

# **“The importance of counseling in a sustainable substance abuse recovery program”**

*by Robert Higgins, LMFT, CH*

In my 26 years as a mental health counselor I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of clients both in the private sector and in the military who were battling with recreational and/or prescription substance abuse. Along with the physical discomfort caused by the withdrawal from drugs or substances, there are also psychological challenges that, if not addressed, will regularly cause relapse or an unsuccessful attempt to become substance free.

Most clients that I have worked with can identify a point of stress, disappointment or a feeling of helplessness around a given situation that triggered the desire to escape the pain they were experiencing which prompted them to start to use.

Paul was a 21 year old soldier I worked with who was returning from Iraq after serving 18 months away from his family. Upon returning home he learned that his young wife had been seeing another man while he was away. Paul turned to heroin use which he explained numbed the pain of his wife's indiscretion. Upon assessing the situation I realized that the relationship pain that Paul was experiencing would not allow for a successful outcome unless the relationship pain was also worked on and resolved. In order to help resolve his need for the drugs we started relationship counseling at the same time as the substance abuse work. Without addressing the relationship issue he probably would not have been successful in getting off the heroine or he could have gotten off the heroin but would have found a substitute substance or behavior to help him mask his pain.

Counseling and life planning are also important because most addicts have created a daily routine that revolves around their drug use. In many cases an addict's social network, daily activities and friendships all revolve around their drug use. It is important that a recovering abuser have someone to help them look at their old routines and help them develop strategies to deal with the new set of circumstances they will encounter. It is important for them to create strategies on how to deal with temptation from the people who are still engrossed in the lifestyle that he/she is attempting to break free of.

Kim had been a regular cocaine user when she came to see me. She had lost her job because of her inability to focus when she was using which she was doing on a daily basis. She reported to me that she did not know how to cope with her life without the crutch of cocaine use. All of her close friends, she reported, were users and she had gotten into the habit of using regularly to fit in with her peers and to deal with the pain of unresolved issues with her parents. Her low opinion of herself made it difficult for her to see that she could be accepted into a different social network that was not focused on the use of drugs.

Meaningful substance abuse treatment should not be about guilt or punishment. It should be a place of support, information and partnership with a qualified practitioner who can help the client understand and come to terms with the reason(s) that he/she is using, help them develop a strategy to deal with any pain or conflicts that the drugs are helping them to avoid, and help them develop a new set of routines and ways of dealing with stress and their social life. Strategies that will best serve them in their desire to become substance free.