

The Healing Power of Meaningful Activity

It takes a great deal of work to maintain an eating disorder or an addiction. It takes a lot of time, energy, and focus - even when the behaviours related to the eating disorder or addiction are not entirely within an individual's control. It can be exhausting to live a life that surrounds an eating disorder or addiction. These disorders can take up all of one's mental energy, they can take over all goal-directed behaviour, and they can even begin to feel like they subsume one's entire identity.

When it comes to eating disorders and addictions, a great deal of time is spent maintaining related behaviours. Rituals, roles, habits, and pastimes emerge in order to maintain these behaviours. For example, someone with an eating disorder may spend a great deal of time tracking calories in notebooks, exercising excessively, eating in secret, researching ways to stave off hunger, or inventing elaborate ways to acquire or dispose of food. Someone with an addiction may spend a great deal of time procuring substances, using substances, procuring or creating paraphernalia, or researching ways to mask substance use or abuse. In both cases, engaging in behaviours related to the disorder can become the most common way in which individuals occupy their time. More importantly, however, is the fact that in both cases, engaging in behaviours related to the disorder or addiction can become the most meaningful way in which individuals occupy their time, thereby becoming the main source of meaning in one's life.

Participation in eating disorders and addictions is a meaningful activity. This is a fact that is often ignored. It is important to realise that these activities, regardless of their destructive nature, mean a great deal to the person who is struggling. Engaging in behaviours related to eating disorders and addictions can become ways of creating identity, connecting with others, creating purpose, or even just spending time in a purposeful way. They can also be a way of dealing with pain or trauma. When someone is thinking about the prospect of recovery, they may feel distressed about letting go of something that has been the central driving force in their lives for so long. It can get to the point where someone may think to themselves, "Who am I without this?"

When starting to let go of destructive activities it is important to redirect the energy that was used to sustain the addiction or eating disorder onto something else, lest an activity vacuum be created. If someone who is recovering from an eating disorder or addiction has a goal of reducing or eliminating their destructive behaviours, this means that they will necessarily be giving up a host of meaningful, goal-directed activity. In short, this means that all of a sudden, they will have a lot more time in the day to fill up. Without filling this newly empty time with something else, it can be easy to fall prey to the seductive option of returning to familiar, fulfilling, yet destructive roles and habits.

It is important for people contemplating and working towards recovery to identify and fortify aspects of their identity that are independent from the eating disorder or addiction. These identities and roles can include everything from friend, to parent, to artist, to teacher, to animal lover. During the course of the addiction or eating disorder, it can be easy to lose sight of these roles and identities in the shadow of identities related to the addiction or disorder. People working towards recovery can think of all of the things that they used to spend their time on before the eating disorder or addiction became a central activity in their lives. They can think of all the new things they would like to try to channel their energy towards. They can work on exploring and reclaiming these identities by making plans to add more of these previously valued activities into their daily schedule, or by trying out new activities.

It can be helpful for people working towards recovery to make a daily schedule outlining their daily activities. Any time that would have ordinarily been filled with eating disorder or addiction-related behaviour can be planned for, and filled with a different, meaningful activity. Idle or free time can similarly be planned for, as for many people idle time can be a trigger to engage in destructive habits.

Meaningful activities don't have to be extravagant. They can be something as small as writing a letter to a friend, watching a film, or taking a walk. They can be unrelated to the eating disorder or addiction, or they could be related to the eating disorder or addiction. Related, recovery-oriented activities can include posting on an online help forum, writing a letter to the eating disorder or addiction, phoning a support person, or creating artwork that expresses associated feelings. Looking up books and online resources to compile ideas for different activities to engage in can be helpful when brainstorming.

Of course, it is difficult to make such a major life shift on one's own. Creating a circle of support is extremely helpful in enacting and sustaining such significant behaviour change. Members of a circle of support can include everyone from medical professionals to friends and family. For example, occupational therapists are rehabilitation professionals whose main role in healthcare is to help individuals going through challenges find ways to engage in meaningful activity, thereby promoting healing and wellness. Friends and family are equally important members of a circle of support - their role can involve just being available to talk on the phone when the recovering individual's time needs to be filled in a meaningful, recovery-oriented way.

For supporters of people who are working towards recovery from eating disorders or addictions, it is important to support the individual in identifying, creating, and fostering their new (or reclaimed) identities. You can offer to sit down with the individual and brainstorm meaningful activities together. If this is someone you know well, you can remind them of past activities and roles that they engaged in. You can even suggest that

you do things together that are unrelated to the disorder. It is important to remember not to push the individual towards this kind of conversation - merely offer your support and suggest that one day you sit down to collaborate together on recovery strategies.

Perhaps most importantly, remember that the individual who you are supporting is an entire person with a complex spectrum of identities, habits, behaviours, and roles. The eating disorder or addiction is just one of these. Make sure that not every conversation is about the disorder. Talk about things that speak to recovery-oriented aspects of their identity. Ask them about other activities they are engaging in. Help remind them that they are an entire person, and that you see them as such.

Making the shift from engaging in primarily destructive activities to engaging in recovery-oriented activities can be daunting. In many cases it can involve rearranging one's life and reclaiming lost identities. Filling the void of absent disorder-related activities with recovery-oriented activities is essential in finding a way to not only leave destructive aspects of one's identity behind, but to also look forward to a more healthy and fulfilled life.