

Along the route to recovery: Choosing the form of help required to change behaviour

Professor Clark looks at some of the factors that are likely to influence decisions about what route to recovery a person chooses to pursue.

Recovery from addiction is rarely an isolated event; it is the endpoint of a process that takes place over time. For most people, their pattern of problematic use of substances contains multiple attempts to give up or to bring their use under better self-control.

In my last Briefing, I described four main types of help that facilitate recovery. These comprise the person using: their own strengths and resources; the help of family members and other loved ones; support groups in the community; and, formal treatment.

People may use these different types of help at different times along their pathway to recovery. Some may find one type of help more beneficial than others, although this may change over time.

Whereas there are a multitude of different pathways to recovery, they all have one thing in common – they involve behavioural change. The transtheoretical model of change described by Prochaska and DiClemente breaks the change process down into a set of hypothetical stages, as summarised in the last Briefing.

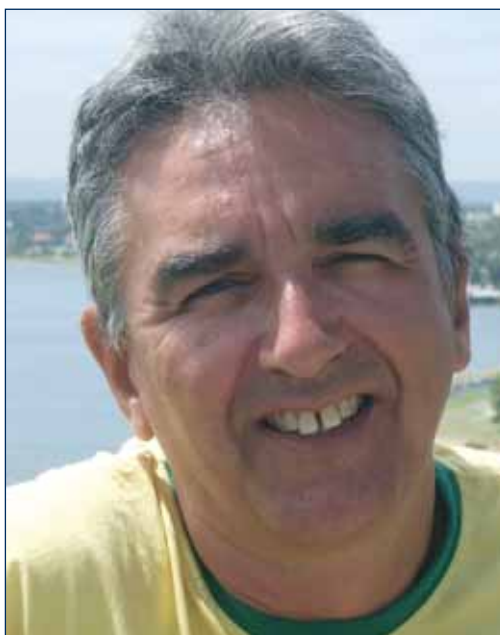
Harald Klingemann and colleagues in their book, *Promoting Self-change from Problem Substance Use*, provide an excellent overview of the behavioural change process from the viewpoint of the individual, in terms of whether the person will seek help, what type of help they will seek, and why. They look at the factors that are likely to influence a person's decision about what recovery route to pursue.

'These factors, which operate in selecting the general route of change and the specific method within that route, range from personal beliefs and experiences to practical issues, and to community structure and attitudes.'

Once a person has made a decision to attempt to change, the ways they approach this objective must start from their knowledge about how to change and what assistance might be available. This knowledge is derived from general information and help that is available, and from knowing the experiences of other people in a similar situation.

Klingemann and colleagues describe six 'information/knowledge' factors that are likely to influence decisions about what route of change to pursue:

- Treatment programmes
- How others have changed
- Self-help group existence and local availability
- Trusted others available to provide informal counsel
- Professional services available



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- How people recover from substance use problems

Sadly, there is little quality information related to these factors that is freely available to help people affected by substance use problems.

Environmental factors also influence decisions about which change routes to select. Firstly, there is the availability of treatment services, self-help groups, and counselling and other support services. This availability varies greatly, particularly between urban and rural areas. Secondly, the ease of access to services plays an important role, with waiting times and transportation being important.

Thirdly, community attitudes towards substance use problems play a major role. We live in a highly prejudicial society and this can influence whether people access treatment and the ease with which they can recover from addiction. For example, it has been shown that a key element underlying recovery is being considered 'normal' by so-called normal society. A society that stigmatises people who have a substance use problem is not likely to facilitate their efforts to find recovery.

Fourthly, a treatment system that operates within the criminal justice system is only going to attract certain types of client: it will miss many potential clients who fear they will be labelled as criminals if they access treatment.

A variety of individual factors influence choice of change route. Many of the change routes involve personal costs that the person may or may not find worthwhile. Treatment programmes and self-help groups can involve a commitment of time that conflicts with other responsibilities (*eg* looking after young children) or activities (*eg* work). Some treatment programmes (*eg* private residential care) may involve a financial commitment that a person may not be able to afford.

Klingemann and colleagues point out that these factors serve to make the individual aware of a menu of choices and a set of costs and benefits related to each choice. The person will weigh up these costs and benefits and make a decision whether they want to change.

However, the resultant choice is made against a backdrop of psychological factors.

'Individual differences in traits, attitudes, backgrounds, preferences, values and the other factors that combine to yield our idiosyncratic identities will ultimately serve as the filtering mechanisms through which choice merges.'

These psychological factors include:

- Attitude towards independence
- Trust of others to give aid
- Beliefs about how one should recover
- Past experiences

Understanding how people decide what route to try to change – and providing relevant high quality information so they can make informed decisions – is extremely important in delivering treatment and other support services. Ultimately, demand for treatment will always outstrip supply, so we need to optimise the way that we help people find recovery.