

The Third Leg of the Stool

Nutritional Support for the Addicted Brain

By Christina Veselak, LMFT

The American Medical Association has long understood that addiction is a brain driven, bio-psycho-social illness. Traditional treatment programs, including Alcoholics Anonymous have done a great job developing effective approaches to the psychological, social and spiritual aspects of addiction. However, for the most part, these programs do not teach their clients the skills necessary to address or manage the biochemical and brain imbalances that drive addiction. Thus relapse rates are chronically high, and even when people do manage to stay sober, they are often plagued by ongoing depression, anxiety, irritability and insomnia. This leads them to seek relief by going to psychiatrists whose tool-boxes are generally limited to the use of psychotropic medications, thus rendering patients dependent upon them for lifetime prescriptions. Many addicts and alcoholics go into treatment to get off mood altering substances, only to leave treatment on more drugs than they entered with. Furthermore, many of these drugs are toxic, have serious side effects, or stop working effectively after a while. Just as importantly, these drugs do not address the root causes of brain imbalance.

Fortunately, 50 years of research supports an alternate approach to addressing the chemical imbalances underlying addictive behavior. By learning to feed their brains and bodies the simple nutrients required for optimal and balanced functioning, many recovering people are empowered to create a stable and enduring recovery and a vibrant life. Imagine a three legged stool: if this stool has only one functioning leg, it will fall over immediately; if it has two legs, the person attempting to sit on it may stay upright for a short while, but only by staying focused on maintaining strict balance. Once distracted, they fall right over. However, bringing in the third leg of the stool allows a person to easily find balance, and move on with life.

This “bio” approach is based on two premises: keeping blood sugar very stable through the day by never, ever missing a meal, avoiding simple sugars and starches

and eating protein every 3-4 hours; and quickly replenishing the malnourished addicted brain with the nutrients necessary for its optimal functioning. These nutrients are ideally found in a well-rounded, whole food, “pro-recovery” diet. They include amino acids, vitamins, minerals and healthy fats. However, by the middle and late stages of addiction, most addicts and alcoholics are profoundly nutrient deprived, and have developed serious digestive issues. Therefore, we have found that using supplements which contain these crucial nutrients, often effectively jump starts the repair process and frequently leads to dramatic decrease of withdrawal symptoms and cravings, quickly improving mood and sleep. These supplements can be found at any local vitamin store and can be taken as needed without a prescription. Treatment programs which utilize this approach, and bring in the “third leg of the stool” have been shown to have a much lower relapse rate than programs which don’t.

Finally, these treatment programs have identified underlying physiological disorders which many people self-medicate by using mood altering chemicals and behaviors. These disorders include hypo- or hyper-thyroidism, adrenal dysfunction, food intolerances, and genetic polymorphisms such as issues with the MTHFR gene or Reward Deficiency Syndrome. These disorders can be easily identified and treated, again leading to a more serene recovery.

Books which teach this approach include Seven Weeks to Sobriety, by Joan Mathews Larson, PhD; End Your Addiction Now, by Charles Gant, MD; and The Mood Cure by Julia Ross, MA. The non-profit educational organization, The Alliance for Addiction Solutions, is another good source of information.