



Half Measures for Good Measure

Suppose a morbidly obese man was seeing his doctor for treatment of his high cholesterol and he was making progress and slowly losing weight but one day came in to his doctor and confessed that he had a bad weekend and ate a big greasy double cheeseburger. Would the doctor simply look at him and say "You're not compliant, now go somewhere else!" Now suppose a diabetes patient told their doctor that he ate a banana split with extra whipped cream, would that doctor discharge him from the practice? In both cases, the doctor likely would do their best to first acknowledge the prior progress that had been made and then help their patient get back on the right track. Both clinically and logically speaking, continuing to help the patient is the wisest course of action for the doctor, few would disagree. However, the substance abuse treatment field has been getting away with discharging people prematurely from treatment programs due to setbacks and relapses for decades. It is time this contradiction has ended.

Of course there does come a time when someone who relapses needs to be discharged. There often comes a point in treatment when someone is having repeated relapses or showing a persistent lack of effort or displaying a dangerous decrease in progress, when cutting the cord is without a doubt clinically indicated. However, most people need more than just a few chances to get better because change so often occurs incrementally or little by little with lots of ups and downs along the way. This fact cannot and should not be ignored by treatment providers. Think about your own situation and think about the last time your doctor recommended a lifestyle change for you (such as changing your diet, for example) Were you 100% compliant with your doctor's recommendations or did it take some time and patience to get it right? Did your doctor threaten to kick you out and stop seeing you right away if you failed to follow his recommendations? Should a diabetes patient get discharged over a banana split? Should a patient with high cholesterol be given his walking papers because of a

double cheeseburger? By the same token should someone with a drug problem be automatically discharged just for using drugs?

If you look up the phrase “half measure” it is associated with being “inadequate”. That may be the case, as half-hearted efforts can end up in failure because they don’t have the momentum needed for success. In competitive areas like sports, academics and in many careers, if someone doesn’t give it their all, then success is unlikely so half measures are frowned upon. Nevertheless, in many other arenas of life a half-measure can still be a very positive thing for one simple reason: a half-hearted effort is still better than *no effort*.

Take for example, exercise. Isn’t it better that someone do a lousy workout than no work out at all? At least, he or she got up and went to the gym which is worthwhile in itself. Another example would be if you asked an oppositional teenager to clean his or her room and he or she responds by doing a subpar job. At least he listened and did *some* cleaning! These types of efforts are clearly at a minimum a step in the right direction. There is at least something to work with in both scenarios.

The same is true for substance abuse. If someone is willing to “just give it a try” when it comes to addressing their substance use, it is still better than someone who refuses to do anything about it. Do people need to “hit bottom” and does it then need to be viewed as “life or death” in order for positive change to happen? Surely it can be helpful when someone feels desperate for change but it is not a requirement for a successful outcome. In reality, many people come into substance abuse treatment with a “half-hearted” or ambivalent attitude still end up doing extremely well in the long term. By contrast, sometimes the people who come in “gung ho” about recovery in the beginning actually start strong but end up burning out when the “fire” inside them runs out. Whether it is just a half measure or not, when someone finally makes their way into treatment there is always some hope for improvement. Going back to the fire analogy, if there is at least a spark, then the rest of us (counselors, family members, friends, and other helpers) can figuratively blow on and then feed that tiny spark of motivation to help then build up a fire inside for change.

What is important to remember when it comes to substance abuse and other similar areas, is that *some change is better than no change*. Many of us need to walk before we can run as the saying goes. Therefore, it is so critical that any of us in a role as “helper” remember the importance of being a cheerleader, motivator, supporter, etc. for those who unsure or ambivalent about change that may be just starting with a half-measure. Or if you are a person struggling with something right now, it is worth it make an effort, no matter how limited that may be because it is a step in the right direction. Change has to start somewhere, so whether you are ready to give it your all, or just go half way, if you can just get up and get out the door then there is hope.