Analyzing Risk Patterns

What Are Risk Patterns? - Risk patterns encompass decisions, thoughts, or attitudes that heighten the likelihood of reverting to negative old habits or behaviors. These patterns often develop gradually, making them difficult to notice until they lead to significant challenges (and often at that point it's too late!). By identifying these patterns early, we can take proactive steps to maintain progress and avoid future setbacks. Therefore, *insight* and *self-awareness* are critical factors in identifying and coping with risk patterns. The key is to <u>recognize risk patterns</u> as early as possible and then make necessary adjustments before it's too late.

Why Is Recognizing Risk Patterns Important? - Understanding and addressing risk patterns is a crucial part of sustaining progress and staying on a positive course. Recognizing these patterns can help us to:

- **Prevent Escalation**: Early identification of risk patterns helps prevent small issues from snowballing into larger problems.

- **Maintain Motivation**: Addressing risk patterns reinforces commitment to long-term goals and minimizes discouragement which can deplete internal motivation.

- **Support Resilience**: Learning to manage risk patterns now, increases our ability to continue using coping skills effectively, which in turn builds our sense of inner strength and resolve.

Risk patterns are closely tied to external or internal factors that provoke cravings or urges (also known as triggers). Triggers can include stress, environmental cues, social dynamics, or unresolved emotions. Recognizing both risk patterns and triggers allows for use of effective strategies to maintain balance and reduce vulnerability. Remember, triggers—also known as 'Setback Factors'—can take the following forms:

Setback Factors (Relapse Triggers)

External Setback Factors *are identifiable external influences:*

- **People**: Interactions and association with individuals who may influence negative behaviors.
- **Places**: Environments that remind you of past substance use or unhealthy behaviors.
- **Things**: Objects associated with substance use or unhealthy habits.
- **Events**: Situations, dates, or occurrences that may influence negative behavior during, or afterward.

Internal Setback Factors *are less obvious and located within the mind or body:*

- **Thoughts**: Negative or intrusive thoughts that challenge recovery or lead to self-doubt.
- **Feelings**: Emotional responses like sadness, anger, frustration, excitement or overconfidence
- **Habits/Routines**: Old repetitive behaviors that reinforce returning to old negative decisions
- **Impulsivity**: Acting or speaking without thinking and planning first.
- **Conditions**:
    - **Physical/Medical**: Health issues or physical discomfort increase vulnerability.
    - **Psychological**: Mental health issues like anxiety, depression, or trauma can affect stability

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> ➢ **DISCUSS – Is everyone in the group aware of their triggers?** *Use the above list as needed*

Recognizing and Managing Risk Patterns

Recognizing risk patterns is crucial for preventing relapse as it helps us identify and address potential triggers before they lead to setbacks.

- **Staying self-aware** is a vital first step—regularly checking in with ourselves about our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can help us detect early signs of stress, cravings, or emotional shifts.

- **Being proactive** involves taking steps to address these risks early, such as reaching out to supportive people like friends, family, or counselors who can offer perspective and guidance.

- **Tools** like journaling, mood trackers, or wellness plans can also assist in spotting patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. For those in support groups, discussing risk situations openly can further aid in this process, as can speaking honestly with a trusted helper or counselor.

- By combining self-awareness with external support, we create a solid foundation for staying on track and preventing relapse, ensuring we're equipped to manage challenges before they get out of hand.

Dashboard Illustration
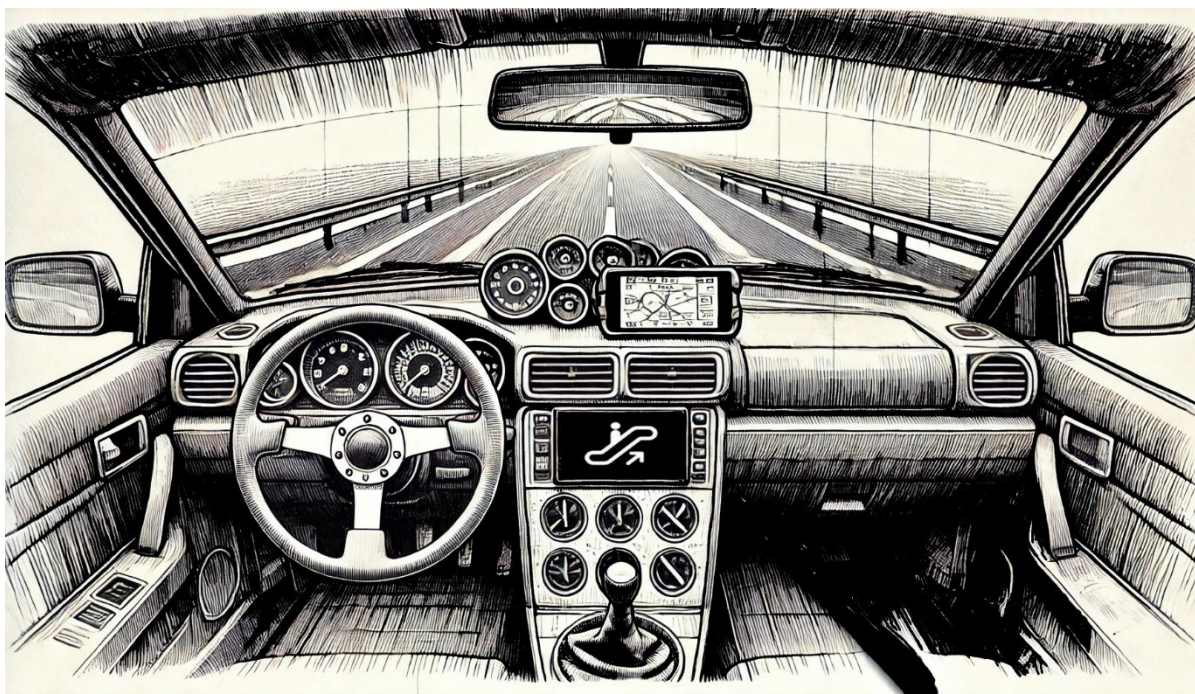
As we drive along the "Road to Recovery" think of Risk Patterns as gauges on our "Dashboard"
- Is our car in "Drive" (Are we staying motivated?) we don't want to go backward (in Reverse)
- Look at the gas gauge and make sure we are not on "E" (Out of energy)
- Use our GPS map so we can plan ahead and avoid challenges (triggers) along the way
- Keep an eye on our Speed (Travel at a safe pace, not too fast or too slow)
- Take care of our engine (Self-care) so our car doesn't overheat (The temperature gauge)
- Check our Mirrors, so we are aware of our surroundings (Self-awareness)
- Keep your hands on the wheel to steer the car in the right direction (Make good decisions)
- "Honk the horn" when there is danger to warn others (Let our supports know we need help)

Common Risk Patterns

As a group review each of the following risk patterns. Identify if this is something you may have done in the past. Also see if you can honestly identify and share if this is something you need to watch out for in your current situation.

A. **Letting Up on Discipline**: Staying disciplined is key to reducing risks. This includes maintaining regular contact with support systems and consistently using coping skills, such as managing stress, avoiding triggers, and staying committed to healthy routines. When something is working – keep doing it.

B. **Loss of Structure**: Idle time can be dangerous. A well-organized lifestyle is essential to prevent falling back into old habits. Schedule and plan ahead to keep busy with purposeful activities.

C. **Negative Associations**: Spending time with people or environments tied to past use or negative behaviors can increase risks. Even when others aren't actively using, the exposure to negativity can be triggering.

D. **Bottling Up Emotions**: Talking about feelings is crucial to managing stress, remaining emotionally stable, and avoiding high-risk behaviors. Holding emotions in can lead to isolation, vulnerability, and bad decisions

E. **Dishonesty**: Small lies can snowball into self-deception and denial, which can set the stage for risky decisions. There is no need to lie when you don't do anything that you will feel inclined to lie about later.

F. **Frustration**: Life's challenges can make risky behaviors tempting. Practice using positive supports, coping strategies and healthy outlets instead or allowing frustration to fester or build up inside.

G. **Argumentative Behavior**: Adaptability is a hallmark of progress. Persistent conflict or thinking our way is the only way, can close us off from valuable guidance and self-awareness. Stay open-minded and reasonable

H. **Self-Pity**: Feeling sorry for yourself can lead to discouragement, which might escalate giving up on progress. Self-pity can easily become an excuse for giving in and giving up.

I. **Impulsiveness**: Recovery requires thinking before acting. Rash decisions can lead to risky behavior. So many of life's problems can be avoided by thinking before speaking and acting.

J. **Overconfidence**: While confidence is good, overconfidence (which can become cockiness) is dangerous. Believing you're invulnerable can lead to risky situations. Stay humble and vigilant.

K. **Apathy**: Adopting a "Who cares?" attitude can quickly lead to setbacks. Remind yourself of the consequences and your reasons for progress. Remember what is at stake and how far you have come.

L. **Negative Substitution**: Replacing one negative behavior with another negative behavior is rarely a formula for success.

M. **Fantasizing About Use**: Romanticizing past substance use, or lifestyle can lead to cravings and eventually high-risk behaviors. This holds true with behavioral addictions too like gambling.

A Story to Consider

Risk patterns often emerge gradually. There are signs and triggers that occur long before someone returns to old behaviors. Review the following story below and identify the risk patterns and triggers. Use the list above to mark the corresponding letters in the story. Consider both the risk patterns and the triggers present

Jake's Return to Risk Patterns

My name is Jake, and I've been working on changing my life to overcome a past life of problematic substance use and untreated mental health concerns. A few months ago, I completed a treatment program. I felt really hopeful about the changes I was making, and my family showed incredible support. My younger sister even wrote me a heartfelt letter about how proud she was and how she believed in me. Her words gave me strength to keep moving forward. In the first few weeks, I committed to my positive change plan. I attended support meetings regularly, attended therapy, and practiced the breathing techniques and other coping skills that I learned in treatment to manage anxiety, anger and other challenging emotions. Another major change that was tough or me at first but very helpful was that took up jogging in the mornings which further helped relieve stress. These new habits made me feel grounded and focused. Things were going well and I was feeling better day by day.

As time went on, work demands started piling up, and I began missing meetings with my support system and my therapist I told myself it was fine because I was doing well and I reasoned that I was strong enough to let up on some of my responsibilities. When my therapist tried to talk to me about attending for a while longer, I argued with her that I didn't need it and stopped altogether. Eventually, I stopped jogging too, reasoning that I needed more rest in the mornings. I quickly learned that this reasoning was false when my hours were cut at work giving me extra time which I spent sleeping in, binge-watching shows, and playing video games instead of more recovery-oriented activities. To add some excitement to life, I also started gambling on football to try to make extra money even though this had been problematic for me in the past. When my family members would call, I would lie and tell them I was still working. Around that time, I got a message on social media from an old friend I used to spend time with during my substance use days. I hesitated but I convinced myself that reconnecting would be harmless as long as we didn't revisit old habits even though this person had been someone, I ran pretty hard with in the past.

We met for coffee, and the conversation stayed light. I felt good about maintaining my boundaries, even though it was a little uncomfortable seeing them again. A week later, they invited me to a gathering which was in an old neighborhood where I used to get into trouble. I decided to go, thinking I was strong enough to handle being around people who might still use. That night, I stayed substance-free, which made me feel even more confident in my ability to control my environment. When my support system called me and asked if everything was okay and if I was struggling with any triggers, I told them things were going great, even though I knew I was purposely leaving out the details of me getting back together with old associations.

The following week, I had a heated argument with my boss, leaving me angry, overwhelmed, and incredibly frustrated. Instead of reaching out to my support system or my therapist, or talking it through with someone I trusted, I kept my emotions all to myself. On Sunday I saw all the beer commercials when watching football so I went to the bar to watch the second half of the game. I was feeling like I just didn't give a crap anymore and I ended up bumping into the same friend at a bar. He offered me a drink, and after a moment of hesitation, I immediately accepted, without thinking saying to myself "who cares, it's just one drink". But I started thinking about how much I missed getting wasted, and I told myself, "My life has been a real struggle lately, I deserve to let loose for one night". I got drunk, then I got high with my substance of choice all night into the morning.

The next day, I convinced myself it was only a slip and that I could regain control. But over the next week, I found myself daydreaming more and more about using, and by the end of the week, I was back to daily use. Each time, I told myself it wasn't a big deal and that I could stop again whenever I wanted. But deep down, I knew I had fallen back into old patterns.

Identifying Your Own Risk Patterns

Take some time to reflect on the behaviors, thoughts, attitudes, or situations that have led to challenges in your own journey. Ask yourself:

1. What are the common situations or feelings that make me more vulnerable to risk patterns?
2. Are there specific relationships or environments that create challenges for me?
3. How do I usually respond to stress, frustration, or other challenging emotions?

Coping Strategies to Sustain Recovery

Below is a list of coping strategies to help address risk patterns and sustain progress. Choose the ones that resonate with you and incorporate them into your recovery plan:

- ☐ Stay connected to and open with your support network (e.g., friends, family, or support groups).

- ☐ Practice self-awareness by asking yourself questions and honestly evaluating your progress

- ☐ Keep a structured daily routine to minimize idle time. Strive for productivity and purpose.

- ☐ Set achievable goals to maintain focus and recognize small successes along the way

- ☐ Develop and stick to a physical activity plan and a plan for emotion-regulation and relaxation.

- ☐ Use journaling or talk with trusted others to process thoughts and emotions.

- ☐ Identify and stay away from high-risk environments and avoid negative associations

- ☐ Reach out to a trusted person when feeling overwhelmed instead of going at it alone

- ☐ Engage in hobbies or creative activities to channel energy positively.

- ☐ Practice positive self-talk, affirmations, cognitive reframing, and self-esteem building.

- ☐ Prepare and use a list of emergency coping strategies for high-risk moments.

- ☐ Develop and practice coping skills for cravings and stressors

- ☐ Practice maintaining an attitude of acceptance and gratitude.

- ☐ Others – *What has worked for you?*

The best way to stay on track is to check in with yourself and your support system before the road gets too bumpy to navigate and you go off course

ANSWER KEY TO Jakes Story: **Jake's Return to Risk Patterns**

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As time went on, work demands started piling up, and I began missing meetings with my support system and my therapist (**A**). I told myself it was fine because I was doing well and I reasoned that I was strong enough to let up on some of my responsibilities (**J**). When my therapist tried to talk to me about attending for a while longer, I argued with her that I didn't need it and stopped altogether (**G, B, J**). Eventually, I stopped jogging too, reasoning that I needed more rest in the mornings (**A**). I quickly learned that this reasoning was false when my hours were cut at work giving me extra time which I spent sleeping in, binge-watching shows, and playing video games instead of more recovery-oriented activities (**B**).To add some excitement to life, I also started gambling on football to try to make extra money even though this had been problematic for me in the past (**L**). When my family members would call I would lie and tell them I was still working (**E**). Around that time, I got a message on social media from an old friend I used to spend time with during my substance use days (**C**). I hesitated but I convinced myself that reconnecting would be harmless (**J**) as long as we didn't revisit old habits even though this person had been someone, I ran pretty hard with in the past.

We met for coffee (**T**), and the conversation stayed light. I felt good about maintaining my boundaries, even though it was a little uncomfortable seeing them again. A week later, they invited me to a gathering which was in an old neighborhood where I used to get into trouble (**T**). I decided to go, thinking I was strong enough to handle being around people who might still use (**J, C**). That night, I stayed substance-free, which made me feel even more confident in my ability to control my environment (**J**). When my support system called me and asked if everything was okay and if I was struggling with any triggers, I told them things were going great, even though I knew I was purposely leaving out the details of me getting back together with old associations (**E**)

The following week, I had a heated argument with my boss (**G, T**), leaving me angry, overwhelmed, and incredibly frustrated (**F**). Instead of reaching out to my support system or my therapist, or talking it through with someone I trusted, I kept my emotions all to myself (**D**). On Sunday I saw all the beer commercials (**T**) when watching football so I went to the bar to watch the second half of the game. I was feeling like I just didn't give a crap anymore and I ended up bumping into the same friend at a bar (**T**). He offered me a drink, and after a moment of hesitation, I immediately accepted, without thinking (**I**) saying to myself "who cares, it's just one drink" (**K**). But I started thinking about how much I missed getting wasted (**M**), and I told myself, "My life has been a real struggle lately, I deserve to let loose for one night" (**H**). I got drunk, then I got high with my substance of choice all night into the morning.

The next day, I convinced myself it was only a slip and that I could regain control (**E, J**). But over the next week, I found myself daydreaming more and more about using (**M**), and by the end of the week, I was back to daily use. Each time, I told myself it wasn't a big deal and that I could stop again whenever I wanted (**E, J**). But deep down, I knew I had fallen back into old patterns.

Legend:

- **A**: Letting Up on Discipline
- **B**: Loss of Structure
- **C**: Negative Associations
- **D**: Bottling Up Emotions
- **E**: Dishonesty
- **F**: Frustration
- **G**: Argumentativeness
- **H**: Self-Pity
- **I**: Impulsiveness
- **J**: Overconfidence
- **K**: Apathy
- **L**: Negative Substitution
- **M**: Fantasizing About Use
- **T**: Trigger (You may find even more triggers than in the answer key)