Addictions: overcoming denial, recognizing the problem, taking action

Resolving addiction problems, whether mild, moderate, or severe, can be one of life's most difficult challenges. Unfortunately, there is no formula to follow to guarantee complete success. There are, however, a few important steps that people can take to help improve the chances that their efforts will be successful and long-lasting.



These steps cover the various stages of recovery, which include: overcoming denial, recognizing the problem, and taking action.

Overcoming denial

Denial can play a significant role in an addiction problem. People must overcome denial before they can begin any recovery effort. Essentially, denial can be defined as the refusal to acknowledge or inability to recognize and admit that there is an addiction problem.

Denial is especially a problem for those with a mild addiction, or for addictions that are not recognized as such by friends and family, or even by society as a whole (such as in the case of a spending addiction, work addiction or sexual addiction). In these cases, denial is often maintained for an extended period of time, as the individual with the addiction issue is able to continue their regular daily routines such as work or school, continue to fulfill social and family obligations, and may not show any significant physical signs of a problem.

Working through denial means that the individual comes to realize that he or she has a dependency on a substance or activity, and that dependency is having a negative impact on their own lives or the lives of others. Successfully working through denial also means that the individual comes to realize that *even though they have a problem, it doesn't mean they are weak or a failure.*

Recognizing the problem

Once denial is overcome and the individual recognizes that a problem exists, they can now focus on the main problem or high-risk situations that involve the addictive behaviour. Discovering the key triggers underlying the addictive behaviour and its related consequences is very critical at the recognition stage.

High-risk situations are those in which an individual always, or almost always, uses the substance or the activity problematically. There might be some situations where the substance or activity can be used without a problem, such as in the case where an individual with an alcohol problem is able to have a glass of wine at dinner with their family—and keep it to one glass. This situation can be differentiated from problematic situations, such as attending parties, or being alone and bored, when the individual always, or almost always, drinks to excess.

Identifying the triggers or factors that contribute to high-risk situations is vital. Once these are recognized, the individual can begin to take some preventative measures to prepare to effectively handle the high risk situation. For example, if you know that being alone and bored often contributes to your problematic drinking, you will be in a position to take action to change the addictive behaviour.

Taking action

This stage of the recovery process is characterized by a person being ready to develop new strategies and action plans to replace the old conditioned habits or automatic behaviours associated with the addiction. These action plans are geared specifically to the high-risk situation(s). They can take the form of behavioural or mental strategies.

For the individual who drinks when bored and alone, an effective behavioural strategy might be to replace

drinking with another activity, such as exercising or reading. An effective mental strategy is self-talk, which involves talking to oneself in a way that promotes motivation and commitment to change. For example, statements such as "I do not want to drink because I enjoy feeling healthy" or "I am saving a lot of money when I don't drink" are common and effective self-talk statements. A self-talk strategy can be combined with a behavioural strategy, such as practicing a relaxation technique while engaged in positive self-talk.

Another popular mental strategy is when one works through the discomfort of not succumbing to the urges or temptations of high-risk situations. This strategy is often referred to as "*toughing it out.*" The individual withstands the uncomfortable feelings triggered by the urge and does not drink. Self-talk may also be incorporated in the toughing-it-out technique. For example, one may say, "I can stand being bored; I don't always have to be entertained," or "It's fine to be alone sometimes."

In addition to the specific behavioural and mental strategies already outlined, other common strategies include:

- seeking professional assistance such as enrolling in addiction treatment centre programs
- going to private addiction therapists
- attending ongoing peer self-help groups in the community.

It is crucial that individuals struggling to overcome an addiction use as many strategies as possible, and that the strategies are practical and realistic. Unrealistic strategies—those that you know you can't or won't do—will greatly hinder your effort towards successful problem resolution, and can actually lead to a greater likelihood to relapse.

Successfully recovering from an addiction problem involves many different processes and there is no single approach that will guarantee complete success. However, if you are able to break through and overcome denial, recognize the main problem or high risk situations, and then take action in terms of implementing appropriate strategies, your chances of success are greatly enhanced.