

SereneScene

Magazine for Long-Term Healthy Lifestyles of Recovery

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PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

Andrew Martin, MBA, CADC II, SAP



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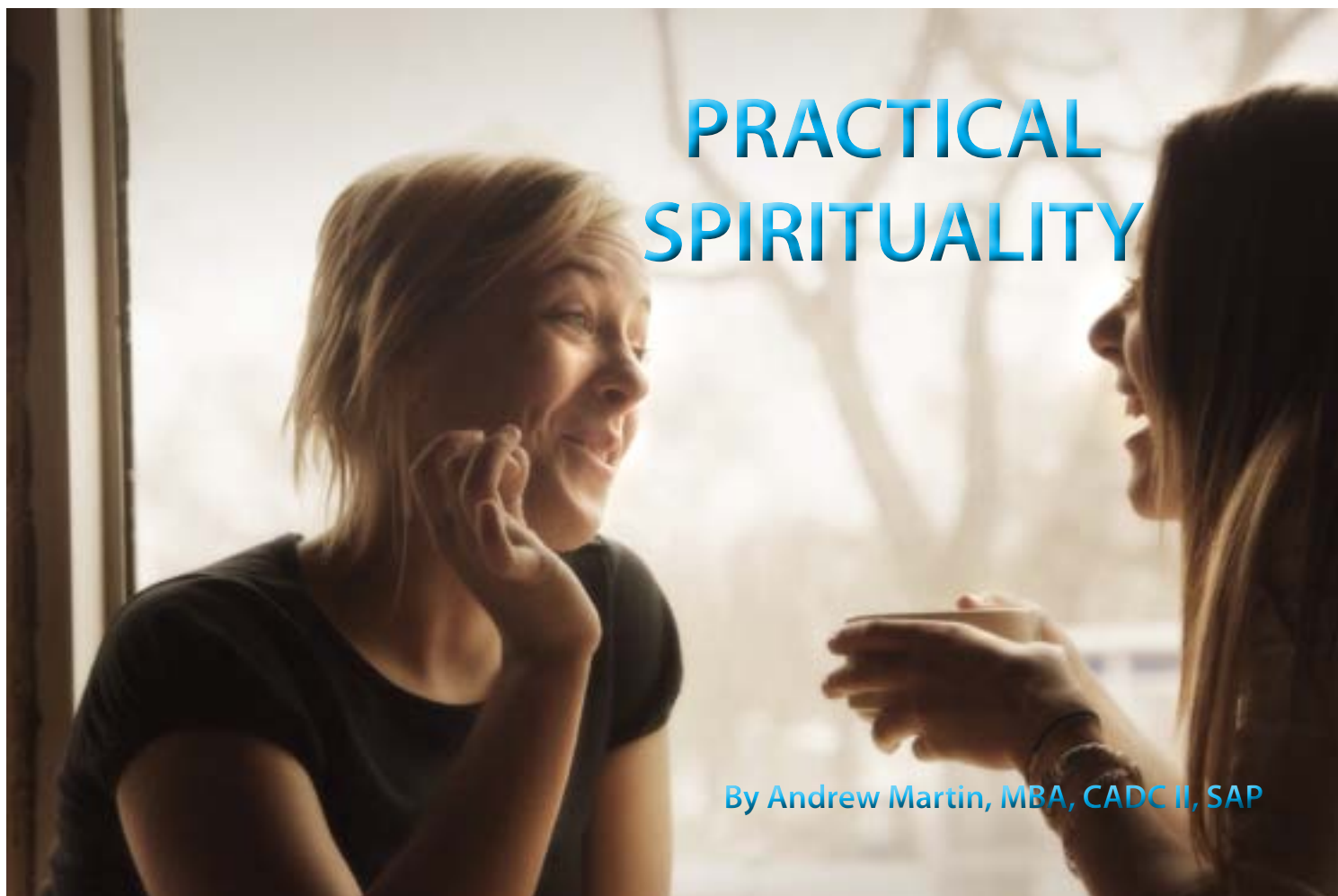
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Recovery is highly individualized, there is no one answer that fits all: however, there are certain overarching concepts that seem to apply to most people that find quality long-term recovery from addiction. Practical spirituality appears to be one of the components that the vast majority of recovering people, with a high quality of life, will integrate into their ongoing recovery efforts. It is, however, only part of the recovery process.

Before exploring practical spirituality, a review of how addiction impacts the individual is in order. It is important to remember that there are three broad areas of impairment: physiological, psychological, and sociological (which includes spiritual).

Physiological

To oversimplify; your brain has a mind of its own.

The nucleus accumbens is located in the mid-brain and operates as the human being's pleasure center. When mood altering addictive substances are introduced to

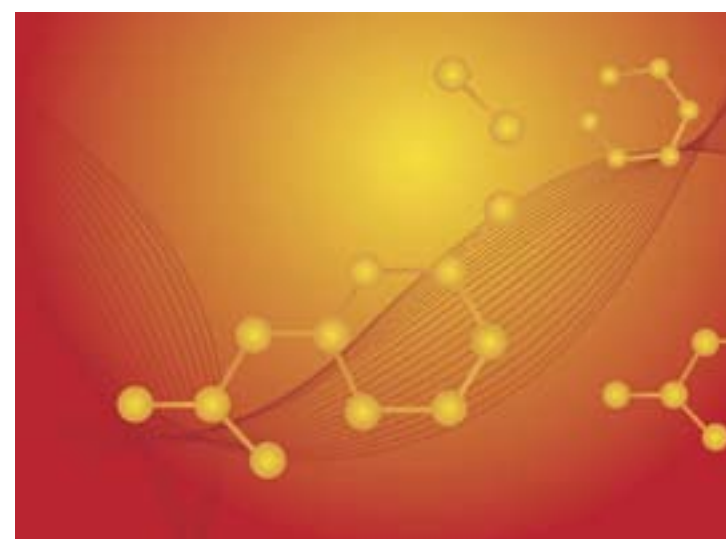
the body, the synapses in the neuropathways located in the nucleus accumbens release neurotransmitters such as dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin which results in feelings of euphoria, happiness, and contentment. The brain believes these feelings are advantageous for survival, so it releases glutamate to construct a hard-wired memory circuit attached to the use of the addictive substances. This chain of events is partly responsible for cravings and drug seeking behavior.

Moreover, there are two changes that happen inside the nucleus accumbens that directly impact one's ability to stop using addictive substances. Over time, the brain develops tolerance to the addictive substance because the synapses in the neuropathways mutate. The mutation is a direct result on the onslaught of addictive substances causing an abundance of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin to reside in the synaptic cleft. Because the entire body is constantly seeking balance (aka. homeostasis), the body's reaction is to create more neuroreceptors to



handle the excess neurotransmitters. As soon as this happens, tolerance has been created, and the disease of addiction has taken hold. The unfortunate side effect of this mutation is that the nucleus accumbens now has too many neuroreceptors designed to handle dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin. As a result, when there is a lack of these neurotransmitters in your nucleus accumbens, your brain seeks to get more of the addictive substance so your body can be in balance once again. When this happens it is called withdrawal and is another reason for cravings.

There is yet another change that happens in the nucleus accumbens that is thought to possibly account for the chronic nature of the disease of addiction. Recent research has shown that with prolonged use of addictive substances there is a genetic aberration created in the DNA structure within the nucleus accumbens.



The aberration occurs when certain genes are turned

on within the DNA that are not supposed to be turned on. With prolonged use of addictive substances, the genes that are turned on do not turn off again. This genetic aberration could be the reason why addiction is considered chronic, and why efforts have been unsuccessful to develop an effective medication to eliminate the effects of addiction.

There is another physiological effect of addiction that contributes to stress which is a primary cause of the relapse process: anhedonia. With prolonged use of mood altering addictive substances, the brain's pleasure center has reset itself in a way that has elevated the hedonic threshold. An elevated hedonic pleasure threshold means that in order to feel pleasure, it takes a great deal more stimulation than it would if the hedonic pleasure threshold was normal. For example, if going to view a funny movie is very entertaining for a normal person, an addict would simply not think the movie was very funny or enjoyable. One's brain is somewhat numbed to the sense of pleasure. This can lead to depression and other forms of stress: additionally, it can lead to using alcohol and drugs to catch a glimpse of a pleasurable experience.

As you can surmise, there are many factors involved with the disease of addiction and how addiction influences brain physiology. It is important to understand that these effects will only improve with complete abstinence from all mood altering addictive substances. But physiology is only part of the picture, there is far more going on with regard to the individual effects of addiction.

Psychology

Stress comes in many forms, from momentary and intense stress to chronic lingering anxiety. Stress may be caused by external factors that an individual may have no influence over to cognitive factors for which one is entirely empowered to change. Regardless of the type or causes of stress, it is a relative certainty that stress launches the relapse process once abstinence is achieved.

Something can be done about most forms of stress because the root cause of the personal impact on the individual in recovery is provoked by how one thinks about the world and one's self.

The disease of addiction is most often associated with cognitive distortions which are exaggerated and irra-



tional thoughts about the people, places and things around one's self. For example, one might think that a couple of people across the room who are giggling and laughing are making fun of one's self: however, the reality is that they are simply having fun and are not even aware of others in the room. Cognitive distortions warp the way in which one deals with life, and therefore causes a great deal of stress and anxiety because one believes that the warped perception is reality. Cognitive distortions are remedied through guided therapy over a period of time.

Another stress related factor includes how one deals with naturally occurring stress. Everyone is exposed to stress in the course of living life and respond on both a conscious and subconscious level using coping mechanisms which are learned responses when dealing with life stressors. When addiction is part of one's life, appropriate coping skills are substituted with mechanisms of escape and avoidance. With practice, the same old ineffective methods of trying to cope with life stress keep recurring. In order to break the cycle of stress mismanagement it is necessary for to learn new coping mechanisms. The process of learning new coping skills is usually led through therapy; however friends, family and other mentors can also have a significant impact.

Sociology

The propensity to return to dysfunctional behaviors time after time can often be linked to sociological factors in one's life. Cultural influences such as everyone drinking at the bar or at family gatherings are very difficult to break away from. Furthermore, some cultures simply do not understand that addiction is a problem, or may think that drinking and using a little bit is per-

fectly acceptable just as long as one does not take it to the extreme. Obviously, if an individual is trying to remain 100% abstinent, these types of attitudes around the individual will not help.

Furthermore, family systems play a very important part in sociology. A family system that is rigid, has many rules that are difficult to follow, or has virtually no rules, will perpetuate deviance within the family. One may experience this in adulthood through defiant behaviors and belief systems that prevent accepting one's self as an addict. This lack of acceptance will lead to acting out in avoidance and denial which will inevitably lead back to drinking and drugging.



Family systems can also provide one with permission to drink and drug by enabling unacceptable behaviors. Very often family systems think they are helping by giving the addict food, money, or shelter when all they are really doing is helping the individual to stay addicted and slowly kill themselves with excessive drinking and drugging. Enabling behavior is understandable because most people want to help out other people. However, when it comes to addiction, traditional methods of help are often times destructive.

There are many other sociological factors that contribute to sociological impairment. Factors such as one's environment, education, race, religion, and even one's workplace can have a significant impact on one's recovery effort. The most important thing to remember about sociology is that the individual is empowered to change it: all one needs to do is be willing to make difficult decisions that will steer one's self in a healthy direction. The process of making those decisions is usually led through therapy or self-help organizations.



Spirituality

One's sense of being, the essence of one's self, is likely misunderstood or entirely missing as long as one is participating in addictive behaviors and using mood altering addictive substances. It is nearly impossible for an individual to intimately connect to any power other than one's self as long as one is drinking and using. If spirituality is the way in which people find their deepest values and meanings for being, then being isolated from spirituality is bound to prevent one from the realization that one has value and is interconnected with humanity and natural inspiration.

One of the challenges with spirituality is that a spiritual connection with others must be formed in order to create a recovery support system. Without the spiritually connected support system one will be isolated when stresses mount and addictive behaviors will recur.

Additionally, a spiritual sense of belonging to the world is very useful in creating an understanding of purpose as well as a grasp on humility. Without humility one will likely continue to fight one's addiction with an attitude of win or lose. If one must win or lose, there is no room left for being human and making occasional mistakes. Being humble must become a way of life, and a spiritual connection is the best way to accomplish this task.

Life and living life are concepts one may not think about too often. Contemplate the terms now: what does it mean to live life? It is a hard question to answer. When joyous people are asked this question their response always contains a sense of spiritual connection with others and with a higher power. Spirituality is highly individualized, yet connects us all as human beings.

Practical Spirituality

One must make an effort to connect spiritually. Regardless of whether one's spirituality is centered in religion, common beliefs and practices, or is entirely independent of any organized culture, one must invest time and develop a routine to engage in a spiritual lifestyle.

Spirituality is best realized when one is present in life and pays attention to one's surroundings, interactions with others in the moment, and remains accurately focused on one's importance at the time. It is valuable to understand that one is entirely unimportant and simultaneously of paramount importance at the same time. Instead of putting energy into how one will respond to others, the energy should be invested into paying attention to what others are saying and responding to others with understanding.



Having a system of people around one's self is an extremely useful method for finding and maintaining a sense of spirituality. These people must have an understanding of addiction and a love for humanity. In many ways, these people will act as a healthy family system that provides support and stability for the recovering addict.

Life is a gift and must be appreciated. A gratitude list, a regular share at a self-help meeting, or a daily prayer of thanks may be an excellent way for one to feel appreciative of life. Even when times are difficult, there are always gifts of life to be appreciated and revisited.

Self-awareness within the construct of self-reliance is critical to maintaining spirituality. This is due to the propensity for one to feel as if accomplishments can be made independent of others, and that others can often just be an inconvenience when attempting to achieve

a goal. While self-reliance is healthy up to a point, it can also be destructive for one's feeling connected to humanity and enjoying the spiritual connection generated when giving and receiving assistance.

A belief in a higher power is very helpful in creating a spiritual sense of being part of a larger meaning. A higher power may be defined by one's own belief system, or a higher power may be adopted from another belief system or religion. Regardless, having a higher power to pray to is helpful in letting go of unhealthy self-reliance and creating healthy coping rituals that help to ground an individual to reality.

Finally, practical spirituality must include time for one to pay attention to one's own needs. This time must be uninterrupted and have intention. One must make the effort to meditate, be mindful, or simply think in an environment that allows introspection. Making time for one's self in a daily or weekly routine is a tremendous way to accomplish a spiritual balance. **SS**



Andrew Martin
M.B.A., CADCI, SAP

Andrew Martin began his entrepreneurial approach to business in 1982 at the age of fifteen. Throughout his career, Andrew has fulfilled his duties as a senior executive in viable business ventures in various industries including; health care, sound reinforcement and lighting, electrical safety equipment, commercial catering, specialty metal

shapes manufacturing, and the entertainment overhead suspension industry.

Andrew's current business efforts are encompassed by Serene Recovery Network, a group of branded organizations with a common vision of helping people in early recovery to help themselves to a long-term rewarding quality of life without addiction. The individual businesses include Serene Center, a 36 bed transitional sober living facility in Long Beach, CA which also conducts outpatient counseling services, drug testing and monitoring, and outpatient detoxification. Serene Connections, a publishing and professional educational conference production company catering to the field of addiction treatment. Serene Directory, an online directory of professionals and organizations affiliated with behavioral and mental health. Serene Foundation, a micro loan lender providing funding for the continuum of addiction care.

Andrew has authored many articles related to addiction treatment, health care agency productivity, industry specialties, as well as business approach and leadership and has been published in Serene Scene, Behavioral Health, Freedom Newspaper, Sound & Video Contractor, Western Wall and Ceiling Contractors Association Bulletin, Connections Magazine (Australia), dB Magazine, EQ, Lighting & Sound International (Canada), Sound & Communications, Live Sound International (UK), Recording-Engineering-Production. Additionally, many patents and trademarks have been awarded to Andrew Martin for various business related products, brand names, and service marks.

Andrew is also very active in the California Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (CAADAC) Board of Directors and Sober Living Network. Andrew also keynotes for many organizations.



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