

## Treatment of substance use problems: Reflections part 2

Professor Clark continues his reflections on treatment of substance use problems.

**Only a small proportion of people who use substances recreationally go on to develop problematic use. Many factors moderate the development of an addiction to substances, and help create exits from initial engagement and problematic use.**

In general, people are less likely to become addicted to substances if they have few life problems, and good personal and social resources, such as healthy self-esteem, strong family relationships, and non-drug using friends. In addition, if a person can find satisfaction and happiness in other activities, they are less likely to become addicted.

In general, people are more likely to become addicted to substances if they have complicated personal problems (eg depression), few personal resources (eg low self-esteem), and live in a deprived social environment offering few alternative pleasurable activities. Serious substance use problems often occur as part of a larger cluster of psychological, physical, family and social problems.

A variety of factors can change problematic substance use once it has developed. For some people, the problems are transitional in nature and they mature out of them as their setting changes, eg other life events become more significant, such as setting up a home with a loved one.

Other people spend years misusing substances and suffering negative consequences and losses, before dying without overcoming their problems.

For most people, however, their substance misuse involves multiple attempts either to stop using or to bring their use under better control. The majority of people eventually resolve their substance use problems, often on their own without formal treatment.

In general, it is easier to resolve substance use problems at earlier and less severe stages of problem development. For some people, reduced use or abstinence can be triggered by relatively brief interventions, the impact of which is thought to be on the person's motivation for, and commitment to, change.

A common obstacle to early help-seeking is ambivalence and the perception that one does not have a 'problem' serious enough to warrant change or treatment. Once this ambivalence is resolved and a commitment made, change may proceed without much additional support.

For other people, their substance misuse is part of a larger cluster of life problems that can become very resistant to change. Family factors and social networks may be central in establishing and maintaining the substance misuse. It is important to understand what maintains substance use in



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these individuals and, more importantly, establish which components need to be addressed to produce stable change.

Recovery is a word used to describe the process through which individuals with serious substance use problems resolve these problems and establish a meaningful and fulfilled life. Recovery involves the development and use of coping strategies and techniques that reduce a person's vulnerability to relapsing back into problematic use.

Recovery, or overcoming problematic substance use, is rarely an isolated event. A person may make a number of attempts to stop using a substance before they finally stop permanently. Each of the attempts at stopping involves events and processes that the person can learn from and that can ultimately contribute to recovery.

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pathways to recovery.

However, there are four main types of help that facilitate recovery. These include the person using:

- their own strengths and resources;
- the help of family members and other loved ones;
- support groups in the community;
- and, formal treatment.

People may draw upon these different types of help at different times in their path to recovery. Some may find one type of help more beneficial than others, although this may change over time.

For example, treatment may play a large role at the beginning of the recovery process, whereas later on help may be sought from loved ones and friends during difficult periods.

While there are many routes to recovery, they all have two things in common. Firstly, they all come from within the person. Self-change is the foundation and the process underlying all recovery. Formal treatment is a time-limited, circumscribed experience or series of experiences that interacts with and hopefully enhances the self-change process on the way to recovery.

Secondly, all routes to recovery involve behavioural change – a change from a problematic behaviour to one that is healthier for the person concerned.

In general, people pass through a sequence of stages on the way to resolving substance use problems. In brief, they:

- become concerned about the need to change
- become convinced that the benefits of change outweigh the costs, and make the decision to change
- create and commit to a feasible and effective plan of action
- carry out the plan by taking the actions needed to make the change
- and consolidate the change into a lifestyle that can sustain the change.

A person may move forwards and backwards between the stages on many occasions, before they finally achieve a sustained recovery.

A variety of processes, occurring within the person and in their environment, combine to help them move through the stages of change. Achieving and maintaining change depends on using the right processes at the right time. This can help explain why it can often take a person numerous attempts to overcome their substance use problem.

*The first part of this article was published in DDN, 11 February, page 15.*