

Cross Addiction - Chasing the Illusion of Control

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

When transitioning into addiction recovery, one's first efforts involve attempts to interrupt the momentum of the addiction by abstaining from the chemical. Early attempts to quit drinking/using is often hampered not only by a lack of abstinence skills but also by limited awareness of the impact of their drug use on their lives over time. They often do not fully understand the nature of addiction and rudimentary elements crucial to recovery. Many people attempt to halt their addiction by using a "trial and error" process. Addicts, in trying to regain control over their using, often try to make the least amount of change to their lives overall, while eliminating negative consequences.

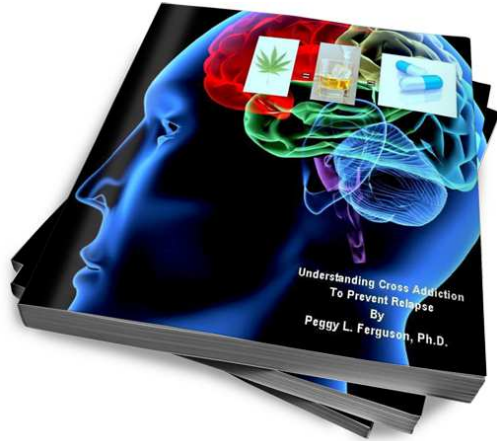
Many people attempt to regain control of use of drugs before trying to quit altogether. They try changing their drugs of choice. They may believe that oxycontin is causing major problems in their lives, and that when they were "only" drinking, that life was more manageable. Addicts, whose spouses are threatening to leave them over the last DUI, continuing fights, blackouts, and broken promises, may be motivated to quit drinking, but can easily maintain the defense that their cannabis smoking has not caused these negative consequences. The spouse may even believe it.

Switching to a different drug of choice rarely solves the problems identified. Essentially, in the process of trying to regain control by switching drugs, alcoholics/addicts in their early efforts toward recovery may be chasing an "illusion of control."

The idea that switching drugs will restore control is an almost irresistible notion to someone who cannot imagine a life without mood/mind altering drugs. In fact, this latest attempt at control does not and will not have a lasting effect over "control". They may be lulled into a false sense of security as they perceive things to be better or under better control. Control has typically not been re-established, and any seeming reduction in consequences and problems from the chemical are only illusory or temporary.

The cognitive distortions and defense mechanisms that assist the addict to persist in addictive behavior also operate to reinforce an addict's tendency toward cross addiction to other drugs. An addict will seek any evidence that supports the belief that complete abstinence is not necessary. When they seem to be less hostile, less depressed, or make some minor behavioral changes, this evidence of "improvement" is given great credence. Disconfirming evidence that indicates that the problems and consequences are still there will be minimized or disregarded.

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Regardless of which new drug an addict may switch to, the disease continues to progress-consequences and all. It is only a matter of time, usually a short amount of time. If you substitute another drug for your drug of choice you are still addicted. And you will continue to experience the same negative consequences of active addiction. You cannot regain persistent control over drug use by changing drugs. Believing that you are successful in regaining control with a different drug is the "illusion of control".

Keep in mind that while these descriptions refer to most recovering people, there are those who also have serious mental illnesses that necessitate medically supervised medications that are mind/mood altering.

Understanding Cross Addiction To Prevent Relapse
by Peggy L. Ferguson Ph.D.

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