



Hope—a cornerstone of addiction recovery

BY TREVOR SWANSON, BRE, MTS

The disease of addiction permeates all aspects of the individual including their mental, social, and physical health. Addiction is also a spiritual disease, but it is not always considered as such. When it impacts an individual's spirituality, addiction can affect a person's ability to realize their full potential and to have meaningful relationships – with themselves and others. It may begin with rebelliousness towards authority, or a desire to have one's own way. This inability to effectively relate to others can affect a person's understanding of the "self" and how he or she fits in. In turn, an individual can feel isolated, experience difficulty with important relationships, and may turn to alcohol, gambling, drugs or sex to fill the void. This downward spiral can progress and physical illness may result from the abuse of a substance or compulsive behaviour leading to a decline in health. Physical consequences such as liver disease from the abuse of alcohol, HIV, hepa-

titis or sexually transmitted infections from intravenous drug use or sexual activity are only some of the effects of substance or behavioural addiction.

The process of recovering from an addiction usually occurs in the reverse direction as the progression of the disease. For example, recovery often begins with the repair and restoration from the physical effects of addiction first and then moves into spiritual healing and restoration. This progression of healing reveals that recovery from addiction is not simply the act of staying sober. Instead, successful recovery from addiction results from improving one's physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. It is realizing one's true potential through the understanding that sobriety is a foundation for recovery.

An holistic treatment approach may be successfully used to address the physical, psychological, spiritual and social aspects of health and recovery. By treating not just the problem but the person as a whole, the treatment centre helps clients gain the strength and ability to make the healthy choices critical to overcoming their addiction. The recovering addict's physical health is assessed by a physician and then closely monitored by medical staff throughout their treatment experience. Mental healing is facilitated through cognitive therapy, relapse prevention and learned coping and life skills. Social health improves when important relationships are repaired, and loved ones begin their own healing. Relational work continues through challenges in relationships leading to forgiveness and reconciliation. As recovery begins to take root, many are encouraged to be more open to spirituality in order to move forward into long-term recovery.

While successful recovery and realizing one's full potential is the ultimate goal when treating an addiction, this goal is not easy to achieve. Unfortunately, some attempting to rid their lives of the dependence on substances or behaviours may lose sight of their recovery goals and may find it difficult to cope. In 2005, 3,743 Canadians died through suicide. Of those who took their lives, 90 per cent suffered from depression, mental illness or substance abuse.

Without resources or help, an addict deep in their destructive lifestyle can eventually feel helpless and develop a sense of hopelessness. The absence of hope would, without a doubt, result in unhappiness, apathy, and possibly depression and despair. Someone who has a deep desire to improve their life but feels helpless in doing so can be propelled to consider suicide as the only option.

Without hope we have nothing. Many can live without a lot of things but no one can live without hope. A few years ago, a newspaper article described the destruction from Hurricane Juan that ravaged the Halifax area in September 2003. An unemployed fisherman who was left homeless from the hurricane shared his thoughts on the importance of hope in his life. He stated that he has already lived quite awhile without work. He can, for a time, live without money and shelter. Although he loves his wife and children, he admitted he could even live without his family. Going further he voiced he could live for a short period of time without food and water, “but one thing I cannot live a moment without is hope.” There will always be difficult and dark periods in life, but without hope these difficult times become even more unbearable.

Hope is often defined as a feeling that what is wanted, will happen; it is a desire accompanied by expectation. Although hope can encourage one into wishful thinking and provide optimism, hope is not that simple. Hope is neither wishful thinking nor optimism and does not delude one into thinking that life is perfect. Instead, hope is based on a reality, that although life comes with its challenges, suffering, and pain, we still have a sense that our lives are important and have an ultimate purpose beyond the current experiences we face. The hope we are discussing is therefore deeper and more meaningful. In the best sense, hope anticipates, and waits with excitement for something that is extremely important to us. It is grounded in a solid, realistic, and certain reality that an event will take place in our future. We must be sure of our future for hope to take place. In short, hope is the present anticipation of a future reality.

What is the source of our hope? What will the source of hope be for someone suffering from an addiction? For someone in recovery hope is re-ignited once they choose to reach out for help. For a time, recovery becomes a source of hope as opportunities and future prospects, that were once limited, begin to expand as important life changes take place. Anticipation grows as the recovering addict returns to work or ventures into a new career or business endeavour. Often, passions are rediscovered in treatment. Many also notice that while in treatment, disposable income increases, as money is no longer spent on their addictive behaviour. Personal income can also increase as overall health improves resulting in increased productivity leading to job promotions, and the like.

For many, this period of contentment will last for a time but inevitably, life's challenges will return. Negative life events can occur such as unemployment, the death of a loved one, relationship conflict or unresolved issues such as past abuse or trauma may resurface. Through these difficult times, hope must remain in order for one to face the tribulations life can present in recovery. Some may base their hope on their careers, relationships, financial security, or their health. Unfortunately, these things may be fleeting and lost at any moment. When all is gone, is there anything else that can channel our hope?

Whatever challenges or disasters life brings, hope must remain. The only way in which one can anchor his/her hope is by being open to a life of spirituality. Openness to spirituality can occur either during a crisis or by quietly exploring life's important questions. In any event, one may be challenged to re-evaluate life, and re-establish core values and goals. One may be encouraged to return to their faith tradition, or perhaps venture into a new faith tradition whereby breaking away from what may have been an unhealthy pattern. In any case, a spiritual journey provides life with deeper meaning and purpose and provides the recovering addict with a greater sense of self.

If hope is the present anticipation of a future reality, then it must be rooted and anchored in a spiritual life. I am

understanding

convinced that everyone is on a spiritual journey and because of this, my challenge to my clients (and to anyone in recovery) is to discover where they are in their spiritual journey, and where they need to go. Once this is discovered, the recovering addict is then able to choose the appropriate course for that journey. For some, it may be returning to a faith tradition, for others it may be admitting that they don't have all the answers – but whatever the situation, hope is re-ignited.

This spiritual journey of hope is an important component of recovery from an addiction. Until this breakthrough occurs, as exciting as the journey has been, it is only then that recovery becomes a purposeful and long-lasting

journey. During this journey, world views expand, relationships provide new perspective, and recovery becomes a path to a hopeful and realistic future. Insights into recovery have more purpose and meaning, therefore serving greater principles beyond “staying sober.” Sobriety becomes the foundation of recovery as opposed to the sole source of recovery. Hope becomes rooted and anchored in a flourishing life of spirituality. ■

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