

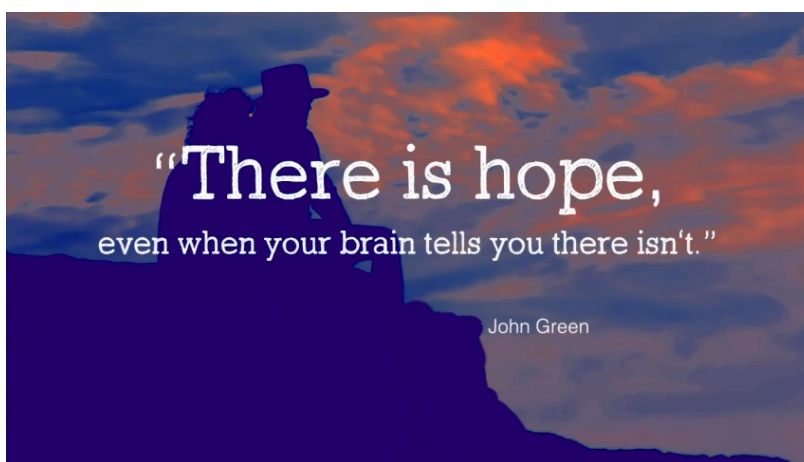


The Resilient Brain – *Not to Fear our Brain Can Heal*

- **Video Intro:** <https://youtube.com/shorts/lgrE8FbdBiU?feature=share>

Intro- The human brain is truly amazing and there is still so much to learn about it. When it comes to substance use disorders, we know that the brain is impacted. However, research continues to show that the brain is very resilient and with the right recovery plan, the brain can get better. A recovery plan is unique to each person and includes a variety of aspects ranging from things like medication, support, physical exercise, different types of therapy, lifestyle changes, coping skills and much more. People impacted by substance use and mental health disorders should establish and maintain a multi-faceted recovery plan that works for their individualized needs. This can promote lifelong learning, growth, and healing. Recovery and positive change is a process that really works when we find the right plan and work along with it, making adjustments as needed along the way.

The Brain Can Recover



Part 1: CRAVINGS – One of the most difficult things people with substance use disorders often experience is cravings or urges, which can be quite challenging to cope with. People trying to recover from a substance use disorder may ask: *Will I always experience these intense cravings?*

There is growing scientific evidence that the brain does recover from addiction. Although for some it may never return fully to its “pre-addiction” state, the brain is still very resilient and with time and the right recovery plan, cravings can be reduced dramatically to a manageable level. They can be reduced in both intensity and frequency. For example, one study specific to methamphetamine use showed that with prolonged abstinence from this substance, natural dopamine levels in the brain returned to normal levels.

Link to study - <https://www.jneurosci.org/content/21/23/9414.full>

Planning a Recovery Plan for Cravings – Discuss the following:

Who in the group is learning (or has learned) to effectively cope with cravings and urges?

- **Link to Cravings information and worksheets for future groups:**
 - [Coping with Cravings](#)
 - [Cravings Plan](#)
- **(Both of these worksheets are available free on [Taking the Escalator website](#), under the heading “Cravings”)**



Part 2: PSYCHOLOGICAL WITHDRAWAL is often associated with the concept of Post-Acute Withdrawal (PAW). Most people know about physical withdrawal symptoms which are those unpleasant things that can happen to the body after stopping prolonged daily substance use such as nausea, cramps, sweats, chills, etc. (often dependent upon the type of substance). Physical withdrawal can last days or even weeks but eventually subsides with time. Psychological withdrawal symptoms, however, can last many months after substance use is stopped. Psychological withdrawal happens because the brain is conditioned to the effects of substances and when those substances are removed, the brain can have lasting problems and difficulties adjusting. Some examples of psychological withdrawal can include:

- Anxiety
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Irritability, stress, and agitation
- Emotional dysregulation (Ranging from numbness to uncontrolled outbursts)
- Low confidence/self-doubt
- Poor focus/ difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty finding pleasure in activities that are supposed to be pleasurable
- Sleep problems
- Lack of motivation

Discuss: Has anyone in the past (or currently) experienced psychological withdrawal symptoms since starting to work on substance use issues?

There is scientific proof that the brain can heal from psychological withdrawal.

“Neuroplasticity” is defined as the ability of the nervous system to change its activity in response to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli by reorganizing its structure, functions, or connections...”

(Source: “Neuroplasticity” - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK557811/>)



The brain can heal in both structure and function with time and healthy habits. Some things that are proven to promote healing of the brain to overcome psychological withdrawal include the following list below:

As a group review this list of proven ways to help the brain heal from psychological withdrawal. Check the items on the list you are working on or planning to work on:

- Limiting stress and learning stress management skills
- Learning and practicing healthy coping skills
- Participating in healthy peer groups
- Healthy diet and regular hydration
- Good sleep habits
- Therapy
- Limit stress
- Learn new recovery skills
- Join healthy peer groups
- Get about eight to nine hours of sleep
- Eat healthy foods
- Stay hydrated
- Exercise
- Emotional and behavioral therapy

(Source: WebMD)

For a follow up exercise in future groups, see “Self-Care Review” on the Taking the Escalator website to review an extensive list of ways to assure health and healing in recovery –

<https://uploads.documents.cimpress.io/v1/uploads/64adaaa8-6162-4ae4-a650-d71322ea59ee~110/original?tenant=vbu-digital>

Or go to the Taking the Escalator “Group Activities by Topic: page and look under the heading “Self-Care”

<https://www.takingtheescalator.com/group-activities-by-topic>



Part 3 - TRAUMA is an ongoing emotional/psychological response to an event or series of events that are disturbing or distressing. The events that can cause trauma can vary greatly and can be different between one person and another, based on individual perceptions and experiences. Trauma can do a lot to adversely impact the brain including:

- chronic stress, anxiety and/or fear
- feelings of guilt and shame
- desire for social isolation
- feelings of hopelessness
- anger and irritability
- unpredictable emotions
- difficulty managing and sustaining relationships
- loss of sense of “self”
- self-destructive behavior
- poor memory
- sleep problems including nightmares
- flashbacks
- dissociation (feeling disconnected from yourself or with the rest of the world)

(There are also a variety of physical symptoms that can be associated with emotional trauma including headaches, aches, pains, etc.)

The brain can heal from trauma with time and effort. Some things that people who have experienced trauma can do regularly to help heal include the following:

- **Practicing insight and self-awareness** (aka mindfulness) by learning to stop, slow down and pay attention to your thoughts and feelings as well as physical sensations which can then help shifting to a focus of calm and effective coping.
- **Creativity** (art, music, writing, etc.) can be a way to channel emotions in a positive manner.
- **Self-care and serenity:** Finding peaceful places and situations like walks in nature, taking a relaxing bath, or just resting on the beach, for example can help one cope with trauma
- **Avoid substance misuse (or addiction)** – There can be a direct correlation between addiction and trauma. People may misuse substances to cope with or avoid trauma (ineffectively) so learning to live without substance use/misuse can promote effective recovery and healing
- **Connection** helps heal trauma. This can include connection with others we know for support as well as connecting with others we don't know as well (or at all) by helping others and engaging in volunteer work. For people of faith seeking a deeper spiritual connection can be helpful for healing.
- **Therapy** – There a variety of therapies for the treatment of trauma. Talk to a licensed therapist, psychiatric nurse practitioner, psychiatrist, or other trained professional to learn more and find something that works for you.

Discuss as a group what people in the group are doing from this list to help with healing and recovery

For more activities on Trauma see the Taking the Escalator Trauma Resources page:

<https://www.takingtheescalator.com/trauma-resources>