



ADDICTION AND ANXIETY

Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strength. ~ Charles Spurgeon

People come to a co-occurring treatment program with a variety of mental health and substance abuse issues. Anxiety among alcohol and drug users is common and complicates recovery in several key ways. Alcohol has an anxiety-lowering effect, producing a state of relaxation and calm. Continued alcohol use can lead to tolerance of the anxiety-reducing effects, and soon more alcohol is required to get the same level of anxiety reduction. What starts out as a quick fix quickly leads to growing and chronic problems. Research shows people with

inherently high anxiety levels are at increased risk of becoming alcoholics. Withdrawal from alcohol in chronic users is often accompanied by extreme anxiety, which only adds to the addiction intensity.

DOUBT AND INSECURITY

William is a 25-year-old single man with two children, ages four and two. He was in and out of trouble early in high school and managed to stay until 12th grade, but did not finish. His friends were using marijuana and alcohol, and upon experimenting, William quickly gravitated toward the relaxing and comforting feelings of being drunk and high.

By the age of 19 or 20, William was using increasingly more alcohol and having trouble keeping a job. He used alcohol to deal with withdrawal effects from an opiate addiction. He made frequent attempts to cut down his alcohol use, but almost immediately, his anxiety levels got worse.

MOUNTING ANXIETY

With every attempt to reduce his alcohol use, the apprehension, worry, and anxiety got worse. He described difficulty relaxing, feelings of panic, the inability to feel at peace, and he began avoiding things that made him anxious.

Before coming to treatment, William's alcohol tolerance was extremely high, he had regular blackouts, and his withdrawal effects had become severe. He described shaking and feeling cold when withdrawing from alcohol and had been hospitalized several times in the past six months for dangerously high blood-alcohol levels. When he arrived in our program, he was highly motivated to quit drinking, manage his anxiety, and begin a new life of recovery.

GETTING HELP

William began addressing his alcohol addiction and severe generalized anxiety symptoms. Prescriptions used in treatment were low addiction-risk medications that helped him feel less keyed up and sleep better, reduced his irritability, and brought an increased ability to focus and concentrate on psychological and emotional management tactics presented in treatment. In his case, as in many, the powerful reinforcer of the addiction was not the pleasant effects of a substance, but rather loosening the agonizing grip of anxiety.

MANAGING ANXIETY

Use the following anxiety management techniques to help reduce anxiety and decrease the cues and triggers to use alcohol as an inferior anxiety management tool.

Take inventory of your anxiety. Learn about the different types of anxiety. This can reduce the fear and stigma when symptoms begin.

Resist the urge to avoid. As temptation to avoid the thing causing distress goes up, so does anxiety. The more anxious and distressed you feel, the more you will want to avoid the stressor. Learning to take on small amounts of worry and reducing or managing anxiety is a better long-term plan.

Practice relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation, in advance. Waiting until you are having a panic attack to implement these techniques would be too late. They must be learned and practiced to be effective.

Recognize negative thoughts. As you grow in recovery, you will better identify pessimistic and destructive thoughts

as they come. Recognizing negative thoughts enables you to refute and replace them. Develop a pattern of reviewing positive substitutions using realistic, empowering self-statements.

A TIME TO REFLECT

1 Take an inventory of your anxiety. Determine what cues and triggers produce anxiety for you.

2 Consider using relaxation techniques regularly. You can find breathing exercises, scripted meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation exercises on YouTube and other websites.

3 Identify negative thoughts that produce or intensify feelings of worry and anxiety. Develop a pattern where you can remember and review realistic self-statements. During distressing events, mentally repeat those positive thoughts as substitutions for negative self-talk. List three positive thoughts below that you can remember and use.
