

# Treatment for Drug Addiction: It Won't Work If They Don't Receive It

**Lisa Simon Onken, Jack D. Blaine, and John J. Boren**

Treatment won't work if it is not administered. Penicillin will not effectively treat streptococcal pneumonia if patients don't take it, and take it as prescribed. Insulin won't help a diabetic if it is not used. Cognitive therapy for panic disorder won't work if all the therapy sessions are missed. And treatment for drug addiction will not work if the addict is not engaged and retained in treatment. Although engagement, retention, and compliance are problems for the treatment of virtually every medical and mental disorder, these issues are especially problematic for drug addiction treatment.

People want bacterial infections to go away. They want to be free of the symptoms of diabetes. They want the panic attacks to stop. However, drug addiction is a disorder that many individuals do not necessarily want to stop. Unlike most medical and mental disorders, drug addiction has a strong component. If the pleasure associated with drug taking did not create so many social, financial, criminal, and medical problems, it is hard to imagine many people seeking treatment at all. Thus, while drug-addicted individuals want to stop the problems associated with drug use, they may not want to stop taking drugs.

Some want treatment, but the very thing for which they are seeking treatment can prevent them from coming—that is, they are involved in drug-taking behavior, making them unavailable for treatment. And for some, problems associated with drug addiction (e.g., medical problems, low income, lack of adequate transportation, inability to pay for child care) make it difficult to engage in treatment.

These and other factors contribute to a person's inclination and ability to change and readiness to engage in a particular type of treatment. One of the more exciting concepts put forth in the drug addiction treatment research field is Prochaska and associates' (1992) Stages of Change model, promoting the idea that people cycle through varying degrees of readiness for change and that treatments

should be tailored to meet the individual's readiness level, rather than imposing an inappropriate treatment on the individual.

In drug addiction treatment research, the issue of patient dropout is always present. Sometimes, it is merely acknowledged. Oftentimes, while it is acknowledged that statistical correction is inadequate, in the absence of alternatives, statistical corrections are nonetheless made. Most investigators do the best they can to retain patients in treatment, and then analyze their data with all of its flaws. A clinical trial of a drug addiction treatment without the problems created by dropout is, at this point, a fantasy.

It was because of the enormity of the problem of patient dropout that a meeting was held to address the issues of engagement and retention in drug addiction treatment. The name of the meeting, "Beyond the Therapeutic Alliance: Keeping the Drug-Dependent Individual in Treatment" was chosen because of the belief of the cochairs that far more was needed than a strong therapeutic alliance to engage and retain drug-addicted individuals in treatment. The purpose of the meeting was to review the literature on research in this area, but, even more important, to stimulate new research that addresses directly the issues of the engagement and retention of drug-addicted individuals in treatment. The meeting was held on May 10 and 11, 1994, and was chaired by Lisa Simon Onken, Ph.D., Jack Blaine, M.D., and John Boren, Ph.D., of the National Institute on Drug Abuse's Treatment Research Branch. Participants included Larry Beutler, Ph.D., Kathleen Carroll, Ph.D., Carlo DiClemente, Ph.D., Ellen Frank, Ph.D., Stephen T. Higgins, Ph.D., Kenneth I. Howard, Ph.D., Bruce Liese, Ph.D., Lester Luborsky, Ph.D., G. Alan Marlatt, Ph.D., A. Thomas McLellan, Ph.D., Cory Newman, Ph.D., and M. Duncan Stanton, Ph.D. The chapters that follow are the product of this meeting.

## REFERENCES

- Prochaska, J.O.; DiClemente, C.C.; and Norcross, J.C. In search of how people change: Applications to addictive behaviors. *Am Psychol* 47:1102-1114, 1992.

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