

Facilitator Lesson Notes Understanding Addiction & the Brain Part 1

Overview: In this two-part lesson, attendees will gain an understanding of the biological roots that drive addiction and how the term ‘addiction’ differs from ‘substance use disorders’ (SUD). They will discuss how early SUDs may start by drugs to get high or experience euphoria or using them to alleviate pain and or mental health anguish. These early stages of SUDs often involve very poor choices. But with chronic drug exposure (weeks to months), changes in the brain start to occur where the individual using drugs begins to lose their ability to control their use. These brain changes reflect what we call ‘addiction’ and medicine now recognizes addiction as a treatable medical disorder. The lesson will emphasize that people who struggle with addiction are very much trapped inside a mind that won’t allow them to process life’s problems or solutions effectively. Evidence-based treatments can help people with addiction retrain their brain so that they can be back in control.

Notes:

- Blanks: d = dopamine, A = Addiction
- This lesson content was provided by an addiction expert from the Mayo Clinic and is based on the latest research.
- Fundamentally this lesson is designed to dispel myths about addiction, show that research supports addiction as a medical condition and although there are moral implications, such as poor behaviors associated with drug use, the brain is affected, and those behaviors are a result of these changes in the brain.
- It is important to emphasize that the checklist provided is not for parents to diagnose their children but is provided for their understanding of how professionals determine the extent of substance use disorder.

Driving points home:

There are several questions you can use for this discussion. You may ask only some of these questions each time you facilitate this lesson.

- **What did you learn in this lesson about addiction that you did not know prior?**
- **What is your initial reaction after reading this lesson?**
- **Does your experience with your loved one fall into one of the areas of how addiction starts?**
- **Option: have everyone complete the DSMV checklist and discuss what they discover about their loved one and the number of items they checked.**
- **What are some common misunderstandings you hear from people about addiction?** (For example, that it is just a choice, a person that is weak from a moral standpoint, or someone that has not been taught right from wrong, that only certain “types,” of people get addicted or that it is all genetic).
- **How does the term substance use disorder (SUD) differ from the term addiction?** (ANSWER: Addiction involves significant changes to the structure and function of the brain. Addiction is an advanced stage of substance use disorder, but early stages do not involve these brain changes).
- **Why is it important to distinguish the two terms?**

(ANSWER: With early SUD, addiction has not yet taken control of the brain which means the person is much more in charge (and responsible) for their decisions. Once transformation to addiction has taken place with repeat drug exposure, you need specialized treatments to help the brain recover.

- **What is addiction? Are its roots psychological, social, spiritual or biological? You may want to ask each of the first three separately and discuss what each means- i.e. Ask: Are the roots of addiction psychological?** (does addiction come from a mental disorder), then: **Are the roots of addiction social** (is it due to social pressure like peer pressure or other societal factors), **Are the roots of addiction spiritual?** (is it some lack of spirituality or sin or something similar from a spiritual standpoint that is lacking in the person's life) *(ANSWER: Changes in brain reward, motivation and related circuitry impact an individual's ability to make rational choices, therefore it can **affect** all of the above). The driver of addiction, however, is **biological**, when the brain changes and rewiring occurs, it affects the brains ability to operate normally.*
- **What are some common pathways to developing addiction?** *(ANSWER: Using drugs like opioids for pain management, using drugs to get a high/euphoria, using drugs for mental health alleviation).*
- **After hearing this lesson, does it make more sense that people need help from professionals to turn this around? What is it that makes more sense now?**
- **How does understanding this information about the effects of the brain help you in how you can respond to your loved one in a healthier way?**

Cross-reference material:

Please see Dr. Holly Geyer's book: Ending the Crisis: Mayo Clinic's Guide to Opioid Addiction and Safe Opioid Use