

Essential Information for Family Members and Friends Navigating the Path of a Loved One's Addiction, Treatment and Recovery

by
Lisa Frederiksen

Addiction is a brain disease. Or is it? How does someone “get” this disease? What do you mean, powerless? And, what is codependency? Science-based answers to these questions and more are now possible, thanks to 21st century brain and addiction-related research. The resulting findings are exploding long-held beliefs about addiction and addiction treatment. The following provides a few of the highlights.

About the Disease of Addiction:

- Repeated substance abuse results in chemical and structural changes in the brain, which alter the way the brain works, especially with regards to pleasure, judgment, decision making, learning and memory. These changes occur with substance abuse and addiction. It's these changes that make it difficult for a person to think straight and act responsibly and cause their substance misuse behaviors (DUIs, fights, poor work/school performance, blackouts, binge drinking, etc.).
- “Chemical and structural changes” refers to how the brain works – how neurons (brain cells) “talk” to one another. This “talking” is known as a neural network. All drugs of addiction interrupt neural networks in the brain. This is why addiction is now defined as a chronic, often relapsing brain disease. Given that the brain controls EVERYTHING we think, feel, do and say, healing the brain is an important part of addiction treatment and recovery.
- Addiction is different from substance abuse because of the four key characteristics of the disease: cravings, loss of control, physical dependence and tolerance. An addiction craving can be five times stronger than our hardwired, instinctual cravings to eat when hungry or drink water when thirsty. This helps explain why an alcoholic/addict will lie, steal, cheat, sneak, intimidate a loved one – do anything – to get and use their substance.
- Addiction is “caused” by a combination of biological, developmental and environmental risk factors. The most common include: early use, mental illness, social environment, childhood trauma and genetics.
- Addicts/alcoholics must abstain completely if they want to stop triggering their hijacked, addiction-related neural networks, and thereby change their brains and stop their substance misuse behaviors long-term.

Alcohol or drug abuse interrupts the normal functioning of neural networks and eventually causes chemical and structural changes in the brain. These changes, in turn, alter the way the brain works, especially with regards to pleasure, judgment, decision making, learning and memory. (NIDA)

About Addiction Treatment and Recovery:

- There is no “one size fits all” model of addiction treatment, however effective addiction treatment should follow the disease management approach and include: 1) detox/stabilization, 2) rehabilitation and 3) continuing care.
 - Detoxification / stabilization is the phase of treatment when alcohol and drugs are safely removed from the addict/alcoholic's system in order to physiologically stabilize him/her.
 - Rehabilitation (a.k.a. Rehab) is the phase of treatment where individuals start the process of changing their brains – repairing, developing new and rewiring old neural networks – while at the same time, restoring their body's physical health. Generally rehab starts with an intense, almost immersion-like period, during which time the addict/alcoholic focuses on abstinence, education and behavioral changes. As neural networks change/repair and physical health returns, rehabilitation efforts are generally changed and/or modified. Objectives of Rehabilitation, include:
 - Brain and Body Healing Activities
 - Coping Skills Strategies
 - Dual Diagnosis Treatment (if applicable)
 - Prescribed Medications (if applicable)

- Mindfulness Activities
- Therapies
- A Strong Family-help Program
- **Continuing Care** is the phase of treatment that follows rehabilitation. This is a plan, a specific strategy, for how the addict/alcoholic is going to continue and maintain abstinence *and* a joy-filled life after the detox/stabilization and rehabilitation phases have been completed.
- Rehab and early recovery generally take about one year, which helps to explain, in part, why “all is not well” just because the substance use is stopped. While stopping their substance use is the first step, the “turning point” for addicts/alcoholics in recovery is their recognition that *they* are responsible for what’s happened and what will happen in *their* lives – not their boss or spouse or parent or “lot in life.”

What Happens to Family Members and Friends?

- The term, “codependent,” has a long history in the world of addiction treatment and recovery. It is used to describe a person, typically a family member or friend, who has become “co” “dependent” with the addict/alcoholic on the addict/alcoholic’s addiction. Against the backdrop of this new brain research, we can also think of the term as a label to identify a person who has developed neural networks of coping patterns to deal with secondhand drinking/drugging (SHDD). Secondhand drinking/drugging is a term used to describe the impacts a person’s drinking or drug use has on other people – the being on the receiving end of the nasty, mean things said or the fights or the fall-out of a DUI or the hiding or trying to protect the children, as well as, the worry, anxiety and fear, and the constant “What if _____?”

Powerlessness – what does it mean?

- This is a term you will see in various 12-step programs. But it boils down to the idea that given that addiction is a brain disease, an addict/alcoholic is powerless to control how much they use – using any amount can trigger their embedded addiction-related neural networks. If the addict/alcoholic cannot control how much s/he uses, the family member/friend most certainly cannot either. Both are powerless over alcohol and/or the drug(s). Viewed another way, the addict/alcoholic has been used to turning to their substance in order to cope with “life,” and the family member/friend has been coping by trying to control the addict/alcoholic’s substance use. Understanding the brain disease nature of addiction gives all concerned a great deal of power to learn what can be done to change and heal their brains and thereby change how they cope.
- Because addicts/alcoholics and family members/friends have both been affected, and in different ways, it is generally most productive if each is doing their own recovery work, independent of the other – at least until all learn more about the disease, its impacts and what happens next. For family members/friends, this might include family group meetings, a 12-step program, therapy with an addictions specialist, and/or learning more about the disease and SHDD (codependency) and how to change unhealthy SHDD coping skills.

Resources:

- **Addiction** – a series of video and informational pieces on all aspects of addiction produced by HBO in collaboration with the NIDA, NIAAA and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, www.hbo.com/addiction
- **List of 12-Step Groups** - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_twelve-step_groups
- **NAMI – National Alliance of Mental Illness** – for those with a loved one who has a dual diagnosis (mental illness and substance addiction) – NAMI has local chapters and offers family-to-family and peer-to-peer programs. www.nami.org
- **National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)** - <http://www.nida.nih.gov/>
- **National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)** - <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/FAQs/General-English/>

This two-page information piece is provided by Lisa Frederiksen, author of *Loved One In Treatment? Now What!*, and www.BreakingTheCycles.com. ©2010. All Rights Reserved. Reprints by permission.