Recovery and Relapse: Opposing Directions on the Same Road

By Stefan P. Kruszewski, MD

Some years ago, Mrs. Nancy Reagan, the wife of then President Ronald Reagan, was credited with supporting an anti-drug advertising campaign with the slogan, "Just say no." After some publicity, time and money, the media alleged that the program was unsuccessful in its primary goal: "Just saying no" was not effective in preventing the initiation or continuation of illicit drug use.

Addiction is complex

The program’s failure was not a surprise to many people working in addiction treatment. The model was too simple. It did not address the many environmental and genetic factors that lead to drug abuse and dependence. The program minimized the depth and strength of addiction; and, it did not emphasize the positive attributes necessary for, and a consequence of, a healthy sober life.

Questions were asked: "If it were that simple to stop using drugs and alcohol, wouldn't many people stop using them just to avoid the negative consequences? Wouldn't most addicts facing the pain and suffering that inevitably occurs with long-term drug and alcohol dependence just say no and quit using?"

Addicts would if they could, but they can't so they don't. Drug dependence takes away choice. A drug-dependent person uses his drug of choice because he must. Drug use is not an option; negative consequences do not prevent use or relapse. "Just saying no" cannot succeed because it implies an option and no option is available to the drug addicted person. It also misses the point — since recovery from drugs and alcohol is more than saying no to chemicals, it requires saying yes to life.

The success of a program to prevent relapse and to enhance the recovery efforts of someone with a previous drug dependency depends upon more than a desire to avoid negative consequences. For example, let’s take Bill, a fictitious individual in early recovery. When Bill was drinking too much, he faced dissolution of his marriage, financial ruin and medical problems that included elevated liver enzymes. If Bill could have easily said no to drinking, he could have retained his employment, saved his marriage and watched his blood chemistries...
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return to normal. But, that didn’t happen. The awareness of those negative consequences did not stop Bill from excessive alcoholic drinking for more than a day.

In much the same way, now that Bill is sober, those negative factors are not much help in keeping him sober. Simply knowing about bad outcomes does not prevent relapse. Likewise, the knowledge of adverse possibilities does not enhance his recovery efforts. Although Bill knows on some level that a return to drinking would have horrible consequences, that doesn’t do anything to improve his sober life.

Positive action is key to success

Recovery and relapse are at odds with each other. The road to solid recovery requires the maintenance of that recovery route with positive actions, not just the avoidance of negative events. If you are moving in a forward direction on the road to recovery, you are moving away from the road to relapse. The further along on the road to recovery, the farther away is the U-turn to relapse.

Let’s return to fictitious Bill for a moment. Bill is still in early recovery. He doesn’t drink, but his life isn’t getting better. He complains and is angry at his fate. He starts to think that sobriety isn’t so good. Bill retreats more into his own world of doubt and fear. He gets bored and irritable. He becomes deceitful and blaming. He isn’t drinking, but his life isn’t much better than it was before he stopped. He hasn’t relapsed (yet), but the road to relapse is immediately before him.

But, Bill doesn’t choose to take that road. He wants more. He doesn’t want to relapse and he wants a sober life. So, Bill begins to expand his circle of sober friends. He reaches out, he attends meetings, he is less secretive, and he isolates less. He begins to take care of his physical self, exercising and eating right. He spends time with his family. He becomes more spontaneous. He is able to laugh and, in time, can even laugh at himself. He is able to have fun. He begins to give to others without others asking him to give. He finds that he is grateful. He is able to love more deeply. He enjoys times of intimacy, as much as he does time alone. He thinks more clearly. He can experience inner peace and joy. He finds a connectedness with the universe about him. He looks forward to personal responsibility, altruism and spiritual integrity.

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Road to recovery

Avoiding chemical use is a precondition to sobriety, but does not, in and of itself, enhance recovery efforts. It does not guarantee recovery nor does it sustain it. Moving in the wrong direction, the assumption of negative attitudes and behaviors greases the road to relapse.

On the other hand, the opposite of the analogy is also true. For fictitious Bill, and for any person wanting to experience sobriety and avoid relapse, positive actions reinforce the road to recovery and decrease the potential for relapse. People in recovery cannot move in two different and opposing directions simultaneously.

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