



## Lifeboat: A Recovery Planning Guide

*Brought to you by (De)serving Life*

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**INTRODUCTION:** This Is Not About Preventing a Relapse. It's About Building a Life. We're not here to "prevent" anything. We're not here to scare you straight or hand you a checklist for perfection. Recovery isn't a list. It's a life—your life.

Old-school relapse prevention plans tried to predict when you'd fall and gave you bandaids for the bruises. This guide does something different: it helps you build a foundation strong enough to hold the weight of your story. It honors your pain, your power, and your process.

This is recovery planning reimagined. We'll talk about what matters to you, how you move through the world, and what helps keep your fire lit. And we'll do it using a structure that doesn't just sound good—it actually works.

That structure? SMART goals.

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### What Are SMART Goals (And Why Are We Using Them)?

SMART stands for:

Specific: Clear and concrete. What exactly are you trying to do?

Measurable: Can you track it or see progress?

Achievable: Is it within reach given where you are right now?

Relevant: Does it matter to you and your recovery?

Time-bound: Is there a target date to work toward?

SMART goals aren't just for corporate meetings or treatment plans. They're for anyone trying to move forward with intention. They turn vague hopes into real steps. They help you focus when everything feels foggy. And most importantly—they put you in the driver's seat.

In this guide, we'll use SMART goals as a framework to break your life down into manageable, meaningful moves. Not because you have something to prove—but because you deserve to know what it feels like to **build something that holds**.

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## STAGE 1: Values & Vision

*What's worth staying alive for?*

You've been through hell. And you're still here. That means something. But survival isn't the finish line—it's the starting point.

This first stage is about **building your foundation**: not the rules, not the recovery buzzwords—you. What matters to you? What kind of life feels like yours?

We're going to slow down.  
Zoom in.  
And ask the big questions:

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### Step 1: Define Your Core Values

Your values are your inner compass. They're what keep you steady when everything else feels shaky. They're the things you're willing to protect, stand for, or build around. Even if you've strayed from them in the past, they never stopped mattering. They're still yours.

#### Examples of values:

- Family
- Peace
- Spirituality
- Freedom
- Growth
- Loyalty
- Honesty
- Connection
- Creativity
- Justice

#### Your Turn:

Pick 3 to 5 values that feel real to you right now. Not the ones you think you're supposed to choose—the ones that actually hit.

Then write 1 sentence for each about what it means to you.

#### Like this:

**Freedom:** I want to wake up and choose where I go and who I become—nobody else gets to decide that for me anymore.

**Loyalty:** I don't just want people to ride for me—I want to be someone worth riding for.

**Peace:** I've lived in chaos. I want silence that doesn't feel like punishment.

## Step 2: Picture Your Life Worth Living

If you made it through all the mess to the life that was waiting for you on the other side... what would it look like?

- Who's in it?
- What are you doing for work? For joy?
- Where are you waking up?
- How do you handle stress, anger, temptation?
- What would make you proud?

This isn't a fantasy—this is **your vision**.

We're going to turn it into SMART goals next. But first, just feel it. Write it out like a letter to your future self. Or describe it in bullet points if that's easier.

### Prompt Starter:

- If I could build the kind of life that made all this struggle worth it, it would look something like this...
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## Step 3: Set Your First SMART Goal

Based on what you just uncovered, what's one thing—just one—you want to move toward?

Pick something:

- Connected to your values
- That brings you closer to your vision
- That's small enough to do, but meaningful enough to matter

Then turn it **SMART**:

**S:** I want to attend 1 AA meeting a week

**M:** I'll track my attendance in a journal

**A:** There's a meeting 3 blocks from my house every Tuesday

**R:** Staying sober connects to my values of peace and family

**T:** I'll do this for the next 30 days and then reassess

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### This Stage Isn't About Perfection. It's About Alignment.

No more chasing someone else's idea of success.

This is your vision. Your values. Your moves.

Stage 1 sets the tone. And you just did that.

Now, **Stage 2: Triggers & Tools**.

We're gonna dive into what throws you off... and what you can do about it.

## STAGE 2: Triggers & Tools

*"I don't have to go back there... even if it comes back for me."*

This is where we start getting real about what knocks you off your game—so you can stop getting ambushed and start getting equipped.

Every human being has triggers. But when you've lived through trauma, addiction, incarceration, or all of the above, your nervous system gets trained to fire on all cylinders just to survive.

We're not here to shame that. We're here to understand it, name it, and take the power back.

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### Step 1: Identify Your Triggers

A trigger is anything that sets off a chain reaction in your body, brain, or behavior. Sometimes it's loud and obvious—sometimes it's sneaky and quiet. Either way, the more you know your triggers, the less control they have over you.

#### Categories of Triggers:

**Emotional:** Shame, anger, rejection, loneliness, boredom

**Environmental:** Certain neighborhoods, smells, people, songs

**Internal:** Self-doubt, cravings, restlessness, racing thoughts

**Relational:** Arguments, feeling misunderstood, abandonment

**Situational:** Job loss, court dates, financial stress, big changes

#### Your Turn:

Write down 5 of your most common or powerful triggers.

Then, for each one, ask:

- What does it feel like?
- What does it make me want to do?
- What has it led to in the past?

#### Example:

**Trigger:** Being ignored or dismissed

**Feels like:** Heat in my chest, instant frustration

**Urge:** Prove myself, raise my voice, or shut down

**History:** Has led to fights, silence, or using to numb the pain

## Step 2: Build Your Toolkit

Now let's flip the script.

Instead of getting pulled into old reactions, you're going to build a response kit—a set of tools to help you move through triggers without losing yourself.

This is not about “staying calm” all the time. This is about staying connected to your values when life gets loud.

### Types of Tools:

TOOL TYPE	EXAMPLES
<b>**Grounding**</b>	5-4-3-2-1 method, cold water, focusing on breath, holding something solid
<b>**Movement**</b>	Walk, stretch, punch a pillow, pace it out
<b>**Mindfulness**</b>	“This feeling is real, but it’s not forever.” Observe > React
<b>**Connection**</b>	Call a sponsor, message a trusted friend, pray
<b>**Delay**</b>	Set a timer for 20 minutes before acting on a craving or urge
<b>**Expression**</b>	Journal, scream into a towel, write a poem, hit record and vent

### Your Turn:

For each trigger you wrote earlier, match at least one tool you could try instead of defaulting to past patterns.

“When I feel [trigger], I will try [tool] because it helps me stay connected to [value].”

### Example:

“When I feel rejected, I will go for a walk and call my sponsor because it helps me stay grounded in my value of self-respect.”

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## Step 3: Map the Cycle, Interrupt the Pattern

Every relapse (whether it's using, isolating, self-harming, exploding) follows a cycle. If we map it, we can interrupt it.

Use the **SOBER** space as your anchor:

**S:** Stop

**O:** Observe what's happening (internally and externally)

**B:** Breathe—just one full breath can slow the spiral

**E:** Expand awareness—what are my choices? What do I want?

**R:** Respond—make a value-aligned move, even a tiny one

You don't have to “win” the whole battle in one breath.

You just have to make space for something better to happen.

## Triggers Don't Mean You're Failing.

They mean you're **healing**.

If you weren't trying to grow, life wouldn't feel so loud.

You're not broken for feeling dysregulated—you're brave for staying in the ring.

Now that you've got your foundation (Stage 1) and your toolkit (Stage 2), next up is **Stage 3: Support & Connection**—because no one gets out of the dark alone.

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### STAGE 3: Support & Connection

*"You don't have to do this alone—and you were never meant to."*

The opposite of addiction isn't just sobriety.

It's **connection**.

To people. To purpose. To the part of you that never gave up.

This stage is all about who and what helps you stay grounded, lit up, and locked in on your path.

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#### Step 1: Map Your People

You need a crew—not just any crew, but people who remind you of who you are, not who you were.

Start by naming people in your life who:

- Show up without judgement
- Respect your boundaries and growth
- Encourage your vision
- Can handle hard conversations
- Make you laugh, breathe deeper, or think clearer

Break them into categories:

SUPPORT TYPE	EXAMPLES
**Emotional**	Best friend, partner, sponsor, therapist
**Practical**	Ride to meetings, help with job search or errands
**Spiritual**	Pastor, elder, meditation teacher, prayer group
**Recovery-Based**	Peer support, fellowship crew, reentry mentor

#### Your Turn:

Fill in your personal version of this chart. Then ask yourself:

- Where are the gaps?
- Who do I need to reconnect with?
- Who might I need to let go of (with love) for now?

## Step 2: Know What You Need from People

A lot of us grew up without knowing how to ask for help—or believing it was even allowed. But clarity saves relationships.

When you know what kind of support you need, and when, it keeps you from:

- Expecting people to read your mind
- Feeling let down by people who mean well
- Burning out your supports or yourself

### Tool: “In This Moment, I Need...”

- Someone to just listen
- Someone to give feedback
- Help solving a problem
- Company through a craving
- A reminder of my goals
- A reminder that I’m not alone

You don’t have to be “low” to ask for support.

**Support is a lifestyle**, not an emergency button.

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## Step 3: Practice the Reach-Out Ritual

When things get loud in your head, your first instinct might be to isolate.

That’s not weakness—it’s conditioning. But we’re unlearning that now.

Create a **Reach-Out Ritual**—a short, doable script you can follow when you’re triggered, slipping, or just overwhelmed.

### Example:

- “Hey, I’m not in danger or anything. Just feeling [emotion/urge] and trying to stay on track. Can I talk it out for a few minutes?”
- “I don’t need a fix, I just need a witness.”
- “I promised myself I’d reach out instead of disappear. This is me keeping that promise.”

Write your own version of this. Keep it on your wall, your lock screen, your pocket. You don’t have to think of the right words when your brain’s on fire.

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## Step 4: Boundaries ARE Support

Sometimes the most powerful support is the kind you give yourself—by setting boundaries that protect your peace.

That might mean:

- Saying no to old patterns, places, or people

- Cutting ties with anyone who keeps pulling you backward
- Letting go of guilt around doing what's right for your recovery
- Telling people what behaviors or topics are off-limits
- Walking away without needing to explain yourself

Boundaries aren't about control.

They're about **self-respect**. And that's a form of love.

### **The People You Let In Shape the Person You Become**

Every strong recovery story has a **crew** in the credits.

Let this stage be your reminder: You are worthy of that kind of support.

Next up is **Stage 4: Values & Vision**—where we tap into your why, build a life that matches your worth, and map out what freedom really means to you.

## **STAGE 4: Values & Vision**

*“Recovery isn't just about what you leave behind. It's about what you're walking toward.”*

This stage is where we shift from surviving to building.

From fixing what's broken to **planting what matters**.

It's where you remember your **why**, define your **worth**, and create a vision that reflects the life you want—not just the life you think you can get.

### **Step 1: Discover Your Core Values**

Your values are the compass underneath your goals.

They don't tell you what to do, they help you stay true to who you are while doing it.

When you know your values, it gets easier to:

- Say yes to the right things
- Say no without guilt
- Stay grounded in chaos
- See progress even when it feels slow

**Some examples of core values:**

Growth	Loyalty	Integrity	Freedom	Creativity	Service	Wisdom
Justice	Compassion	Family	Faith			

**Your Turn:**

Choose 3–5 that speak to you the loudest. Write why. Not what sounds good—but what feels true.

**Example:**

“I value freedom, because I've lived caged in my mind, my habits, and the system. Now I protect that freedom by staying accountable and honest.”



## Step 2: Build a Vision That Matches Your Values

Values are the foundation.

Vision is the house you're building on top.

This isn't a dream board. This is your recovery blueprint—something that keeps you moving even when life tries to shake the ground beneath you.

### Ask yourself:

- If I was fully living by my values, what would my life look like?
- Where would I be? Who would be around me?
- What kind of work would I be doing?
- What would my mornings feel like?
- What kind of legacy would I be leaving?

Let **your imagination run**.

Then pull it back and ask:

“What’s one small step I can take now that moves me closer to that life?”

That’s a SMART goal in disguise:

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound.

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## Step 3: Reframe Your Story

A strong vision also means refusing to stay stuck in old shame loops.

You're not pretending the past didn't happen.

You're rewriting what it means.

Instead of: “I’m damaged.”

Try: “I survived what tried to destroy me—and I’m building from the ashes.”

Instead of: “I’ve wasted too much time.”

Try: “I’m using everything I’ve learned to make the most of the time I have.”

Your story isn't over—it's evolving. And you're the one holding the pen.

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## Step 4: Define What Success Really Means to You

Forget what social media says. Forget what anyone told you in the past.

### What does success look like for YOU?

Write it down in real words. Not vague fluff—real signs of progress.

- “Success means being present when my kids talk to me.”
- “It means not ghosting people when I get overwhelmed.”
- “It means finishing my GED.”
- “It means laughing and not feeling guilty.”
- “It means choosing peace, not chaos.”

And guess what? Every time you move toward that—**that is recovery**.

## Vision Pulls You Forward When Willpower Runs Out

This stage isn't about being perfect. It's about having direction.

Recovery is more than not using. It's **building something so real, so aligned, so meaningful** that the old life can't compete with it.

And you're already doing it.

Next up is **Stage 5: Triggers & Responses**—where we get honest about the things that knock us off center, and we build real-time tools for staying rooted through the storm.

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### Stage 5: Triggers & Responses

*Name it, don't blame it. Feel it, don't feed it.*

Every single one of us has triggers — people, places, feelings, or memories that send signals to our nervous system that something isn't safe. Sometimes those signals are loud (panic, rage), and sometimes they're quiet (boredom, numbness, avoidance). Either way, they matter — not because they make you “weak” or “unrecovered,” but because they're part of your body and mind doing exactly what they're designed to do: protect you.

The goal in this stage isn't to get rid of triggers — it's to **recognize them, respond to them skillfully**, and **rewrite the script** before it takes over.

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#### What Is a Trigger?

A trigger is anything that activates a painful thought, memory, emotion, or urge to use. It might come from the outside (someone yelling, a specific smell, a place you used to use) or the inside (shame, grief, loneliness, excitement, even joy).

You can't always control when a trigger shows up. But you can control what you do next.

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#### Step 1: Know Your Personal Triggers

Start by building your list. Don't just think “drugs” — think deeper. Look for emotional, environmental, and physical cues that tend to stir something up in you.

Here's a jumpstart:

- Feeling misunderstood, dismissed, or not listened to
- Being alone too long or feeling abandoned
- Big crowds, loud noises, or too much stimulation
- Conflict with loved ones or authority figures
- Physical pain, exhaustion, or hunger
- Money problems or talk of bills/debt
- Romantic rejection or feeling unwanted
- Smells, songs, or streets that connect to your past
- Holidays, anniversaries, or dates tied to loss
- Success or happiness (yep, that can trigger relapse too)

Write your own. Name them. Make peace with the fact that being triggered doesn't mean you're broken — it means you're human.

## Step 2: Build Your Response Tools

This is where SMART meets heart. For every type of trigger you face, you need a real, doable, practiced response — not just “try harder.” That’s what this plan is for.

For each of your triggers, fill out this response tool:

**Trigger:** What tends to set you off?

**Thought:** What goes through your head when this happens?

**Feeling:** What emotion shows up underneath?

**Old Reaction:** What did you used to do (or want to do) in response?

**New Response (SMART):** What are you going to do instead? Make it Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

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### Fierce Compassion, Not Harsh Criticism

This part of the guide isn’t here to shame you into behaving better. It’s here to help you **train your nervous system** like you would a muscle. You don’t have to “master” your triggers to move forward — you just have to be willing to meet them honestly, treat yourself with kindness, and take one step at a time in the direction of your peace.

Now for **Stage 6: High-Risk Scenarios & Safety Planning**. It’s time to test the plan in real life.

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## Stage 6: High-Risk Situations & Safety Planning

*Don’t just hope you’ll make it — plan like your life depends on it. Because it might.*

Sometimes you can see the storm coming. Sometimes you can’t. High-risk situations are those moments when the pressure is high, your resources feel low, and the old wiring lights up like a damn Christmas tree. You don’t plan for these because you expect to fail. You plan for them because **you expect to fight for your future — and win.**

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### What Are High-Risk Situations?

These are **more than triggers** — they’re full-blown setups. Situations where **multiple factors** make it easier to fall back into old behavior and harder to use your **new tools**. Everyone’s list will be different, but here are some common ones:

- Getting out of prison or finishing treatment
- Running into old friends or people you used to use with
- Big arguments or moments of betrayal
- Boredom, loneliness, or isolation that stretches for days
- Too much success too fast (yes, really)
- Crises like eviction, job loss, or the death of a loved one
- Celebrations with alcohol or old habits
- Romantic rejection or breakups
- Mental health spirals like depression, mania, or panic attacks
- Unstructured time without accountability or purpose

These aren’t just “bad situations.” They’re **high stakes**, and they deserve **high-level strategy**.

## Step 1: Anticipate the Setup

Name the situations that are most dangerous for you personally. Think about:

- Your history
- Your patterns
- Your weakest moments

Try filling out this sentence a few times:

“It’s hardest for me to stay grounded when \_\_\_\_\_ happens, especially if I’m also feeling \_\_\_\_\_.”

Keep it honest. **No shame.** You’re not planning for failure — you’re **building a safety net.**

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## Step 2: Build a Safety Plan That Works

For each high-risk situation you listed, we’re going to create a clear action plan. This isn’t a vibe. It’s a blueprint. Ask yourself:

- What warning signs do I notice before it gets bad?
- Who can I contact immediately if I’m feeling unsafe?
- Where can I go that is physically or emotionally safer?
- What grounding tools can I use in the moment?
- What commitment am I making to myself about how I’ll move through this?

Here’s a mini template to try out:

### High-Risk Situation:

[Describe it.]

### Early Warning Signs:

[How do I know it’s starting?]

### Safety Response Plan (SMART):

- I will call/text: [Name + number]
  - I will go to: [Safe space]
  - I will do: [Grounding or coping skill]
  - I will say to myself: [Affirmation or anchor]
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## This Is Strategy, Not Fear

You are not being “negative” by planning for the worst. You’re being **wise, courageous, and accountable.** You’re building the muscle memory of resilience before the test comes. Think of this as your fire drill — so when the alarm goes off, you don’t panic. You pivot.

You’ll never have total control over what life throws your way. But you’ll always have control over how ready you are to meet it.

Now we’re headed into **Stage 7: Values & Vision** — where we start crafting a life that pulls you forward, not just one you’re running from. So Strap in. You’re building more than a plan — you’re building a life.

## Stage 7: Values & Vision

*You're not just surviving anymore. You're aiming for something.*

Up 'til now, we've been focusing on crisis response, grounding skills, relapse awareness, and harm reduction. And all of that matters. But what keeps most people going — really going — isn't just what they're running from.

**It's what they're running toward.**

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### Why Values Matter

When the hype dies down and nobody's looking, your **values** are what make the decisions. They're the compass that keeps you from drifting, the core of what makes your life worth building.

Values aren't goals. They're not destinations. They're the direction you travel in. And when your values are clear, your vision can get **bold**.

#### Examples of values:

Integrity	Service	Creativity	Family	Freedom	Growth
Faith	Justice	Peace	Community	Honesty	Love

You don't need to pick them off a list. You already live by some. You just might not have **named** them yet.

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### Step 1: Reflect on What Matters to You

Ask yourself:

- When have I felt proud of how I handled something?
- What kinds of people do I admire? Why?
- When do I feel most like myself?
- What breaks my heart? What brings me joy?

Your answers point toward your **core values**. Write them down. Keep them visible. These aren't decorations. These are your anchors.

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### Step 2: Use Values to Shape Your Vision

Now we ask: If I really lived by these values, what would my life look like?

This is where we start to sketch your vision — your ideal future. This is the “why” behind your plan. It's what makes all the effort mean something.

You might write it like a paragraph. You might create a vision board. You might build a SMART goal around each one. Whatever works for you — just make it real.

Here's a sample format to try:

**Value:** Community

**Vision:** I want to help others the way I was helped. I see myself volunteering with youth, sharing my story, and creating safe spaces for people to heal.

**Value:** Growth

**Vision:** I plan to go back to school, take recovery seriously, and keep working on myself — not because I have to, but because I want to keep evolving.

## This Is Your Fuel

Vision work isn't fluff. It's fuel. When life hits hard — and it will — your values will remind you why you don't give up. Why you don't go back. Why you take the next right step even when no one's clapping.

This isn't about being perfect. It's about being intentional.

You're not just building a plan to stay clean. You're building a life that feels good to be inside of.

Stage 8 is next — the final stage — **Review, Reconnect, and Recommit**.

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## Stage 8: Review, Reconnect & Recommit

*Because finishing a plan isn't the end. It's the beginning.*

You've done something serious here. Not just a worksheet, not just a "plan." You've taken a long, unflinching look at your life and dared to believe that something different is possible. That you are possible.

This final stage is all about:

- Reviewing your plan
  - Reconnecting with your "why"
  - Recommitting to the path — and yourself
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### Review: Look at How Far You've Come

Before you move forward, **take it all in**:

- You've identified triggers and red flags.
- You've mapped out support and routines.
- You've defined goals that actually mean something.
- You've named your values.
- You've built a plan that reflects who you are and where you're going.

Now look again — do any sections need refining? Anything missing? Anything worth celebrating? This is your shot to **fine-tune** and make sure this plan feels like you.

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### Reconnect: Anchor Back to Your Why

This is where you sit with yourself and remember:

Why did I start this? What do I want for my life?

Read your values and vision statements again. Revisit your SMART goals. Look at the people you listed in your support network. Feel it in your chest: **You're not alone**. You're not the person you used to be. And you don't have to prove your worth — you're building from it.

If the fire's flickering low, this is how you **relight it**.

## **Recommit: This Work Doesn't Stop — But Neither Do You**

Every day isn't going to feel like a big leap. Some days, recommitting will look like:

- Making that one call
- Showing up when it's hard
- Revisiting this plan and updating it
- Asking for help instead of isolating
- Doing one thing that moves you closer to your vision

This stage is about making that quiet, daily decision:

**“I'm still in this.”**

**“I'm worth showing up for.”**

**“Let's keep going.”**

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## **Final Note from (De)serving Life**

You've done something powerful. Not just because you wrote it all down, but because you dared to be honest. You chose reflection over avoidance. Planning over drifting. Growth over shame.

**You chose you.**

And whether this plan changes a little or a lot over time — one thing stays true:

**You're not doing this alone. We see your effort. We believe in your future.**

**From serving life... to living it.**

Let's keep building. **Together.**