected or thrown by rejection or by our feelings of deprivation, we still react to them.

Obviously, the way to not feeling deprived is to put into play a counter action... if that is the only solution that works for us.

Concentrate on how far you have come, that you have achieved much in a short time and that your feeling of being deprived is something to battle in every way you can. Sometimes something as materialistic as buying something for ourselves can help rather than buying a bottle.

When we lapse, we are leaving ourselves to slip back into self-destructive behavior. When this turns into a relapse... a time of more than a one-time lapse... we have lost ourselves to those endless days and nights of alcoholic drinking.

The important thing is to remember that no matter what happens, it can be changed by your stopping drinking. It is also important to remember that the smallest amount we drink is the

easiest to 'fix'. If you should lapse, seek out your group at once. The best remedy to feelings of being deprived is to seek out group members the moment those feelings begin, **before** the lapse.

Getting help EARLY is the answer to getting back into the stream of recovery. Too often we feel ashamed and guilty, not wanting to go back to group because we feel disgraced. Not to go back is the worst of the two.

Sobriety is a wonderful time to get to know ourselves, to see what we react to and how our reactions devastated us in the past. To know the negative of ourselves is the first step in changing. My early sobriety was a great time for me in learning so much about myself... what brought out the worst in me and what made me feel depressed and unloved. It also taught me the signals to watch for. You, too, can learn these and never resort to a time of lapse or relapse. ☞ [October 1987]

(This article is from *The Collection of Sobering Thoughts Booklet*, Volume 12 and copyrighted by Women for Sobriety, Inc., PO Box 618, Quakertown, PA 18951.)

Comments from Cathy (Hamilton, Ontario Canada group):

I chose this article of Jean's, "Understanding Relapse" because that is a road I do not want to travel again. You see, after 10 ½ years of sobriety I lapsed, which in time led to a full blown relapse.

I can really relate to Jean's words, "*The alcoholic woman doubted that she was alcoholic and then 'tested' to see if it were really true. And, sadly enough for her, she discovered not only was it true, but she had put a blotch on her record of sobriety.*"

I can honestly say that during that sobriety, I never thought that I would entertain the thought to drink again; but, I did, so the question is WHY? I know I was very ashamed of being an alcoholic and was so afraid that people would find out. Only my family and a few others knew. I did not want to be an alcoholic.

Perhaps it was something someone told me just before I entered rehab in August of 1987, "There are some people, who after years of sobriety can drink again, responsibly." I know I held on to that thought, even today I can still envision the conversation. However, I know now, how wrong that was. Jean writes that we relapse "when we feel deprived." "I felt rejected," "I was left out," or "I was not included." I did not know how to socialize without the aid of alcohol, so when I quit drinking I definitely felt all those things.

My first lapse was at a party. I was very cautious, felt terribly guilty and afraid. It was almost a year before I tempted fate again. I mean, after all those months had gone by so maybe I was 'cured'... I could control my drinking? And, thus began a 2 year relapse. Jean describes my relapse when she writes, "*We have lost ourselves to those endless days and nights of alcoholic drinking.*"

I am so grateful to have found WFS. The "New Life" Program has given back 3 ½ years of sobriety. Jean writes, "*The important thing is to remember that no matter what happens, it can be changed by our stopping drinking.*"

I cherish my new sobriety and do not take it for granted. I cherish my new life and guard my sobriety very carefully. Today I will tell anyone who will listen that I am a recovered alcoholic; it no longer is my dirty little secret, but rather something I am very proud of. Without my WFS group, I may never have found my way back.

Thank you, ladies. And yes, you can have a great social life without the bottle... one filled with joy, a clear mind and no regrets. ☞ [October 2004]

Comments from Chantel "SlightlyOff":

When I signed up to write about Jean's article "Understanding Relapse" it was early to mid-November. I didn't know then that the next several weeks would set me up to really test my ability to avoid relapse. Nothing catastrophic happened; however, the holiday stress hit me hard and I had various forms of emotional upset and then I had the flu twice for which my doctor gave me prednisone (which I did not realize can cause depression!). I went through a depressive cycle and just day to day life was challenging me. Old thoughts of wanting to just "turn off" or "numb out" started coming up. Fleeting thoughts about having a drink came more frequently and became less fleeting. I was riding through Red Flag Central. We will all go through times like this (and even worse, I'm sure), so we have to understand how and why and when we are standing on that slippery slope toward relapse. It can happen in the first few hours or days or weeks or months or years. Nobody is immune to periods of time where the urge to go back to drinking can rear its head. A week sober or 20 years sober, we all have to remain vigilant and know what to do when those voices come whispering (or screaming) in our ears.

Jean's article starts off by talking about how people often use the phrase "I slipped" when referring to a relapse. Jean is against this terminology because to her it implies "a merry ole vacation from sobriety", lessening the value and seriousness of what a return to drinking truly means. People slip on the ice, or slip in the shower - those are accidents. Alcoholics don't

accidentally slip on a bottle of booze and accidentally ingest it. Although on the surface it may seem like a spur of the moment occurrence, it is when we look deeper that we can see all kinds of red flags were going off to warn us of what was coming. Learning to look for, recognize and then take action upon those red flags is how we can avoid a relapse.

So what are these “red flags” we need to be looking for? We all have our personal specific ones (like dealing with particular people or places or events or seasons or smells or thoughts, etc.), but there are general red flags that we all will face. Recognizing them for what they are is the absolute KEY to squelching these dangerous moments. Once we recognize them, we can get to work changing them. Jean speaks of one of the most common red flags that can lead us into a relapse. The oh-so-common idea of *“I must not truly be an alcoholic, I haven’t drank in a long time now, I must be ok to drink normally now, I’ve been cured, I just needed a little break.”* Then we have to do a little test on this most excellent theory we’ve come up with. And that little test inevitably flings us right back into our addictive drinking cycle. I have never heard any alcoholic person anywhere say that they had successfully overcome their addiction and can now drink moderately and live healthily and happily. Have you? Lord knows we have all tried our darndest to make that our truth. But it isn’t our truth and it will never be our truth. Full acceptance of your addiction will free you from toying with this notion. It will simply take the option off the table; it will no longer be a consideration NO MATTER WHAT. So if you find yourself going through this thought process, focus yourself on **Statement #1, “I have a life-threatening problem that once had me.” I now take charge of my life and my disease. I accept the responsibility.** (ACCEPT THE RESPONSIBILITY)

Another red flag we should be very aware of is when we start thinking negatively about ourselves. This is a very deeply rooted thinking pattern that most of us have to try very hard to change and not keep slipping back into. When we start thinking negatively about ourselves, we quickly revert back to self-destructive behaviors. Sometimes we may immediately return to drinking if this happens. Sometimes other self-destructive behaviors will precede the drinking, like overeating or spending money frivolously or smoking a lot more than usual (or starting up smoking) or sexual deviance. We may also start going around the old people or places we used to frequent in our using days. Often telling ourselves *“I can handle going there now, I haven’t drank in _____ days/weeks”* or *“I’m so lonely, I need to see my old pals.”* All of these behaviors are huge red flags if you find yourself thinking or doing any of these things. Ideally, the goal is to catch yourself at the very beginning of this cycle when the negative thinking first begins. Using the statements can help us to notice our negative thoughts and turn them around to positives. You often hear ladies around here suggesting that we replace one negative thought with 2 or 3 positive ones. This is a good practice to get your thinking into a new pattern. Pay close attention to your thoughts (particularly about yourself) throughout the day. When you hear those negative voices saying things like *“You aren’t smart or capable or pretty or creative or funny oretc. etc.”* use **Statement #2, “Negative thoughts destroy only myself.” My first conscious sober act must be to remove negativity from my life.** And **Statement #5, “I am what I think.” I am a capable, competent, caring, compassionate woman.** Our thoughts are directly related to our reality. Our thoughts become things. If we stew in negative thoughts, we will continue to live in a negative and self-destructive cycle. It is imperative that we spend time and effort and energy re-wiring our brains to think positively. Statements #12 and #13 are also very helpful statements when working on changing negative thinking: **Statement #12, “I am a competent woman and have much to give life.” This is what I am and I shall know it always.** **Statement #13, “I am responsible for myself and for my actions.” I am in charge of my mind, my thoughts, and my life.**

General stress is also often a trigger for relapse. Sobriety doesn’t guarantee there won’t be stress in your life. Life still goes on, and things will come up to create stress and upset. However, in using this program, and consciously growing and changing in our recovery, we begin to acquire tools we can use to cope with stress and hardship without turning back to drinking. Taking a look at **Statement #4** is very helpful with this type of relapse red flag, **“Problems bother me only to the degree I permit them to.” I now better understand my problems and do not permit problems to overwhelm me.** This statement reminds us that by taking a realistic (sober) look at our problems in life, we can begin to understand why those problems exist for us. And, therefore, begin to understand how we can solve those problems instead of just becoming overwhelmed by them (and turning to drinking). Often times our problems exist purely because of drinking. Some problems will go away with sobriety. But many will not. And many problems we created due to drinking will need to be overcome as well. These are opportunities to really grow our sobriety muscles. Overcoming difficult times in life by using new coping skills is very empowering. And every time we can do so, our sobriety becomes that much more solid. Again, we can shift our outlook when a stressful time comes upon us. Instead of thinking *“Oh no, I can’t believe this is happening to me! How can I deal with this?? I need a drink, this is awful!”* we can think *“Ok, this is where I grow stronger. This is where I learn how strong I can be. This is when I put my new knowledge to work. This is where I regain my power.”*

Another very prevalent red flag (particularly in early sobriety) is a feeling of being “deprived”. We’ve all felt that emotion of *“It’s not fair”* or *“Why me”* or *“I don’t get to have any fun or reward or enjoyment.”* We feel like we are depriving ourselves of *“the one thing that made me feel good”*. Jean explains that beyond this sense of deprivation, we can also include notions of feeling rejected or left out or unappreciated. Jean stresses the importance of dealing with these feelings head on and early on, *“These are very negative feelings that are hard to overcome, since they are feelings we have probably experienced all of our lifetime. Breaking that pattern is tough.”*

BUT IT CAN BE DONE!

We must shift our focus from all that we have done wrong (the drinking, addiction, poor and dangerous behavior, loss of relationships, etc.) and focus what we are NOW doing RIGHT. Even if you are only a few hours or days or weeks sober, you must acknowledge what you have already achieved. Focus on that instead. The most effective statement for letting go of bad feelings about ourselves is **Statement #9, "The past is gone forever." No longer will I be victimized by the past. I am a new person.** Realize that by dwelling on mistakes of the past, you are allowing yourself to be repeatedly punished and victimized. We must let go of that habit in order to heal and move forward. We can also do nice things for ourselves to reward ourselves for staying sober. Buying ourselves a little trinket or a new book can be a nice material reward. We can also reward ourselves with important self-care, like taking a long bath or joining a gym or taking a walk or starting a new hobby (or returning to an old one). We must shift our perception from sobriety being a punishment (or deprivation) to sobriety being a gift - a reward in and of itself! If you are having trouble doing that, make a list of all the positive things drinking is doing for you and your life. Then make a list of positives of how sobriety is affecting you and your life. That's usually a good perception changer. Also, take a look at **Statement #3, "Happiness is a habit I will develop." Happiness is created, not waited for.** As well as **Statement #6, "Life can be ordinary or it can be great." Greatness is mine by a conscious effort.** And also **Statement #11, "Enthusiasm is my daily exercise." I treasure all moments of my new life.** Notice each of these statements emphasis an action needing to be taken on our part: *"Happiness is CREATED, Greatness is mine by CONSCIOUS EFFORT, and Enthusiasm is my daily EXERCISE"*. Read the statements; understand what they're saying and then take the suggested action in order to make those changes needed to live a joyful sober life.

In the early days, we are still usually feeling very bad about ourselves; but, it's imperative that we start changing that around very quickly. Jean states, *"...these are feelings that we must begin to deal with at a very early point in our sobriety or we will be right back again, back into the soup...so to speak!"* Another very important point Jean stresses that we always remember is that no matter what happens, it can be changed and improved by stopping drinking. Just start by stopping drinking. If we relapse, we often feel we have failed not only ourselves but those who are helping us and want us so badly to stay sober. But the most important thing we can do is reach out as quickly as possible for that support again, the sooner the better and the shorter the relapse. Sadly, we often are so steeped in feelings of shame and failure that we do the opposite and we isolate ourselves. We are embarrassed and also don't want to disappoint those who are supporting us. When we do that, we will keep drinking and spiral further and further downward. It can be hard for us to accept love and support from others. It can be hard to feel like we truly deserve love and support. Jean has a couple of statements for this feeling as well, **Statement #7, "Love can change the course of my world." Caring becomes all important.** And also **Statement #10, "All love given returns." I will learn to know that others love me.** (And they do, they really do.)

All of the ideas suggested here are things I did to get through my recent period of vulnerability. I have to say the most important thing I did was reach out to various women online and let them know what I was thinking and feeling. I also confided in my husband that I was having intense urges. That was one of the first things I did; and, by doing that, I not only gained love and support, it really took a lot of the power away from those urges. Our addictive mind doesn't want us reach out for love and support. It wants to keep us isolated and alone. Our addiction is an abuser to us. When we pull others in to help us, that abuser gets called out for what it is. So if you find yourself steering towards taking a drink, the best first thing you can do is reach out for help. Call a friend who knows what you're going through, come to the WFS message boards or online chats, go to a WFS meeting, go to any addiction meeting, call a counselor. Just reach out. Then start working with the statements as Jean intended to get your thoughts and your spirit back on track. The sooner you notice that red flag and turn it around, the easier it will be.

I'll end with the last paragraph of Jean's article:

"Sobriety is a wonderful time to get to know ourselves, to see what we react to and how our reactions devastated us in the past. To know the negative of ourselves is the first step in changing. My early sobriety was a great time for me in learning so much about myself...what brought out the worst in me and what made me feel depressed and unloved. It also taught me the signals to watch for. You, too, can learn these and never resort to a time of lapse or relapse." ☞ [January 2013]

Comments from Lily "lily_of_the_valley07":

I feel like I should preface this post by saying if you prefer not to go to a male doctor because you doubt he really knows what he's talking about not being a woman and all, then you might want to skip my post. I quit drinking on May 14, 2007. I know the exact date because I was in outpatient therapy at the time and was keeping detailed records of everything I drank, ate, thought, did, dreamed, loved, hated, feared, you name it. Since then, I haven't relapsed and I haven't slipped either. Still, I hope you will stick around and give me a chance to talk about the article "Understanding Relapse" because I do feel qualified to discuss this topic.

In "Understanding Relapse", Jean describes a phenomenon with which most of us are intimately familiar, namely: *"...most of the lapses occurred when the alcoholic woman doubted that she was an alcoholic and then 'tested' to see if it were really true. And sadly enough for her, she discovered not only was it true, but she had put a blotch on her record of sobriety, to say nothing of a hangover and overwhelming remorse and guilt."*

The first time I read that, I was reminded of the following scene in the screwball comedy “Raising Arizona” (1987) in which Nicholas Cage’s character, H.I. McDunnough, has been called up for a parole hearing after his latest stretch of jail time for robbery:

Parole Board Member #1: They’ve got a name for people like you, H.I. That name is called “recidivism.”

Parole Board Member #2: Re-peat offender!

Parole Board Member #1: Not a pretty name, is it H.I.?

H.I. McDunnough: No sir. That’s one bonehead name, but that ain’t me anymore.

Parole Board Member #1: You’re not just telling us what we want to hear?

H.I. McDunnough: No sir, no way.

Parole Board Member #2: ‘Cause we just want to hear the truth.

H.I. McDunnough: Well, then I guess I am telling you what you want to hear.

Parole Board Member #1: Boy, didn’t we just tell you not to do that?

H.I. McDunnough: Yes, sir.

Parole Board Member #1: Okay, then.

That was how I felt whenever I furtively went through one of those “Are You an Alcoholic?” checklists, or sat there anxiously contemplating what my “problem” was.

“They’ve got a name for people like you, Lily. That name is called ‘alcoholism’.”

“Al-co-holic!”

“Not a pretty name, is it Lily?”

“No sir. That’s one bonehead name, but that ain’t me.”

“You’re not just telling us what we want to hear?”

“No sir, no way.”

“‘Cause we just want to hear the truth.”

“Then I guess I am just telling you what you want to hear.”

“Girl, didn’t we just tell you not to do that?!”

Let’s look at the first part of what Jean wrote in the article, the testing part. If you hadn’t decided you were officially quitting drinking, do you remember swearing you were never going to drink (or at least drink like *that*) again? Or that you were seriously going to do something about *this* – whatever *this* was – because drinking = not good? I know I did – off and on for two decades. There was no “record of sobriety” to blotch; everything was still purely in the testing stages. Some elevators have a “-1” button. I think of this phase “Level -1.”

Next let’s look at the second to last part, the hangover. Hangovers are the strangest things. Preparing for this Series, I went back and read some old life journals, specifically from 2000 - 2001. I had just turned 30. The number of times an entry started out with some variation on “*omg I’m so hung-over*” is staggering. As is the number of times I mention waiting out the worst of it in order to be able to start drinking again, or being bummed about not being able to start drinking again due to whatever physical and/or mental distress was involved. They can certainly be the catalyst to deciding once and for all to take your life-threatening problem seriously, but a fear and loathing of hangovers alone isn’t enough to act as a long-term deterrent. They don’t belong in your new life toolbox as an effective means for making real, lasting changes. It just doesn’t work that way. Aversion therapy is an outdated approach to treating alcohol addiction.

Now what about the last part, the overwhelming remorse and guilt? Much like a hangover, these feelings have a surprisingly short half-life. We do all sorts of things to try to turn “overwhelming” into bearable. In fact, the more practice we have, the quicker the ebb, and we don’t even realize how thick the layer of guilt and remorse covering our entire lives has become. Until we decide we’ve had enough and are ready to leave it behind. It can be done; but, it’s going to take time (and it could get messy).

Did you read *Tulipe’s* contribution to these comments? I played “Annie” for a while before I woke up one day miserably hung-over and realized I wanted to retire from that role and be “Betty” instead. Why the change of heart? Because I couldn’t deal with playing Annie anymore and I couldn’t deal with drinking anymore, either. Which left me with two choices: either end it all or choose sobriety for me. Contemplating no longer being around made me want sobriety for me very badly. Something else suddenly became clear to me: this would require outside help. Real help. No more testing, no more bargaining. It took intensive outpatient therapy (non-12 step-based) to move up from Level 1.

Incidentally, yesterday (February 1st) was a very special day for me: it was February 1st, 2007, when I received a message from the rehab facility that my intake forms had been processed and my assigned counsellor would be in touch within three days. The new life ball was rolling!

Moving onto the next part of the article, Jean asks: “More seriously, why do we relapse for longer periods of time? Surely it happens when we are back into our negative feelings about ourselves, which have thrown us back into self-destructive behavior.

When we have an emotional upset that we can't handle, we get back into the 'What's the use' feeling and, for us that is devastating unless we have taught ourselves how to combat disappointments and emotional upsets."

It's the **"for us"** that is crucial to understanding relapse. Us = women who know and accept that we have a life-threatening problem that once had us. The testing part is over. It may have taken a lot of experimentation, a lot of 'backing and forthing', an accident in private or a public humiliation, but whatever the case may be: we've moved up from Level 1. And contrary to what this article may lead you to believe, you don't have to go with the "alcoholic woman" label. Personally, "woman with a life-threatening problem" worked better for me. "Alcoholic" was clouded by external input and confusing, conflicting definitions; "life-threatening problem" was not.

"Sobriety is a wonderful time to get to know ourselves, to see what we react to and how our reactions devastated us in the past," Jean writes. In doing so, I quickly filled up a notebook. I remembered how a friend and I loaded up his car with pot and booze and headed to his family's lake house when the Gulf War began in early 1991. And, how a decade later, I responded to the news that my only sister had been hospitalized due to pregnancy complications by creating my own personal drug-related complications. Then there was the stretch of days in 2005 when I spent each night glued to the television, drink in hand, sobbing soundlessly watching the coverage of Hurricane Katrina, seven time zones away. And the next year, when I was trying the hardest I'd ever tried to moderate successfully, falling apart high in the Andes after seeing a horse left to die on the side of the road. I think it's safe to say that I know what I react to and how my reactions devastated me in the past.

One of the earliest exercises I did on my own was to list as many possible personal relapse scenarios or potentially impossible to handle emotional upsets that I could think of. **The past is gone forever**, so there's no use regretting not enlisting my outpatient counsellor's help in doing this exercise. It would have been nice, though, because it was kind of horrifying! The list started with everything from being the victim of a violent crime to contracting some kind of terminal disease and expanded to include all of that, only now with a loved one on the receiving end. Next came witnessing something terrible happen to a stranger or an animal...followed by a long list of manmade and natural disasters, different types of terrorist attacks, extreme weather, and so forth.

I realized then and there that I had reached an important new life crossroads: I could focus more on the "But what if..." or more on what *Puterduh* referred to as "Nowsville." You can only prepare for so much, right? But you can drive yourself crazy imagining the worst case scenarios. What if...I take Statement #4 and decide that problems = life? And, so, drinking = permitting life to overwhelm me? What if...I take Statement #13 and decide to do my best to protect my sobriety and set aside the ever-growing list of nightmare scenarios largely beyond my control ("*and what about my dad's intermittent forgetfulness?! What if that's really early dementia?!*"), and direct the bulk of my effort toward teaching myself how to combat emotional upsets? Much more positive and realistic.

"To know the negative of ourselves is the first step in changing," Jean tells us. "My early sobriety was a great time for me in learning so much about myself...what brought out the worst in me and what made me feel depressed and unloved." Mine was, too. **Is**. I still consider myself in early sobriety. Stuff like dining out and travelling, going to shows, celebrating, relaxing, none of that fazes me anymore as a woman with a LTP (Life-Threatening Problem) that once had her, it's second nature after tons of practice. Stuff like work hassles and neighbor conflicts, likewise, no longer triggers any urge to drink. The other stuff, the "what made me feel depressed and unloved," is still emerging and being dealt with, but the desire to drink is gone. I have "thought through the drink" so many times that I can't conjure memories of drinking that make me miss it.

"[My early sobriety] also taught me the signals to watch for," Jean writes. "You, too, can learn these and never resort to a time of lapse or relapse." This takes time, energy and, in some cases, money. I have invested a lot of time and energy and, in some cases, a lot of money on this part of the process. Intensive outpatient therapy, two different nutritionists, two different acupuncturists, a naturopath, regular body work in the form of massage, gym membership, tai chi lessons, a mindfulness workshop, couples counselling...and it was all time and effort and money well spent.

Speaking of which, perhaps one thing missing from this article, which Jean does address in other materials, is the relationship between what you do to your body after you quit drinking and slipping / relapsing. Something I'm still getting the hang of is the mood-food connection.

Questions to explore (please feel free to share your responses to one or more of these):

- **Have you stopped testing to see whether some mythical drinking re-set button has been activated? If so, what prompted you to stop? If not, what's holding you back?**
- **What are some ways you have taught yourself to combat disappointments and emotional upsets?**
- **What type of counter actions do you use to avoid feeling deprived or alienated?**
- **What are some signals you have learned to watch for and how do you cope?**

In "Understanding Relapse", there's one slip/relapse scenario that Jean doesn't specifically address; namely the one in which you decide to quit – not test drive sobriety, but actually quit – and end up deciding that feeling good, feeling in control, calls for a drink or two, and so you slip/relapse that way. This form of lapse/relapse can be condensed into a kind of Mad Lib:

"I made a decision to quit drinking on [date 1] because [insert whichever variation on "*I was disgusted with myself*" applies]. I was doing fairly well, until [insert date 2 and/or event that inspired the choice to start drinking again] and I thought I had

everything under control. I decided I would have [insert quantity] of [insert alcoholic drink of choice]. I [insert whichever variation on “*did okay with drinking*” explanation applies], but it didn’t last. Eventually I ended up [insert whichever variation on “*drinking with negative consequences*” applies]. I figured out that I couldn’t drink like this.”

What happens between “I decided to quit drinking” to “I was doing so good I figured I could have a drink or two”? On second thought, Jean seems to have covered this in the article, too. Most likely it’s either a matter of not being able to be entirely honest with yourself (you are still in the Level 1 testing phase) or things really weren’t going that well: you weren’t feeling so hot, but it was too unpleasant to face let alone reach out to your support group “the moment those feelings began, before the lapse.” Or a matter of cold feet; namely, quitting for real suddenly seemed too daunting, too lonely, where’s the fun in it?

Time to break out the 4C Lib! “I made a decision to quit drinking on [date 1] because [insert variation on “I was disgusted with myself” that applies]. I was doing fairly well, and I felt like I had everything under control. What a blissful change! I decided this called for [insert new life reward of choice].”

In the article, Jean presents the importance of rewards as a counter action to feeling deprived: “Concentrate on how far you have come, that you have achieved much in a short time and that your feeling of being deprived is something to battle in every way you can. Sometimes something as materialistic as buying something for ourselves can help rather than buying a bottle.”

I couldn’t agree more, and if the Mad Lib “feeling strong” scenario is what has been tripping you up, I would strongly encourage you to go that route. Feeling good and feeling in control is NOT something to question or battle; it’s something to celebrate!!

So you’re feeling strong and sobriety feels entirely manageable – rejoice! It doesn’t automatically mean you are headed for a relapse. In fact, it might mean that – gasp! – you’re taking good care of yourself, you’re getting the hang of “living and overcoming and triumphing.” Besides, there will undoubtedly come a time when things (life) gets heavy and difficult again so let’s hear it for the free ‘n easy stretches!

Honestly, a lot of damage has been done by the attitudes and information about relapse that have been taken as irrefutable truths by society at large. By creating WFS, Jean not only challenged some of the most commonly held narratives about relapse (not to mention addiction and recovery), she also encouraged us to do so. It gives me great pleasure to answer her call to “defy society” and challenge those narratives. Change them!

In closing, I would like to share something that anti-racism activist Tim Wise wrote: “*I know we aren’t to blame for history – either its horrors or the legacy it has left us. But we are responsible for how we bear that legacy, and what we make of it in the present... Guilt is what you feel for the things you have done, but responsibility is what you take because of the kind of person you are.*”

That, too, is how we prevent relapse, and low and behold it’s right there in Statement #1 and Statement #5 and Statement #9 and Statement #13.

Another question to explore: ***When it comes to understanding relapse, how are you challenging and/or changing the narrative?*** 🍷 [January 2013]