

## RECOVERY

The month of September is RECOVERY MONTH; recovery from addiction; whether chemical or behavioral or both. This type of recovery is usually referred to as “recovering” rather than “recovered” as the process is life long; more like having diabetes which can be controlled by diet and exercise rather than the healing of a broken leg which is a one shot deal.

Because of the development of dysfunctional coping strategies, to simply stop the chemical abuse or compulsive behavior is not enough. You must also learn new ways of dealing with life or “living life on life’s terms”. For some folks it may mean learning new coping strategies, new defenses and new ways of relating to other people. For others it may mean changing jobs and changing friends. You can be guaranteed that any kind of recovery will entail change and it ain’t easy.

How to begin? The first step is about making a decision that you need to stop drinking or abusing drugs or that the behavior you are engaged in is causing problems in your life and you need to change it. Sometimes folks are helped into the change process by the law or by their medical provider. Just as with any other type of injury or illness, chemical addiction is on a continuum of intensity and has a range of options available to help you in the process. Probably the most well known of these are the 12-Step Groups that are self-help and not run by professionals. Many thousands of people all over the world have stopped the chemical abuse or compulsive behavior and begun the path to recovery through the use of these groups. This might be compared to the idea that if you have a bad cold you can self-medicate with aspirin, orange juice and chicken soup. Because of the differing intensity of addiction there are some folks who need more help. With physical illness you may need to see your doctor for an antibiotic and take a few days off work to rest and recover; with addictions you may need a structured outpatient treatment program with a qualified therapist. If you are not able to break the cycle of addiction with either of these courses of action, you may need to consider a residential treatment or “rehab”. This would be the equivalent of being hospitalized for a serious accident or illness where you need lots of help and support for recovery.

Recovery from addiction or chemical abuse is just what it sounds like. Any kind of recovery takes time with the symptoms being more intense in the beginning and lessening as recovery progresses. Recovery from addictions must take place physically, psychologically/emotionally and spiritually. This does not happen overnight or with just ceasing to use the chemical or stopping the compulsive behavior. Your brain chemistry has been severely altered through the course of the addiction. Neurotransmitters may have been destroyed or depleted and will take many months to recover. A man named Terence Gorski has studied this phenomenon extensively and has written several books about it. One of the most interesting concepts he has proposed is the concept of Post-Acute Withdrawal or PAW. PAW describes the brain chemistry healing and the subsequent problems in emotions and behaviors during this healing process.

PAW symptoms are often mistaken for something else. Folks in early recovery may even say “I am more miserable now than when I was drinking or using”. The good news is that this will pass as the brain chemistry heals. Sort of like the person who has an appendectomy, they may be in tremendous pain right after surgery, but they will eventually heal and the pain will be gone. As a person begins to recover he/she can experience problems with mood swings, emotional over reaction or under reaction, appetite, physical coordination, inability to feel pleasure, memory, unable to think clearly, lack of focus/concentration, judgment can be impaired, sleep disturbance, etc. All of these items are regulated by the neurotransmitters so of course they will not be functioning properly in early recovery.

The good news is that as we move through the process of recovery and continue to focus on healing and making the changes necessary for healthier and more functional living, these symptoms will alleviate and disappear. I have heard many a person exclaim “I am a grateful alcoholic, (or addict)” and I finally realized that recovery is about being free from the compulsion and the dysfunctional lifestyle. It is also about learning a new way of living that is happier and healthier and would not have been possible without having gone through the process.

Some of the tools that are available to help a person begin the recovery process include: 12-Step Groups, having a good support system of family and friends, physical exercise, counseling or therapy and above all --- a good sense of humor and ability to laugh at the absurdity of life!!

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