The Importance of Nutrition in Substance Use Recovery



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Nutrition for Successful Recovery

We all know it's important for everyone to eat a healthy diet, but for those with a substance use disorder, nutrition can play a key role in the recovery and treatment process. Abuse of certain drugs can cause malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies which can result in chronic health conditions that may require medical treatment. Stimulants may suppress appetite and cause weight loss. Other drugs, such as alcohol and opioids can create nutritional deficiencies and even change the way the human body metabolizes food. For instance, vitamin D, B vitamins, iron, and amino acids are not absorbed well by those with chronic substance use disorders.

Whether by choice or circumstance, substance users also tend to prefer sweet, sugary foods and food with little nutritional value. One physiological reason for this is that sugar intake triggers the release of dopamine in the brain in a similar way that heroin, cocaine, and alcohol do. All of these factors make good nutrition during the both detoxification and recovery process essential.



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Nutrition to Retrain the Brain

Nutrition is also important to successful recovery from a neurological perspective. Substance abuse can disrupt brain connectivity and neurotransmissions, this disruption of neurotransmitters can leave those in the detoxification stage of recovery feeling depressed and agitated. Proper nutrition during recovery can promote neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to form new connections and rearrange old ones. For instance, carbohydrates are important during the early stages of recovery because they help the body produce serotonin, the neurotransmitter that stabilizes mood, promotes healthy sleep, and reduces cravings for drugs or alcohol. Likewise, amino acids found in proteins like fish and poultry are essential for creating dopamine, another "feel good" neurotransmitter. Using diet and nutrition to alter the way the body produces these neurotransmitters may contribute to a longer-lasting recovery, if sustainable healthy eating habits can also be formed.



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Nutrition in Inpatient Treatment

Inpatient facilities provide a great opportunity to include nutrition in a treatment plan. This can include having a dietary team that provides meals that are healthy and engaging for patients, but it may also include meeting with a registered dietitian who can provide a therapeutic nutrition plan for both during and after treatment. To create lasting recovery, education is essential. A dietary team and registered dietitian can create learning opportunities to teach clients how to meal plan, grocery shop, and cook simple, healthy dishes to support long-term recovery after they leave your facility.

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Why More Recovery Centers Don’t Focus on Nutrition Services

Although it’s well documented that good nutrition can play an important role in successful recovery, few treatment centers are providing nutrition services. While inpatient treatment centers provide an ideal environment for the inclusion of nutrition services in treatment, less than 7% of treatment centers offer nutrition counseling as part of their services and only half of treatment centers offer nutrition education.



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Barriers to Nutrition Services

What are the barriers to providing nutrition services in inpatient treatment? First, many facilities are not-for-profit and feel they are unable to include nutrition services in their budget. Second, there is a perceived “lack of need.” Many providers see their main goal as helping the client achieve sobriety and have not made the connection on how nutrition can impact their recovery.

For those who want to include nutrition services and recognize the importance of diet in recovery, partnering with a food service provider may provide a strategy for success. Contract food management companies, like Culinary Service Group, can provide custom menus created by professional chefs and registered dietitians that will not only satisfy nutritional needs but encourage food intake through dishes that are full of flavor and taste. A registered dietitian can be provided as part of a food service contract on a full or part-time basis to provide nutritional counseling to your clients. And a good food service provider can conduct a food service budget analysis that will determine areas in which a food service contract may save costs. Assessments are free and they can assist you with planning and budgeting for a value-added dining program.



The Role of a Registered Dietitian in Recovery

Registered dietitians are uniquely equipped to address both operational concerns and client nutrition in inpatient settings. Operationally, they can work to create healthy menus that may reduce costs and food waste. They can also implement a data-driven quality assurance performance improvement (QAPI) program to ensure a high standard of food quality and nutrition-related services are provided to clients. To address the issues that arise during both the detoxification and recovery stages of inpatient treatment, they can create individualized nutrition care plans that evolve with the client throughout their recovery journey.



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Dietitians During the Recovery Process

During the initial detoxification stage, a dietitian can work with the client to minimize immediate issues like malnutrition and gastrointestinal distress. Some drugs, like opioids, clear the body quickly during detoxification and can result in abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle cramps, fever, and sweating. This rapid loss of body fluid can result in the loss of nutrients, minerals, and cause an electrolyte imbalance. Without adequate nutrition and hydration, this may lead to heart irregularities and erratic glucose levels.

After detoxification, a registered dietitian can work with the client using the Nutrition Care Process to improve the client's overall health and identify malnutrition and co-occurring nutritional issues. This model consists of four steps:

- Nutrition Assessment and Reassessment
- Nutrition Diagnosis
- Nutrition Intervention
- Nutrition Monitoring/Evaluation



Bringing It Home

Once a plan for optimal nutritional health has been put into place, a registered dietitian can educate and encourage clients to adopt a healthy diet as part of their new sober lifestyle. Often individuals with substance abuse problems have had little nutritional education and may not have the skills necessary to purchase and prepare healthy meals themselves. Along with recommending well-balanced meals and snacks, encouraging drinking plenty of water, and limiting caffeine, a registered dietitian may also teach nutritional life skills to clients. This may include reading nutritional labels while shopping and cooking simple, healthy meals on a budget.

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Liberalized Diets in Recovery

A healthy diet is important to address nutritional deficiencies during recovery but if a diet plan is too restrictive there's a risk that a client will see it as too much of a change to the diet they enjoy eating. When a person is in recovery, changing too much about their lifestyle may increase their risk of relapsing back into the self-destructive patterns of substance abuse.

Instead, it's important to focus on a liberalized diet approach. Liberalized diets are a concept widely recognized in long-term care settings but are applicable in addiction treatment also. This approach stresses that dietary interventions should be individualized, have a person-centered focus, and allow preferred foods. In other words, moderation is key.



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A Liberalized Diet Approach

During recovery, a patient may crave sugary, sweet foods with plenty of carbohydrates, such as cakes and candies. These foods trigger the release of dopamine and often serve as a replacement for drugs and alcohol during early recovery. Many facilities whose focus is only on achieving sobriety overindulge this behavior by providing unlimited access to highly palatable foods with a lot of refined sugar and fried foods like hamburgers and French fries. This is not ideal in the long term though, as clients who are not receiving proper nutrition will continue to have nutritional deficiencies. This type of diet may also increase the risk of heart disease and diabetes along with causing excessive weight gain, which is distressing to many clients.

A liberalized diet plan during the recovery process should focus on regular mealtimes and balanced food intake. But satisfying cravings through simple carbohydrates and sugars should also be allowed within reason, especially in early recovery. Later, it will be the role of the dietitian to introduce healthier options to satisfy cravings.



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Nutritional Planning After Leaving Rehab

Before leaving any inpatient treatment program, clients are given a variety of different tools and new skills designed to help them maintain their sobriety. This relapse prevention strategy should include a nutritional plan as part of a self-care routine that may also focus on physical activity, proper sleep, and activities and hobbies that are enjoyable.



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Nutritional Education

While clients should be educated on the importance of nutrition in the recovery process, they may also need to be taught how to achieve nutritional success. Financial struggles and unstable living situations can often lead to food insecurity which may lead to an unbalanced diet. Education on nutritional resources such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and local food banks may be essential to their success. Teaching meal planning and budget-friendly recipes may also be helpful. Many clients are unsure how to grocery shop effectively, plan healthy meals, or read food labels to understand their nutritional content. These topics should also be included in any nutritional education provided.

Finally, holding basic how-to cooking classes and providing easy to follow recipes can not only teach healthy skills and set clients up for success, but may also provide a new healthy hobby or career path. Many of the centers Culinary Services Group works with also offer culinary training as part of a vocational program to provide real-world job skills that can help to alleviate financial struggles.

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