Abstinence vs. Moderation

This word “abstinence” can be an intimidating word to many, especially those in the early stages of recovery. Your whole body may convulse saying, “I’ll do anything, just don’t ask me or tell me that I have to stop forever.” This is normal. If this is how you feel, commit yourself to being open to new ideals and beliefs that may result in a healthier and more fulfilling lifestyle. Here are some answers to your questions.

Why abstinence?

What we know is that after one has developed a severe addiction, the simplest, easiest, safest, and surest way to keep from repeating past behaviors is total abstinence. This is not to say one may not go through a period of “day at a time,” or “week at a time,” or even try a “harm reduction” approach. Still, if you want the easiest way to minimize the problems in your life, go for abstinence eventually. It actually is much easier to just give it up entirely than punish yourself trying to moderate or control your addictive behavior. Studies have shown that regardless of the method employed to become sober, the number one factor for sobriety success is a permanent commitment to discontinue use permanently: a commitment to abstinence.

When will I be ready?

Some of you are ready right now. You have experienced enough consequences in your life that no one needs to tell you that you are fed up with your addictive behavior. You just need some tools to help you. If you are just starting your recovery program it may take time to make a decision on a commitment to abstinence before it is really firm in your heart. It needs to be something that you are really committed to and not just something you would like to do. Stick with the

program and let the decision build in your heart. When you are ready, you'll know it.

Is abstinence the only way?

Studies have shown that in some cultures there are a small percentage of people who can return to moderate drinking. Still, the chance of being successful is unclear. Attempts at moderation may not be worth the effort or the risk when considering the consequences. If your own life has been a mess because of your addictive behavior, why chance it? What has the empirical evidence in your own life been? Have you tried to moderate and not been successful? Then that's your answer.

Abstinence may not be a realistic solution with some addictions, such as eating and, in some cases, sexual addictions. For these addictions moderation is the prescribed course of action. Even in these instances commitment to moderation is an important factor for success.

How do I make the commitment?

First of all, as mentioned earlier, don't make a commitment until you are firm in your path to sobriety. Second, realize a commitment to sobriety is not a commitment to be forever perfect. Before you consider that to be a SMART Recovery® license to relapse, it is not. The reality for alcohol addictions, for example, is that people have an average of two and a half relapses in their ultimate turn to permanent sobriety. Many never have a relapse and that can be you. A commitment to sobriety means that you are committed to a course of action, understanding that it is not an easy task and one that takes a great deal of patience, persistence and practice. You may be tempted, and many succumb to the urges. We are not perfect beings; we are fallible and breaking a commitment is not the same as giving up on one. A permanent commitment means we are committed to a course of action for the future, and we

will do everything in our power to fulfill and maintain that commitment.

What if I lapse or relapse?

Learn from it and don't beat yourself up. Ask what events led up to the lapse/relapse. Ask yourself what were the excuses you gave yourself to use and dispute them. Your commitment isn't broken and you can renew your resolve. If you do slip, the outcome does not have to be an experience without worth, it can be a powerful learning experience. It does not mean that you will repeat this behavior in the future. Forgive yourself, learn from it and remember that a commitment applies to what we plan for the future.

When you are ready, say to yourself, "I am not going to use again!" Reinforce that commitment in any way possible and rational. One of the best ways is to remember why you are making the commitment. The consequences of using should be remembered, not with a guilty conscience, but in a realistic portrayal of why you have chosen sobriety. The addictive behavior just is not worth it anymore! Also to be remembered are the experiences and feelings that come from abstinence. A balance of both experiences has proven to be a powerful tool.

What can I expect?

If you continue to use, your past may dictate your outcome. A permanent commitment to abstinence means we no longer have to fight a battle with moderation; but rather devote ourselves to sobriety permanently. Ours is a "no excuses" program, we are responsible for our decisions and behaviors; we have a choice. There is a feeling of freedom that results from this commitment where one does not feel hopeless or without choices. You know what our commitment is. Combined with a consistent and aggressive disputing of urges to use, most find their messages to use either decrease

to nothing or become infrequent and easily handled. It may not be easy to see now, but your life can be restored to where you are in control, your addiction and the urges will recede to an unpleasant memory. You don't have to live in a constant battle with these painful, nagging urges.

Will the urges go away forever?

Possibly, but one will benefit from being on guard for them, as they can reappear years later. Be ever vigilant, but ever hopeful and know that you can control your outcome; the choice is yours.

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