
Relapse Prevention: Understanding the Predictable Cycle of Renewal

by Jana Heckerman

What makes a woman who has been sober for a year, five years, or twenty years start drinking again? The answer to that question is unique to every woman, but one overriding factor I see in recovery circles – and in my coaching practice – is an inability to cope with significant life changes. Since life changes and challenges are pretty much guaranteed, sober women must learn to anticipate and manage the various phases and chapters that their lives will predictably cycle through.

I did my coaching training at The Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara. One of the things that drew me to this particular program was a model developed by Frederic Hudson, PhD – the *Cycle of Renewal*. In a nutshell, the model consists of four distinct phases (plus one transitional phase) which everyone – *yes, everyone* – cycles through over the course of their lives. Most people cycle through these phases multiple times. Having an awareness that these phases are normal, predictable, and temporary gives the sober woman confidence and the ability to maximize the phases that are “good” and transition gracefully through the phases that are “not good.”

When I first learned about the *Cycle of Renewal*, I immediately saw possibilities for using it in coaching women in recovery. What follows is an adapted description for understanding the sober woman in each phase of the cycle. (Used with permission from the Hudson Institute; to view a diagram of the model you may visit www.hudsoninstitute.com).

Phase I – Go For It

This is the preferred phase for most people because it is here that things get done, success is experienced, and life moves along more or less according to plan. It’s unlikely, but not out of the question, that a woman would relapse during this phase. *Go for it* can last months or years and it’s not uncommon for someone newly sober to be in this phase – feeling hopeful, ready to tackle life, on the proverbial “pink cloud.” However, for the recently sober woman, this stage can be short lived if she doesn’t have adequate support. Coaching individuals in the *go for it* phase is usually about helping them take action and achieve their goals.

Phase II – The Doldrums

This is a danger zone for the sober woman. In the *doldrums*, she may be experiencing burnout, boredom, depression, restlessness, or pessimism. In her drinking or using days, a woman could medicate these feelings with her substance of choice. The pull to do so again can be very strong. Coaching sober women who find themselves in the doldrums is primarily about helping them move out of this phase by either slowing down and spending some time in Phase III (*cocooning*) or by doing a *mini-transition* which entails retooling or reinventing in a way what will move them back into Phase I, the *go for it* phase. Helping a woman understand that “this too shall pass” is part of the coaching process for a woman in the doldrums.

Phase III – Cocooning

This phase is about turning inward, contemplation, self-exploration, and assessing the state of one's life. Depending on a woman's ability to be quiet within herself, this phase can be either a time of valuable growth or another danger zone. Coaching the sober woman in the cocooning phase is typically about supporting her to be patient, helping her be gentle with herself, and assisting her as she sorts through the self-evaluation process and begins to emerge from the cocoon. It's about helping her to do these things without relying on alcohol or drugs to numb feelings that will inevitably emerge during this introspective period. At this point, she may want to incorporate tools such as meditation, journaling, spiritual retreats, and others which offer her a safe and unhurried environment for renewal.

Phase IV – Getting Ready

This phase is about preparing for a new life chapter . . . getting ready to step back into the beloved *go for it* phase. Women in the *getting ready* phase are often planning, learning, and organizing. Like Phase I, it's unlikely (but not outside the realm of possibility) that a woman would relapse in this phase. One risk factor, however, could be the tendency for a woman to become overwhelmed with too much to do or too many possibilities which could make her want to pick up a drink as a coping mechanism. Coaching a sober

woman in the *getting ready* phase is about helping her sort out her various options, make the best decisions possible, and step into action in a way that will support, rather than undermine, her sobriety. Women who are a few months sober frequently find themselves in this phase and most would be wise to stay put for a while, letting their heads clear and the dust of their drinking days settle before plunging full steam ahead into a "new life."

This model is used by coaches with many kinds of clients. I've found it to be particularly helpful in supporting women in recovery. A woman who can assess where she is in this predictable cycle of renewal can move through recovery with grace and ease. As a woman's coach, this model allows me to meet her where she is and hold the space for wholeness and health as she creates a vision, plans her next life chapter, and plots out action steps that will see her through to a future of solid sobriety, meaning, and a life of purpose and pleasure.

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