

Overcoming Addictive Behaviours; My Gambling Addiction

After ten years of chaos and misery, I finally made the conscious decision to take back control of my life and commit to recovery. This is not an easy decision to make; it can take months or even years to arrive at a point where you ask yourself “is this how I want to live my life?” This question, although simple enough, cannot be answered in one day, but is the start of a process that can lead someone on a more fulfilling life course. Overcoming addiction does not come easy; however, working through the stages of recovery, can help one understand where they are within the process and help them better understand what needs to be accomplished before moving to the next stage.

It is always easier to see problems in another’s life than it is to see them in our own. The first step in the stages of recovery model is pre-contemplation. I call this the honeymoon stage because everything in your life seems perfect and the benefits of engaging in the addictive behaviour seem endless. As such, during this phase a person is unable or unwilling to see the negative consequences of their behaviour. Although harms in one’s life are easily seen by family and friends, attempts to discuss this topic are quickly stopped by the addicted person. This is also how people come to define this stage as denial. In general though, the addicted person does not believe anything is wrong and chooses to make no changes within their life.

Towards the end of pre-contemplation, the addicted person’s life seems to be falling apart and is most likely suffering hardships resulting from their addiction. As they begin to approach or hit “rock bottom”, they begin to ask questions and seek insight into how and why life has deteriorated. These thoughts usher in the next stage of the process, contemplation.

Contemplation is the first step in the actual recovery process and is defined as a time where the person will seek information about addiction and consider a course of action. After one has reflected, they will either choose to revert back to the pre-contemplation stage, continue to question and reflect, or move to the next stage, preparation. Personally, I bounced back between the first two stages for well over seven years. I was aware of the negative aspects of my behaviour, but I was unwilling and unable to make those changes at that time in my life. Keep in mind, the stages are a process and it could take many years to work through them.

Please be aware at this stage, you might be faced with feelings of shame and guilt. As the realities of addiction and the repercussions set in, it is extremely easy to mentally shut down and revert back to the pre-contemplation phase. Shame and guilt are such negative emotions that are unproductive and paralyzing in the recovery process, it is extremely important to let go of these feelings early within the process. After all, you are only human. I know for me, letting go of the shame and guilt was a critical point in my recovery and laid the foundation for me to move into the next stages.

Preparation is the process of preparing for changes in your life. This is a time where you will develop an action plan and organize a system of recovery. How will you do this? There are many ways, but first and foremost, you must determine what your goals are. Do you want to focus on harm reduction (seeking to minimize the harms from addictive behaviour) or do you want to focus on abstinence (completely stop the addictive behaviour)? Only you can decide what is best

for your own situation. There is no right or wrong answer; as this is a process, movement between these stages are free flowing and you can choose to make alterations as you go along. Please keep in mind it is never all or nothing.

As you move into the action stage, you move into the essence of recovery. You are now taking action and taking responsibility for overcoming addiction. In the action phase, you are carrying out the plan created during preparation. This could take many forms and it all depends on what you as an individual are comfortable with. You could attend a 12-step group, meet with an addictions counsellor, turn to family and friends for support, attend outpatient or inpatient rehab, play sports, or read personal growth books. The amount of ways to take action is limitless. The action plan above includes steps I took to overcome my addiction. Keep in mind action plans are personal and what worked for me might not work for you. As you enter the action phase, be flexible, keep what works and discard what does not. The goal in the action phase is to keep everything simple and approach life one day at a time. If something is not working, feel free to make alterations. You are in charge of your action plan!

Moving forward, as you are successful utilizing your action plan you enter the maintenance stage. Most likely still following strategies in your action plan, reliance on them is reduced. As milestones approach or have been reached, feelings of elation might take hold as you finally realize the success of your efforts.

An aspect of the action and maintenance phase, most people will experience a lapse, when a return to the addictive behaviour occurs. Many people might view this as an insurmountable setback, but in my experiences a lapse allowed me to build necessary skills enabling me to become more self-aware. Part of the recovery process is to know and understand yourself. A lapse allows you to learn something new about you and work it into your recovery plan. For example, after six months of continued recovery, I had just been informed I had won a \$100 gift card for a survey I filled out at work. Unbeknownst to me, this small trigger of winning caused me to lapse and return to gambling. Although it was defeating to lapse, I gained a valuable lesson; an awareness of how winning could affect me.

Lapses do not happen only through the partaking in the addictive behaviour. They usually occur weeks in advance and have subtle warning signs to pick up on. The way to harness the power of knowing yourself is to learn from lapses. As said earlier, it is never all or nothing in recovery, it is a process. When lapses occur, learn from them; do not focus on the negatives, focus on the positives and how the insight can strengthen your recovery. This will result in a heightened awareness of behavioural changes.

As you venture through the various stages, please know, recovery is a process and it takes time to reach your goals. Focus on living one day at a time, and if you must, minute to minute, and hour to hour. It is not a race; the goal is to learn, adapt, and adjust to a new and rewarding way of life.

Bio about the Author:

Jason Applebaum is a recovering gambling addict and has not gambled in over 18 months. He is currently working towards a Social Service Worker diploma at Seneca College and is a placement student at Eating Disorders of York Region. He shares his experiences to defeat stigma while promoting health and wellness.

References:

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