

Post-Acute Withdrawal Syndrome (PAWS)

Everybody is familiar with the concept of withdrawal from drugs. However, not everybody knows that there are two stages of withdrawal. The first one, which most people think is the only stage, is the *acute stage*, which usually lasts a few days, weeks or heaven forbid, months (methamphetamines) after cessation of the drug. This is when the drug user experiences physical withdrawal symptoms. During this stage, everybody's symptoms vary according to the type of drug they used, and the unique physiological response to their drug.

Something many people don't know and are not prepared for, is the second stage of withdrawal. A bunch of emotional and psychological symptoms called *post-acute withdrawal syndrome* (PAWS) will most probably come to visit you on and off for up to two years into your recovery.

Post-acute withdrawal occurs because your brain is gradually returning to normal. While your brain recovers and moves toward a new stability, brain chemicals can ebb and flow as they sort themselves out. This is the cause of PAWS episodes. So, it's a good thing, but doesn't necessarily feel too good while this stabilising process is occurring.

Many people relapse because of their lack of understanding about the likelihood of experiencing PAWS symptoms in the first year or two of recovery. This is a great shame, when you can be armed with knowledge to get you through these episodes.

As mentioned, every person is different in the acute stage of withdrawal, whereas in **POST**-acute withdrawal, most people experience the same symptoms, including:

- Irritability and hostility.
- Mood swings (severe highs and lows).
- Anxiety or panic attacks.
- Variable energy.
- Variable concentration.
- Lack of libido.
- Inexplicable chronic pain.
- Sleep disturbances – insomnia or vivid dreams.
- Issues with fine motor co-ordination or balance.
- Depression.
- Lack of initiative, enthusiasm or motivation.
- Fatigue, tiredness or low energy.
- Foggy thought processes.
- Poor memory.
- Poor impulse control.
- Increased sensitivity to stress.
- Alcohol or other drug cravings or urges.

- Alcohol- or other drug- related dreams.
- Apathy.
- Emotional over-reactions or numbness.
- Inability to experience pleasure (also known as anhedonia, or “pleasure deafness”).

It seems a lot, but the good news is that you won't experience all these symptoms, or all of them at once. In fact, you may not experience many of them, or any of them at all. You may only feel a little tired or stressed every now and then, which can be upsetting, but if you know that it is probably PAWS, you have a better chance of handling it. As already mentioned, it is a great shame that many people relapse because they don't know that these symptoms are normal: the discomfort actually indicates that their brain is healing, and the symptoms **will** and **do** pass. For some people, PAWS can be a very debilitating experience. But don't lose hope!

During the development of a new maladaptive behavior, such as the repeated use of your mind-altering substance or behavior (becoming dependent or addicted to it), the repeated and habitual use of the drug leads to changes in the brain. Neuroplasticity aids in the reverse process, which is good news. Once you have become abstinent from your drug through your new recovery behaviors, thoughts and feelings, your brain will rewire itself completely (or almost completely) back to your pre-addicted state.

Strangely enough, and according to neuroscience, PAWS actually helps you recover. It is likely that PAWS is due to the rewiring of the neural circuitry, which means it is letting you know (albeit in annoying and unpleasant ways at times) that you're recovering. Remember, if it feels worse, you're probably getting better.

Post-acute withdrawal feels like a roller-coaster of symptoms. At first, your symptoms may change from minute to minute and/or from hour to hour. Throughout your recovery they will come and go. As you continue recovering, the good stretches will get longer and longer. But sometimes PAWS can be intense.

Duration of PAWS

PAWS visits for a few days. It will appear and disappear, just like a family member or friend who lobs in on you from time to time, unannounced. If you hang on for a maximum of up to just a few days, PAWS will leave as suddenly as it arrived.

You'll become accustomed to the ups and downs, and you will learn to trust that the down times end just as surely as the good times. We have a saying in recovery: “This too shall pass”, reminding us that everything changes. You simply have to wait the uncomfortable times out and know that they'll eventually end.

The post-acute withdrawal period can last for up to two years. This doesn't mean that it will plague you for all that time. Some people don't even experience PAWS, or don't recognize it because the symptoms are so vague, compared to the hell of addiction. But if you are forewarned you are forearmed, and you can sail through the PAWS moments with this knowledge. We have some strategies for you to employ if you encounter PAWS in your recovery.

Don't push yourself

You may try to avoid PAWS by pretending it doesn't exist and pushing yourself through each day, regardless of the comfortability you may feel. Don't. You'll exhaust yourself. One of the danger times for relapse is when you feel tired, or fed up, thinking that nothing is ever going to change. Therefore, try to see PAWS as a good thing – a sign that you are getting well. Remember, if you feel bad, you're probably getting better. Feelings pass more quickly if you accept them.

Accept the PAWS 'visit' as part of the process of healing

There are good days and bad days ahead. Enjoy the good days and just try to relax and nurture yourself with healthy behaviors on those days when you feel uncomfortable or 'off'. You could go to the movies, visit a good friend, take a long bath, listen to your favorite music, dance, do some yoga, go to the beach, or read a good book, and know that these tough days will pass. Breathe and allow the feelings to pass through. The saying "What you resist persists" is appropriate here. Try to accept rather than resist your uncomfortable feelings.

Look after yourself

Understand that you will need to learn new ways to care for yourself and don't over-book your life. Give yourself permission to focus on your recovery, without being totally self-absorbed and unhelpful to others.

Know your PAWS and befriend it

Everybody's symptoms are different and the timing of PAWS visits differs also. If you don't know about PAWS and how it manifests in your body and mind, you may be caught off guard. But if you know what to expect, you may be able to ride it much easier. So keep some sort of diary or journal for tracking your emotional and physical health for the first year or so of recovery. You will then know what to expect and how to manage it.

Learn to practice relaxation frequently and regularly

When you're relaxed, PAWS symptoms are easier to acknowledge without getting caught up in them. Work out what relaxes you. Everybody is different. Some relax with heavy metal music, others opera, and still others, jazz or pop. You need to discover your own path through recovery. It will be unique to you. So get going on some writing, or awareness exercises to build your own unique relaxation strategies.

Plan ahead

We best manage the emotional and physical ups and downs of recovery by being prepared for them. It's important that you are able to draw up a PAWS response plan (below) and share your plan with your peers and family, so that you have the extra support and understanding you may need when you have PAWS moments. It's also important to remind yourself that the feelings you are having are just part of PAWS. Your symptoms mean that you are healing, and they will pass.

Use mantras or slogans

Some of the slogans used by recovery circles such as "Just for today", or "One day at a time", can be helpful when you are experiencing PAWS.

Other examples include: “How important is it?”, “Easy does it”, “Keep it simple”, etc. Think of your favorite sayings or slogans.

Confusing PAWS with boredom

Something else to seriously consider, with regard to PAWS moments, is the concept of “boredom”. We hear many times in recovery that people are bored. But boredom can be the outward sign of an inner state, such as anxiety or restlessness, symptoms of addiction and PAWS. Boredom takes way too many addicts back to using their drug, which is a terrible shame, because if you understand where it’s coming from, you have a chance to avoid relapsing.

By identifying what “boredom” means to you, you may be able to arrest its effects. Human behavior researchers have become interested in the phenomenon of boredom over the past decade and they agree with us: there is more to “boredom” than meets the eye.

They have found that boredom is about restlessness as much as apathy, and that many real-world problems which are highly correlated with boredom are connected to the idea of self-control, including addiction, gambling and binge-eating. They also say that boredom can be a destructive feeling, leading people to zone out in meetings and classes. In some cases, it can even lead people to revert to alcohol or drugs.

Thankfully, the experts acknowledge that boredom can also be a force for good, becoming the spark that starts a creative process, or leading to greater self-reflection and wellness. So turn that bored frown upside down, get to the real cause of the “boredom” in you and treat it. For instance, if your boredom is about anxiety – i.e., not knowing what to do with yourself now that you’re not using your drug – you can use some anxiety management techniques, talk honestly with somebody about it, or simply acknowledge it for what it truly is, get off your butt, and find something else to do. Easy.

This may save your life one day, or the life of somebody else who believes that boredom is real and doesn’t think they can tolerate it, leading to relapse. You can tell them what you have learnt, and it might just be the thing that keeps them going through their own recovery. This is one of the reasons it’s a good idea to get to know people who are in the same stage of recovery as you, so that you can compare your experiences and support each other through them.

Recommended Video

TED Talk: What is Post-Acute Withdrawal Syndrome (PAWS)?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25c7UZKnFO0> (12:25 mins)

Reflective Questions: PAWS

1. Did you know about PAWS before this module?

Yes _____

No _____

If not, how do you feel about PAWS now? (For example, are you upset about it? Excited to know about it so that you can recognize it in the future? A bit of both? Indifferent? Confused?)

2. Write a PAWS response plan for yourself here. We best manage the emotional and physical ups and downs of early recovery by being prepared for them.

PAWS Response Plan

PAWS symptom	Strategy

3. How can you practice **self-care** today?

4. What relaxation strategies can you use when you're feeling agitated?

5. What are three sayings or slogans you will use when you are experiencing PAWS? (For example, "One day at a time"; "One minute at a time"; "Just for today"; "This too shall pass"; "Easy does it"; "Keep it simple"; etc.)

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____