

Nebraska licensee Assistance Program

Substance Abuse assistance for healthcare professionals licensed, certified or registered by the State of Nebraska

Cross-Addiction – Obstacle to Recovery

A person who is addicted to drugs or alcohol often identifies a “drug of choice.” Once dependent upon this drug the body can become dependent upon other addictive substances, especially drugs that are similar to the drug of choice.

One addiction situation may be helpful in understanding how a dependency to one drug can be transferred to another mood-altering drug:

PAIN + ALCOHOL/DRUGS = IMMEDIATE RELIEF + FUTURE PAIN

This addict relies on a drug of choice to cope with emotional or physical pain. When the drug is removed, the addict often substitutes another drug to relieve the pain and the dependency transfers to the substitute drug. However the substitute drug is usually not as effective as the drug of choice and the person will crave a return to the drug of choice. A person’s judgement will also become impaired under the influence of the mood-altering drug and can trigger a return to the drug of choice. Continued use of any mood-altering drug is not full recovery and the person is at risk for continuing their addiction on one drug, the other drug or both.

Almost half of all clients completing treatment for addiction have some type of relapse within one year. The first twelve months of abstinence are the most difficult and important. It is essential during treatment and the early stages of recovery to help the addict understand complete abstinence must be achieved from all mood-altering drugs including alcohol. Any claims made by the addict that alcohol can be used, just not cocaine, or that some prescription narcotics can be used, just not certain narcotics, is a denial of the reality of addiction. The addict’s denial needs to be broken through so they can achieve the abstinence they need for a complete and healthy recovery with a greatly reduced risk of relapse. Cross-addiction can block recovery from addiction and lead the addict back to the very damaging path they are working hard not to travel.

If you are a licensed health service professional or an employer wanting more information about addiction recovery or other related issues, please contact the Nebraska Licensee Assistance Program (NE LAP) at (800) 851-2336 or (402) 354-8055 or visit our web site at www.lapne.org. If you know of or are concerned about a colleague’s alcohol/drug use, contact the NE LAP for appropriate intervention and ongoing support. You may be saving a life, a family and a career.

Sources: Gorski, T.T., Miller, M., Staying Sober: A Guide for Relapse Prevention; Shelby, Saul, A Look At Cross-Addiction.