

PERSONALIZED AND COMPREHENSIVE

Recovery from addiction isn't simply a matter of abstinence. Refraining from drinking, abusing drugs, gambling, or any other compulsive behavior is just one part of a recovering person's journey. True recovery involves creating a life in which it is easier and more rewarding not to return to those behaviors.

Addiction is a chronic (long-lasting) condition. So maintaining an addiction-free lifestyle and preventing relapse involves a continuum of care and support. There's no "one size fits all" approach. Each person develops his or her addiction for unique and varied reasons (predisposition, childhood experiences, living environment, for example); recovery involves understanding those reasons and addressing them. Addiction usually causes collateral damage in multiple areas of the individual's life—physical and mental health, relationships, career, finances, legal matters—and it's important that they be addressed as well.

Treatment is most successful when it incorporates multiple components, each of which targets particular aspects of the illness and its consequences. This creates a balanced, more complete foundation on which to build long-term recovery. The process begins with abstinence.

In some cases, this may necessitate detoxification. Medical care may be needed for physical problems caused by the addiction (hepatitis, liver disease, or malnutrition). A successful recovery plan typically incorporates mental healthcare, behavioral therapy, and/or other related counseling; development of a support network; and possibly additional support services such as career rehabilitation and financial or legal counseling.

RECOVERY: DETOXIFICATION

Substance abuse can cause physical dependence over time; the body becomes accustomed to the substance's effects and can't function without it. Quitting—depriving the body of the effects to which it has become accustomed—can result in responses ranging from unpleasant (heart palpitations, nausea/vomiting and difficulty breathing) to life-threatening (seizures, heart attacks and strokes). "Detoxification" may be needed as the first step in recovery to ease withdrawal symptoms. Detox, as it's commonly known, is the process of getting the abused substance and toxins out of the addicted person's system and getting him or her physically stable. Medical supervision is important.

Detox is usually easier, and often safer, on an inpatient basis, although outpatient detox is possible. As with every aspect of recovery, this will depend on factors unique to each individual—substance of abuse, duration of addiction and amount used, age, coexisting physical/mental conditions and ability to pay for treatment. An inpatient approach offers a medically-monitored, highly structured environment where individuals are closely monitored to prevent the use of the abused substance and to ease withdrawal symptoms.

RECOVERY: MAINTENANCE & RELAPSE PREVENTION

Quitting is the first step; a treatment and relapse prevention plan should be implemented to maintain recovery. The plan will involve significant, sometimes abrupt, life changes like cutting oneself off from everything and everyone associated with the addiction—i.e., their former life. To ensure that the plan stays relevant as the recovering individual's needs, emotions, and life circumstances evolve, it's important that it is assessed routinely and adjusted as needed. The recovery options for people with addictions are growing, so if an approach isn't working for an individual, alternatives can and should be explored. Recovery may involve any combination of the following therapies:

Medication: Medication can be a helpful component of treatment. Medications can be used to help with withdrawal during detoxification and also to help prevent relapse by re-establishing normal brain function and/or diminishing cravings. Individuals with coexisting behavioral disorders or mental health issues (such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, a personality disorder) may also benefit from medication.

At one time, addiction was viewed as separate from mental health problems, but it is now widely accepted that each can drive the other, and their treatment should go hand in hand. "Dual diagnosis" recovery refers to the blending of substance abuse treatment and mental health care, treating them as part of a continuum rather than separate problems.

Recovery Options

Behavioral Therapy & Counseling: Behavioral treatments help patients identify and modify attitudes and behaviors related to their addiction and increase healthy life skills. These treatments can also enhance the effectiveness of medications and help people stay in treatment longer.

How and where each individual participates in treatment depends on his or her individual needs. Residential (inpatient) treatment programs (sometimes referred to as therapeutic communities, or TCs) can be effective in severe cases by creating a highly structured, intensive program. They are not meant to be long-term solutions, but they can provide a jumpstart.

Behavioral therapy encompasses a variety of individual and/or group counseling and supportive programs. Common approaches to counseling include:

- Cognitive-behavioral therapy – helps patients recognize, avoid and cope with the situations in which they are most likely to relapse
- Motivational interviewing – centers on the individual's motive(s) for change (recovery)
- Couples and family therapy – Strong relationships are essential to the recovery process, and addiction typically damages relationships with family, friends, and others

In some circumstances (typically in a highly structured program), contingency management (motivational incentives) may be used. This involves positive reinforcement (e.g., vouchers for goods and services or privileges) to encourage abstinence. Studies have shown it to be effective in drug rehab, but there are concerns about lasting effectiveness once the incentives stop in the absence of other interventions.

Recovery coaching can also be a part of recovery and avoiding relapse. Certified recovery coaches help individuals identify a new vision for their life and develop and enhance life skills for achieving that vision.

Therapy typically involves an in-person interaction with the therapist. With the rise of the Internet, online treatment is now emerging as an alternative possibility. The web and digital communications have already made a significant impact when it comes to self-help and support networks.

Peer support groups can be an invaluable source of guidance, assistance and encouragement. Not only are there numerous options for individuals in recovery, but also for family and friends who have been impacted by the addiction. These groups offer a safe, nonjudgmental place to get support and discuss challenges. Connecting with others in a similar situation can help reduce feelings of isolation, anxiety and hopelessness that people in recovery often feel early on. It's much easier to remain motivated and positive with others you can turn to and lean on when the going gets tough. Many of them offer online discussion groups and other support services; some are purely internet based.

12-Step Programs: These are based on guiding principles developed by Alcoholics Anonymous, established in 1938, that have been adapted for recovery from a wide range of addictions and other behavioral problems (narcotics, codependency, gambling, online gaming, compulsive eating, sex addiction to name a few). The 12-step principles are spiritual in nature and involve admitting that one is powerless to control his/her addiction, and recognizing a "higher power" that can give the individual the strength to remain addiction-free.

Other groups offering alternatives to the 12-step approach include:

Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS): www.sossobriety.org. According to its website, SOS targets alcohol and drug addiction and compulsive eating and "credits the individual for achieving and maintaining his/her own sobriety. SOS respects recovery in any form, regardless of the path by which it is achieved. It is not opposed to or in competition with any other recovery program."

SMART Recovery (Self-Management and Recovery Training): www.smartrecovery.org. This group targets all types of addiction and compulsive behaviors. It advocates self-empowerment and self-directed change through a 4-point program (building and maintaining motivation; coping with urges; managing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and living a balanced life) using scientific evidence-based tools and techniques.

SELF-HELP GROUPS

Moderation Management (MM): www.moderation.org. MM is designed for people who believe their drinking has become problematic and want to moderate or abstain. Its approach involves early intervention and harm reduction.

Women for Sobriety: www.womenforsobriety.org. This group's "New Life" Program for women alcoholics is centered on 13 principles (acceptance statements) emphasizing positive thinking, personal responsibility, and embracing the future instead of rehashing past mistakes.

LifeRing: www.lifering.org. For individuals with an addiction to alcohol or nonmedically indicated drugs, LifeRing's approach is based on developing, refining and sharing members' personal strategies for continued abstinence and crafting a rewarding life in recovery. It advocates sobriety, secularity (recovery focused on human efforts), and self-help (personal motivation and effort).

Buddhist Recovery Network: www.buddhistrecovery.org. This organization supports the use of Buddhist teachings, traditions and practices to help people recover from addictive behaviors. Grounded in Buddhist principles of non-harming, compassion and interdependence, it promotes mindfulness and meditation, is open to people of all backgrounds, and is respectful of all recovery paths.

ASSESSING THE OPTIONS

To be successful, addiction treatment must help the individual stop the problem behavior, maintain a drug-free lifestyle, and achieve productive functioning within the family setting, workplace and society. Before making a commitment to a specific course of action, it's important for the individual and/or whoever is responsible for the individual to assess options and any proposed treatment plan. Look for programs that incorporate research-validated techniques, and the people administering treatment should have the appropriate credentials.

The goal of regularly reassessing and adjusting treatment is to prevent relapse by modifying the plan as the individual's life in recovery evolves. But relapse does occur, especially in the earliest stages of recovery. This does not mean that treatment has failed or the individual is weak. Professionals involved in treating addiction now realize that relapse can be a constructive (though not necessary) part of the recovery, serving as a signal that some aspect of treatment needs to be adjusted so that forward momentum can resume.

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