

By Chandler Scott McMillin

## Part Six: Coping With Relapse

There's no single 'right' way to intervene with a client who's had a slip. But in almost every such situation, leverage can be a valuable tool in restoring compliance. That is, if the clinician has taken the time to identify and prepare such leverage for use when it's needed.

The goal isn't to punish the client for relapse. It's to make sure that consequences follow noncompliance. Research suggests that consequences are most effective when three conditions are met:

1. The client knows in advance what they will likely be;
2. They're imposed swiftly, without unnecessary delay; and
3. Consequences are reliably and consistently enforced.

What doesn't seem as important is the severity of the consequences. A big fine, for instance, isn't necessarily a better deterrent than a lesser one that is administered quickly and effectively.

In Brenda's case, she tested positive for drugs nine weeks into treatment. Not surprising, given her history of recidivism. It was probably a bigger surprise that she lasted for nine weeks. She arrives for a scheduled meeting with her counselor shortly afterwards. Her agenda is clear: split the clinician from the probation officer. It's no doubt worked in the past.

Let's look in on their conversation:

**Counselor:** Well, you tested positive for marijuana. Surprised?

**Brenda:** Not really. I mean, I knew it could happen. I thought maybe I wouldn't...

**Counselor:** Get caught?

**Brenda:** (*embarrassed laughter*) I guess so. It was just the once.

**Counselor:** That's all it took, apparently.

**Brenda:** Yeah. But look, do you think we could deal with it on our own? You and I? Not bring in the Court?

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**Counselor:** Why not?

**Brenda:** Because it would just make everything worse. I know this is just an excuse, but let me explain what happened. In the first place it wasn't even a whole joint. A few hits. And I immediately regretted it, and stopped myself. I was at a birthday party for my friend Luis, and my ride wasn't feeling well so she went home. And I needed a ride and this guy offered and in the car on the way home he opened up the ashtray and wanted to know did I want to smoke...(*Brenda continues with a detailed account of that evening.*) Anyway, as soon as I got home I felt terrible about it, and I haven't had anything since. I should have told you. I'm sorry I didn't, I really am.

**Counselor:** You don't have to apologize. Most people don't confess until they get caught.

**Brenda:** (*relieved*) Thanks for being so understanding.

**Counselor:** Sure.

**Brenda:** I'm trying as hard as I can.

**Counselor:** Well, technically, if you were trying that hard, you wouldn't have smoked the marijuana. But I appreciate the effort you've made.

**Brenda:** Thank you. So do we have to report it to Gail? She'll see it as like, a failure.

**Counselor:** I don't think Gail regards you as a failure.

## Using Leverage in Counseling the Court-Referred Client

**Brenda:** Maybe. But I'd appreciate not having to explain it to her.

**Counselor:** Too late.

**Brenda:** What do you mean?

**Counselor:** I've already told Gail about it.

**Brenda:** What?

**Counselor:** That's the agreement you signed. Disclosure of any positive tests to the Court. Meaning Gail.

**Brenda:** You already told her? Before you talked to me?

**Counselor:** Yeah. That's the procedure.

**Brenda:** So I'm being punished without a chance to explain myself?

**Counselor:** It's not a punishment. It's a consequence. If you do A, then B happens. Test positive, Gail gets notified.

**Brenda:** (*seems shocked*) I can't believe this. What happens now?

**Counselor:** You and Gail and I discuss it.

**Brenda:** What? When?

**Counselor:** Now. Together.

**Brenda:** What if she's not available?

**Counselor:** She's expecting our call. (*Dials number.*)

The discussion with Brenda's probation officer lasts about 20 minutes. A solution is reached. Gail is clear that the Court must be informed. However she is willing to advocate for Brenda in terms of the progress she has made. Brenda's counselor will confirm that. They'll recommend the judge modify the order to include extra testing and counseling sessions for Brenda, who will sign a contingency contract regarding further positive tests. The agreement allows Brenda to stay in school and in treatment as an intensive outpatient – an incentive that helps balance the consequences.

**Brenda:** I still wish you hadn't told her.

**Counselor:** That would send the wrong message.

**Brenda:** It would show that you cared.

**Counselor:** (*laughs*) Brenda, how many times have you overdosed? Two, three, more?

**Brenda:** Two. Where I wound up in the ICU, I mean. A couple others where it was just the ambulance to the ER. Another time where I just woke up eventually.

**Counselor:** Uh-huh. So that's a few times you dodged the bullet. How many relapses do you have left?

**Brenda:** I only smoked one joint.

**Counselor:** But it never stops there, does it? It's like watching the same movie over and over. We already know how this ends. What kind of friend would I be if I let you slide, knowing what could happen next?

**Brenda:** You're my friend?

**Counselor:** (*laughs again*) Brenda, when it comes to this stuff, I'm probably your best friend in the world.

### Summary

Take note of the efficient way the counselor and probation officer worked together in the application of leverage. Despite Brenda's protestations, it's unlikely her drug use was limited to one joint or even one occasion. Given her history, she would quickly slide right out of treatment and back into substance use. Because the counselor had taken time to identify and develop leverage, it was available when needed. And it may be that a far more severe consequence was avoided.

### Next:

## Part Seven: The "Mini-Intervention"



Chandler Scott McMillin, Principal of Recovery Systems Institute, has created and operated successful addiction treatment programs for more than thirty years. He has written countless articles and co-authored seven books on addiction treatment and helped hundreds of families with successful interventions.