

Main Office
8790 Manchester Road
St. Louis, MO 63144
(314) 962-3456



Branch Office
1723 Pennsylvania Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63104
(314) 664-7550

FACING THE 5 CHALLENGES IN RECOVERY FROM ADDICTION

By Marcia J. Lawton, Ph.D.

Recovery from addiction involves breaking through the tendency to deny that you have a problem before the natural healing process can take hold. As you give up old habits and compulsions, you will face five challenges commonly encountered by people in recovery.

1. Maintaining Abstinence. When you use an addictive object to provide euphoria and escape from pain, it becomes strongly entrenched. In order to abstain from using it, you need to overcome two particular barriers:

- Resistance to change is a factor that you will encounter at each step of recovery. While change is painful for anyone, it is especially difficult for the newly recovering person who compares the intense pain of a changing lifestyle to the numbing effects of the addictive substance.
- Grief is the natural response to the loss of something that has been prominent in your life, even something as destructive as an addiction. You must experience all of its elements – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – in order to lay the object of addiction to rest.

2. Accept Your Powerlessness. Once you give up your addictive object, you also give up the self-centered powerful identity and external security that the object provided. You must come to grips with the humbling pain of reality. Your task is to assume responsibility for your life while accepting your personal and social limitations, needs, and abilities.

3. Changing Identity Messages. In addition to grieving and accepting realistic limitations, you also must overcome the identity messages – probably learned as a child – that contribute to your addictive dependence on an external object. Children learn early identity messages about whether they are good, bad, smart, stupid, lazy, or helpful. These perceptions can be distorted grossly by the addictive process, and they must be faced in recovery.

Often the distorted messages are compounded by an irrational imperative of secrecy – the sense that you cannot reveal who you really are. The challenge then is to expose all the messages and secrets, correct them to correspond with reality, and utilize them constructively during recovery.

4. Coping With Pain. Upon relinquishing the addiction, you are faced with all the old emotional and physical pains that you tried to numb with the addiction. Your challenge is to find new ways to endure and overcome painful times. Supportive involvement with other people, such as members of self-help groups, has been beneficial to many addicted individuals. Progress may be slow and you will need practice and patience. It took years to develop your destructive addictive habits, so don't expect new habits to appear overnight. Individuals who have developed or have pre-existing psychological disturbances, may need to see mental health professionals for more intensive counseling or appropriate medication.

5. Finding New Highs. As you develop new coping mechanisms to deal with pain, you also need to find alternate highs. A distinction can be made between euphoria, which is a fleeting feeling coming from an external source, and joy, which is a more constant internal state, independent of fluctuating external events. Exactly how you reach this state of joy differs from individual to individual, but it is the ultimate positive resolution of the human condition, and the lifetime challenge of recovery.

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