SENTIO UNIVERSITY

Abstinence Violation Effect Worksheet

Part 1. Right now

Item	Entry
Name	
Date of the lapse	
Today's date	
My counselor or therapist	

A lapse is a first use after a time of not using. I fill in this page first.

My safety steps

Include: a few words for each step that fits me, and "not needed" for any step that does not.

Step	Done, or not needed
I have stopped using and moved away from where I used.	
I have thrown out or handed over whatever was left.	
If I used opioids: my tolerance is likely lower, so my old amount can cause an overdose. I keep naloxone with me and tell someone where it is.	
If I have been drinking heavily for several days: I get medical advice before I stop or cut down, or today if I have already stopped, since stopping all at once can bring alcohol withdrawal.	
I have told someone I trust about the lapse, or I will today.	
I will contact my counselor or therapist by this date:	

If I am in crisis

In the United States or Canada, I call 911 if I am thinking about suicide, in crisis, or having an overdose or another medical emergency. Elsewhere, I call my local emergency number. The numbers I will use and my emergency contacts:

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Part 2. What happened

Where I was and what was going on

Include: the place, the time, who was there and what happened just before I used.

What I was feeling and thinking before I used

Include: feelings such as stress, loneliness, boredom or excitement, and the thoughts that came with them.

What I used, how much, and how it ended

Include: what I used, about how much, and when and how I stopped.

The urge before I used

How strong was the urge just before I used? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No urge										*The strongest urge I have had*

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Part 3. What I told myself afterward

What I told myself about the lapse

Include: the words in my head, such as "I've blown it," "I'll never be able to stop" or "I might as well keep going."

How I felt afterward

Include: feelings such as guilt, shame, anger or hopelessness, and how strong each one was from 0 to 10.

What the lapse means to me

How much do I believe the lapse means I have failed? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all										*Completely*

Getting back to my plan

How sure am I that I can get back to my plan? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not sure at all										*Completely sure*

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Part 4. Looking at the lapse again

A lapse often points to a situation I did not yet have a way to handle. Seeing it this way helps me learn from it and plan for next time.

What made this situation hard for me

Include: the feeling, person, place or time that made using more likely, and what I did not have a plan for yet.

Skills I can learn or practice for situations like this

Include: one or two coping skills, such as leaving early, calling someone or saying no, and when I will practice them.

What I will tell myself now

Include: a way of explaining the lapse that ties it to this situation and to skills I can learn, in my own words.

What the lapse means to me now

Now, how much do I believe the lapse means I have failed? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all										*Completely*

Getting back to my plan now

Now, how sure am I that I can get back to my plan? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not sure at all										*Completely sure*

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Part 5. My next steps

What I will do next

Include: one small, concrete step for each time.

When	What I will do
In the next hour	
Later today	
Tomorrow	
This week	
The next time I am in a situation like this	

People I will contact

Include: people who know my plan, how to reach them and when I will contact them.

Name	How to reach them	When

What I will bring to my next session

Include: anything on this worksheet I want to talk through, and changes to my relapse prevention plan.

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Clinician guide: using the abstinence violation effect worksheet

- **When it fits.** Use the worksheet in the hours and days after a lapse, and show it to the client before any lapse as part of the lapse plan. Marlatt and Gordon described the abstinence violation effect as a person's reaction to a first lapse after a period of abstinence, and a person who blames the lapse on personal failure is likely to feel guilt and other negative emotions that can lead to more use (Larimer et al., 1999).
- **Put safety first.** Go over Part 1 before anything else. A return to opioids after a period of abstinence carries a higher risk of overdose, because tolerance is likely to fall (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, n.d.), and naloxone can reverse an opioid overdose if it is given in time (World Health Organization, 2025). Stopping heavy drinking abruptly can bring alcohol withdrawal, which can progress to seizures and delirium tremens without treatment (Tiglao et al., 2021). Ask about thoughts of suicide as part of your usual assessment, and follow your setting's crisis protocol and medical protocols whenever a situation involves risk.
- **Listen for the explanation.** A client who explains a lapse by stable, global, internal causes beyond their control, such as a lack of willpower, is more likely to give up the goal than a client who explains it by not yet coping with one high-risk situation. A client who sees it that second way can learn from the lapse and find better ways to cope with similar situations (Larimer et al., 1999). In a study of 97 people interviewed 6 months after inpatient treatment, those who relapsed gave more stable and global explanations for their use than those who lapsed (Walton et al., 1994).
- **Rewrite together.** Help the client reframe the lapse as an error in learning tied to one situation to plan for (Larimer et al., 1999), then take the two ratings again. In a study of 203 smokers, a drop in self-efficacy after repeated lapses predicted a faster next lapse (Kirchner et al., 2012).
- **Plan the next steps.** Turn the rewrite into coping steps, rehearse one of them in session, and add the situation to the client's relapse prevention plan. Respond to every lapse calmly and without blame.

Based on Marlatt's description of the abstinence violation effect and lapse management in Larimer, Palmer and Marlatt (1999). The layout and wording are original.

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Completed example: Marisol (a fictional client)

Marisol, 39, is a dental office manager in outpatient counseling who stopped drinking 11 weeks ago. On a Saturday evening, after her sister canceled a visit, she bought a bottle of wine at the corner store and drank most of it at home. She filled in Parts 1 to 3 the next morning and finished the worksheet with her counselor, D.K., at her ninth session on November 17, 2026. Marisol, her counselor and every detail of the case are invented.

Part 1. Right now

Item	Entry
Name	Marisol
Date of the lapse	Saturday, November 14, 2026
Today's date	Sunday, November 15, 2026
My counselor or therapist	D.K., counselor

My safety steps

Step	Done, or not needed
I have stopped using and moved away from where I used.	Done. I stopped around 10 p.m. and went to bed.
I have thrown out or handed over whatever was left.	Done. I poured the rest down the sink this morning.
If I used opioids: my tolerance is likely lower, so my old amount can cause an overdose. I keep naloxone with me and tell someone where it is.	Not needed.
If I have been drinking heavily for several days: I get medical advice before I stop or cut down, or today if I have already stopped, since stopping all at once can bring alcohol withdrawal.	Not needed. It was one evening.
I have told someone I trust about the lapse, or I will today.	Done. I texted Ana this morning.
I will contact my counselor or therapist by this date:	Called the clinic this morning. Session on Tuesday.

If I am in crisis

Call 911. Ana and my sister Lucia are my emergency contacts.

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Part 2. What happened

Where I was and what was going on

At home on Saturday evening. My sister canceled our dinner at 5, and I had nothing else planned. I walked to the corner store for groceries and bought a bottle of wine.

What I was feeling and thinking before I used

Lonely and let down. I kept thinking that I deserved something to take the edge off after a hard week.

What I used, how much, and how it ended

Most of a bottle of red wine between 7 and 10 p.m. I stopped when I got tired and went to bed.

The urge before I used

How strong was the urge just before I used? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	**8**	9	10
No urge										*The strongest urge I have had*

Part 3. What I told myself afterward

What I told myself about the lapse

I've wasted 11 weeks. I'll never be able to stop for good. I might as well finish the bottle.

How I felt afterward

Guilt, 8. Shame, 7. Lonely, 6. A little hopeless on Sunday morning, 5.

What the lapse means to me

How much do I believe the lapse means I have failed? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	**9**	10
Not at all										*Completely*

Getting back to my plan

How sure am I that I can get back to my plan? Circle a number.

0	1	2	**3**	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not sure at all										*Completely sure*

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Part 4. Looking at the lapse again

What made this situation hard for me

A free Saturday evening alone, feeling lonely and let down after a canceled plan, with wine for sale at the store I walk to. I had no plan for an empty evening.

Skills I can learn or practice for situations like this

Plan each weekend evening ahead with one call and one activity. Shop at the market by work on Saturdays. Text Ana when plans fall through and ask her to come over or go for a walk. Practice that text with D.K.

What I will tell myself now

Saturday showed me that empty weekend evenings are a high-risk time for me, and I can learn to plan for them. My 11 weeks without drinking count, and I can get back to my plan today.

What the lapse means to me now

Now, how much do I believe the lapse means I have failed? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	**4**	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all										*Completely*

Getting back to my plan now

Now, how sure am I that I can get back to my plan? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	**7**	8	9	10
Not sure at all										*Completely sure*

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Part 5. My next steps

What I will do next

When	What I will do
In the next hour	Text Ana and walk around the park.
Later today	Join the 4 p.m. online recovery meeting and cook a real dinner.
Tomorrow	Go to work as usual and call Lucia in the evening.
This week	Bring this worksheet to my session on Tuesday and plan next Saturday with D.K.
The next time I am in a situation like this	Text Ana or Lucia when a plan falls through, and stay away from the corner store that evening.

People I will contact

Name	How to reach them	When
Ana, my friend	Text	This morning, and on weekend evenings
Lucia, my sister	Phone	Monday evening
D.K., my counselor	Clinic front desk	Session on Tuesday

What I will bring to my next session

What I told myself on Sunday morning, how to plan weekend evenings, and adding empty evenings to my relapse prevention plan.

D.K. thanked Marisol for calling the clinic the same morning and went over her safety steps first, including how much she had drunk and whether she had any thoughts of suicide. They read Part 3 together, and D.K. asked what the evening showed about her high-risk situations. Marisol wrote a new explanation in her own words, and her belief that the lapse meant she had failed fell from 9 to 4. They added empty weekend evenings to her relapse prevention plan and rehearsed the text she would send Ana when plans fall through.

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References and further reading

Books for clinicians

Marlatt, G. A., & Donovan, D. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Relapse prevention: Maintenance strategies in the treatment of addictive behaviors* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press. ISBN 978-1-59385-641-0.

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