

*Please Note: The information contained in this Guide is not intended as legal advice in any individual's case. There are many exceptions and variations in the parole consideration process. If you have questions, please consult with an experienced parole attorney.*

## HOW TO WRITE A RELAPSE PREVENTION PLAN

This Guide is intended to help you write a Relapse Prevention Plan (RPP). While an RPP is not required by the Board, it can be a very important document for you to prepare and give to the Board in advance of or during your parole consideration hearing. Your RPP should show the Board that you have reflected on your past problematic thinking patterns and/or behaviors and have the skills now to prevent returning to those thinking patterns and behaviors in the future – both while in prison and if released. A common misunderstanding about RPPs is that you only need one if you have struggled with substance abuse in the past. This is wrong. RPPs can address many different problematic thinking patterns and/or behaviors, such as drug or alcohol abuse, gang membership, criminal thinking, anger leading to violence, domestic violence, or some other identifiable pattern of negative behavior. This means that you could have multiple RPPs, each targeted at a specific set of thinking patterns and/or behaviors. This Guide is intended to help you reflect on what behaviors you may need to target in your RPP; identify your triggers, coping skills, and support network; and write your RPP.

### I. Identify Your Target Behaviors

First, you need to identify your “*target behaviors.*” This means reflecting on what negative thinking patterns and/or behaviors you have struggled with in the past, especially those that contributed to the crime for which you are in prison. Potential target behaviors include: substance abuse, gang membership, criminal thinking, anger leading to violence, domestic violence, unhealthy relationships, and codependency. For example, you might have abused drugs and alcohol, and you may have committed crimes as a member of a gang. This means you have two target behaviors: (1) substance abuse, and (2) gang membership and criminal thinking. Each of these target behaviors may require a different RPP, as they are likely associated with different behaviors, thoughts, and triggers. However, there is often some overlap.

Your target behaviors will likely have played a role in the life crime; however, this is not always the case. For example, you might have begun abusing substances after coming to prison. While this target behavior is not directly related to the life crime, you still need to be

able to assure the Board that you have the tools to prevent a relapse into this behavior if released.

## **II. Identify Your Triggers (or “Warning Signs”)**

Next, you need to identify potential internal and external triggers that led to your target behavior in the past. **Internal** triggers are emotions, thoughts, or feelings that might result in the target behavior. Think about the **emotions** that led to or accompanied your target behavior. Did you feel unwanted, unloved, abandoned, depressed, or stressed? What feelings made you turn to the target behavior to begin with? **External** triggers are circumstances outside of and around you that might result in the target behavior. Think about the **circumstances** that led to or accompanied your target behavior. What people, environments, situations, or things do you associate with the target behavior? For example, certain smells may remind an addict of the place they formerly used drugs, or the sight of people congregating and drinking alcohol may remind an alcoholic of past relationships, parties, and other experiences they associate with drinking. It is critical that you identify both the internal and external triggers that led to your target behavior so that you can show the Board you are aware of how your own past thoughts, feelings, or circumstances could be triggering in the future.

## **III. Identify Your Coping Mechanisms**

Next, you need to identify the **coping mechanisms** and **tools** that you now use to prevent a relapse into the target behavior. What specific actions do you take upon experiencing the thoughts or feelings you identified as potential triggers? How will you physically, psychologically or emotionally remove yourself from the situation? Potential coping mechanisms and tools include: self-talk, walking away, meditation, deep breathing, exercise, listening to music; calling a sponsor (or spouse, pastor, family member, etc.), and going to a 12-Step or other Support Meeting. As you reflect on your coping mechanisms, remember that they should be **specific** to you and tools that you **actually use**. If you cannot answer questions about what a coping mechanism or tool is and when the last time you used it was, it should probably not be on your RPP.

## **IV. Identify Your Support Network**

Last, you need to identify the **support network** that you turn to when you feel triggered. Is there someone you will call to discuss your thoughts and feelings? This could include a sponsor, mentor, family member, friend or organization whose contact information you keep with you so that you can reach out to them at any time to address the thoughts and feelings associated with the target behavior.

## V. Write Your RPP

Once you have reflected on and identified your target behaviors, the internal and external triggers to them, and your coping mechanisms and support network, you are ready to start writing your RPP. Your RPP does not have to be long or complicated (a page or two), but it does have to address the four topics listed above. The best RPPs are those that are specific and personal. When the Board looks at your RPP, they should be sure that it could only be yours. Below is a suggested outline for one way you could organize your RPP:

- a. Introduction. Start your RPP with a short introduction. Your introduction should (1) explain what the target behavior is; (2) how it developed; and (3) how it contributed to the life crime. Do not forget to explain how your target behavior is tied to *violence* (if this is true for you). Substance abuse and anger are problematic thinking patterns and behaviors that are important to avoid to be a healthy person, but the Board needs to know you understand how these thinking patterns and behaviors have been connected to violence in the past.
- b. Triggers. Next, list your internal and external triggers to the target behavior. Make sure that you list them separately so that it is clear that you understand the difference between internal and external triggers. Remember, be specific and personal.
- c. Coping Mechanisms & Tools. Next, list the coping mechanisms and tools that you use when you feel triggered. Again, be specific and personal.
- d. Support Network. Last, identify the people who are in your support network and provide contact information for them.