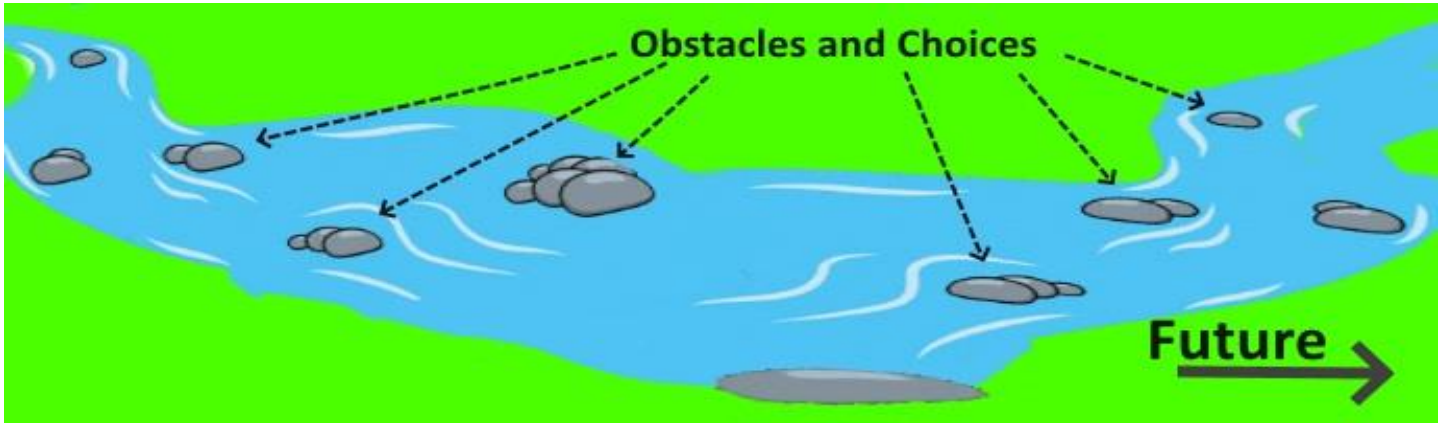




The River of Choices – Coping with the Stigma that may be Associated with the Past

Our life choices flow like a river in one direction – toward the future. Our choices of the past, whether good or bad affect our present and our future, however they do not define us. Today we can choose a new way to navigate down the river different than the way we did during when making our past choices



Quite often however, we may have to live with the consequences of our past choices. But again: *we are not defined by our past choices*. Even if we are still paying for past choices, we are a new person today who can change (for the better) and improve the way we live and make better decisions. People can and do change for the better with time and effort.

Discussion – Have you ever felt like others were defining you by your past choices?

Think about how society, family, or others may hold your past choices against you through the following:

- Being judgmental or prejudiced
- Labeling
- Discrimination or unfair treatment

The above are all examples of **stigma - a mark of disgrace or infamy; a stain or reproach, as on one's reputation.**

Surviving Stigma

In a perfect world, there would be no stigma. In a perfect world, everyone would show compassion, empathy, love and forgiveness. In a perfect world, people would let our past go and let us all move forward in a positive and encouraging way. Although these fine qualities do exist, the world is not perfect and often when dealing with mental illness and substance use issues, there may be some judgement, labeling, unfairness and stigma to deal with even when you may be working on making positive changes in your life.

Discussion – What are some ways that stigma may impact your life? Some possible examples below:

“I think about what others will say if they see the scars on my arms from my past”

“I worry about what others will think if they knew I take medication for my mental health (or addiction)”

“I dread the thought of certain people finding out about my past (or present) legal situation”

“When I meet new people, I feel uncomfortable that eventually they may find out about ____ (from my past)”



Stigma Survival: Start with Self-Healing and Self-Acceptance – Stigma is wrong, but sadly, it is a reality. It can be hard to cope with the negative aspects of stigma that others may be exhibiting when we have not first forgiven ourselves and let go of the past. Building self-confidence and self-acceptance make it easier and easier to drown out any negativity that may be buzzing around us in this world. Healing from past hurt makes us stronger and more resilient today. Consider some of the following ways to increase self-acceptance and self-healing

- **Understand the Disease Model** – Substance use disorders and mental illness are examples of diseases that impact the brain and its functioning. When someone has a disease of this type, they are not thinking clearly. For example, when someone is using large amounts of drugs and/or alcohol or has untreated mental illness, their brain is not functioning the same way as a healthy brain. Decision making and other higher thought processes are negatively impacted. This is fact.

To put this in perspective, imagine if a person had a disease in their arms and legs such as severe arthritis. Would you judge this person with severe arthritis for not being able to do as much work as others who are healthy? Would you label that person as “lazy” or “incompetent” because they were limited physically by their disease? Of course you wouldn’t. So by the same reasoning, is it fair to harshly judge someone who is suffering from the disease of addiction or mental illness for having misguided thinking? Accepting the disease model of addiction and mental health is not an all-inclusive excuse for all of our past choices. However, by accepting the disease model, this means we accept the fact that substance use disorders and mental illness are contributing factors to why we may have made some poor choices in the past. By getting help for these disorders, we can work toward self-healing, self-improvement and self-acceptance. We can let go of the mistakes of the past and focus on a more positive future.

- **Peer Support** – One of the things that makes support groups so effective is the positive power of knowing that you are not alone. Getting to know others who have had similar experiences can make acceptance of substance use issues and mental illness much easier. Good groups provide compassion, empathy and acceptance that can be essential for self-healing and self-acceptance
- **Therapy** – When deeper issues from the past may result in trauma, participating in therapy can be extremely helpful in the process of letting go. Some scars may be there for a lifetime, but with therapy over time “open wounds” can heal and stop hurting so much today. Therapy can help with learning to effectively manage and let go of some of the negative feelings and thinking associated with a traumatic past.
- **Self-Care and Skill Building** – There is a lot involved here but it is worth the effort. Developing new skills for making ourselves feel better takes practice but with time this will develop positive results. Learning how to cope with anxiety, insecurity, anger and other negative emotions goes a long way toward building the self-confidence and self-acceptance needed to overcome the negative effects of stigma. Emotions like fear, regret and resentment can keep you anchored to the past but learning to cope and move forward is like breaking free which is extremely empowering. When you feel empowered by your progress, stigma is much less likely to be able to bring you down as your positive momentum will help steamroll your confidence level past any of the critics who may be out there
- **Goals and Purpose** – As your life gets more meaningful, any negative things others may think, do or say, becomes less and less meaningful. As you attain more goals and continually build on your successes, you will increasingly be able to ignore and drown out whatever naysayers may try to say. Your amazing progress will make you increasingly immune to negativity. It is worth the effort to continuously set and strive for new goals across many different life areas. As you make better and better decisions along the river of choices your life will get better and better, leaving negative thoughts associated with your past farther and farther in your rear view mirror until you can barely even see them. Your success will drown out the haters



Process:

What has helped you so far?

How do you feel about the idea of the disease model?

Do you have enough support? If not, how can you get more?

Have you considered therapy? If not, what is holding you back? If you are in therapy, what has worked for you?

What skills have you learned that have helped you heal?

What skills do you still need to make continued progress?

How do you care for yourself on a regular basis? What do you need to do more of?

What goals have you achieved that have helped you build positive momentum?

What short term goals are you still working on?

What are some of your long term goals in life?

What helps you feel and build a sense of meaning and purpose in life? What do you think can help you in this important area?

Considering what was reviewed, what do you still think that you need more of? Specifically how are you going to get more of what you need? – Come up with three specific ideas that you can start working on today or in the very near future:

1.

2.

3.