Relapse Prevention Plan

Part 1. My goal and my warning signs

Item	Entry
Name	
Counselor or therapist	
Date	
Date we will review this plan	

My goal

Include: the change I am working on, in my own words, such as staying sober or cutting down.

My reasons

Include: what matters most to me about this goal.

My warning signs

Include: thoughts, feelings and actions that tend to come before I use, such as skipping meals, telling myself one won't matter or staying away from support.

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Part 2. High-risk situations and how I will cope

A high-risk situation is any place, person, feeling or time that makes using more likely. List the ones that matter most for me, and one thing I will do in each.

High-risk situation	What I will do instead

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Part 3. If I slip

The first thing I will do after a lapse

Include: how I will stop, how I will get somewhere safe and when I will tell someone.

People I will contact

Include: people who know my plan and how each one can help.

Name	How to reach them	How they can help

What I will tell myself

Include: words that help me treat a slip as something to learn from and get back to my plan.

If I am in crisis

If I am in danger or thinking about suicide, I call or text 988 in the United States or Canada. Elsewhere, I call my local crisis line or emergency number. The numbers I will use:

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Clinician guide: using the relapse prevention plan

- **When it fits.** Build the plan once the client has chosen a goal, abstinence or cutting down, and keep it in the client's own words. In Marlatt's model, relapse prevention starts with an assessment of the client's own high-risk situations (Larimer et al., 1999).
- **Map high-risk situations from experience.** Ask about past lapses, strong urges and times the client used more than planned. In Marlatt's analysis of relapse episodes, negative emotional states and interpersonal conflict together set off more than half, and social pressure more than 20 percent, so ask about feelings and conflicts along with people and places (Larimer et al., 1999).
- **Pair each situation with a coping response.** Choose a specific response for each situation and rehearse it in session. Effective coping in a high-risk situation builds self-efficacy and lowers the chance of relapse (Larimer et al., 1999).
- **Write the lapse plan in advance.** Agree on what the client will do in the first hours after a lapse and whom the client will contact. Treat a lapse as a chance to learn about triggers and coping, which counters the guilt and self-blame of the abstinence violation effect (Larimer et al., 1999).
- **Review the plan regularly.** Add new situations as they appear, update the contacts and check that the crisis numbers are current. 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.

Based on Marlatt's relapse prevention model as described by Larimer, Palmer and Marlatt (1999) and Hendershot et al. (2011). The layout and wording are original.

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Completed example: Andre (a fictional client)

Andre, 41, is an electrician in an intensive outpatient program who stopped drinking ten weeks ago. He filled in this plan with his counselor, M.T., at his fourth individual session, on December 2, 2026. Andre, his counselor and every detail of the case are invented.

Part 1. My goal and my warning signs

Item	Entry
Name	Andre
Counselor or therapist	M.T., counselor
Date	December 2, 2026
Date we will review this plan	December 16, 2026, at my session

My goal

Stay sober from alcohol and get my weekends back.

My reasons

My daughter stays with me every other weekend, and I want to be fully there for her. My blood pressure is down for the first time in years. I want to keep my license and my job.

My warning signs

Skipping lunch and getting short with people. Telling myself one beer won't matter. Driving home past the bar on Route 9. Not answering texts from my recovery group.

Part 2. High-risk situations and how I will cope

High-risk situation	What I will do instead
Friday after work, when the crew goes to the bar	Drive home the long way, text my brother at 5, and go to the 6 p.m. group on Fridays.
Calls with my ex about the visiting schedule	Write down what I need to say before I call, keep the call short and take a walk after.
Football at my cousin's house, where everyone drinks	Bring my own seltzer, tell my cousin I'm not drinking and leave at halftime if the urge gets strong.
Sunday nights alone	Plan dinner with my sister or go to the Sunday meeting, and call someone before 8 p.m.
Payday, with cash in my pocket	Have my pay go straight to the bank and carry only twenty dollars.

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Part 3. If I slip

The first thing I will do after a lapse

Stop after the first drink, pour out the rest and leave where I am. Call my brother right away, and call M.T.'s clinic the same day.

People I will contact

Name	How to reach them	How they can help
My brother, Luis	Saved in my phone	Comes over or drives me to a meeting
M.T., my counselor	Clinic front desk	Same-day check-in
Recovery group	Group text	Someone to talk to late at night

What I will tell myself

One drink is a slip I can learn from. It doesn't erase ten weeks. I'll look at what led to it with M.T. and get back to my plan the same day.

If I am in crisis

Call or text 988. Luis is my emergency contact.

M.T. built the table of high-risk situations from Andre's account of his two lapses in the past year, then asked him to rehearse the Friday plan out loud, including the text to his brother. When Andre said a slip would mean he had "blown it," M.T. asked what he would tell a coworker in the same spot, and Andre wrote his own answer under What I will tell myself. They agreed to review the plan every two weeks.

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.

Research

Hendershot, C. S., Witkiewitz, K., George, W. H., & Marlatt, G. A. (2011). Relapse prevention for addictive behaviors. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy, 6*, Article 17.

Larimer, M. E., Palmer, R. S., & Marlatt, G. A. (1999). Relapse prevention: An overview of Marlatt's cognitive-behavioral model. *Alcohol Research & Health, 23*(2), 151–160.

Witkiewitz, K., & Marlatt, G. A. (2004). Relapse prevention for alcohol and drug problems: That was Zen, this is Tao. *American Psychologist, 59*(4), 224–235.

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