

## *Relapse Prevention Services*

7200 E. Dry Creek Rd., C-203, Centennial, CO 80112 (303) 888-9617

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### *The Addictive Process*

What is addiction? Addiction is a pathological relationship with any mood altering substance, event or personal relationship that has potentially life threatening consequences. Let us take a clear look at this.

The most important aspect of addiction is that it is a relationship intended to improve the quality of someone's life, which becomes destructively out of control over time. It is a process whereby a person begins to center his/her life around a substance, behavior (sex, gambling, etc) or around personal relationships (spouse, children) in a way that begins to interfere with their ability to function in an emotionally and physically healthy way.

The addictive process usually begins with an experience of fun, excitement or other feelings of euphoria. Sometimes the experience is simply relief from emotional or physical pain or a feeling of normalcy for the first time in the person's life. These feelings, like all feelings, are mediated through the nervous system of the body. Our brains and nervous system release certain brain chemicals in response to the addictive substance or behavior which elevate mood and relieve pain. We become attached to these sensations, which are very powerful. Why not? They feel good, lift anxiety and can give us a sense of being alive. The problem arises when we begin to confuse these feelings with love and life, and we lose other ways of relieving stress or feeling good. If we become too attached to these feelings and sensations, we begin to confuse excitement with intimacy. We begin to believe that fun, friendship, life or that special person who gives us these feelings are indeed the *source* of love and joy, which we therefore can't live without. The brain gets used to functioning on these higher levels of chemicals. The body however, cannot sustain such intensity and it begins to shut down parts of the brain that receive these chemicals. Tolerance develops. An addict therefore begins to need more drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling or emotional intensity to get back those wonderful feelings. This is early addiction.

The chemicals responsible for these sensations are called "neurotransmitters". The brain gets used to high levels of these chemicals and becomes dependent upon them. In fact, the brain develops the belief that it **NEEDS** them to survive.

Once this takes place, the person needs more stimuli to keep the brain pumping out these chemicals. He/she begins to obsess over getting the drugs, or continuing the behaviors. Use increases and more time is spent obtaining the drugs or dealing with the consequences of use. Hangovers may increase, financial stress may occur and legal and relationship conflict may begin. The addict may change friends and places in order to keep using. In other words, the addict changes his/her life to maintain use. This is middle stage addiction. The person's life begins to revolve around finding, maintaining and recovering from addictive behaviors. All other aspects of life become less important over time.

As time goes on, the addict ceases to have fun or experience any elevated mood in response to addictive behavior. He/she uses just to keep functioning and to avoid the pain of withdrawal. Emptiness and chaos develop internally and all sense of connection to God or to a community of people other than fellow addicts stop. Internal loneliness increases. The addict feels a need to control his/her environment to reduce the internal chaos. Addicts deny that they have a problem, and blame others for the consequences because facing the issue may mean change. Change to the addict means death because the brain and psyche now believe unconsciously that the addictive behavior is necessary to survival.

The secondary gains of getting high or the fear of stopping may be worse than the immediate pain the addict is suffering in the moment. The addict will live with obsession, fear, anger and chaos rather than

face change. He/she develops the defense of *denial*. The addict has two major faulty beliefs. 1) "I am in control of my behavior" and 2) "I am not an addict". The addict begins to develop elaborate ways to maintain these two beliefs. Challenging these beliefs is terrifying.

Furthermore, the more one uses the more one depletes his/her brain chemicals. This will bring on feelings of depression, fatigue, fear and anxiety. A change in chemistry will bring on changes in thinking. The addict begins to make more mistakes, break rules, and seriously neglect responsibilities. As addictive behavior increases, brain chemicals decrease. As brain chemicals decrease, addictive behavior increases and a very vicious cycle continues. Attempts at abstinence create more anxiety and fear as the brain begins to believe it is dying. Thus, just deciding to stop rarely helps. However, this does not mean that the situation is hopeless.

Since addiction affects the whole person, then treatment and recovery must address the whole person. The first step is to realize that one has a problem and become willing to get help of some sort. The second step is to get stabilized as one quits the addictive behavior. Once a person stops using he/she will begin to have withdrawal symptoms due to the depletion of neurotransmitters. Addiction is not unlike taking neurotransmitters out of a bank account. The balance becomes low and the body and brain do not get what they need to function. Anxiety increases. Relapse comes primarily from physical, emotional and lifestyle instability. The stress becomes too much to handle and the person uses in an attempt to balance the brain and body and temporarily feel more stable.

Thus, stabilizing the brain *naturally* becomes crucial. Amino acids, vitamins and minerals help restore the brain's depleted chemicals and reduce withdrawal symptoms. A healthy regimen of a balanced diet, nutritional supplements and exercise, along with working a recovery program that addresses both the physical and emotional issues associated with addiction, supports abstinence and allows the recovery process to progress.

Recovery is not abstinence. It is a gradual transformation in the way we relate to self, other people, God, feelings and life challenges. Therefore we look at recovery as a four legged stool. Each leg supports the stool. It is possible to miss a leg, but one will then spend so much time balancing that there will not be time or energy to do anything else. The four legs of the recovery stool are the biochemical, psychological, social and spiritual aspects of recovery. These involve learning how to keep the brain and body healthy and in balance, healing psychological and emotional wounds, learning effective feeling and stress management tools, and creating a supportive, non-addictive support system and social life. Each leg is very important. Here at Garden Gate Counseling we treat all four legs of recovery. Free programs like Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step programs, or Celebrate Recovery (a Christian recovery group), also help with the spiritual side of recovery, and in learning healthy ways of coping with the stresses of life. Please contact us to see how we can help you in recovery. Please call now for more information or to get started on your recovery journey!

By: Jan Veselak, MA, LAC and Christina Veselak, LMFT, CN