

Benefits of Relaxation, Exercise and Nutrition in Substance Abuse Recovery

MCC Medical Patient Education Module

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Relaxation, physical activity, and better nutrition contribute to a physically and emotionally healthy life. Involvement and improvement in these areas is to be encouraged as part of the lifestyle changes a chemically addicted person has to make in order to progress toward recovery. Recreation helps to support one's recovery by providing relaxing activity that reduces stress and helps the patient to maintain a sense of balance in his or her life.

The counselor should discuss what kinds of healthy recreational activities the patient enjoys and, if necessary, encourage the person to resume participating in them. If the patient does not currently participate in any such activities, the counselor can help the patient to identify some leisure activities, new or old, that would be feasible.

Whenever possible, some form of physical activity should be undertaken as part of one's leisure time. In some cases, the patient should check with his or her physician before starting any type of exercise, but this step is less necessary if the patient is generally healthy and already engaged in some physical activity. Healthy exercise supports recovery in two ways. Engaging in physical activity helps to combat boredom, which can be a major trigger for drug use. And it helps the recovering person to feel better physically, which will hopefully lessen the severity of any postacute withdrawal symptoms.

If the patient does not come up with suggestions for any physical activity on his or her own, then the counselor should offer suggestions, including those on the following list.

Physical Activity Suggestions

- Taking daily walks (in a pleasant area that will not trigger drug craving).
- Window shopping (which essentially involves walking), as long as the recovering person does not have problems with compulsive spending. The advantage to this type of walking is that in bad weather, one can do this activity inside a mall or shopping center.
- Fishing (many, predominantly male, patients enjoy this activity but the counselor has to clarify that there must be no alcoholic beverages on the fishing trips).
- Joining a local health club or YMCA or YWCA.
- Riding a bicycle, either to commute to and from work or other places or just for pleasure.
- Taking one's kids to the park and playing with them. For younger children, this activity usually means taking them to the playground; for older kids, helping them improve their baseball, basketball, or soccer skills might be appropriate. These activities offer the additional advantage of giving parents and children valuable quality time together, which is important because the addiction has usually damaged familial relationships.
- Playing a sport that one used to enjoy, such as tennis, a summer softball league, or "pick-up" basketball games at the neighborhood courts (as long as there is no alcohol or other drugs involved).

A related area of recovery to emphasize is good nutrition. Addicts often fail to eat properly either because the bulk of their time is spent in getting, using, and recovering from cocaine or because after supporting their drug habit, they do not have the money to buy food. Additionally, cocaine use temporarily suppresses one's appetite, so if the addicted person does not consciously try to eat well, he or she will tend to skip meals because of not feeling hungry. Good nutrition helps the recovering person feel better physically by lessening the experience of postacute withdrawal symptoms and rebuilds the body ravaged by addiction.

The counselor should discuss eating habits with the patient to determine how aware he or she is about good nutrition. If the patient does not have healthy eating habits, some nutritional suggestions should be offered. The following are very basic suggestions for improving one's nutrition.

Nutrition Suggestions

- Patients should be encouraged to eat two or three healthy meals a day and follow the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (USDA, USDHHS 1990)
- Choose foods from the different food groups, including meat, poultry, and fish; dairy products; fruits and vegetables; and bread and grains. Five fruits and vegetables daily are recommended.
- Many Americans eat too much processed sugar, too much fat, and too much salt, which can contribute to common health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, obesity, and high blood pressure.
- Balanced, nutritious meals are better and more economical if prepared at home rather than purchased at fast food restaurants.
- Eating more healthfully will give one more energy and help one to feel better sooner in recovery.