

# THE BEST PROGNOSIS: INTEGRATED, HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ADDICTIVE DISORDERS

*Seven areas of focus, when addressed at the appropriate time and with expert guidance and support, can bring about a fuller recovery process – one which goes beyond simple abstinence and towards true recovery, prescribes Dr Mark Atkinson*

People with addictions and their loved ones deserve the best treatment and support available to them and to receive that care in a way which empowers them to recover from the physical, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual contributors and consequences of their illness – and, also as importantly, to discover how to live a healthier, more fulfilling life.

While acknowledging the truth that it is the clients' own willingness, commitment and ability to access and harness their resources and inner strengths that accounts for most progress in the process of recovery and discovery, what can we do as health professionals to support our clients in actualising the potentials of their heart, body and mind?

Are we really utilising the best approaches to foster our clients' wellbeing? Are we embodying the way of being, living and relating that we are recommending to them? Are there any models of care or principles of treatment which can support and guide us in our work?

These are useful questions, as they contain seeds of personal and professional change and evolution,

and help to prevent apathy and stagnation.

Most of us view addictions and the treatment of people with addictions through the filter of our own personal and professional belief systems. What's more, we each have an inner lawyer, a sub-personality who makes a convincing argument for our way of practicing, and against ways which conflict with our practice.

This innate bias is common; we all do it to differing degrees. For example, there are a variety of perspectives on why addictions come about and how best to treat them. One movement believes that addictions, such as alcoholism, are progressive, genetically-based diseases, rooted in painful emotional and psychological problems which, over time, through therapy, abstinence and support groups, need to be identified and addressed. The focus is then on learning to live a healthy and fulfilling life with the disease of addiction.

Another movement takes the nutritional approach and believes that addictions are brain- and body-based diseases with their roots in our

genetic make-up, and that full and sustained recovery can be brought about through nutritional rehabilitation and biochemical repair.

Yet another movement says that addictions are the consequence of not living a healthy and fulfilling life, and not having the skills and tools to regulate emotions, manage stress and build on innate strengths and talents.

So who is right? Research does not yet have the answer. My own experience is that all these perspectives contain elements of truth, but none contain the whole truth – or whole solution.

So surely a sane and sensible way forward is to harness the strengths of each in a way which is tailored and adapted to the needs of the client, while also remaining open to new innovations, research discoveries and, of course, refinement with experience?

This is the essence of the integrated holistic approach to addictions that an increasing number of professionals and addiction treatment centres around the world are starting to embrace.





#### WHOLE-PERSON EMPOWERING CARE.

The integrated holistic approach to addictions – and indeed any health challenge – is a personalised, person-empowering approach to healthcare which uses an eclectic mix of nutritional, psychological, medical, social and spiritual approaches to address the underlying barriers to the health, thriving and flourishing of our clients.

To achieve this, integrated holistic healthcare makes use of all of the appropriate self-help, conventional and complementary therapeutic assessments, tools and approaches available and, where possible, does so according to the evidence of their effectiveness.

Underpinning the approach is the unique relationship between the practitioner and patient. This melds the commitment of the patient to learning new skills, acquiring new knowledge and transforming perceptions, habits and attitudes, and the skills, awareness and presence of the practitioner. This definition should not be revolutionary or challenging: it is based on common sense.

So what would an integrated holistic approach to addictions look like? The answer is that it depends on the context in which it is being delivered and the needs of the client.

A programme delivered in an addiction treatment centre will obviously look different and have different areas of emphasis compared to that delivered by a therapist or team of therapists in the community.

That said, there are seven areas of focus which, when addressed at the appropriate time and with the necessary expert guidance and support, can support and bring about a fuller recovery process, one which goes beyond simple abstinence and towards true recovery.

#### FOCUS ON SEVEN AREAS.

What I am about to share with you is based on my own experience of using an integrated holistic approach to addiction treatment in a non-residential setting. It is a work in progress.

The seven areas of focus cannot be delivered by any one practitioner in isolation. No one has the specialist knowledge and expertise to do so. It requires a cooperative approach.

This holistic, multidisciplinary, client-centric solution requires a coordinated approach involving a lead practitioner (usually a counsellor, psychotherapist or medical doctor) working with, at the appropriate time and when relevant, a nutritionist, a complementary therapist (for example acupuncturist or bodyworker) and workshop providers.

The approach in this article assumes that clients are actively participating in a 12-step abstinence-based programme, are knowledgeable about the nature of addictive illness and its underlying contributors, are aware of their addictive outlets, are under the care and guidance of at least one health professional and are receiving appropriate help for co-existing mental-health problems.

#### FOCUS I – NUTRITIONAL AND BIOCHEMICAL REPAIR.

Targeted nutritional supplementation and individualised dietary recommendations create the foundations of an integrated holistic addiction treatment programme.



Most people who come into recovery have nutritional, biochemical and neurotransmitter imbalances resulting from and contributing to their underlying addictive illness. Screening for these then providing appropriate nutrition-based treatment has, in my experience and that of nutrition-based addiction treatment based centres around the world, been a key to improving and stabilising clients' energy levels, mood and mental clarity. They can then benefit more from their treatment programme.

The following list gives a brief overview of some of the main biochemical imbalances experienced by people with addictive disorders.

Neurotransmitter imbalances, including those of serotonin, dopamine and acetylcholine, are recognized contributors to and correlates of addictive illness. Addressing these using specific amino acid supplements, oral and possibly intravenous nutrient therapy and the judicious use of prescribed medication is an essential part of the recovery process. This can be enhanced even further with the use of acupuncture and auricular acupuncture.

- **Dysglycemia** – fluctuating blood-sugar levels – is a very common contributor to mood swings, depression, irritability and poor concentration. This can be addressed by eating a nutrient-dense whole-foods diet which is high in vegetables, wholegrains, fruits, nuts and seeds and high-quality protein and is low in processed foods, trans fatty acids, sugar and caffeine. The mineral chromium is also useful to stabilise blood sugar.

- **Mineral/vitamin/essential-fatty acid imbalances:** nutrient deficiencies are common among the general population and very common in individuals with substance addictions. These can be addressed using nutritional supplements and a tailored diet.

- **Food intolerances/sensitivities** are particularly common in alcoholics and should be considered. Wheat, dairy and sugar are the most common. The solution is to remove the triggering foods for a period of time while the underlying issues, such

as leaky gut syndrome, are addressed.

- **Adrenal fatigue:** the adrenals are two small pyramid-shaped glands sitting on top of our kidneys which play an important role in our vitality levels, mood and stress resilience. Prolonged periods of physical and psychological stress, alongside nutritional deficiencies, leads to suboptimum functioning of the adrenals. This in turn is associated with fatigue, sleep disturbance, low stress tolerance and depression.

Many patients with addictive illness are exhausted and find themselves much more able to do the necessary psychological work of addiction recovery once receiving treatment for adrenal fatigue. Hypothyroidism can sometimes co-exist with adrenal fatigue; this should be checked for.

- **Dysbiosis** refers to a condition in which the normal healthy population of beneficial bacteria in the intestines has been disrupted, leaving it open to the overgrowth of yeast, fungi, parasites and potentially harmful strains of bacteria. This should be addressed with appropriate medications, herbal and probiotic supplements.

All these are fairly straightforward to identify and address by a nutritionist or integrated medicine doctor. If you are a counsellor or psychotherapist, I highly recommend that you work alongside such a person.

### FOCUS II – HEALTHY SELF-CARE.

Healthy self-care is the ongoing process of responding to the needs of our body/mind in a balanced and moderate way. Most people with addictive disorders neglect or abuse their body, so learning about the principles and practice of healthy self-care and addressing deficits is an important component of recovery. One way to illuminate areas to be addressed is through a physical and emotional needs audit.

Physical needs include shelter, clothing and warmth, rest and sleep, healthy eating and supplements, physical activity and respectful touch, healthy environment and sunlight

Emotional needs include security (a safe

place to live in), privacy, receiving/giving positive attention, a sense of autonomy and control, being emotionally connected to others, engaging the wider community, developing friendship and intimacy, developing a sense of competence and achievement, having a sense of status within social groups and creating meaning and purpose.

Once each of these has been assessed an individualized healthy self-care programme that combines practical action, skills-based training, as well as a variety of self-help, complementary therapies, social, nutritional and mind-body approaches.

### FOCUS III – HEALTHY EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT & INTELLIGENCE.

In my opinion, many of the behaviours people of people with addictive illness are simply unskilled attempts to sedate and control the emotional pain held within their body. Learning healthier, more skilled ways of managing and processing emotion is another essential aspect of the recovery and discovery process. Options to consider include:

- Using somatic-based approaches such as core energetics, breathwork, The Freedom Process or The Trauma Release Process to release deep chronic tension patterns and the un-discharged energy/emotion from the body. See [www.traumaprevention.com](http://www.traumaprevention.com) and [www.thefreedomprocess.com](http://www.thefreedomprocess.com)

- Mindfulness meditation in order to develop emotional body awareness. I recommend the book *Mindful Recovery* by Thomas & Beverly Bien

- Education on relapse prevention

- Improve emotional literacy and other skills of emotional intelligence (EI)

- Teaching stress reduction, emotional resilience and dynamic relaxation skills

- Learning emotional processing skills, such as honest emotional sharing, embracing emotions with an attitude of openness and welcoming, journaling, EmoTrance and Emotional Freedom Technique.



- Learning about anger, fear and grief and receiving instruction on how to work with and process these emotions.

#### FOCUS IV – TRAUMA HEALING.

I am yet to work with anyone whose level of happiness, emotional health, quality of life and relationships has not in some way been negatively influenced by trauma. Trauma is part and parcel of life. Learning how to recognise and recover from it is a vital part of facilitating clients towards a higher level of wellbeing and functioning.

Trauma healing work should be facilitated by a trained expert with whom the client feels safe. The two main types of trauma to be worked through are shock trauma and developmental trauma. Treatment approaches well suited to shock trauma include EMDR, somatic experiencing and the rewind technique ([www.rewindtechnique.com](http://www.rewindtechnique.com)). Developmental trauma refers to the neglect and/or physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual abuse that occurred during the clients' early childhood. This prevents the essential developmental processes of bonding and separation to take place, believed by some authorities to be one of the most significant contributors to emotional immaturity, addictive behaviours and poor emotional health.

#### FOCUS V – SELF-ACCEPTANCE.

Developing compassionate self-acceptance, the ability to lovingly embrace and accept who we are, just as we are, is a life-time endeavour – but it reaps many benefits for clients often in a couple of weeks of starting the following:

- meditation (especially loving-kindness and formless meditation) to enhance ability to stabilise and settle attention, develop detachment and cultivate presence; see [www.buddhism-connect.org](http://www.buddhism-connect.org)
- thought management and defusion techniques to address negative self-talk and the inner critic, with a third-generation CBT approach called Acceptance & Commitment Therapy being particularly useful; see [www.contextualpsychology.org/act](http://www.contextualpsychology.org/act)
- NLP, hypnotherapy and energy psychology

techniques for changing self-image and re-programming self-limiting beliefs

- self-parenting through inner child work and inner child dialogue and healing
- processing and containing shame, including releasing inter-generational shame
- using positive psychology interventions such as practising gratitude, finding flow and cultivating realistic optimism.

#### FOCUS VI – POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS.

Research has consistently shown that one of the single most important contributors to happiness and wellbeing is the quality of our relationships. The following support the creation of healthy relationships and are best facilitated by a counsellor with experience with relationships. The tasks involve:

- learning the skills of respectful communication, conflict resolution and assertiveness
- attending Recovering Couples Anonymous ([www.recovering-couples.org](http://www.recovering-couples.org))
- learning about boundaries and gaining experiential practice in setting/ maintaining them
- developing the capacity for empathy
- identifying and starting to address codependency and counterdependency dynamics
- reclaiming projections and transferences
- working through the process of sexual healing and developing and implementing the skills of emotional, physical and sexual intimacy.

#### FOCUS VII – CONSCIOUS LIVING.

Conscious living is an approach to life rooted in simplicity, sustainability and soulfulness. It is about living consciously and responsibly and being sensitively attuned to the evolutionary impulse which guides, moves and evolves the universe. Put another way, it is about living in surrender to a power greater to ourselves and co-creating through our words, actions and deeds a more enlightened society. The path of conscious living is highly personal and can involve:

- living the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

- simplifying the life we live
- identifying our values (what truly matters to us) and taking actions and establishing goals which honour our values and strengths
- liberating the creativity and power of our 'shadow'
- contemplative practices; these can be movement practices (yoga, chi gung, martial arts), creative practices (singing, art, creative writing), stillness (awareness meditation, silence), generative (visualisation, loving-kindness meditation and prayer), ritual (creating a sacred space, sweat lodge, soul initiation, vision quest) and relational practices (deep listening, story telling)
- surrounding ourselves with life-enhancing people
- being part of a spiritual community
- following an established spiritual/secular/religious path.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION...

...on nutrition-based approaches to addiction, visit [www.allianceforaddictionsolutions.org](http://www.allianceforaddictionsolutions.org) – or read my book (see end last paragraph)!

...on emotional needs, visit the Human Givens Institute [www.hgi.org.uk/lena](http://www.hgi.org.uk/lena)

...on trauma healing, visit [www.weinholds.org](http://www.weinholds.org) – I recommend its book, *Flight from Intimacy*.

...on self-acceptance, read the book *The How of Happiness* by Sonja Lyubomirsky

...on conscious living, see [www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)

...good workshops include the Meadows ([www.themeadows.org](http://www.themeadows.org)), Onsite ([www.onsiteworkshops.com](http://www.onsiteworkshops.com)), Caron ([www.caron.org](http://www.caron.org)) and Heart Stream Journeys ([www.heartstreamjourneys.com](http://www.heartstreamjourneys.com)).

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