



## Addiction as an “Incurable” Disease:

Are there people with substance use issues who can never ever use again without consequences? The answer is undoubtedly yes. There are definitely those who, for example could go twenty years completely sober then try to have one drink and soon find themselves exactly where they were twenty years earlier in the depths of alcoholism. There are millions who have this “allergy” to substances and they simply cannot and will not be able to successfully use again no matter how bad they want to, or try to set limits. It is necessary to pose a follow up question: Is this the case with *everyone* who has a substance use issue? The answer is no. Although the a large portion of people who get help for substance use issues find that abstinence is the only answer as they simply will never be able to control their use again, there are still others who break the mold. For example, think of how many youths “age out” of alcoholic patterns simply through the process of maturation. There are many who in college, if assessed would meet the criteria for alcohol or drug dependence who if studied later when married, working, or after having children (for example) no longer demonstrate abusive or problematic patterns of use, without ever attending treatment or 12 Step programs. It is important to be careful with this idea because it is the fantasy of many people who in reality can never drink or use again without losing control, to want to believe that they are those who may be able to one day use again in a controlled manner. Still, just because many people with serious substance abuse problems may eventually have to accept an abstinent lifestyle as the only way to get better, it is not fair to discount those other individuals who through mere chance are exceptions to the rule in that they one day simply “outgrow” problematic substance use issues.

It is important to avoid sticking only with absolutes in this process by making generalizations about the fate of every substance user/abuser. In the true spirit of the 12 Steps what matters most is that a person makes the decision not to use “just for today” or “one day at a time”. However, it is not necessary for someone to accept the fact that they can never drink or use again (even if in their case it is true.) The “here and now” is what matters most, especially early on in the process. Consider the following scenario:

DAILY DRUG USING TEENAGER – “I am on probation now and I do not want to get locked up so I am going to stop using drugs but I assure you that the minute I am off of probation in 6 months I am going to go right back to getting high whenever I feel like it

COUNSELOR – “You are only going to learn the same lessons again once you go back to using as you will most definitely end up arrested again and right back where you started.”

TEENAGER – “No I won’t, this time I will be smarter and I will only use at home and I won’t buy drugs on the streets anymore and I won’t let myself get into trouble again. I’ll show you!”

COUNSELOR – “In this program you will receive education about how addiction is a disease and that if you continue thinking like that you are one day going to regret it”

TEENAGER – “Whatever, who cares!”

The above exchange only served to strengthen the teenagers resolve that he or she does not have to stop using in the future and the relationship with the counselor is already off to a rough start. Now consider an alternate counselor response to the same scenario:

DAILY DRUG USING TEENAGER – “I am on probation now and I do not want to get locked up so I am going to stop using drugs but I assure you that the minute I am off of probation in 6 months I am going to go right back to getting high whenever I feel like it

COUNSELOR – “Thanks for being honest, I respect that, but for now you are willing to stop and that is good enough for me, let’s work on that so you don’t get locked up again this time while you are on probation”



## TEENAGER “OK”

The strategy here is that the counselor is aligning with the drug user as opposed to getting into a useless argument about something that is not even going to happen for six months. There is enough of a challenge to get through today without arguing about a situation that at this point is completely hypothetical. It is not productive to argue about the hypothetical or the future. Both for the person and especially for counselors, family members and other helpers, arguments about hypothetical future situations can be akin to banging one's head against a wall. Trying to convince someone of something what is theoretically going to happen in the future can be a challenge to say the least for those on both sides of the discussion. Not to say that it isn't effective to help someone to learn about potential long term consequences of their decisions because that is extremely important. Still, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, as the saying goes. A promise of cooperation today is worth more than 1000 promises for the future. The long term hope is that by embracing one's willingness today, over time (with help) insight and internal motivation to hopefully continue to make the right choices will be developed based on the benefits one starts to experience by not using for today. By accepting even reluctant abstinence for today, then all involved are at least buying time to help learn about the benefits of upward change and inspired progress over time.

The main idea is that for those who are trying to help others who are misusing, abusing or addicted to substances it is often necessary to start small and move forward. In traditional 12 Step based programs, many people who are not mandated to stay in treatment often leave early on in the program because of the difficulty with having to grapple with the fact that they have an “incurable” disease and their lives will never be the same again. It is far more effective to deal with the here and now and take incremental small steps forward without asking people to make huge assumptions about themselves. This way, fewer people are lost along the way by being overwhelmed. This idea is in agreement with the harm reduction perspective which accepts incremental change as progress by allowing people to take “baby steps”

In addition, the idea of telling everyone who seems to have a substance abuse problem that their condition is fatal can do more harm than good. Imagine if a doctor told all of his or her patients that manifested some symptoms of a disease that their prognosis was fatal if they did not get the right treatment. That may sound preposterous however; many in the substance abuse field, especially in Disease-model based programs do just that by educating everyone who shows some signs of the “disease” of addiction that their condition will one day be fatal if they don't get help. Not many marijuana smoking young people are willing to swallow that line no matter how the counselor or program delivers it, for example. The fact is that substance use issues, like other diseases have the potential to progress to the point where the outcome is fatal but that is not a given or an absolute with any disease. What is more important is for those with substance use issues to focus on the constructive perspective that people can be healthier and people's lives can be better with positive lifestyle changes and increased motivation and insight. Any change for the better that someone is willing to make is a step in the right direction. Being scared straight by avoiding a supposed “fatal” disorder is not necessary for progress.

When looking at change, drastic change makes for good stories, headlines, and legends but in reality drastic change is the often exception rather than the norm. We have all heard the story of the person who had some kind of “awakening” which changed them forever. That does happen and it is wonderful that it does. Still, for every one of those stories these days there are the dozens, hundreds even thousands of less glamorized stories of people who had to go to multiple treatment centers, experience numerous consequences and setbacks before they finally “get it” and they make the changes needed in their lives. The Escalator is designed for the needs of the people who recover gradually based on their own experiences and unique circumstances.



If you are a person reading this who has never had a compulsion or addictive issue, it is helpful to think about something you have changed about yourself in your lifetime. Likely whatever that change was, it was the direct result of some kind of gradual process that occurred as you learned, grew and matured. It is possible multiple experiences, people and events shaped your change process like a ball of clay is slowly molded into a vase on a potter's wheel. That is what the change process is all about.