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Drug and Alcohol: 10 Ways to Develop Emotional Intelligence in Recovery

Addiction as a Lack of Emotional Intelligence

Giving up an addiction is an important first step, but it is not usually enough to ensure future happiness for the individual. This is because there will usually be a reason for why the person fell into substance abuse in the first place and that reason is likely to be still there. One of the most common motives for turning to alcohol or drugs is an inability to deal with emotions. This occurs because the individual lacks emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence Defined

Emotional intelligence can be defined as the ability of the individual to assess and control the emotions of themselves and others. This type of intelligence is measured using the emotional quotient (EQ) which is similar to the intelligence quotient but measures different things.

Emotional Intelligence in Addiction and Recovery

A typical problem for people who fall into addiction is that they have difficulties dealing with their emotions. In fact there is a common overlap between substance abuse and Alexithymia – this is a condition where an individual is unable to express their emotions in words. Alexithymia is an ancient Greek term for 'without words'. This inability of the addict to deal well with their emotions makes life difficult for them so they self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. Their lack of emotional intelligence drives them towards addiction, and it is this that helps keep them stuck in this misery. If this person becomes sober they can still struggle unless they develop emotional intelligence.

Skills Required for Emotional Intelligence

It is suggested that emotional intelligence involves a number of different skills including:

1. The individual is able to control their impulses, behaviors, and feelings. This is referred to as the ability to self-manage.
2. Those people who are emotionally intelligent are able to understand the emotions and needs of other people. This is referred to as social awareness.
3. The individual is able to recognize their own emotions and understands how this can impact their thoughts and behavior. This ability is known as self-awareness.
4. The person good skills in regards to relationship management and this means they are able to build healthy relationships and communicate effectively.

In order for the person to be considered emotionally intelligent they need to be able to:

1. Recognize and manage their emotions.
2. Be able to quickly reduce their own stress levels.
3. Will be able to confident resolve any conflicts in a positive manner.
4. Will have developed some mastery over nonverbal communication.
5. The individual is able to use humor when dealing with the difficulties in life.

Emotional Intelligence as Emotional Sobriety

When people give up alcohol or drugs they will become physically sober. This ending of the addiction is a positive step, but it may not be enough to ensure happiness in sobriety. This is because the individual will still be expected to deal with their emotions and now they will not have a chemical crutch. By making a determined effort to develop in recovery the individual is able to become emotionally sober. This can take years to accomplish but it will lead to greater happiness in life.

10 Ways to Develop Emotional Intelligence in Recovery

Here are just 10 suggestions for how people can increase their emotional intelligence in recovery.

1. Learn to Empathize with Other People

Empathy can be defined as the ability to identify and understand another person's situation. It differs from sympathy in that it involves trying to understand things from the other person's perspective. Sympathy is more about feeling sorry for the other person, and this can involve little understanding of what this other person is going through.

Learning to be more empathetic is a skill. It means that the individual is able to use their imagination so as to understand what it might be like for the other person. In order to be empathetic is vital to not jump to judgments. Even if the behavior of the other person is wrong they may have good justification for their actions. Empathy is a key to good communication because it leads to greater understanding, and the other person really feels that they are being listened to.

2. Learn to Recognize Stress

Some people experience stress so frequently that they are unable to even recognize it. This is worrying because it means that the individual could be suffering the consequences of chronic stress without them realizing it. The symptoms of stress can include:

1. The individual is unable to think clearly - they can describe this as having a fuzzy brain.
2. Frequent episodes of upset stomach.
3. Frequent headaches.
4. Physical symptoms where there does not appear to be an obvious medical cause.
5. Tension in the body.
6. Inability to sleep at night.
7. Butterflies in the stomach.
8. Evidence of an ineffective immune system - for example, the individual always seems to be picking up colds and other infections.
9. Loss of appetite or comfort eating
10. The individual easily becomes irritable or upset.
11. Feelings of anxiety.
12. Lack of energy to do things.
13. Symptoms of depression.
14. Excessive negative thinking.
15. Loss of interest in sex.
16. The individual feels frustrated.
17. They describe feeling antsy much of the time.

3. Develop Effective Techniques for Dealing with Stress

Once the individual recognizes that they are suffering from stress they need to deal with this. There are many options for how they can do this. Some people find that relaxation techniques are useful, but talking to other people, exercising, and spending time in nature can also be a great help.

4. Understand Non Verbal Communication

There is more to communication than words. It is possible to learn a great deal about other people by their body language - otherwise known as nonverbal communication. A failure to understand body language may mean that the individual is missing out on vital information in their communications. It might also mean that they are sending out the wrong signal through their own body language.

5. Become Skilled at Conflict Resolution

The ability to deal with conflict is a vital life skill. The fact that humans have competing needs and desires means that at least some conflict is unavoidable. If the individual is unskilled with dealing with such challenges they may find that life is full of arguments and bad feelings. By learning to effectively and confidently deal with conflict the individual ensures a far smoother time in recovery.

6. Learn to Listen

Learning to listen is another important skill for anyone who wants to develop emotional intelligence. Those who are a bit self-obsessed will only pretend to be listening to the other person – in reality when they are not talking they may be planning what they will say next. Listening involves being fully focused on the other person's words. It also means giving this other person the space to say what they want to say. Those individuals who have a tendency to always interrupt the other person should make a commitment to count to 5 after the other person has stopped talking before saying anything at all. This will help to ensure that the other person has sufficient time to say what they want to say.

7. Learn to Recognize Emotions Learning to recognize emotions is another skill that many people struggle with. This is a common reason for why people will comfort eat – they mistake feelings of tiredness or boredom with hunger. The individual learns to recognize their emotions by closely examining how they are feeling. There are usually physical sensations in the body that can help people identify the emotion they are currently feeling. For example, when the individual is angry they may feel tension in their abdominal area.

8. Mindfulness Meditation and Self Understanding

Mindfulness meditation is a technique for helping the individual gain a better understanding of their internal landscape. It not only helps people become better at identifying their emotions, but it also gives them the ability to manage them better. Mindfulness is learning to live in the moment and fully accepting what is happening. Over time, the individual comes to appreciate the transitory nature of emotions, and this makes them easier to deal with.

9. Willingness to Face Life on Life's Terms

In order to develop emotional intelligence the individual needs to be willing to face life on life's terms. This means not attempting to run away from things or find the easy way out. It is the obstacles in life that help humans develop and grow. By overcoming the challenges in their path the person is forced to develop the coping strategies that will increase their emotional intelligence. Eventually the person becomes emotionally sober, living becomes easier, and they will rarely have to deal with strong emotions of any sort.

10. Learn to See the Humor in Difficult Situations

The ability to see the lighter side of life is another aspect of emotional intelligence. Humor is not only effective for the individual but can also help those around them who are dealing with a difficult situation. The advice here is not to make a joke out of everything, but to just appreciate that even the darkest situation will usually have its comic element. This type of humor should never be at another's expense.

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