

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The Road Back: Recovering from Addictions

We can become addicted to anything. Although alcohol, drugs, and gambling are often considered to be the main addictions, and seem to get the most attention, it would be erroneous to think these are the only areas in which we can become addicted. Work, shopping, sex, exercise, certain foods, even the Internet, are just some of the other areas that can be associated with addiction. Even though each addiction has its own unique characteristics, there are common elements that underlie all addictions.

The recovery process or problem resolution in addiction can be challenging for some individuals; for others, however, it can be rather smooth and easy. Successfully resolving an addiction problem usually involves addressing, and "working through" a variety of factors:

Recognition. Recognizing that one has a problem is an important first step toward problem resolution. Terms such as "denial" or "defensiveness" are often used to describe someone who does not yet recognize there is a problem. Once this acknowledgment of a problem occurs, then opportunities for further exploration into the problem can begin. Gaining insight into the problem—i.e., the degree of exploration that is done—is usually dependent upon the individual's motivation level.

Motivation. The more an individual is motivated to recover, the greater the likelihood of problem resolution.

There are two forms of motivation. One form is referred to as extrinsic motivation. Individuals experiencing extrinsic motivation are affected by external factors such as a spouse putting pressure on the partner to change, or the individual changing because his/her job is in jeopardy.

The other form of motivation is referred to as intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from within an individual and thus is not influenced by external factors. Intrinsically motivated people will say things such as "I want to change" as opposed to "I have to change." Although both forms of motivation are important in contributing to the individual's ability to resolve the problem, those with a higher intrinsic motivation tend to have better success rates and improved long-term maintenance of behavior change.

Analysis. The analysis stage emerges once the individual recognizes the addiction problem and is motivated to make changes in behavior to resolve the problem. During the analysis stage, the individual needs to:

- Identify the costs and benefits of continuing to engage in the addictive behavior
- Focusing on the main problem situations involving the addictive behavior
- Discover the key triggers underlying the addictive behavior
- Relate the addictive behavior to its consequences

A thorough analysis will lead to an effective action stage.

Action. At this point, the individual is ready to develop new strategies and action plans to replace the old conditioned habits or automatic behaviors associated with the addiction. These action plans can take the form of behavioral strategies such as exercise or reading, and/or may take the form of mental strategies such as self-talk or "toughing it out." It is crucial that the individual sets realistic strategies and action plans.

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Relapses/Set-Backs. Relapse in the addiction population is not uncommon. The overall success of an individual's problem resolution of an addictive behavior is typically directly related to how well he or she manages a relapse. A relapse is best addressed as a temporary set-back or slip. If a set-back or slip occurs, it does not mean all that the individual has accomplished is destroyed. One can use the slip as a learning experience and continue to work towards recovery right from where he/she left off before the slip.

Other strategies for long-term problem resolution of an addiction are:

- Seeking professional assistance
- Obtaining strong social support through family and friends
- Reading self-help books
- Participating in self-help community groups

Each of these activities, alone or in combination, can strengthen the individual's ability to handle relapses and remain focused on healthy lifestyle choices.