



Taking an Honest and Nonjudgmental Look at Abstinence, Harm Reduction*, and Substitution & Cross Addiction.

* This information, discussion and activity is designed for a Harm Reduction environment where abstinence is a choice and there may be individuals in the group who are still struggling with that choice or who may be actively making the choice to substitute substances

Abstinence – The root word of abstinence is *abstain*.

- Abstain – v. to choose not to do something : to refrain deliberately

Discussion: In order to discuss abstinence in an open and productive manner, everyone in the group should follow two simple guidelines:

1. **Honesty is required** - To lie or be deceptive about where you stand with regard to abstinence will undermine this discussion. Most people in a group of people who use substances have pretty good instincts when it comes whether or not someone is telling the truth or if someone is lying to make themselves look better. Just be honest, it's the only real way to make progress
2. **Refrain from judgement** - If you have come to the conclusion that abstinence is the best way for you to make progress then that is great but that does not mean that it is okay for you to pass judgement on someone else who may be struggling with abstinence or who has not come to the same conclusion that you have. It is better to let your positive example speak for itself and your words be encouraging and supportive rather than being condescending or judgmental which never helps others.

With these requirements in mind consider some basic principles about abstinence -

- A. Controlled use is impossible for some individuals:** There are many individuals out there who are unable to control their substance use no matter how hard they try. For these individuals, abstinence is the only option.
- B. There are and always will be exceptions to the rule** – There are other individuals out there who may one day be able to use less harmful substances in a manageable way at some point. An example would be someone who was addicted to opioids who stabilizes that addiction yet is still able to drink socially later in life without any problems.
- C. People do not get to choose whether or not they are in group A or B above** – A host of factors including genetic, social, emotional and legal factors can play a role as to whether or not someone can even consider anything other than abstinence. For example
 - a. **Genetics** – Some individuals through no choice of their own seem to have an “addictive personality” with a strong genetic predisposition to become addicted to a variety of substances
 - b. **Legal**- Obviously if there is an existing legal mandate such as being on parole, probation or involved with child protective services, abstinence (if possible) is the better option to avoid getting deeper into trouble. The legal system often removes choice from the equation as many legal situations require full abstinence. (However, an increasing number of legal programs are accepting of medication assisted treatment options for addiction and the legal system in many areas is still coming up with policies for medically prescribed marijuana)



- c. **Mental and emotional conditions**– The presence of a significant coexisting mental health condition may also influence the choice of abstinence as the primary solution.
- d. **Social** – It is much easier to choose abstinence when your social circle also is abstinent

D. Abstinence is the ideal – Like the old saying goes, **abstinence is the safest and most effective method for preventing consequences**. Simply put, if you don't do something then you don't have to worry about what might happen afterward. (If you don't have sex, for example, you don't have to worry about STD's or pregnancy. If you don't drink or use and drive, you don't have to worry about a DUI. If you don't gamble, you don't have to worry about losing, etc.) Still, harm reduction (which often means using a less harmful substance) is still an option for someone who is either not ready for abstinence or has tried abstinence repeatedly and failed.

GROUP QUESTIONS – Take turns answering the following as a group:

- ▶ Being honest without expressing judgement toward others who may be in a different place: Where are you today with regard to using or not using substances? Prescribed, non-prescribed, legal and recreational?
- ▶ Who here has currently made the choice that abstinence is the best route for them? (Or perhaps due to a legal situation abstinence may be the only choice if required). If you are not choosing abstinence then what is your plan?

Harm Reduction, Substitution, and Cross Addiction -

- **Harm reduction** is a set of practical strategies and ideas aimed at reducing negative consequences associated with drug use (harmreduction.org)
- **Substitution** is the act of replacing one thing for another. When considering harm reduction, substitution involves replacing one drug with a less harmful drug which may or may not be successful
- **Cross addiction** implies that if a person is a dependent on one psychoactive substance, he is at high risk to develop dependence on any other addicting psychoactive substance (Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation)

The Gamble: Many people who have a substance use issue who try substitution end up failing – Consider some reasons why substituting may be off the table as an option – *Check all that apply for you*

- I know from personal experience that I cannot substitute one drug for another
- I have a legal situation that makes substitution a very bad idea
- I want abstinence as I know it is the best option for me right now
- If I try substitution, I may end up associating with people who use which is something I want to avoid
- If I substitute for another substance (like marijuana) I may need to break the law where I live
- Whenever I try something different I find myself eventually going back to my most problematic substance (or substance of choice) so substitution is a bad idea based on my experience
- I feel that substitution for me involves trading one addiction for another which will hold me back from the progress I really want for my life
- Other? _____

Discuss your answers



Substitution can be a Gamble: A game focused on discussing substitution and two commonly used substances: *Alcohol & Marijuana*

Materials needed: 2 dice

Directions: Take turns rolling the dice and answer according to how you roll. Do a few rounds until complete

- If you have a real life experience that you can share, then do that. If not, try to come up with a reasonable sounding imagined scenario about what could happen and elaborate.
- **Keep this in mind:** Everyone participating has their personal views on alcohol and marijuana use and substitution. Even if you get a scenario that you don't ever feel will happen to you, still use your imagination and consider how that could possibly happen and if it were to happen how would it play out for you and what would you do. In life, you never know so be open minded about the possibilities.

Rolled **Outcome** – (Describe how this happened or could happen to you)

2	You are arrested for something that happened while you were using alcohol or marijuana. How could that happen? How would that affect your life?
3	You overdid it and used too much and feel lousy (hangover or burnt out) the next morning. What might happen the next day? (For example missed day of work)
4	You develop a health condition that may be adversely effected by drinking or smoking weed. What would you do if a doctor told you that you could no longer use without it affecting your health?
5	You end up being around someone who is not a good person for you because of weed or drinking. How could that happen and how could that affect your life overall?
6	You start to feel like you aren't living to your full potential due to alcohol or weed – How could alcohol or marijuana either directly or indirectly cause that to happen?
7	Free answer – In your own words what is at least one downside of smoking weed or drinking for you?
8	You start to feel alcohol or weed adversely effecting your mental health triggering anxiety or depression. What would you do in this case?
9	You do something you later regret because of a decision made while drunk of high? Come up with an example and how that could impact your life.
10	You find yourself increasingly mentally dependent on alcohol or marijuana to get by. What would you do?
11	\$\$ - Talk about the financial cost of a regular marijuana or alcohol habit for you.
12	Your tolerance to alcohol or marijuana gets so high you need larger amounts.



Concluding discussion: Ultimately we all have free will so in the end we all have to make our own choices with regard to what we are going to do. The decision to be abstinent or to continue to try to socially use more socially acceptable substances like alcohol or marijuana is a personal choice that everyone with a substance use issue has to make. For some people it's a no brainer as they have come to the conclusion that any use of alcohol or marijuana for them is just a bad idea. Others may still be grappling with the decision and yet others will one day find the hard way through life experiences. With this in mind, being open-minded and honest, consider the following closing questions as a group:

1. What are some of the strongest reasons for choosing abstinence in your opinion? (Legal, social, emotional, financial, etc.?)
2. If you are still drinking or smoking marijuana, what would be some indicators for you that it isn't working out and you need to reconsider your plan?
 - If your family was here what might they say?
 - What have you discussed with your counselor on this topic? – What risks are involved?

“When my information changes, I alter my conclusions. What do you do, sir?” — [John Maynard Keynes](#)