

Wellness and Addiction



Ohio River watercolor by Harlan Hubbard¹

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Understanding Addiction

Imagine for a moment that you went to work one day and came home to discover that your house was no longer there, a storm had blown everything away. The shock, grief, fear, despair, and other swirling negative emotions would be overwhelming. We depend on certain things and relationships to maintain a happy life. When the things or people we depend on are suddenly removed -- the psychological impact is not unlike the withdrawal experienced by the alcoholic or drug addict when he no longer has his drug of choice. If the loss is of something physical -- shelter, food, the use of an arm or leg, a disease -- the symptoms of loss are also physical. As much as we in America want to exert our independence, it is even more important that we acknowledge our dependence on nature, our environment, and each other. This dependence is actually a good thing -- it is life-affirming and sustains us. There is a web of life, an ecosystem that we belong to. Our give and take within that big picture is essential to our health and healing. Ultimately we are neither truly independent nor dependent but interdependent.

This analogy is only meant to help us understand the naturalness of addiction; that alcoholism is not some strange condition -- but rather something that *any human being* can relate to. Each of us consumes, each of us has needs and dependencies. We can be dependent on a life-saving medication, a deep personal friendship, a source of inspiration and hope. Dependence is not the problem per se, addiction is something else. It is not just habit although habit is a part of it. Addiction is an unhealthy, excessive dependence characterized by compulsion, loss of control, and continued use despite consequences.²

A Natural Way of Life



My brother David and I testing the outboard October, 1973³

When I was twenty years old I built a raft out of oil barrels and scrap lumber and set sail down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in search of myself. I wrote a book about that journey many

years later. When I was researching my book, I had the occasion to go to Trimble County Kentucky to look for an elderly couple I had encountered on my journey, Harlan and Anna Hubbard. They were no longer alive but their biographer, the outspoken environmentalist and writer, Wendell Berry agreed to see me and talk about the Hubbard's. Both of us had encountered them in a serendipitous fashion, drifting along the Ohio River. The Hubbard's were well known in those days, the late 1960's and early 70's when so many young people were seeking new ways of thinking, living, and being. They were modern Thoreau's and had lived "off the grid" for more than forty years in a home built from stones from the creek running alongside their property into the Ohio River. Harlan was a prolific artist whose works decorate many libraries, churches, banks, and schools today. As a couple they were engaging and full of life, playing music together for their evening entertainment. In the 1980's the electric power company decided to build a nuclear plant on the Ohio River almost directly across from their home. Wendell Berry was quite active in opposing the construction of this project. During my interview, I became curious as to how Harlan and Anna Hubbard responded to the protests. Did they get involved? Did they write letters to the editor? Did they help? The answer was not what I expected, but very true to the life that the Hubbard's had chosen to live. According to Mr. Berry, Harlan had said "If you don't want the nuclear power plant, don't use the electricity". His way of life was his protest, it was his statement and it was thoroughly consistent with who he was. Hubbard is akin to an American Mountain Daoist hermit committed to following the path of nature.⁴

You might also see that our relationship with nature has become out of control. Modern society is addictive in its over-consumption and compulsive destruction of the natural world. There are consequences to this that can be devastating. In his education course called Project Nature Connect, Michael J. Cohen likens this cultural phenomenon to addiction. We are "addicted" to oil, to big houses, to cars, to rich foods, etc. He advocates a restoration of our relationship with nature (nature as higher power) as key to recovery from this addictive lifestyle. I have incorporated much of what he has to say in my own approach to how healing for alcoholics and drug addicts can take place.⁵

NATURE FIND

Here is an example of a fun and engaging group exercise that was first introduced to me by Ms. Barbara -- a warm and no b.s. counselor that I worked with several years ago. I have modified and incorporated her activity into my treatment work.⁶



The purpose of this exercise is to more deeply connect with nature and to find within the natural world a process at work that in a way reminds you of your own process of recovery.

Take a walk.

Observe your surroundings.

Find something.

Look in the natural world for an object, an action, a scene, an experience, a force at work or anything that piques your interest.

Think about it.

Use what you observe in nature as a metaphor and relate your observation to something that is happening within yourself.

This may be a process – like a process of growth, or healing, or a cycle of change. It may be an emotional state – a feeling or mood. It may be a behavior that you observe in nature and see a parallel within yourself. It may be anything else you find relevant. Take what you have observed in nature and relate it to your own recovery process.

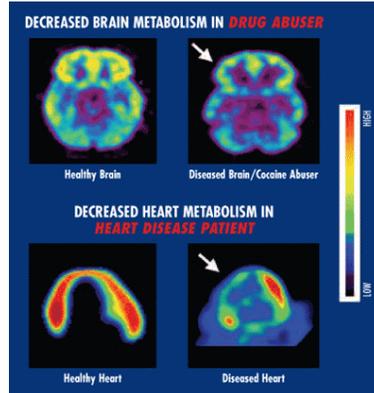
Express yourself.

Develop a means of sharing your experience with others. Create a poem, a story, a drawing, a song, a painting, a sculpture, an essay, a dance. The medium you choose is less important than the ability to express yourself creatively and to communicate your experience with others. Then read, perform, or show your results to your peers. A tradition of repeating your presentation twice gives others a chance to more fully absorb and receive what you have to offer.

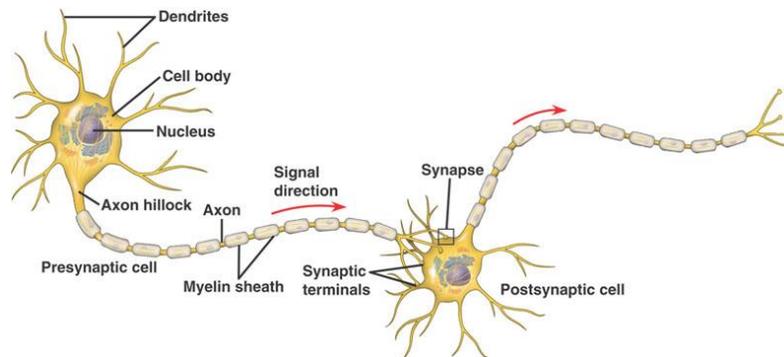
Receive Feedback.

Be open to comments from peers about your experience and creation.

Wellness and Recovery



Recent studies tend to support the idea that addiction is a “brain disease” with marked changes in the physiological function of the brain – not unlike physiological changes to the heart that can be measured in heart disease patients. These changes may *precede* addictive behaviors as in the theories that rely on the idea that there is a deficit in dopamine receptors – similar to the idea that there is not enough serotonin in individuals who suffer from depression – or the brain changes may occur as a *result* of behaviors making new pathways or causing atrophy of healthy brain function through repeated use of mood altering chemicals. Some evidence exists to support both perspectives; my bias is toward the brain changes occurring as a result of behavior.⁷

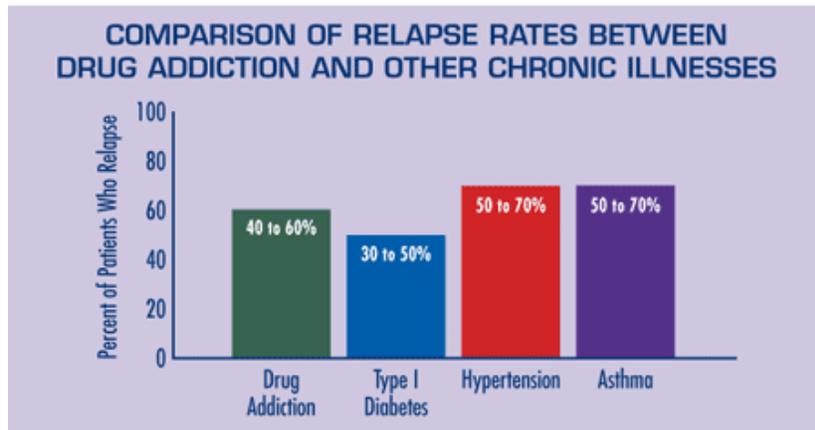


Modern neuroscience describes the formation of these neural networks – connections between neurons that are strengthened as memory and learning occurs. The myelin sheath provides insulation for electrical conduction, as one repeatedly does an activity the conduction becomes more and more efficient. These neural connectors – axons and dendrites transmit electrical energy and then that electricity is translated into chemical energy as the neurotransmitters cross the synaptic gap to move the neural signal from one cell to another. With pleasurable behaviors, the reward pathways of the brain and central nervous system are stimulated to repeat the activity again and again. Over-stimulation by drugs or other intensely pleasurable actions can lead to compulsion, craving, and loss of control.⁸

I enjoy hiking and backpacking in the woods. Typically, I stay on the trails and follow maps and trail markers. Some of those trails started with deer or other animal pathways then became human footpaths later. By repeatedly walking through a section of forest on the same path, a

groove is worn into the earth. The underbrush disappears. As the path gets continual use it may be widened. Then people come to maintain the path, clearing brush, cutting trees, adding steps, bridges, or paving. The more the path is used, the greater the structure. This simple footpath could develop into a logging road, or a street, then a highway. There is a lot of structure involved. If we do something again and again, the structure of our brain and the neural pathways becomes stronger. If we stop doing the activity, it may take many, many years for the neural structure to disappear. Traces of the path may still be there, and can be revived at any time. With long repeated patterns of behavior, the risk of relapse can be quite high.

Another helpful analogy is to observe the flow of a river. It too wears a path through the mountains and plains on its way to the sea. Given enough time and water, we can even see a magnificent riverbed like the Grand Canyon appear. What would it take to redirect the flow of that river? Once the path has deepened, it becomes very difficult to change any habitual behavior.



When compared to other chronic illnesses that involve some type of behavioral management or self-care, relapse rates – or a return to active symptoms – are similar. Addiction is believed to be similar to other chronic illnesses because:

- It has biological and behavioral components, both of which must be addressed during treatment.
- Recovery from it--protracted abstinence and restored functioning--is often a long-term process requiring repeated episodes of treatment.
- Relapses can occur during or after treatment, and signal a need for treatment adjustment or reinstatement.
- Participation in support programs during and following treatment can be helpful in sustaining long-term recovery¹⁰

Here is my premise: If addictions are disease processes at work -- can they not also be treated as other chronic diseases -- with basic changes to improve health including proper nutrition, adequate exercise, rest, sunlight, fresh air, plenty of water, and stress reduction techniques?

The Healing Power of Nature

Let's begin to put the treatment and recovery process for addictions into this context. There are many great systems of healing that use nature and natural processes including aboriginal healing found in all of the indigenous human cultures around the planet, the healing systems of India and China, and the western traditions of naturopathic and holistic medicine among others.

Naturopathic medicine recognizes an inherent self-healing process in people that is ordered and intelligent. Naturopathic practitioners act to identify and remove obstacles to healing and recovery, and to facilitate and augment this inherent self-healing process.

Naturopathic practitioners treat each patient by taking into account individual physical, mental, emotional, genetic, environmental, social, and other factors. Since total health also includes spiritual health, naturopathic physicians encourage individuals to pursue their personal spiritual development.

Naturopathic practitioners emphasize the prevention of disease by assessing risk factors, heredity and susceptibility to disease, and by making appropriate interventions in partnership with their patients to prevent illness.¹¹

If I cut myself, the body has natural mechanisms to promote healing. Blood clots, a scab forms, the scab eventually withers and the integrity of the skin is restored, perhaps with a scar. Naturopathic interventions would be washing the wound and applying a bandage to facilitate the natural healing and remove any barriers. If the cut were deeper, stitches may be employed to stop the bleeding. It is important that I allow the natural healing process to run its course, picking the scab would interfere causing the bleeding to start again. One key behavioral principle that is critical to a naturopathic approach is to stop doing things that will interfere with good health -- in the case of addiction that would mean abstaining from whatever substances are involved. It would also mean learning how to let go.

Holistic Medicine

Holistic medicine is a form of healing that considers the whole person -- body, mind, spirit, and emotions -- in the quest for optimal health and wellness. According to the holistic medicine philosophy, one can achieve optimal health -- the primary goal of holistic medicine practice -- by gaining proper balance in life.

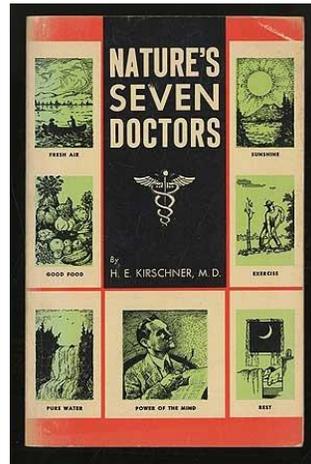
Holistic medicine practitioners believe that the whole person is made up of interdependent parts and if one part is not working properly, all the other parts will be affected. In this way, if people have imbalances (physical, emotional, or spiritual) in their lives, it can negatively affect their overall health.¹²

These two approaches, holistic and naturopathic, can be combined to form a practical basis of health and healing from any type of illness -- including addiction and the underlying biological, psychological, and spiritual conditions that may have caused the problems in the first place.

Nature's Seven Doctors

One of the great early books from the naturopathic movement is Nature's Seven Doctors by H. E. Kirschner, MD. His prescription for healing and healthful living includes the following ingredients:

sunshine, fresh air, exercise, rest, clean water, good food, and the power of the mind.¹³



Let's explore a perspective on these principles that will integrate the physical and spiritual dimensions of healing.

Sunlight

It is readily apparent that sunshine has an effect on mood directly contributing to feelings of optimism and joy. One of the group activities I like to do is what I call an emotional weather report. Our moods are our weather, able to change moment to moment with atmospheric conditions. We often use the language of weather to describe mood. Low pressure (depression) produces storms with rain or snow. We have our own internal experience of rain -- tears. Heavy clouds are not unlike the darkening and dampening effect on mood. High pressure produces sunny days with lots of bright light, and a buoyant effect on mood. There is even a condition called seasonal affective disorder, a type of depression that occurs in far northern climates during winter when there is very little sun. Treatment often involves the use of full spectrum lighting to elevate the patient's mood. The drugs and alcohol that are most problematic in driving addiction are mood-altering -- the user seeks to get high -- to mimic the natural high of a joyous life. Exposure to sunshine can provide a significant therapeutic benefit for those seeking to elevate their mood.

Sunlight also has an effect on bone health and thus the physical structure and posture of the body. Exposure to the sun on the skin triggers the production of vitamin D which in turn helps bone health by promoting the absorption of calcium. Vitamin D has many other beneficial effects and is now being promoted for a variety of health benefits. Our natural means of getting Vitamin D is exposure to the sun. Lighter skinned individuals produce more vitamin D than darker skinned individuals with the same length of time in the sun. This is due to the amount of melanin in the skin. So take the time you need in the sun.

Coming into the light, seeing the light of day, or exposure to the light are metaphorical ways of describing someone who has become “enlightened” -- they have a greater awareness and insight into the truth about themselves, their relationships, and their true place in the world. Living with these truths can be a very important part of a recovery process, staying in the dark will block movement toward change.

When I lived in New Orleans in the 1970’s there were gigantic cockroaches everywhere. When I got up at night to get a drink of water, I would flip on the light and the roaches would scurry into the dark corners of the room. They would hide from that exposure. Recovery is also about freeing oneself from a “cockroach mentality” of living in shame and fear of exposure. Sunlight is a natural antibiotic and purifier, helping us to lead a clean life.

Fresh Air

If you have ever hiked in the woods, strolled along the beach, visited a great waterfall, climbed a mountain, or gone anywhere where there is an abundance of fresh air, it is clear how important this is to feeling good and being healthy. We need oxygen and being in the natural environment around trees and plants is the place where oxygen is released. Turbulent water like the ocean and waterfalls also stirs up oxygen in the air. Oxygen revives us, energizes us, and reduces feelings of stress. Being shut in a room with locked windows and no circulation is a recipe for illness. Being in close quarters -- a hospital, an airplane, a crowded room -- these are the riskiest places for disease to spread. Stifling conditions are unhealthy. Fresh air with good circulation is the remedy. Rather than reach for the artificial stimulation of caffeine or nicotine -- breathe!

Air is our atmosphere. We need fresh air, an unpolluted atmosphere to be healthy. Emotionally and spiritually we need a healthy atmosphere as well. Being around positive and uplifting individuals, an atmosphere of encouragement and peacefulness can have a profound impact on the recovery process. Being in an atmosphere of conflict and anger, negative moods without support for healing can rapidly destroy even very willful and determined efforts to recover. It is important to find people who provide an atmosphere of support.

Exercise

Activity and movement are exercise. One of the key indicators of animal life is movement. Without it we stiffen and die. Exercise promotes circulation, distributing oxygen and nutrients, removing toxins and waste. Aerobic (cardiovascular) exercise engages large muscles over relatively lengthy periods of time to maintain heart and circulatory health. Anaerobic (strength training) exercises muscles to increase their power and tone utilizing stored energy reserves. Stretching which should be done only after warming up the body to prevent injury, increases flexibility and resilience. These three together provide for improved stamina, strength, and resilience, each being necessary for optimal health.

By exercising, we improve. To be healthy we also need to exercise our values: stretching -- to expand beyond one’s own limiting biases; strengthening -- to repeatedly practice living an ethically thoughtful and meaningful life; circulating -- to go the distance in caring for others, service as a means of keeping the internal heart healthy.

Rest

There is no better way to start the day than to get a good night's sleep. Those who suffer with insomnia or other challenges that deprive one of adequate rest do put their health and recovery in jeopardy. Sleep disorders are quite common among the clients I work with. Anxiety is a factor, as is the disruption of circadian rhythms by drugs and alcohol. Artificial environments, excess mental stimulation, television, internet, electric lighting, noise pollution – there is seemingly no end to the modern assault on sleep and rest. Good sleep hygiene can involve some critically important activities:

- Avoid caffeine or other stimulants (including nicotine) 4-6 hours before bedtime
- Create a sleep-conducive quiet bedroom environment (for rest and intimacy only)
- Re-set your internal clock /melatonin production with exposure to sunrise and sunset and a consistent schedule
- Be mindful of the timing and effect naps, exercise, and eating may have on your ability to sleep
- Go to bed when you are truly tired, get up and do something if you are too restless
- Establish a wind-down pre-sleep routine to relax and de-stress
- Spiritual practices to help let go and find mental ease

Rest is also a state of mind – the sense of being calm, peaceful, and at ease with oneself.

Wholesome and Complete Nutrition

This is an area of frequent controversy and changes. Expert advice here shifts quite often and in my opinion is too focused on specific food items or diets rather than on a big picture of healthy eating habits. Since human beings are omnivores, we have abundant choices and flexibility here. However, there are several sensible approaches to eating right that can guide people in recovery. It is important to note that there is a significant food-mood connection¹⁴. Being mindful of the impact of certain foods on your own mental and physical state can be quite helpful. Some simple guidelines follow:

- Enjoy yourself, eat well, learn to make meals from scratch
- Whole foods are better than refined or processed foods - including fruits and grains
- Smaller quantities of sugar, red meats, and saturated fats (think cheese)
- More vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans, and whole grains
- When eating seafood, eat lower down on the food chain (smaller fish) – they are less likely to be polluted
- Use olive or other unsaturated oils
- Balance sweet and salty for mood stabilization
- Maintain proper caloric intake for your age, body mass, and activity level¹⁵

There is food for the body and also food for the soul. Feeding the soul may involve listening to the stories of others, finding inspiration in art, music, and literature. We mentally digest all of the experiences and things we are exposed to. It is important to satisfy our spiritual hunger.

Clean Water

Water is needed for internal and external hygiene. Being properly hydrated keeps all internal processes functioning smoothly, contributes to flexibility and reduction of pain, clears toxins, and aids in mental clarity. Water is also needed externally to wash the body. Hydrotherapies can be quite helpful to resolve injury, promote calm, and provide support to strengthen weakened muscle. The common understanding is that adults should drink about eight glasses (64 ounces) of water daily. I would agree with this if that figure includes the fluid we take in from the foods we eat and other beverages. This of course is modulated by temperature and activity. Overconsumption of water can also be dangerous.

Water washes away impurities and makes things clean. It is frequently used as a metaphor for sanctity, holiness, and purification of the damaged soul. Like hunger, in recovery it is important to quench our spiritual thirst.

Power of the Mind

We do realize that the human mind is quite powerful. Our will, intellect, and emotional life are complex and worthy of great study. The impact of our thoughts, motivation, and intent on health are profound. Much of what is called the “placebo” effect in the treatment of disease has to do with the power of the mind. We will look at applications of this internal quality in greater depth later.

In addition to the natural “doctors” described above, we may also add the following to complete a holistic approach to health and healing. Numbers 7-10 are additions to be found in the worksheet shown below that I developed to lead group discussions on these healing principles.

Principles of Health (Group Discussion)

Discuss each of these principles of healthful living and healing and their corresponding spiritual attributes.

- | | |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Sunlight / Warmth | Truth / Honesty / Insight |
| 2. Fresh Air / Atmosphere | Support / Encouragement / Care |
| 3. Exercise / Meaningful Work | Service / Goodness / Fulfillment |
| 4. Deep Sleep / Rest | Peace / Calm / Tranquility |
| 5. Wholesome and Complete Nutrition | Story / Inspiration / Feed My Soul |
| 6. Clean Water / Proper Hygiene | Purity / Holiness / Sanctity |
| 7. Sexual Vitality and Expression | Love / Beauty / Life |
| 8. Friendship / Family / Society | Citizenship / Filial and Agape Love |
| 9. Playfulness / Fun | Joy / Happiness / Bliss |
| 10. Healthy Spirit – Human-heartedness | Ethical Concern / Empathy |

This is by no means meant to be a comprehensive look at the holistic principles of healing but rather to serve as a brief introduction with a few insights that I have found helpful over the years.

The Generally Accepted Medical Model

The generally accepted medical model is concerned with physical abnormalities of the brain, nervous system, and other internal systems. In terms of mental health, functional disorders are due to psychological factors within the person - major causes are related to the personality of the person.

Medical procedures include a diagnosis, a treatment plan, and a prognosis. Drug therapy is the most common treatment approach. The medical model is often criticized for labeling (diagnosing) and "imposing" treatment on individuals.

American Society of Addictive Medicine – ASAM

This organization is the premiere group of medical doctors concerned with the treatment of addictive disorders. In their new public policy statement ASAM provides the following definition of addiction:

Addiction is a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors.

Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.¹⁶

The American Society for Addictive Medicine is most well-known for their treatment level of care protocols. This definition of addiction unfortunately was not accepted when the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders was released in 2013. Addiction was not defined – instead the DSM-5 uses the terms Mild, Moderate, or Severe Substance Use Disorder.¹⁷

Harm Reduction and Replacement Therapies

The medical model is moving in the direction of Harm Reduction and Replacement Therapies – not unlike medical approaches to other types of chronic illness. These therapies include medications such as Suboxone, Methadone, Chantix, etc. They also apply services in the interest of public health to ease consequences and damage such as needle exchanges and moderation management. They also replace delivery methods of harmful substances in order to lower risk such as nicotine patches and e-cigarettes.

Addicts are medically detoxified in hospitals, when appropriate, all the time. But can they be treated with medications after detox? New pharmacotherapies (drugs) are being developed to help patients who have already become abstinent to further curb their craving for addicting

drugs. These medications can reduce the chances of relapse and enhance the effectiveness of existing behavioral (talk) therapies when used concurrently.

These methods remain quite controversial among traditional treatment providers and arguably focus more on the safety and reduction of harm to the society at large rather than providing effective care for the individual suffering from addiction. For example: must we continue to give opiate replacements on a long-term basis rather than as a short-term aid to detoxification?

Wellness Defined – Optimizing Health

Wellness is much more than simply an absence of illness and/or disease. Wellness is a *proactive* and *preventative* approach that's designed to provide optimum levels of health, emotional and social functioning. Wellness involves our recognition that we have psychological, physical, spiritual and social needs that are necessary for us to have higher levels of functioning. Wellness emphasizes the whole individual. It's the integration of the spirit, body and the mind; and the understanding that everything we do, feel, think and believe has a direct impact on your state of health.¹⁸

Wellness and Recovery

The wellness model is moving in the direction of prevention and holistic care. According to John Newport, Ph.D. who has written an enlightened guidebook on the subject, paraphrased here:

Wellness is the dynamic process of taking charge of one's personal health and living more fully to attain optimal health and well-being. The recovering person is in the driver's seat. They set their own goals and priorities, design and implement their own wellness program, and determine how far they want to go. Wellness involves striving for self-actualization, while making recovery fun!

Wellness is essential to recovery because it provides an effective means of repairing damage to mind and body. It safeguards against relapse. It helps individuals replace negative behavior and anchors them in their own recovery process. Wellness promotes high quality sobriety – and helps people add decades to their life expectancies.¹⁹

How A Wellness Lifestyle Can Help Prevent Relapse

He continues to describe how the wellness lifestyle will help to prevent relapse:

- Helps anchor individuals in their recovery, reinforcing their commitment to clean and sober living.
- Helps safeguard against relapse during early recovery – when mind and body are most vulnerable.
- Fosters resiliency needed to deal with life's ups and downs, without having to turn to drugs.
- Sound nutrition strengthens mind and body – and combats biochemical triggers associated with relapse

- Curbing excessive sugar and caffeine consumption helps stabilize mood swings
- Exercise helps combat depression and anxiety via endorphin production and increased self-esteem
- Meditation helps promote positive mental-emotional equilibrium, and may reduce need for psychotropic medication
- All recovering people need to be actively encouraged to develop their potential to the fullest!²⁰

Alcoholism and Nicotine as Co-Addictions

I cannot reasonably continue without discussing concerns about smoking that arise in the long-term drug and alcohol treatment facility where I have worked for the past 12 years. Of 20 men in residence, it is rare that any one of them is not smoking, chewing, or vaping tobacco. Most of them are heavy smokers. AA and other 12 step meetings are easily identified by the gathered crowds of smokers at breaks outside of the meeting room. Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of death for people in recovery! Between 80-95 percent of Alcoholics smoke cigarettes – and 70 percent are heavy smokers. Many alcoholics / addicts carry their nicotine addiction with them into recovery, although the majority report that they would like to quit.²¹

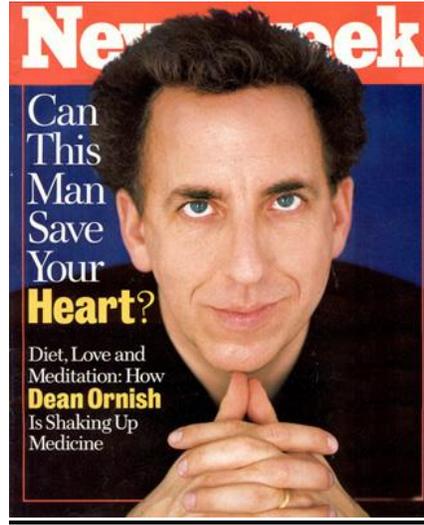


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Many of the pioneers of twentieth century addiction treatment and recovery mutual aid societies died of smoking-related disorders. Bill Wilson (emphysema) and Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith (cancer), co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous; Mrs. Marty Mann (cancer), founder, National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence; Danny C. (cancer) and Jimmy K. (emphysema and cancer), key figures in the founding of Narcotics Anonymous; Charles Dederich (cardiovascular disease), founder of Synanon; Dr. Marie Nyswander (cancer), co-developer of methadone maintenance; and Senator/Governor Harold Hughes (emphysema), sponsor of landmark alcoholism treatment legislation and founder of the Society of Americans for Recovery.²³

Perhaps we should see the continued acceptance of tobacco use in drug and alcohol treatment for what it is – another harm reduction/replacement therapy. Individuals entering recovery should be given tools and help to improve the quality of their recovery, making a clear choice between carrying a toxic lifestyle into their recovery or Reaping the benefits associated with a high level of wellness.

Dean Ornish – a model for other chronic diseases



For more than 30 years, Dr. Dean Ornish has directed a series of scientific research studies showing, for the first time, that the progression of even severe coronary heart disease can often be reversed by making comprehensive lifestyle changes. There are four basic components to his well-documented program:

- A very low-fat diet including predominantly fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and soy products in their natural, unrefined forms.
- Moderate exercise such as walking, yoga, tai chi
- Various stress management techniques including yoga-based stretching, breathing, meditation, and imagery
- Enhanced love and social support, which may include support groups.

These studies also documented that other chronic diseases may be reversible simply by making comprehensive lifestyle changes. These findings are giving millions of people worldwide new hope and new choices, options that are more caring and compassionate that are also more cost effective and competent. ²⁴



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Although his nutritional advice is controversial, perhaps it is time to apply a version of the Dean Ornish program to recovery from addictions.

Chronic Stress

When we stress something – it literally means to put an emphasis on it. Without emphasis, for example speech patterns would be a boring monotone. Music would be without any dynamics, no tension or relief, it would evoke no emotion or feeling. Life would be a daily grind of repetition, there would be no ups or downs, no joy or sorrow, no excitement or vitality. And ultimately, death is the occasion when all stress stops and we are flat lining. No heartbeat, no respiration, no brain activity.

We need stress in our lives to make them meaningful, enjoyable, challenging, and vital. Since stress is truly a part of life, our health is dependent on our ability to manage stress, and to reduce unnecessary or excessive stressors. When the stress response – fight or flight – becomes a chronic condition rather than a momentary experience we are in trouble. It is this chronic excess that produces a physical and mental overload which contributes to disease, depression, and destructive and distorted patterns of coping. Our stress management becomes crucial to whether we are healthy or sick.

When stressors build up – pressures from work, family, school, etc. - we need effective means to manage those pressures. As tension builds, the weakest aspects of ourselves are vulnerable and reach a breaking point. The same dynamics that work in the physical nature of things can also be applied to the psychological pressures that we feel.



stressors cause the Tacoma Narrows bridge to collapse²⁶

Managing Stress

Flexibility -- the ability to bend without breaking becomes a critical skill in learning about stress management. If I have two sticks, one dry and the other green, when I apply pressure – the dry one snaps while the green one bends without breaking. The dry wood is dead and breaks easily, the green wood is alive and flexible.

Resilience – this is the capacity to rebound from stressful or difficult situations. It has to do with having effective coping skills, strength, endurance, and the energy to rebuild or heal.

Many effective stress management techniques are thus focused on increasing resilience and flexibility. Exercise systems such as yoga or tai chi and qi gong are excellent examples. Managing stress in recovery is crucial to strategies involving relapse prevention.

References

- ¹ Harlan Hubbard watercolor from the collection held by Bill Caddell, Frankfort, Indiana Community Library
- ² Fields, Richard, Drugs in Perspective: p. 125.
Commonly known as the “three C’s” which describe the behavioral characteristics of addiction
- ³ Photo taken by my father
- ⁴ This interview took place at Wendell Berry’s home in Trimble County, Kentucky in 2003. The term “Mountain Daoist” is one used by my teacher Kenneth Cohen to describe the Chinese hermits who retreated from society to live humbly and simply in the natural world.
- ⁵ Cohen, Michael PhD. , *Project Nature Connect*: for more information visit <http://projectnatureconnect.org/>
- ⁶ Ms. Barbara is identified by first name only in keeping with the tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous
- ⁷ Photo from laboratory of Drs. Volkow, N. and Schelbert, H: available at <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/drug-abuse-addiction>
- ⁸ Biology Stack Exchange: neuron drawing available at: <http://biology.stackexchange.com/questions/22011/neurons-with-thousands-of-connections-where-are-the-extra-connections-coming-fr> Biology Stack Exchange is a question and answer site for biology researchers, academics, and students. It's 100% free, no registration required.
- ⁹ *Source: JAMA, 284:1689-1695, 2000* Relapse rates for people treated for substance use disorders are compared with those for people with diabetes, hypertension, or asthma. Relapse is common and similar across these illnesses (as is adherence/non-adherence to medication). Thus, drug addiction should be treated like any other chronic illness; relapse serves as a trigger for renewed intervention.
- ¹⁰ Principles of Effective Drug Addiction Treatment, NIDA: for more detailed information see <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-drug-addiction-treatment-research-based-guide-third-edition/principles-effective-treatment>
- ¹¹ These basic principles of naturopathic medicine can be found at the American Association of Naturopathic Physician’s website : <http://naturopathic.org/content.asp?pl=16&sl=59&contentid=59>
- ¹² This simple yet clear definition comes from WebMD: <http://www.webmd.com/balance/guide/what-is-holistic-medicine>
- ¹³ Kirschner, H. E. MD, Nature’s Seven Doctors: copyright 1976
- ¹⁴ Null, Gary PhD. The full title of his book is: The Food-Mood Connection: Nutrition-based and Environmental Approaches to Mental Health and Physical Wellbeing. I include it here as a worthwhile resource.
- ¹⁵ Although there are many resources available that will describe in great detail ways to obtain proper nutrition, one that is simple and helpful that I have used in my groups is Turner, Kristina, The Self-Healing Cookbook : copyright 1996
- ¹⁶ American Society of Addictive Medicine (ASAM)’s website: <http://www.asam.org/DefinitionofAddiction-LongVersion.html>
- ¹⁷ American Psychiatric Association, refer to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5): copyright 2013
- ¹⁸ <http://wellnessproposals.com/wellness-articles/definition-of-wellness/> Note from this site: the world’s largest, free resource for wellness programs and health promotion initiatives..
- ¹⁹ Newport, John Ph.D. The Wellness-Recovery Connection: copyright 2004, <http://www.wellnessandrecovery.com/>
- ²⁰ Newport, John Ph.D. The Wellness-Recovery Connection: copyright 2004, <http://www.wellnessandrecovery.com/>
- ²¹ Newport, John Ph.D. The Wellness-Recovery Connection: copyright 2004, <http://www.wellnessandrecovery.com/>
- ²² Picture located at: <http://blog.kerrygaynormethod.com/3-of-the-most-common-excuses-for-smoking-debunked/>
- ²³ White, W. (2011). Smoking and addiction recovery. For people in recovery. Posted at: <http://www.williamwhitepapers.org>
- ²⁴ Ornish, Dean, M.D., Preventive Medicine Research Institute, http://www.pmri.org/lifestyle_program.html
- ²⁵ Steps to Wellness picture: <http://www.mentalhealthmn.org/be-informed/mental-health-resources/wellness-and-recovery-resources>
- ²⁶ In this dramatic linked video, the forces of nature applied to the weakest points of this bridge cause it to collapse. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-zczJXSxnw>