

One More Tool For Early Recovery -- Structure

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Addiction usually brings with it a loss of daily structure and organization. An addict's lifestyle often becomes chaotic and haphazard, with the loss of work and other personal and family routines. Addicts often have eating and sleeping patterns that are outside of the mainstream, that also tend to help create the lifestyle of chaos and disorganization.

An addict that is seeking recovery, often goes to inpatient treatment. There are many benefits of this type of treatment. One benefit of inpatient treatment is the organizing structure of the program itself and the daily routine that develops by being engaged in treatment. The structure usually consists of a regimented wake up time, a scheduled amount of time for meals served at the same time daily, rules and treatment expectations. Patients in treatment are expected to sleep at night and be engaged in treatment during the day, attend sessions, and focus on recovery. When a newly recovering person leaves the safety of inpatient treatment s/he is called upon to develop structure for herself/himself.

Obsessive thoughts about drinking/using are reduced by closely scheduling your day. Boredom, which is highly correlated with those obsessive thoughts about using, is reduced. Active addiction is characterized by the addict's life revolving around getting the drug, using it, and getting over using it. In abstinence the loss of this behavior represents a loss of structure. The newly recovering addict is called upon to figure out how to replace the old drinking/drugging routine with new, recovery enhancing routines.

A change in routine is necessary to develop a lifestyle that encourages and nurtures recovery instead of addiction. This often involves a complete change and restructuring of time, activities, and attention.

A recovery lifestyle can be developed more easily by using a day planner, appointment book, or other similar tools to build a daily schedule of recovery enhancing activities. In this schedule should be counseling and sponsor appointments, planned personal and family events like parent/teacher conferences, date night, lunch with the girls, etc. Self-care activities, such as daily physical exercise, meditation time, personal relaxation routines, should also be scheduled in.

Having a tightly scheduled day in early recovery is very helpful in preventing relapse. It helps to eliminate excessive free time, which can lead to cravings, and thoughts about drinking/using. It also helps eliminate boredom, depression, and anxiety by maintaining a level of busy-ness and reducing opportunities to ruminate or worry. By not dwelling on the things that may be bothering you emotionally, depression and anxiety are reduced. A tight schedule also helps cut down on the negative emotional thoughts about self, others, and the world that feeds depression and anxiety.

Keeping a daily schedule also helps with prioritizing tasks and activities that recovering people are called upon to participate in. Sometimes people in recovery feel as if they are pulled in too many directions and are scheduled too tightly. In this case, a schedule that is too densely scheduled, serves to increase rather than decrease their stress. A schedule that is too densely committed, may serve as an indicator of the need to learn and practice assertiveness. It is important to learn to set and maintain appropriate boundaries in early recovery. Learning to say "no" to a request for your time, can be difficult, but with practice, can build or reinforce positive self esteem and self-confidence. Knowing that you are engaged in too many activities can also help you to improve your ability to prioritize. Without this ability, it is easy to become frustrated and overwhelmed, thereby increasing your stress.

Increased stress, regardless of whether it comes from too much or too little structure, increases the likelihood of relapse if left unchecked. People in early recovery are called upon to learn how to balance the conflicting demands for their time and attention. Learning this balance takes time, awareness, and practice.

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