JUST THE FACTS

RECOVERY/RELAPSE

AN EDUCATIONAL FACT SHEET FROM
THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION

STAGES OF RECOVERY

Chemical dependency is a disease that causes a person to lose control over use of alcohol or other drugs. It affects every aspect of the person, as well as his family and friends. The goal of recovery from this destructive disease is to eliminate dependence on drugs, achieve abstinence and return to physical, psychological, social and spiritual health. The recovering individual goes through specific stages to acquire the skills necessary to maintain sobriety. These stages include:

PRETREATMENT

Before someone can make a commitment to a treatment program, he must realize that his use of drugs is not normal, but abusive. This abuse usually results in serious consequences such as a breakdown of the family or loss of employment. This type of event is referred to as a "motivational crisis" and causes the addict to realize his problems are serious and he needs help. This phase is sometimes referred to as "hitting bottom."

Recent research indicates that early intervention by family, friends, employers or treatment professionals can start the recovery process before this crisis period occurs, although it is often the crisis which forces the individual to seek help.

CHOOSING TREATMENT

Important considerations in choosing an appropriate treatment program are:

- Matching the individual with an appropriate treatment program
- The type of drug/drugs being abused
- Presence of other mental and physical problems, such as schizophrenia or diabetes

The type of drug or drugs being abused strongly affects treatment strategies. Another important component is education for the individual regarding addiction and strategies for attitudinal and behavioral changes. These considerations create the groundwork for recovery.

Chemical dependence is a family disease. Family members and friends can learn how to cope with the recovering person and how to discontinue enabling behaviors that encourage drug use. Involvement in a 12-step program such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous provides a valuable source of support and assistance at no cost.

STABILIZATION

This period of recovery includes acute physical withdrawal (detoxification) from the abused chemical and motivational counseling by a qualified treatment professional. The recovering person chooses treatment because he is unable to cope with his drug-related problems by himself.

EARLY RECOVERY

The individual learns to process the events which helped him realize he was addicted and brought him into treatment. A counselor produces motivation for recovery and encourages a structured treatment program and drug-free lifestyle.

MIDDLE RECOVERY

The addicted individual commits to a long-term treatment program. At this point, he may struggle with emotional acceptance of his addiction and question his ability to live without drugs. With the assistance of a counselor, he makes decisions about his recovery program and formulates a plan of action to implement it.

LATE RECOVERY

During this period the client deals with major life problems and examines his value system and behavior to prevent the recurrence of drug use and to develop a healthy and well-balanced lifestyle. A spiritual search may begin which reinforces the new identity of the recovering person.

MAINTENANCE

Full recovery can only be accomplished through the recognition of drug addiction as a chronic disease and the life-long need for a strong maintenance plan. This consists of a daily program encouraging ongoing recovery and personal growth.

Most treatment programs last for three to six months of recovery. Some individuals can sustain recovery after six months of structured treatment, particularly with the help of support groups and completion of the specific recovery stages. For others, this amount of time in a structured program is insufficient for full recovery and they return to substance abuse and an addictive lifestyle. In the recovery process, this is called "relapse."

WHAT IS RELAPSE?

Relapse is the process of returning to the use of alcohol or other drugs by a person who has remained abstinent for a period of time and has made a serious attempt at recovery. The return to drug use is considered a relapse, only if the individual began the serious recovery (change) process.

During the first serious recovery effort the individual is faced with many problems. His response to these problems and whether there has

been proper completion of the recovery stages will determine if he will relapse and return to drug usage.

Relapse is a common occurrence. Often the recovering individual feels a relapse means he has failed and that no recovery progress has been made. Relapse education teaches that relapse is part of the recovery process and not total failure on the part of the individual. In treatment, the relapsing event is incorporated into the total framework of recovery.

WARNING SIGNS OF RELAPSE

Some individuals may relapse once and then achieve total abstinence; others may relapse several times. There are predictable warning signs in the relapse process which are evident before drug usage recurs. The recovering individual and his support system (family, friends, employer) should be aware of these important signs to help prevent relapse. These include:

- Change. A build-up of stress caused by negative or positive changes and life events such as marriage, divorce, job change, promotion, or financial problems.
- Extreme Moods. Overly positive or negative thoughts, moods or feelings including depression, elation, irritability or numbness.
- Denial. Denial that there is a chemical dependency problem. The individual fails to honestly share feelings in counseling or support groups and attendance becomes sporadic.
- Loss of Control. The individual begins to feel out of control and frequently has thoughts of drug usage. Relapse seems justifiable.
- High Risk Situations. The individual places himself in situations where drug use is likely, thereby sabotaging or defeating his recovery efforts.
- Stress. Stress increases as the individual withdraws from support systems and obsesses about returning to drug use. Frustration, despair, embarrassment and feelings of hopelessness all occur.
- Relapse. Irresistible cravings and urges lead to obtainment and use of drugs. The individual relapses.

PREVENTING RELAPSE

Relapse prevention is essential to the treatment process. Most relapse episodes stem from ignorance about addiction and relapse. The individual's history, personality, the types of problems he is experiencing, family involvement and anticipation of relapse warning signs must all be taken into account. Once these areas are identified and examined, early intervention and prevention of future relapse can be planned for.

Relapse prevention planning can be accomplished in a variety of treatment environments, such as inpatient or outpatient programs. Recovering individuals become involved in individual or group counseling and structured support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. The goal of relapse prevention is a drug-free individual who is comfortable in his recovery He is knowledgeable of warning signs and has a plan of action should these signs develop. This plan has specific steps to prevent relapse.

STEPS OF RELAPSE PREVENTION PLANNING

Stabilization

Through counseling, the individual and the family are stabilized after the first relapse episode. The individual feels he is in sufficient control to discontinue drug usage. Detoxification in a controlled environment is often necessary to accomplish this step.

Assessment

The individual and the treatment professional assess the chain of events leading up to the relapse episode. Other areas assessed are: how often the individual has relapsed, recovery tasks which have not been accomplished and the individual's coping methods.

Patient Education

The areas of addiction, recovery, signs of relapse and prevention are reviewed and reinforced.

Warning Sign Identification

The individual learns to evaluate his own specific behavior before relapse occurs to prevent drug usage.

Review of Recovery

Positive skills are identified and a new recovery program begins. New steps are created at this stage because the old program was not effective in preventing drug usage.

Inventory Training

The individual develops a daily inventory of progress which tells him if he is in the process of recovering or the process of relapsing. Positive events are reinforced; negative events are examined to prevent further occurrence.

Involvement of Others

Recovery cannot occur in isolation. Specific individuals become involved and supportive in the prevention process, including the immediate family, employers, AA, and friends.

Relapse prevention planning does not take the place of treatment but is a necessary step for every recovering person. Relapse prevention planning should accompany a structured treatment program and involvement in self-help groups. The occurrence of relapse does not mean that future recovery is impossible. Proper education about the recovery process, support by family and friends, identification of recovery skills and relapse warning signs all contribute to the achievement of a healthy, drug-free lifestyle.

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