



*Please Note: The information contained in this Guide is not intended as legal advice in any individual's case. There are many exceptions and variations in the parole consideration process. If you have questions, please consult with an experienced parole attorney.*

## HOW TO WRITE A RELAPSE PREVENTION PLAN

This Guide is intended to help you write a Relapse Prevention Plan (RPP). While an RPP is not required by the Board, it can be a very important document for you to prepare and give to the Board in advance of or during your parole consideration hearing. Your RPP should show the Board that you have reflected on your past negative thinking patterns and/or behaviors and that you now have the skills to prevent returning to those thinking patterns and/or behaviors in the future. The goal of a RPP is to show the Board that you can name your key behavioral issues (target behaviors), that you understand them (warning signs, triggers), and that you now have the tools to address them (coping strategies, support network).

You should write an RPP for *each* negative thinking pattern and/or behavior that might be a concern for the Board. This means that you could have multiple RPPs, each targeted at a specific set of thinking patterns and/or behaviors. This should include the issues that showed up in your life crime, but might also include other identifiable patterns of negative behavior, for example, any behaviors that have shown up in institutional rules violations.

A common misunderstanding about RPPs is that you only need one if you struggled with substance abuse in the past. This is not the case. As discussed above, RPPs can address many different negative thinking patterns and/or behaviors, such as drug or alcohol abuse, gang membership, criminal thinking, anger leading to violence, domestic violence, or some other identifiable pattern of negative behavior.

A RPP should include the following elements:

- A *title* that names what the RPP is for
- An *introduction* that describes your target behavior
- A section about your *warning signs*
- A section about your *triggers (internal and external)*
- A section about your *coping skills*
- A section about your *support network*

### I. Identify Your Target Behaviors

The first step in writing your RPP is identifying or naming your *target behaviors*. This means reflecting on what negative thinking patterns and/or behaviors you have struggled with in the past, especially those that contributed to the crime for which you are in

prison. Target behaviors are harmful behaviors that contributed to the life crime and/or other harmful conduct. They are behaviors that you plan to avoid ever repeating and that you want to fix, change, and not go back to doing. Common target behaviors include:

- Substance abuse
- Gang membership
- Criminal thinking
- Anger leading to violence
- Domestic violence
- Unhealthy relationships
- Codependency

Example: At the time of the life crime, you used drugs and were a member of a gang. Both of these behaviors contributed to your actions at the time of the life crime. After you entered prison, you disassociated from the gang, but still broke the rules and received numerous rules violations. In this example, there are three target behaviors: (1) substance abuse, (2) gang membership, and (3) criminal thinking. Each of these target behaviors requires a different RPP, as they are likely associated with different behaviors, thoughts, and triggers. However, there is often some overlap. As in the example, your target behaviors played a role in the life crime and also are related to your actions while incarcerated. While that behavior is not directly related to the life crime, you still need to be able to assure the Board that you have the tools to prevent a relapse into it if released.

## **II. Identify Your Warning Signs**

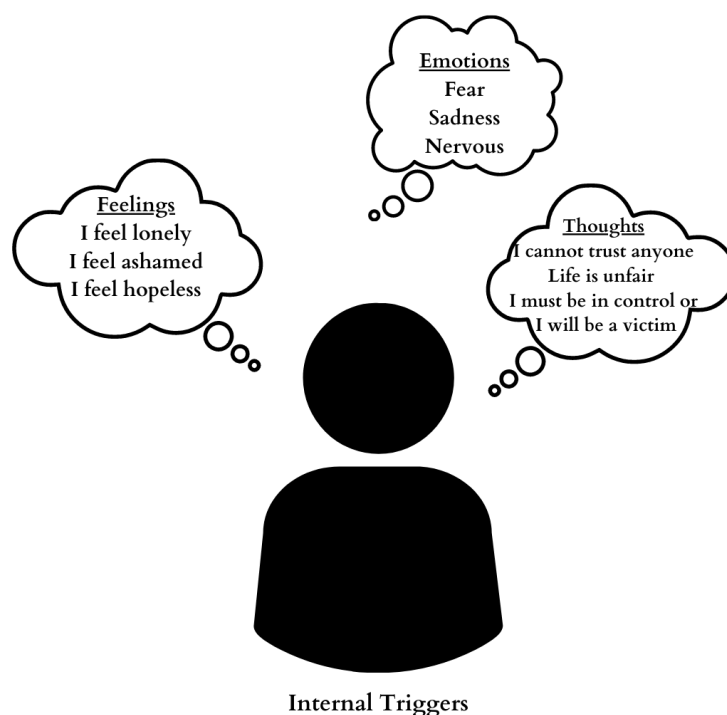
Next, you will need to show an awareness of *warning signs* that might signal a relapse could be coming. A warning sign is something that alerts you to a possible problem. A warning sign is something you notice about yourself that indicates that you might be heading towards one of your identified target behaviors. Your body could emit a warning sign, such as a racing heart or sweaty palms. You could detect a warning sign in your behavior, for example, you notice that you have stopped attending your groups or you have stopped your daily exercises. You could notice a negative thought pattern emerging that involves bargaining with yourself or minimizing, for example, “what if I have just one drink?” Being able to identify your warning signs shows the Board that you will be able to respond in a positive manner, rather than react with a negative behavior.

## **III. Identify Your Triggers**

Next, you need to identify potential *internal* and *external triggers* that led to your target behavior in the past. What situations might spark you to return to your target behavior? These situations can be felt inside of you (internal) or exist outside of you (external).

**Internal triggers** are **emotions, thoughts, or feelings** that become so overwhelming they cause you to resort to your target behavior in order to cope. Internal triggers are often very painful feelings that someone experienced in childhood that made them unable to cope in a healthy or positive way.

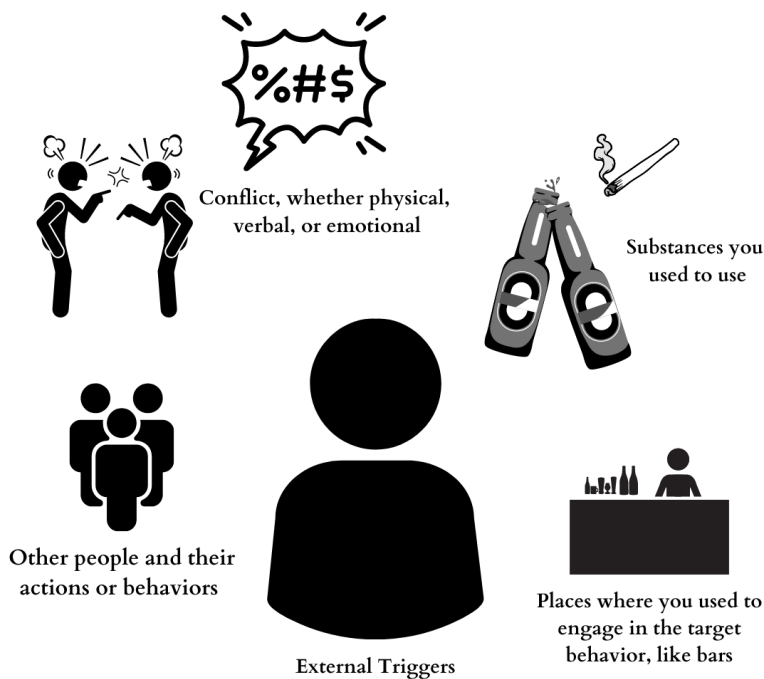
Think about internal triggers as the difficult feelings that caused you to develop the target behavior in the first place. You can begin brainstorming your internal triggers by answering the following question: What were the painful feelings, emotions, and/or thoughts you were trying to cope with, or escape from, by using or engaging in your target behavior? For example, someone may have felt unworthy, abandoned, and depressed (internal triggers) as a result of experiences of abuse, and in response, used substances (target behavior) to cope. Another person may have felt lonely and scared (internal triggers) in response to difficulty in their home, and in response, joined a gang (target behavior) to make each of those feelings go away. Think about the feelings that led to or accompanied your target behavior. What emotions led to each target behavior in the past? Common internal triggers include feelings of: shame, insecurity, abandonment, rejection, grief, and lack of control.



**External triggers** are **situations and/or circumstances** that might result in a relapse to your target behavior. Sometimes, external triggers are environments, people, or places that remind you of the target behavior. Common external triggers like this are: people you used to engage in your target behavior with, environments you used to engage in your target behavior in, situations that cause you to think about/want to engage in your target behavior, or things associated with a target behavior. For example, the smell of cannabis may remind

someone with a substance use disorder of their former cannabis use, making them want to use again.

External triggers can also be associated with trauma or external situations in which your internal triggers may arise. For example, someone who's parent would yell at them before physically abusing them may grow up to associate being yelled at with shame, anger, and/or powerlessness, and therefore may be more likely to react to being yelled at with physical violence.



It is critical that you identify both the internal and external triggers that led to your target behavior so that you can show the Board you are aware of how your own past thoughts, feelings, or circumstances could be triggering in the future.

#### IV. Identify Your Coping Mechanisms

Next, you need to identify the *coping mechanisms* that you now use to prevent a relapse into the target behavior. Coping mechanisms are the healthy tools that you use to deal with stressful situations or triggers in order to prevent a relapse into a target behavior. They are the specific actions that you take – and will continue to take – when you experience an internal or external trigger. Healthy coping mechanisms help you to manage stressful events while maintaining your emotional health and well-being.

As you reflect on your coping mechanisms, ask yourself: What specific actions do I take upon experiencing the thoughts or feelings I identified as warning signs or potential

triggers? How will I physically, psychologically, or emotionally remove myself from the situation?

Potential coping mechanisms and tools include: self-talk, walking away, meditation, deep breathing, exercise, listening to music, calling a sponsor (or spouse, pastor, family member, etc.), and going to a 12-Step or other support meeting. As you reflect on your coping mechanisms, remember that they should be *specific* to you and tools that you *actually use*. If you cannot answer questions about what a coping mechanism or tool is and when the last time you used it was, it should probably not be on your RPP.

## **V. Identify Your Support Network**

Last, you need to identify the *support network* that you turn to when you feel triggered. Is there someone you will call to discuss your thoughts and feelings? This could include a sponsor, mentor, family member, friend or organization and their contact information so that you can reach out to them at any time to address the thoughts and feelings associated with the target behavior. As you consider who you are going to name, think about who are the people who establish healthy boundaries, the people who share your values and goals, the people who you genuinely respect and can listen to? You should add at least one, ideally several contacts to your RPP to show that you have people you can reach out to and receive support.