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Addiction Recovery

Healing One Step at a Time

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About a year ago, I woke up in a trailer someplace in Illinois, full of drugs and alcohol, and I didn't remember anything I'd done. I remembered only that on my business trip, as soon as the plane landed, it took me all of about 10 minutes to ditch my colleague, go straight to the bar, and disappear for three days. The second day—the day I was supposed to fly home—was my daughter's birthday. Just a year ago.

A year ago Mark (names have been changed) didn't know how he would overcome his addiction to drugs and alcohol. He had already tried to quit. He had visited with his bishop, been to professional counselors, gone through rehabilitation centers, and exerted all the willpower he could, but nothing brought permanent change. Soon after that critical moment in Illinois, he found the Church's 12-step addiction recovery program, sponsored by LDS Family Services. In the program, he found the principles and direction that would change his life.

The change occurred as he studied and applied the principles taught in the program workbook and weekly recovery meetings. The workbook guides readers toward recovery using 12 steps, each of which addresses an essential principle

In the Church's addiction recovery program, those who suffer from addiction learn through the Atonement of Jesus Christ how to experience the miracle of living in recovery.

of recovery such as honesty, hope, or trust in God. At the weekly meetings, participants are able to gain strength from others and share their own experiences of applying the principles.

Mark learned that the journey from addiction to recovery is a difficult one, but knowing people who have

already made that journey can give hope to those who struggle. At each meeting a facilitator—someone who has experienced recovery—encourages others by sharing insights based on his or her own recovery. Mark is now a facilitator. Each week he shares his experiences (included in this article in italics) to help others understand that they are not alone and that addiction can be overcome.

The Trap of Addiction

After each time I gave in, I would say, "This time is going to be different. Please, Lord, help me. I don't want this to be a part of my life." Yet it continued to be.

Mark was an active member of the Church. He never thought he could get trapped in an addiction. Living the standards of the Church, such as the Word of Wisdom, keeps members safe from many addictive behaviors, but in a world where harmful influences are increasingly

Grace, a power that comes through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, makes recovery possible. Through grace, participants in the recovery program regain the hope they have lost.



pervasive, addiction is a growing problem, even among Latter-day Saints. Although Mark struggled with alcohol and drugs, addictions aren't limited to substance abuse. They can include gambling, pornography, eating disorders, inappropriate sexual behavior, and overdependence on another person.

At any given recovery meeting, a variety of addictions may be represented. Steve, for example, was addicted to prescription drugs. He initially took medication for a back injury, but after his injury had healed, he lied and eventually stole in order to get more prescription drugs. Steve, who served as a counselor in a bishopric, ended up in jail wearing his suit one Sunday when he was supposed to be conducting sacrament meeting. It was at that point he knew he needed help.

In some locations, groups created specifically for pornography problems are available. Garrett, who regularly attends such a group, says at first he didn't realize his habit was an addiction. "There's no way I would have bought a pornographic magazine, but it was so easy to get on the Internet," he says. He realized he had to change when his marriage was on the verge of falling apart.

Coming to the Program

My inability to reconcile my testimony with my behavior, along with my inability to forsake my addiction, put me in a place where the shame was unbearable. Finally I was willing to try something different.

An oft-repeated phrase among program participants is that an individual seeks recovery "when the pain of the problem becomes greater than the pain of the solution." When Mark reached that point, he took a friend's suggestion and came to a Latter-day Saint addiction-recovery meeting. Some people decide on their own to come. Others are encouraged to attend by friends or priesthood leaders. Some have been ordered by a court of law to attend 12-step recovery meetings.

Many are reluctant to attend a meeting because they feel ashamed of their struggle. In her work as a Church-service missionary, Suzanne marvels to see the change that comes over the participants. "When they first start coming to the meetings," she says, "their heads are often down. They are embarrassed and filled with guilt and fear. After a few weeks their heads lift up with newfound hope. They realize they're not alone in their struggle."

Church-service missionaries are ready to welcome participants and offer them hope and encouragement. Participants focus on a different step from the workbook each week, and the facilitator shares his or her own experience with that step. Those who wish to share their thoughts on recovery introduce themselves by their first names only. A meeting always includes a reminder of the principles of anonymity and confidentiality, which are critical to fostering a safe atmosphere.

An important aspect of the meetings is that participants

are in a setting where they can feel the Spirit again. They can say a prayer and bear testimony, even if their choices have led to their being disfellowshipped or excommunicated. This spiritual environment is a source of great strength to participants as they focus on the 12 steps.

Steps to Recovery

Working the steps of this program simplified the gospel in a way that I could apply the testimony I had always had.

As Mark discovered, the steps of the addiction recovery program are a systematic way of implementing gospel principles. The 12 steps are adapted from the original Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, but the Church's program is unique because it puts the steps into "a framework of the doctrines and beliefs of the Church."¹ In the addiction recovery program, the 12 steps are actually steps to accessing the power of the Atonement.

The workbook, *Addiction Recovery Program: A Guide to Addiction Recovery and Healing* (item no. 36764), outlines the 12 steps and the principles associated with them. Each step has a scripture study section with questions to ponder and space for writing. One participant says that the straightforward approach of the 12 steps gave him hope. By the time Clifford awoke from a coma caused by a drug overdose, his marriage and career had ended. He wondered how he could ever put his life back together. "To have the gospel in little bite-sized steps, 12 of them—I could do that," he says.

Many say that steps four and five, which focus on personal inventory and confession, are the most challenging. But it depends on the individual. Paula, who struggled with compulsive eating and overdependence in her relationships, worked hardest on step eight—forgiving and restoring relationships—as she tried to forgive her abusive father. She says now, "I can't tell you how grateful I am for this miracle in my life: to love and forgive."

Hope in the Atonement

The change that has happened to me is I'm not miserable all the time. Sometimes it's not easy. Perhaps the Lord



RECEIVING THE POWER TO CHANGE

"If we will turn to the Lord and believe on His name, we can change. He will give us the power to change our lives, the power to put away bad thoughts and feelings from our hearts. We can be taken from 'the darkest abyss' to 'behold the marvelous light of God' (Mosiah 27:29). We can be forgiven. We can find peace."

President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, "The Power to Change," *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 123.

doesn't see fit to take it all from me right now, but He strengthens me so I can bear it patiently and cheerfully, and I can progress. He lightens it just enough that I learn the most that I can.

The gospel teaches that grace comes through the Atonement of Jesus Christ (see Ether 12:27). Grace is an enabling power that makes recovery possible. It is "divine means of help or strength" that helps us do good works we wouldn't be able to do or maintain by ourselves.²

Suzanne, who went through the program herself before becoming a Church-service missionary, says, "I knew that God could tell me what to do, but I never knew He had the power to help me do it. Now I understand the grace that comes through the Atonement of Jesus Christ."

Through grace, participants regain the hope they have lost. One participant, Edward, grew up in the Church, but his childhood insecurities left him feeling that he wasn't as good as other people. He says, "I didn't understand the Atonement, and I didn't love myself, so nothing really mattered." When he was in his 20s, he started drinking and using drugs in an attempt to dull his negative feelings—a pattern that continued for 20 years.

When he was arrested a second time for drunk driving, he was ordered to get treatment. In the Church's program, he learned that receiving forgiveness and regaining



HOW TO FIND AN ADDICTION RECOVERY GROUP

Go to www.lidsfamilyservices.org, and click on **Addiction Recovery Support Groups**. The workbook is available in Chinese, Danish, English, Finnish, German, Japanese, Mongolian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Ukrainian. Although using the workbook while attending group meetings is ideal, members in areas where a group has not been established will benefit from using the workbook while working with their priesthood leader or a professional therapist who is supportive of gospel principles and 12-step recovery.

If you are a priesthood leader interested in establishing the addiction recovery program in your area, contact your Area Presidency through ecclesiastical lines.



a sense of self-worth were possible. He attended church every Sunday, studied the 12 steps, and applied these gospel principles and actions to his life. He became willing to turn his life over to Heavenly Father and, in the process, learned how to love himself and how to let the Atonement work in his life. “I couldn’t overcome all these things by myself,” he says. “The Savior can do for me what I can’t do for myself.”

Those who struggle with addiction aren’t the only ones who can experience a mighty change: loved ones find that as they apply the 12 steps to their own lives and attend recovery meetings, they can experience the blessings of the Atonement in regard to their own grief. In some areas the addiction recovery program provides support groups for family and friends, who discover that the Savior can heal them of the pain, anger, and guilt that loved ones sometimes feel.

When Deborah learned of her son’s drug addiction, she was plagued by feelings of guilt as she thought about how she could have been a better mother. Then she discovered that she could apply the steps to herself. She says, “What I learned in the program is that no matter how my son is doing, I can still be happy and have Heavenly Father in my life.” She adds, “On the outside I look the same, but my life has completely changed on the inside.”

Shannon, whose husband faced a pornography addiction, attended the support group for spouses. As she participated, she noticed a change in herself as well. At first she focused on the pain she felt over her husband’s addiction. But then, as she started learning and applying the steps, a miraculous change occurred. She says, “I began talking less and less about my husband and more about what I had learned from each step. I began to see how the Lord was working in *my* life.”

The End Goal

In the past I was able to abstain for periods of time. I’d get myself back in good standing with the Church and serve in callings, and everyone would tell me how great I was. But I didn’t feel great on the inside at all. And that’s why

abstaining is just one part of it. True recovery is not doing it and not wanting to do it because our nature is changed.

Mark learned that through the Atonement, individuals can not only stop their addictive behaviors but also heal the underlying causes of their addiction. And with the help of their priesthood leaders, they can repent and bring the blessings of the gospel back into their lives. Doug LeCheminant of LDS Family Services clarifies the objective of the program: “Our end goal for those in the program is that they will be able to make and keep temple covenants—not just stay sober.” The sweetest fruits are activation, baptism or rebaptism, priesthood advancement, temple ordinances, and restoration of blessings.

Steve, who found himself in jail wearing his church suit, says, “Today I’m clean and sober because of my Heavenly Father and the 12 steps.” His activity in the Church is especially meaningful to him. “I am a father. I am a priests quorum adviser. I am also a facilitator because I want to give back to a program that gave so freely to me.”

Maintaining Recovery Day to Day

Every day I seek my Heavenly Father in prayer and through the scriptures. In the morning I read books about recovery, and I write my feelings and my impressions. I call a support person in the program to help clarify my thinking. I go to the meetings. I try to serve. And I have never relapsed on a day that I have done those things.

Those daily tasks keep Mark spiritually well. Others who have been through the program have discovered the same truth: maintaining spiritual strength requires continuous effort. No one is completely safe from relapse, but through daily gospel living, those who struggle with addiction come unto Christ and receive strength and hope.

“I’m learning bit by bit, precept upon precept,” says Mark. “My nature is changing, and it’s the first time since this started that I can say I have hope. I truly believe that I never have to relapse again.” ■

NOTES

1. James E. Faust, “The Power to Change,” *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 124.
2. See Bible Dictionary, “Grace,” 697; Guide to the Scriptures, “Grace,” 103.

THE 12 STEPS OF THE ADDICTION RECOVERY PROGRAM



1. Admit that you, of yourself, are powerless to overcome your addictions and that your life has become unmanageable.

2. Come to believe that the power of God can restore you to complete spiritual health.

3. Decide to turn your will and your life over to the care of God the Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

4. Make a searching and fearless written moral inventory of yourself.

5. Admit to yourself, to your Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ, to proper priesthood authority, and to another person the exact nature of your wrongs.

6. Become entirely ready to have God remove all your character weaknesses.

7. Humbly ask Heavenly Father to remove your shortcomings.

8. Make a written list of all persons you have harmed and become willing to make restitution to them.

9. Wherever possible, make direct restitution to all persons you have harmed.

10. Continue to take personal inventory, and when you are wrong, promptly admit it.

11. Seek through prayer and meditation to know the Lord’s will and to have the power to carry it out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, share this message with others and practice these principles in all you do.