

Setbacks and Change: What It Means

Many people feel demoralized by setbacks, slips, or relapses. Often these occurrences reinforce a sense of being powerless or hopeless. Thankfully, the evidence shows that setbacks are simply a part of change, and not a hindrance to it! People who successfully change problem behaviors have starts and stops, ups and downs, and they sometimes revisit earlier stages of change after a relapse.

The excellent book *Changing for Good* (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994) has a wonderful metaphor for the process of change. The authors state that changing behavior is like climbing the Leaning Tower of Pisa. As you climb the tower there are times when you are clearly rising up, but when you circle back to the leaning direction it seems like you are going back down, at least until you circle back up. Overall, you are making progress up the tower, especially if you seek to learn from the “down” times.

This book sometimes uses words like setback and relapse, but the change authors noted above like to use the word “recycle” to emphasize that we learn from all efforts toward change. Each effort toward change has its lessons that can be used for the next attempt and, like recycling, the material of what was is transformed into something new.

Conscientious people do not judge their recyclables to be useless and throw them in the garbage. Instead, they make sure their recyclables make it to the recycling center. Treatment is your recycling center when steps forward are interrupted by a step back.

Make your mistakes useful. As Albert Einstein said, “Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.”

Along these lines, if you fall back, remember the acronym SLIP. In DBT-S, SLIP¹⁰ stands for:

Skills

Learning

Improves

Progress

The following exercise will put this concept into action.

¹⁰ In other substance use treatments SLIP has stood for “Sobriety Loses Its Priority.” This definition implies a loss of motivation or desire to do well and seems inherently judgmental. The author has redefined this acronym to better fit DBT-S philosophies and to emphasize learning.

Skills Learning Improves Progress Worksheet ---

What made you vulnerable to the SLIP?

What triggered the SLIP?

What were the consequences of the SLIP (for both you and others)?

What did you learn from the SLIP?

What skills can you use to avoid a similar SLIP?

What skills can you use to deal with the consequences (so they do not become vulnerabilities)?

What skills can you use to make amends with yourself?

What skills can you use to make amends with others?

What are you committed to do to move forward?

With whom are you going to share this commitment?