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Stress and Triggers - A Bad Combination

By [Joe Herzanek](#)

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The combination of stress and "triggers" can be a real problem. We have all heard about Dr. Pavlov and his experiment with dogs. He fed his dogs and at the same time rang a bell. He did this over and over, and eventually the dogs would salivate every time he rang the bell-whether there was food around or not. Looking back on my own drug use, I remember experiencing similar feelings of anticipation. Knowing my drug dealer was coming over, seeing a mirror with a razor blade on it, smelling the drug-all these things excited my brain. With no real conscious effort, I would start to mentally drool, knowing what was coming next.

I learned, just like Dr. Pavlov, that once this subconscious change has taken place, a person can't just turn it off. There is no on/off switch. Over time it will fade, but I don't believe it ever goes away completely.

This is true for many things in life. A particular song, smell, or place can trigger memories that a person hasn't thought of for years. The brain is very powerful, and potentially life-threatening triggers should not be taken lightly.

Socializing with people who drink and use drugs can be a trigger. Going to a bar, with all its familiar sights, sounds, and smells, can be a trigger. Mirrors, razor blades, rolling papers, certain music-any or all of these things-can trigger a relapse. People often ask about the dangers of ingesting seemingly harmless food and drink, such as cough syrup, food cooked with wine or liqueurs or drinking a small amount of wine during communion. Should a recovering person stay away from such things? Yes. Even these items can be invitations for relapse.

When I quit using, I had to go through my apartment and get rid of all kinds of things that could be triggers to me. I looked for anything that had to do with my drug use: rolling papers, pipes, small vials for coke, pictures of drugs, baggies with any residue in them, scales-you name it.

"We couldn't visit him during the first week. The second week we went to see him, and he was really doing good. He had a smile and that was so great to see. The

third week he came home for the weekend. He called one evening during that weekend while I was at work and said, 'Mom there is a half bottle of Vodka here, and I wondered if I could pour it down the sink.' I said of course!"

-Gladys Herzanek

I also knew that I couldn't hang around with any of my old friends who were mostly drug dealers or heavy drug users. That wasn't easy. Though they were not good for me, I still felt a camaraderie with some of them. A few didn't believe the change in me would last. Several times they tried to get together with me to party. I had to say "no" and explain why. This time of letting go was difficult and awkward, but I found it wasn't impossible to leave these relationships behind. After a while, I began to see that many of these friendships were pretty lame anyway.

In the case of a recovering teen, saying no to these things needs to come from deep within—not from a command from Mom or Dad. When parents try pulling their children away from other troubled peers, it is never as effective as when teenagers make the decision themselves.

In fact, the parental control can often have the reverse effect—with the teen adamantly resolving, You can't tell me who my friends can be! I had to learn new ways to handle both stress and triggers. For me, triggers (people, places, and things) were easier to cope with than stress. Triggers were avoidable, whereas stress wasn't. Today, I continue to work on and improve my response to daily stress. Time and experience are wonderful teachers, which over the years have helped to mellow my response to everyday stress.

Once a person has had several years in recovery, all these issues lessen in intensity. I'm thankful that today my relationships with people are much healthier. I don't have any friends who abuse alcohol or use drugs. I no longer have anything in common with users. They are as uncomfortable around me as I am around them.

Looking back to when alcohol and drugs controlled me, I can see that my old way of living bred a level of stress that stemmed mainly from heavy using. Although I have been sober now for over twenty-five years, stressful times are still part of my life, but now I am able to handle them in healthy ways. What has changed is my attitude.

This article is excerpted from Chapter 29 of Joe's book

Joe Herzanek, a man who battled his own demons of addiction over twenty-five years ago, says, "I know people can change. If I can do it, anyone can!"

A recovering person himself, Joe is the president and founder of Changing Lives Foundation and author of the new book "Why Don't They Just Quit?" As an addiction counselor in Colorado he has spent thirteen years working in the criminal justice system.



His passion for helping men and women struggling with addiction, as well as their family members and friends, inspire him to offer hope and solutions.

Joe offers words of encouragement: "Addiction is not a hopeless situation," he writes. "Addicts and alcoholics aren't crazy, and they can quit."

Joe and his wife Judy have three children, Jami, Jake, and Jessica, and enjoy the beautiful Colorado outdoors with their two Cairn Terriers, Lewis and Clark.

<http://www.whydonttheyjustquit.com>

<http://www.changinglivesfoundation.org>

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