

Emotional Intelligence –Dr. Gabrielle Pelicci, Ph.D.

The Key to *Young Adult* Recovery, Relapse Prevention, and Long-Term Sobriety

Our emotions are the driving force of the events, conditions, and circumstances that we experience in our lives on a daily basis. Emotions determine how each and every one of our life events unfold and are brought into existence. Young adults face formidable challenges in emotional development. To become successful adults, they must learn to read emotion, understand emotion, manage emotion, and effectively use emotion in social interactions. Young adult addicts have the added challenge of learning to manage their disease while trying to master the complexity of adulthood.

The self medication model, which originated in the 1960's, states that those who are alcohol and drug dependent are using substances to soothe feelings of anxiety, anger, or depression parentheses (Coombs and Howett, 2005). Young adults, vulnerable to addiction, use alcohol and drugs as a source of mood-management that provides temporary relief. However, this temporary relief actually denies them access to their own emotions and prevents them from developing self-awareness (Dayton, 2000).

Studies show that students who report higher levels of emotional distress go on to have the highest rate of substance abuse (Goleman, 1995). Emotional Intelligence is the ability to use emotion to manage our moods in healthy ways, develop self-awareness and understand how others are feeling. Teaching young adults how to increase their emotional intelligence helps them avoid the pitfalls of substance abuse and end the cycle of addiction.

In his groundbreaking best seller, "Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ.", Daniel Goleman (1995) argued that the Emotional Intelligence is the strongest indicator of human success. Emotions help us make quick decisions when we do not have time to analyze all the facts. Several studies have shown that people with high Emotional Intelligence scores have decreased probability of violence and criminal activity and increased mental health, job performance, academic achievement and overall life satisfaction (Goleman, 1995). Luckily, Emotional Intelligence competencies can be significantly improved and these improvements are sustainable over time (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, A. 2002).

In her book, "Emotional Sobriety", Tian Dayton, Ph. D. (2007) describes a holistic approach to Emotional Intelligence and recovery including healthy self-soothing, the experience of pleasure, and support groups such as 12-step programs. One of the first developmental tasks that young adults in treatment need to learn is self-soothing or self-regulating. They need to develop strategies to calm down, relax and restore balance to their body and mind using activities such as exercise, yoga, meditation, journaling, and spending time in nature. These activities activate a natural high in young adults so that they can gradually become less dependent on substances to artificially achieve high or calm feelings.

Another piece of the puzzle for young adult treatment is activating feeling good body chemicals through play, laughter and creativity. Humor, creative expression and being playful help to develop positive emotion, alleviate boredom, release tension and prevent aggression. Forgiveness and making amends, as taught in 12-step programs, is critical to relapse-prevention. Those most vulnerable to addiction use alcohol and drugs as a way to run away from pain and uncomfortable feelings. 12-step programs have very good strategies for teaching young adults to tolerate not only painful emotions, but joyful ones as well. Support groups help young adults develop inner and outer resources to manage stress and build emotional resilience.

As the director at sober college, I work with hundreds of young adult addicts in recovery. We have integrated educational courses and activities throughout the curriculum to increase the Emotional Intelligence of students and improve their chances for success when they leave treatment. As each student enters our program, we measure their level of Emotional Intelligence using an online assessment tool and we use the results of the assessment to set treatment goals. The clinical staff uses the information from the assessment to inform the work they do in individual & group therapy and program staff use it as a basis for discussion during the Emotional Intelligence activities.

Some of the activities that we use to develop Emotional Intelligence include: rock climbing, surfing, wind tunnel (simulated skydiving), trapeze, parachuting, and visits to places such as the Museum of Tolerance, the Getty Center, and participation in panels held at local high schools. These activities not only serve to treat the disease of addiction, but they are also lots of fun. I believe that it is important for young adults to have fun in recovery so that they develop lifelong interests that substitute for their unhealthy habits.

In addition, we have a full Creative Arts Program, which includes music, dance, drama, yoga, meditation, painting, and film. Creativity gives students the ability to understand and express what they are feeling. Our family program, which addresses deeper family and relational issues, is very helpful in processing emotions and developing healthy emotional intimacy. We've also developed a three credit online course which will provide college credits to students as they participate in the Emotional Intelligence activities and reflect on their experience. The course will deliver the Emotional Intelligence assessment at both the beginning and end of the course so that we can track the progress and measure the development of the student's emotional competencies. This and other courses will also be available through our online school, *Sober College University*, for treatment professionals, individuals in recovery and anyone interested in increasing their Emotional Intelligence as well as learning about other recovery topics.

Recovery is an ongoing process. We're always changing & growing. Emotional Intelligence is built a day at a time from the fortitude we develop by learning to tolerate and manage the power of our emotions. When we learn to process and understand our emotions, instead of run from them, our inner world becomes much less complicated, much more peaceful. We have more energy to devote to things like life passions, relationships and having fun. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution for young adults in treatment, but full recovery from any disease, including addiction is available to us. It requires healing on all levels: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. It requires creative interventions, solutions and lifestyle changes that are long-term and permanent. If young adults are willing to make a sincere commitment to recovery, they will be rewarded each step of the way.

Coombs, R. H. & Howatt, W.A. (2005), *The addiction counselor's desk reference*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
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