

The Importance of Good Relationships

Medical Patient Education Module

The Importance of Good Relationships. Social Skills. Increase Social Competency. Family and Social Dynamics.

When addicts are active in their addiction, their primary relationship is to the drug. The chemically addicted person's behavioral repertoire narrows, because the person spends so much of his or her time in drug-related activities. Time and energy are spent on getting money to buy the drug, obtaining the drug, using the drug, and coming down from the drug. Because of this narrow focus, addicts tend to neglect their relationships with nondrug-using people, and eventually some addicts do not even have relationships with sober individuals.

Positive, healthy relationships are an extremely important source of support during an addict's process of recovery. The counselor should discuss with the patient his or her relationships and find out the nature of these relationships. The counselor will want to determine whether the patient has any positive family or social relationships that can be called upon to provide support during the patient's recovery. The counselor also will be looking at whether the patient has many damaging or unhealthy relationships that will tend to hold him or her in the addiction. Through discussion, the counselor can help the patient to identify unhealthy relationships and work toward changing his or her involvement in these relationships.

Two types of unhealthy behavior, codependency and enabling behavior, can contribute to a person's continued abuse of drugs. The counselor also should define enabling behavior and codependence and point out such relationships in the patient's life.

- *Codependency* occurs when another individual, perhaps the addict's spouse or family member, is controlled by the addict's addictive behavior. Codependents become codependent because they have learned to believe that love, acceptance, security, and approval are contingent upon taking care of a person with substance dependence in the way a person with substance dependence wishes. In their decision-making process, they allow a person with substance dependence to define reality. Unfortunately, this excessively caregiving behavior tends to foster even more dependency on the part of the addict. Some codependents are adult children of persons with addiction or addicts and their codependent behavior is the result of growing up in the environment of addiction.
- *Enabling behavior* occurs when another person, often a codependent, helps or encourages a person with substance dependence to continue using drugs, either directly or indirectly. Examples of individuals involved in enabling behavior are a spouse hiding the addict's disease from neighbors or their children by lying for a person with substance dependence and a so-called "friend" giving a person with substance dependence money to buy drugs. The counselor also will assist the patient to identify positive relationships with recovering or nondrug-using people who will be supportive of recovery. The counselor should encourage the patient to call upon these individuals for social support. If the recovering a person with substance dependence has no supportive relationships, he or she should be advised to use involvement in the fellowship in NA, CA, or AA to begin to establish supportive relationships. Other positive social involvement should be encouraged, such as with one's religious organization or with a recreational organization.

Recovery is a lifelong process that requires the development of a drug-free lifestyle, one of the most important objectives of treatment. Addicts' entire lives often are centered on several behaviors: getting drugs, using drugs, and associating with others who use drugs. When addicts stop drug use, they often must establish new friendships, new social patterns, and new leisure activities.

If the patient has drug-free, supportive friends and family, he or she should be encouraged to develop these relationships and perhaps participate in recreational activities with these people. If the patient reports having no drug-free friends or family to whom he or she can turn, then the patient should be encouraged to make new friends, which often only can be done slowly - by becoming involved in new social groups, such as religious, community, or other volunteer services.

Another part of developing a drug-free lifestyle is to establish a daily schedule that one follows in a reasonably consistent manner. Daily scheduling, and its advantages, should have been addressed earlier in treatment and can be reviewed here. The counselor should find out how well the patient can structure his or her life in a manner that supports abstinence and adhere to that structure. Reviewing the patient's daily schedule reinforces this structure and gives the counselor the opportunity to discuss with the patient deviations from the schedule. These deviations may involve "slips" or other emerging problems; thus, looking at them in counseling often is helpful in continuing to guide the patient toward recovery.

If patients have achieved some healthy structure in their lives, the next component of developing a drug-free lifestyle is identifying larger goals. While remembering that sobriety is maintained "one day at a time," at this point in their recovery individuals may be ready to think about what they want in their life in conjunction with recovery, such as going back to school, changing careers, or saving to buy a house. The counselor and patient can examine how to work toward these goals within the context of the recovering lifestyle.

Family members can play an important role in recovery. In general, including partners, family members, and even close friends in addiction treatment, e.g., in the form of holding family sessions, can facilitate recovery. Encouraging family involvement can help the recovering person create a better, more knowledgeable support network (Galanter 1986). It may decrease the family's addiction-enabling and/or codependent behaviors that tend to impede the patient's recovery. And it will make it easier for the counselor to intervene in any problematic family situations that might potentiate a relapse.

Spirituality

Spirituality, or healing the self, is an aspect of recovery related to the 12-step process but merits a separate discussion because of its importance in a successful recovery program. Spirituality is meant here in the general sense of one's having values and altruistic goals in life, rather than in any specific religious sense. Patients are encouraged to relate to a power that is transcendent and greater than they are. This "higher power" is defined by the patient rather than the counselor and involves connecting to a power that extends beyond the daily concerns of living. One outlet for the expression of a connection to something greater than oneself is found in participating in 12-step meetings, particularly in doing volunteer service at them. Other opportunities to experience and express this connection might lead to the patient becoming more involved in his or her religion, in community affairs, or in charity work.

In either case, the patient is encouraged to reach beyond himself or herself as a way to find fulfillment and happiness. This experience of spirituality is a central part of participation in the 12-step groups. The addiction counselor's role is to introduce and emphasize the idea and encourage the patient to follow through by his or her own efforts and by the fellowship of the self-help group(s) in which he or she becomes involved.