

Start Now to Develop the Self-Discipline You Need to Return To School in Early Addiction Recovery

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

When heading back to school after an extended absence due to life circumstances, make the extra effort to develop the self-discipline skills you need for a triumphant return. For many people in early recovery (or late recovery, for that matter), self-discipline has been a vaguely understood concept and a mostly elusive goal that still baffles, frustrates, and serves as an emotional "hot" button in relationships.

Self-discipline involves a sustained ability to focus on a goal, in such a way that you can rise to the occasion to do what is necessary, with the specified time frame, even when you have low motivation. Lack of self-discipline is often a cornerstone issue in substance use disorder. This deficit makes it difficult to accomplish goals, achieve potential, and develop self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-determination. When people with substance use problems find their way into recovery, they have identified low self-esteem and poor self-confidence as core issues. Before recovery, it isn't easy to connect how one's behaviors, decisions, thoughts, and feelings impact life circumstances. Many believe they are victims of "bad luck," disliked, mistreated, and misunderstood. Recovery makes it possible to believe in the possibility of change and to accept responsibility for those changes. Self-discipline steps in when motivation falters.

Self-esteem and self-confidence impact the choices that you make. You may want to make life changes and even intend to do so. The intention is a start, but it takes more than will accomplish change in your life. Self-discipline is the bridge that connects purpose and motivation to achieve a

goal. You can intend to run a marathon next year, but you need to develop a plan, get off the couch, and train regularly to accomplish your goal. You might get excited about your newly found inspiration. Self-discipline comes in after you have a burst of inspiration and are ready to act. If your goal is to return to school after being temporarily derailed by substance use issues, you must do more than enroll, rent an apartment, and buy books. With a solid plan of action, scheduled engagement, and daily practice of self-discipline, you set yourself up for success in school and recovery. Many people in early recovery still have some lifestyle characteristics that can interfere with academic success. It is common for those with substance use issues (and those early in recovery) to be up and about when the rest of the "work" world is sleeping, and sleeping late into the work day, minimizing the number of things they can accomplish that day. To jump-start your self-discipline development, begin now to set an early rise time, set your alarm, and get up and start your day. Be sure to get into a new habit of waking up early before the semester begins. Otherwise, you will be starting already "behind" in the semester.

If, in your recovery, you do not have a structured day set up, develop a temporary structure for yourself before you start back to school. If you are not working, find someplace to volunteer. Get a schedule for volunteering or making some other contribution. Make it habit to get up early, go to work/volunteer, and go to meetings. Schedule a regular time to meet with your sponsor. Schedule time to study your recovery literature. Get back into the habit of diligently doing schoolwork. Find someone to be your accountability partner. Stick to the routine or the structure that you develop. Schedule time for fun with a sober support group, but practice saying "no" to yourself or to those who would distract you from your structure or self-disciplined routine. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2010 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**

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As you prepare to return to school following a hiatus due to life circumstances, it's crucial to focus on cultivating the self-discipline necessary for success, especially in early addiction recovery. Self-discipline becomes a transformative force, bridging the gap between intention and action. While your recovery-oriented lifestyle is very conducive to college success, the structure of routine and mindful time management is also crucial for a solid foundation for success. "Time Management for College Students" can assist you in implementing a structured daily routine and teach you how to manage a semester for success.

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