



WHOA, TRIGGER

Culled from a variety of professional sources and reports, here are some common triggers that can lead to relapse and how to prevent them.

Relapse prevention starts with not only recognizing what your issues are, but what triggers those old responses, and how to keep those ‘triggers’ from actually firing off relapse. Here are some of the most common triggers, which can apply to all issues, and some suggestions on how to ‘disarm’ them.

Old places, old faces, old habits. Hard as it may be to leave old friends and familiar places behind, those may be what helped you get in trouble in the first place. You can find yourself in a difficult situation if you continue to frequent the old hangouts and hangers-on, no matter how dedicated you are to your recovery.

Action: Choose a different locale and different companions, ones who are as committed as you are to recovery and positive action. Find a meeting, talk to your sponsor.

Isolation; just me and my problems. Even after years of positive living things can happen that will threaten your good intentions. And you’ll find it’s harder to create a support system anew than it is to maintain one.

Action: Make sure you’ve maintained your support network, so that when you need it (them) you aren’t a stranger. Even if things are fine now, there could come a time when you need a touchstone—make sure you keep in touch with that rock of support.

Easy access. No matter what your issue of choice, substance abuse, pornography, tobacco, having it in easy reach, even if you aren’t indulging, is a bad idea. Familiarity brings contempt, and you start to forget what can happen after the first step. Even you can’t control everything.

Action: Don't keep reminders of old, bad habits around, even if it's just to prove that you can maintain your control. Why put yourself intentionally at risk, when the rest of the world is doing enough of that for you? Be aware of your limitations and don't tempt fate.

Expecting too much, of yourself and everyone else. Things will never be perfect or always go well, but it isn't always your fault or your responsibility. Don't shoulder more than you can handle—you set yourself up for failure and old feelings of low self-esteem and confidence.

Action: Keep your goals simple and realistic. Allow yourself to bask in the glow of accomplishment of each and every goal and cut yourself a little slack when things don't go as planned. Remember the progress you've made.

Wallowing in the muck of unresolved issues from the past. Like your crime, the facts of the past won't change and should not continue to define your present and future. Let it go. Obsessing only leads to stress and stress is a huge trigger for all sorts of bad outcomes.

Action: Give the forgiveness you seek. Focus on your recovery and the here and now. If hurts happen now, address them immediately and calmly, with the help of your support network and the tools you have.

Don't transfer your addiction/obsession to another venue. Even if it seems healthy, becoming obsessive about anything is dangerous. If you've left substance abuse or anger behind, don't dive into habitual exercise, computer time or even fanatical group attendance. Any activity or thought that dominates your thoughts, time and life or causes you to feel irritable when you can't indulge in that activity is a concern.



Action: Diversify! Schedule various activities throughout your leisure time and spread your talents around. Too much of even a good thing can be bad.

Ignoring changes in routine, emotions and warning signs. Even a good change—a new job or relationship—can cause stress. When day to day habits change—and they will—when emotions run high and warning signs appear, be aware and prepared to act.

Action: Try to keep a stable routine, and continue as many familiar tasks as possible, even in new situations. Know that even good changes can be difficult at first, but this, too, shall pass and what's

new now, will become normal tomorrow. Take inventory of your emotions, ask for help and don't assume the feelings will just go away.

Personal problems and strained relationships. Personal issues, whether financial, social or trying to cope with a significant other still in the troughs of addictive behavior can become overwhelming, if not addressed. Living in recovery and rehabilitation is an on-going process that sometimes takes sacrifice.

Action: Don't wait to handle these; deal with issues as they come up. Look for 'positive action' ways to resolve conflicts but be prepared to remove yourself from a situation that isn't going to get better. Address financial or living issues directly as they arise and don't wait for them to extrapolate. If positive, pro-active methods on your part aren't reciprocated, be prepared to protect yourself and your recovery.

Overestimating yourself. Dirty Harry said it best: "A man's got to know his limitations." Confidence is great, but over-confidence can be a disaster. Taking on too much and trying to handle all of it alone is a recipe for disaster.

Action: Remember that being positive and confident does not mean you won't need help from time to time. Recognize and honor your limitations—asking for help is a sign of knowledge and strength of character, not weakness.

Recovery and rehabilitation have an end date. It's all over now, the job is done and those old problems, that may have been silent for years or decades, are dead and gone. Not so, believe this at your peril.

Action: Recognize that relapse, into any sort of unproductive or harmful behavior, is always possible, no matter how long you've been on the right path. Stress is rampant in today's society and you'll never be immune from it. Always keep in mind your triggers and your relapse prevention tools—even small challenges become easier to manage when you recognize them, act on them and overcome.

All of us are works in progress. Paroled lifers, who have walked the fire of self-examination, evaluation and change are perhaps better prepared than the Average Joe to maintain sober, safe and productive lives, but even this dedicated breed can run into complications and predicaments in life. It isn't a question of if or when you'll be challenged, just a question of how fast you recognize the signs, know how to handle those challenges and best them.

IT'S ALMOST HERE—WE THINK

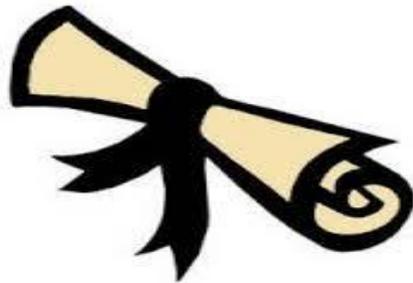
The long-awaited, much vetted and hoped for new travel pass form and process is, (we hear, unofficially, through the grapevine, off the record but we seem to be using it) about to be a reality at last. Well over a year in creation, consultation and approval, the form will be STANDARD for all offices and will, when properly filled out and submitted, provide all the information needed for agents and supervisors to consider and hopefully approve travel passes in a timely manner.

Again, the emphasis is on STANDARD, which means all offices in all parts of the state will be using the same form, in the same manner, requiring the same information and responding in the same timelines. That, in itself, will be quite an accomplishment.

Intended to be submitted, considered and returned via email in many cases the new form will serve as both travel request and authorization, and not only for lifers. One of the near-final version LSA got look at appeared comprehensive, simple and easy for both parolees and agents. But like anything 'new' at CDCR there were multiple layers of consensus needed, requiring months of review from legal staff, performance evaluations, will-it-work conferences and generally touching base with all the moving parts, the last one being the blessing of CCPOA, to be sure the new form protected the union members' rights, wasn't unnecessarily burdensome (?) and assisted them in the performance of their duties. Whew.

About the only cohort that wasn't extensively consulted were those objects of concern, the parolees. To be fair, LSA and perhaps other stakeholders were able to view draft configurations and found nothing really objectionable. That says a considerable amount about the intent of DAPO administration in trying to streamline the form and process, not only for their employees, but to make the whole experience less stressful and more understandable for the parolee.

Some offices are apparently using the form now or shortly will be, and we're anxious to hear from lifer parolees if the new paper and direction is making difference in that long-nettlesome thorn of trying to secure a travel pass and going through various hoops and hurdles, depending on agent and office. Let us know.



PAROLE DISCHARGE PROCESS AND HOW TO APPEAL

The discharge from parole process, which for many years, because so few lifers were coming out, was pretty much unknown, has undergone a review of late and become more standardized. It begins with the parole agent, and that may be the biggest roadblock so far, but the path and bumps in the road can and often do extend into the BPH. However, it is possible to be discharged, even for those former lifers who are subject to potential life-time parole.

If you're at the juncture where a review of possible discharge is in your future, be aware of the process and what is required, both of you, and of DAPO/BPH. If you believe you're a good candidate for discharge and are being either stone-walled or improperly retained on supervision, contact LSA and we'll help you walk through the appeal process. We won't do it for you, but we can help you navigate the maze of 'Just Say No.'

Parole agents, at the conclusion of a 3-5-7 year period, depending on the life crime, initiate the review checklist, eventually reaching a recommendation, whether to discharge or retain on parole and reasons given for a decision to retain; the supervising parole agent will also make a recommendation.

If these two recommendations differ, then the District Administrator will review the case and will make the final recommendation to BPH.

The BPH will review this report, DAPOs final recommendation, and will also review the C-file, current rap sheet and any other relevant information in making their decision. The DCs (2 usually) will make a decision. If the decision is to retain on parole, the parolee will then have an annual discharge review until discharged by BPH or they reach their maximum discharge date and are discharged by operation of law.

This happens seldom for most lifers as the change in law now allows many lifers to be kept on for lifetime; although this is allowed for in law, no one thinks this will be the case, as the state hasn't enough resources in time or manpower to watch lifers for another 20 or 30 years.

The reasons given to deny discharge must be borne out by particular facts in support of the need for continued supervision; a reason of simply the crime or public safety generally is not, in and of itself, sufficient. If that is the reason given for retain on supervision, there must be a nexus to danger spelled out in the decision. All sounds strangely familiar, doesn't it?

If the decision is to retain, the parolee can file an appeal or challenge the decision by submitting a decision review request to BPH Headquarters, attention the Special Processing Unit. No specific form is required but 602 forms would be accepted, stating their reasons for requesting a decision review. There the decision will be reviewed by a cadre of Deputy Parole Commissioners, along with whatever documentation you can submit in support of your claim that you're ready to take off the training wheels and make it on your own.

The most important aspects of this whole process, and when is something from CDCR not a process, is that your performance on parole must sustain a decision that you are and will continue to be a law-abiding citizen, not a danger to society and that at every step of the way you are entitled to a copy of any decision made regarding your parole status and both the reasons for that decision and the name and office of the individual making that decision must be clearly provided.

One final detail—if someone is denied and for whatever reason the BPH/DAPO fail to complete their yearly review, which is supposed to be done by the anniversary date of their parole, 31 days after that date, if they have not received their review and decision as to retain or discharge, they “fall off parole;” because the state failed to exercise their responsibility in the proscribed timely manner, they are automatically off parole. They can then call the BPH and ask for their official discharge notification and there is no recourse for the state.

DATE TO GATE

From the Date to the Gate planning is underway, consultations, consideration and conversations about what paroled lifers need to know, before they leave the gate, about the world they're returning to. Your input is needed and valued—what took you by surprise? What was the hardest challenge you've faced and how did you meet and overcome that hurdle?

Send us your emails, phone messages, letters, even drop by and talk with us. While we have a plethora of professionals helping us, the best source of help for those still inside is you—the guys on the outside.

SACRAMENTO SEMINAR

We kicked off 2015 with the first lifer family seminar in Sacramento on Feb. 28. And to our great surprise and pleasure, it became a bit like being at a lifer picnic where seminar suddenly broke out.

In addition to the 50 or so lifer families in attendance, BPH Executive Director Jennifer Shaffer and California Inspector General Robert Barton also attended, both offering remarks on their various offices and the changes we're all seeing in lifer parole. But the hit of the day were the dozen or so paroled lifers who came to speak hope, reentry and rehabilitation to the families of those still inside.

Just a couple of years ago our seminars could count on one or two, maybe three paroled lifers showing up to prove to the families that parole does happen, lifers do come home. Now we have a cadre and the response is tremendous.

Seminars happen 4 to 6 times a year in all parts of the state. When we come to your area, stop by for a while, speak if you'd like, or just chat with the families, letting them know your experiences and reinforcing their hope and commitment to their lifers. We'll even feed you lunch.

Below are a few of those who came to share—you may find some familiar faces. Out anywhere from several years to a few weeks, all are making their way in the new world and personifying the give-back spirit of lifers by giving up their Saturday to come share with families.

Our thanks to those former lifers who came to Sacramento! We appreciate you, we support you and we believe in you!



Back row L-R: Mariano Munoz, David Sloane, Eugene Dey. Front Row, L-R: William Rucker, Willie Redmond, Daniel Silva, Alfredo Rico and our own John Dannenberg.