OVERCOMING SHAME AND GUILT

It's common in the early stages of recovery – and even beyond – to struggle with feelings of shame and guilt. Thoughts and feelings about past actions while in active addiction can be overwhelming. Sitting in these negative emotions for too long can lead to a reoccurrence of symptoms and create other barriers to long-term recovery. Learning to manage these emotions can be an integral part of the healing process.

Healing starts with developing an understanding of substance use disorder and the difficult emotions that often accompany the disease and using healthy coping skills to move beyond them.

The Science of Addiction
The brain changes with the use of addictive substances like alcohol and other drugs. Just as cardiovascular disease damages the heart and changes its functioning, addiction changes the brain and impairs the way it works. These changes affect parts of the brain responsible for decision-making, problem-solving, managing stress, self-control and regulating emotion. The damage can manifest as lying, blaming, lashing out, shirking responsibilities at work or at home and making irrational decisions.

Without this medical understanding of what's happening to the brain, it's easy to look at the symptoms of substance use disorder as a lack of moral character or decision-making skills. The good news is that the brain can recover, but it does take time.

Risk Factors
There are known factors that can increase the likelihood that a person will develop substance use disorder:

- A family history of addiction
- An existing mental health disorder – about half of people with addiction have a co-occurring mental health disorder like anxiety and depression
- Early trauma – including physical or emotional abuse
- Early use – kids who start drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than those who wait until they are legally old enough to drink.

Defining Shame & Guilt
Feeling shame and guilt about past use can increase the likelihood that symptoms of the disease will reoccur – resulting in a setback or relapse. Bottom line? Shame challenges the recovery journey.

- Shame – an intensely painful feeling of being fundamentally flawed; it's a deeply held sense of unworthiness that can lead to withdrawal and disconnection from others due to a fear of rejection
- Guilt – a feeling of psychological discomfort about past actions that can lead to self-punishment and an inability to move forward in recovery

Together Arkansas is a collaboration between the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce/AIA, Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and Arkansas Opioid Recovery Partnership. Original works written and produced by Working Partners Systems Inc., with special thanks to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Things you Can Do to Tackle Shame and Guilt

- Shame
  - Practice self-compassion and work to develop skills to overcome self-criticism and feelings of inadequacy. In short, talk to yourself like you'd talk to someone you love when you're feeling unworthy.
  - Reach out to someone you trust like a friend, family member and/or someone in your recovery circle.
  - Talk about it. Shame can't survive being spoken about.

- Guilt
  - Practice self-compassion and work to understand that everyone possesses a combination of strengths and weaknesses.
  - Connect with others for support and insight – nurture your connections.

Together Arkansas, including the course and these resource materials, has been developed to raise awareness with businesses about how to respond to the risks associated with the misuse of opioids and other drugs. The content is meant for educational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing legal advice or replacing the work needed to develop a responsible drug-free workplace policy and program. As such, it should not be used as a substitute for consultation with a legal professional or other competent advisor. If you have questions about this course or the information presented here, please reach out Contact@TogetherArkansas.com.

To view the other modules in this course, visit www.TogetherArkansas.com.

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