



Addiction, Recovery, Science, and The Power of Support

By Ambi Daniel

Why do we do what we do? Why do we make, less than wise choices, even when we know better? Why do we choose chocolate cake over salad (Come on, it's not just me)? One of the most helpful things, I have learned over the course of not only my career, but my life, was the basics of how our brain works in relationship to pleasure, reward, and addiction. I wish in so many ways, I had learned it sooner.

I will never forget, working in a residential treatment facility a person who was 3 weeks sober from all substances, seated just to my left and 3 people down, who hung their head, saying, "I guess I just have to get used to life being boring from here on out." This person had had many trips around the treatment circuit and so badly wanted to get life moving forward, and most importantly to them, be a parent. You can tell how vividly I remember this, I can even tell you the clothes the person was wearing, because this was one moment, that I realized something was missing in the care I could offer as a counselor.

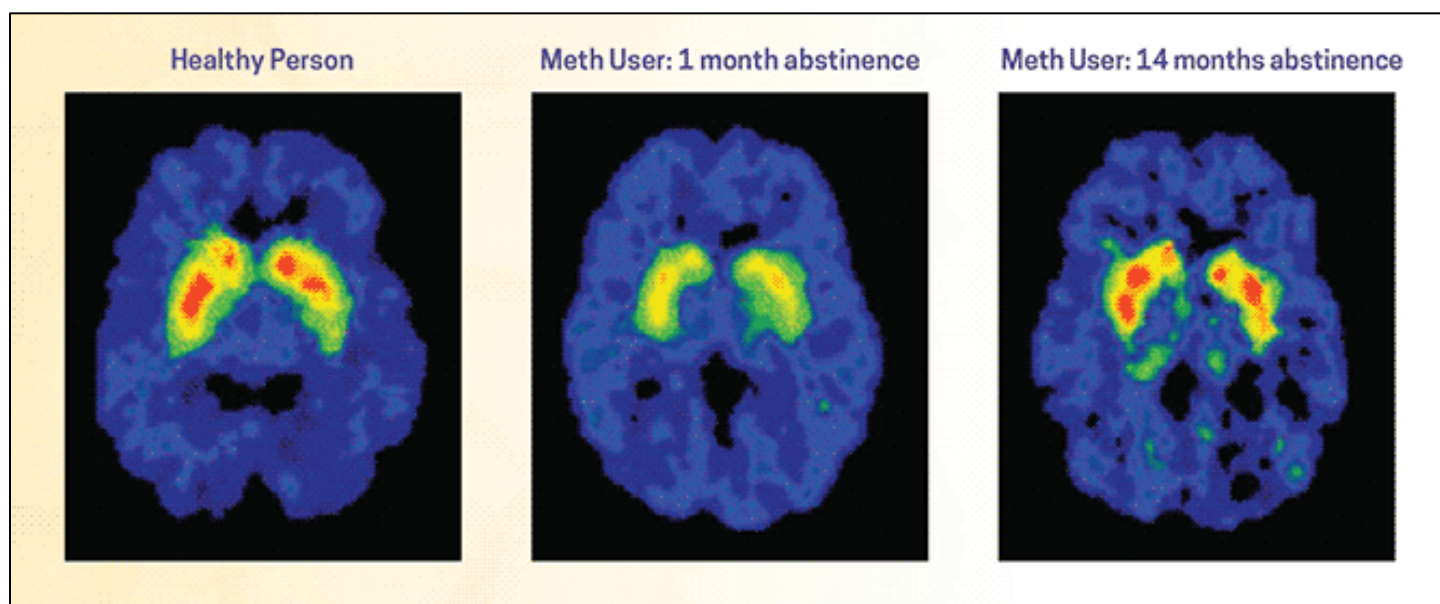
In, now, multiple other instances, I remember having individuals who struggled so greatly while sober, and there were days they seemed so engaged and happy, and it was almost as if you could see the potential life and relationships they could have, it was like they were "normal" only to find out . . . they were under the influence. Not nodding out or stumbling/slurring intoxicated, but at a functioning level. Again, I remember saying, something is missing here, there must be something connected neurologically to this, they are functioning and engaged so much more, in some ways, more capable, while being intoxicated. After one of these interactions, I was so blown away, I actually reached out to a neurologist, and at the time I really didn't find much help in understanding this.

Fast forward to 2016, I took a training with Faces and Voices of Recovery and Friends of Recovery-NY on the Science of Addiction and Recovery, and it was the beginning to my continued fasciation of how addiction actually changes the brain, but more importantly, how we can support the brain's healing to build a foundation for recovery. Sharing what I have learned has been one of the most impactful

opportunities for not only families facing addiction, but counselors in the field and students from junior high to college. So, here is what's ahead, the basics of the neuroscience of addiction, as well as how this can impact our opportunities to engage individuals with more awareness to fight or flight, and how we can navigate our expectations with individuals in their recovery process. We'll look at the dynamics of the family opportunity to support recovery, as well as, how do we shift from addiction focused to recovery focused markers of progress.



This next photo, is one that changed my life. It sounds dramatic to say that, right? But really, it was the beginning of shifting my understanding of human behavior in many ways.



The Journal of Neuroscience, 21(23):9414-9418. 2001

Let's start with that red/orange area of the Healthy Person's brain. It's measuring the release of dopamine. (Side bar: There are 7 major neurotransmitters that are responsible for various connections and responses, we are going to focus on just this one, today.) What does dopamine do? Many know it's

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responsible for our feeling pleasure. Yet, it's more than that, it's part of our survival system, as well as our reward system, and memory system. Our brains are looking for reasons to release dopamine. In many ways it's what keeps us going in life. Do something successfully, Bing! Dopamine! Eat an amazing meal, Zing! Unfortunately, it isn't a very discerning part of the brain . . . it doesn't recognize when too much, is, well, too much, or not healthy. It's why we see addiction to drugs, sex, video games, food, etc.

So, think about all the things that are rewarding, that connects to purpose or survival, go ahead make a list! They can be large things like, finishing a great marathon (not me, I'm only running if there is a bear, or my pup wants to), climbing a mountain, completing a big project, achieving new physical or mental goals. It can be basic simple things like crossing items off a to do list, cooking, finishing a project, playing a game, or even completing your work day. Our brains remember what causes this dopamine release. I listed many healthy opportunities for this that will cause the release, the problem being drugs and alcohol will cause this release more intensely and more instantly, and also train the reward system to seek it for that release, leaving it unpracticed and disconnected from every day rewards. This makes delayed gratification even harder.

I'll never forget when Thresa Knorr explained, "This is a primitive part of the brain, it is not connected to logic, and it overrides the thinking part of the brain."

Take a minute and think about what that means.

Unconsciously, what the person has become addicted to is now accepted as more rewarding and more necessary to survival to the brain than, exercise, healthy food, basic needs, positive relationships, and even one's children. Consider what it is like, that this is one of the greatest challenges for many parents who have faced addiction, the guilt of not feeling connected to their kids or feeling rewarded by the time they spent with them.

So, let's go back to the slide above, 3 things. First, we see after abstinence for 30 days, the brain is not releasing dopamine the way a non-addicted brain would. What do you think that would feel like? To not feel rewarded when completing tasks, playing, achieving at work, in relationships? Someone once said, the world felt gray. Can you imagine how challenging it must feel to try and do all of the things society now expects from us?

Second, it takes time for the brain to build that response to daily life things. It can take 18 months for that retraining and healing to return to a normal state. Fortunately, we know it starts sooner and many individuals share they feel the shift after weeks or a couple of months, though it's not fully "normal."

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Third, and most importantly, we can see **Recovery is Possible**. It happens! Look at that 14-month scan!!! The brain can relearn reward and heal.

So, what does this mean for Recovery?

First, let's look at some typical expectations of responsible adults:

- Go to work
- Take care of your family
- Pay your bills...which mean you have to open your mail
- Sleep 8-10 hours
- Go to the gym
- Cook healthy meals
- Budget
- Spend responsibly
- Clean your home...mow the lawn... shovel snow
- Don't use illicit drugs
- Live life with the good things in moderation

And the list goes on...

Go back to that question I asked, what might it feel like to be 30 days abstinent from all substances and have to start doing those kinds of thing? What would you procrastinate on? What would you reach for instead?

Maybe:

- Social media
- Netflix
- Alcohol
- Sleeping
- Gambling



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The reality is, the less good we feel, the more we reach to things of instant gratification. I recently had a conversation with someone about ice cream. Now, if it's a smooth vanilla bean ice cream, I can make a pint last weeks . . . BUT if there is cookie dough, brownie, or any type of delicious chunk of cookie, I keep digging for the chunk, and that pint might last 3 days. I realized, every time I found a chunk of yummy, Bing! Reward!

Expectations

Knowing this is one of the challenges of Recovery, that you're fighting with the brain's healing and lack of neurotransmitter release, what do you think are some realistic expectations for a person in early recovery?

- It may be hard to get into a routine
 - It will be easier to gravitate towards instant gratification
 - It may be slow to start taking charge
 - It can be easy to fall back into addiction
 - It is going to take practice and time to rebuild that reward system

What else would you add to this list?

How do I help?

Dr. Robert Meyers, the creator of the CRAFT method shared this note (of many) that stayed with me. "Family members are experts in their loved one's life." They can tell you so many things about what will precede choices; feelings, thoughts, interactions, actions. They can also be the pinnacle reason that the cycle of addiction changes. This isn't about controlling someone's addiction. It isn't about knowing better. Sometimes it's about reinforcing both the positive changes forward in communication, messaging imprints, and behavior.

So, what does that mean??

Let's track it back a minute . . . If you had to say, what some of things you want for your loved one's future are, what would be on that list?

Maybe:

- To be healthy
- To be happy
- To have a secure job they love and stable finances
- To have fulfilling relationships
- To find joy
- To be ok, when their parents and/or grandparents are no longer here

What else would you add to this list?



Here's the magic of this . . . More likely than not . . . They want the exact same thing for themselves that you do for them. Your goals are the same. That said . . . the path to get there may not look quite so direct and may travel around a different mountain.

If you had to think of how many different diet/weight-loss plans there are, how many could you come up with?

- Calorie counting
- Keto
- Vegetarian
- Weight Watchers
- Real food
- Whole 30

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How many different exercise opportunities?

- Running
- Yoga
- Boxing
- Football
- Swimming
- CrossFit
- Dance

They are all different, work differently for different people, and appeal differently for different reasons.



Now, how many different Pathways to Recovery can you think of?

- Mutual Aid Groups
- Spirituality
- Music
- Tai Chi
- Treatment
- ROcovery Fitness
- Family
- Photography
- Yoga
- Dance
- Education
- Meditation
- Recovery Coaching
- Family Navigation

Were there some on this list that maybe you didn't think of as a pathway to recovery? What else would you now add?



SAMHSA defines Recovery as: *A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential. SAMHSA also identifies the 4 Pillars of Recovery as: Home, Health, Community, and Purpose.*

I want to also help redefine addiction and Recovery in a way that have really made a difference for many families:

Addiction = Dysfunction caused by _____ (use, behaviors, habits, etc.)

Recovery = Wellness through practice

Many families really responded to this because it helped them to shift their focus from “are they using or sober” to what are they doing that tells me they are in a state of dysfunction or moving in a state of wellness. With this, I also want to add that focusing on even using the word wellness can be helpful. Addiction inherently becomes something to fix and the easy piece to focus on. In turn, it becomes overwhelming to focus on treatment and Recovery. When, for many people, when we shift to wellness and just living life, it seems to really help them not feel like they are counteracting addiction all day long...treatment, meetings, being asked about addiction and treatment. This shift to life, can help immensely.

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As family members and loved ones, we can offer activities, affirmations, messages of support, set boundaries, validate, and support practice of opportunities to be on a pathway forward. This isn't about telling the person what they should do or what they have to do. In all reality, Recovery is not rocket science, knowing the what is not the hard part, the practice is the hard part. And what that means is . . . which what to start with and what to layer on top each day is hard to realize some times. How often are exercise plans or diets strayed from? (Pst . . . remember food can cause that dopamine release fairly instantly!)

So HOW can we help?



Validation and Affirmations

This isn't just a "good job," attaboy. We want to share something specific we notice that has evidence. There are some words and sentence starters that can help to formulate statements of validation or affirmations:

- I appreciate _____
- Thank you for _____
- I noticed _____
- I recognize _____
- You've been working hard at _____
- You've been really consistent with _____
- I can see you're working on your Recovery when you _____

It helps when they are connected to the goals that the person is working towards, which again, are really most often the same goals you have for them as a loved one.

Some common examples look like this:

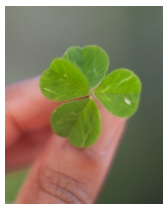
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- ❑ You got up for your appointment, even when you weren't feeling well, **you're taking your commitments seriously.**
- ❑ Wow, you exercised 5 days this week, you are **dedicated to** making this a part of your **routine.**
- ❑ Thank you for cleaning the kitchen after you cooked breakfast, **you're really being considerate of our home.**
- ❑ Thank you for telling me you were thinking about using, it tells me you are **comfortable trusting me** to be a part of your journey, and also that **you wanted more for your Recovery.**
- ❑ I remember you said it was important to go to 90 meetings in 90 days, and today was an overwhelming day, **you chose to take care of your mental health** differently today by going to yoga instead.
- ❑ I notice you've been taking the bus to treatment; I can tell you're **working hard on your independence.**
- ❑ I know you said you didn't feel like today was a great day, I still noticed that you took time to meditate this morning. It was still a day **you didn't give up!**
- ❑ I really appreciated how you handled the temper tantrum with your daughter, **you're taking on this parenting role** head on!
- ❑ You really **took your wellness seriously** today! I noticed you ate extra veggies and stayed away from sugar.
- ❑ Today was an aggravating day, so many things didn't go the way you were hoping, you were angry, and wish you handled things better, at the same time, here you are talking about it, I think that means **you are handling things better.**

Goal and evidence of the work, that is the key! What else would you add to the list? Having a list like this around in your own words helps to make it easier in the moment too! I encourage you to practice making a list for your family! Sometimes vulnerability is hard, and it may feel unnatural to verbalize something like this, sticky notes or a white board that family members can write notes on, or even text messaging can really be just as impactful when validating an affirming. All of this...it's all reward and it reinforces behaviors and actions to move forward. Reward.... release dopamine...practice...rebuild that system.

Maya Angelou said, 'You may not remember what a person said or did, but you'll remember how they made you feel.'



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Speaking in gains and wants instead of “don’t wants” and loss.

This can be a tough one to reconfigure our brains with! Language matters! Our brain receives messages in multiple levels. My favorite example of this is when a teacher says, “Tommy stop bouncing in your chair and stop yelling.” When we use language of “wants” we are not only telling a person what not to do, but the layer of what is better does not need extrapolation. “Sit with your feet on the floor please, and use you inside voice.” Which will help Tommy know what he has to do more? The one that tells him what not to do and he has to figure out what to do...or the desired effect?

What does this look like with Recovery?

- “You need to stop coming home drunk!”
Becomes “I want to spend time with you when you are sober.”
- “You can’t keep skipping treatment.”
Becomes “Going to treatment can really support your success.”
- “Don’t drink and drive.” Becomes
“Please drive safely.”
- “I don’t want yelling in my home.”
Becomes “I really want quiet time when I come home from work.”
- “I can’t stand how sick and tired I am, you need to stop doing this to our family.” Becomes “I really want to feel safe and build trust, so we can have strong relationships again.”

Did you notice, one way we can do this is by simply changing language to, “I want.”? What other “I want” statements might you be able to share?

For a person in on their pathway of Recovery, this shift can be powerful in their own self talk and you can help them by rephrasing!

What they might say:

I hate being sick because of heroin!

I hate going to treatment 5 days a week!

Getting up at 7am sucks!

It’s too hard to get to the gym!

Eating healthy is too expensive!

It sucks I can’t go on vacation!

How we might reflect and rephrase:

You want to feel normal and healthy again.

You want to be in charge of your day again.

You wish you were more rested.

You want to find a way to exercise that feels less like a chore.

You want to find a way to be healthy that fits your budget.

You want to find a way to have a break and feel included with the family.



Can you see how shifting language to “want” statements can help imprint a stronger message?

Practice

Keeping in aligning with the shared goals, family members often find one of the best ways to help someone move forward, is to practice with them . . . no, you don’t have to go to the gym every day with them. There are simple ways to have a wellness accountability partner.

- Using a white board or notebook or sticky notes, write one thing you did for your wellness that day. Each family member can participate and not only reduce vulnerability, but also increase discussion and communication on shared opportunities!
- Take a class together! It not only offers an opportunity for reward and activity; it also creates connection!
- Read a book together and have a discussion one chapter at a time!
- Create or fix something together. This might be a project in the house or something completely new to do together.
- Do common errands together, I’ve heard this called an “errand hang”!

You’ll notice 2 trends here, not only is the person completing simple tasks, to help recharge that reward system, it’s also building connection. Johan Hari shared in his wonderful Ted Talk (that you can find easily on YouTube), when referring to the Rat Park Study, that “The opposite of addiction is connection.” I highly recommend this Ted Talk!



5 Love Languages

I'll leave you with one more tool you can use with all of your loved ones to strengthen your relationships. There are 5 love languages you can find out more about through the wonderful books by Gary Chapman and also on the website www.5lovelanguages.com

They include:

- Quality Time
- Words of Affirmation
- Gifts
- Physical Touch
- Acts of Service

We all have love languages that are primary to us. It tells us how we receive and accept love most strongly. On the website, there is a quiz to learn which are your top love languages and not only more about how a person best receives it, but also what are some ways to offend against that love language. When we speak in a person's love language the connection builds. So, if a person's love language is acts of service, they might really appreciate that you washed their car, or cleaned the kitchen! If their love language is physical touch, they might love to snuggle on the couch or need at least a few hugs a day! What I've found interesting, is often people find it easiest to speak in a love language that they themselves don't prefer! My last love language, for example, is gifts. Honestly, I feel like I owe someone if I get a gift, and it's hard for me. Tell me that you appreciated how much time I dedicated to a project and you're hitting both my words of affirmation and quality time! When we speak in the person's love language, we are able to best connect, support, and love...in action. It is one of the most powerful opportunities in the simplest way! As an FYI, there is also an apology language quiz on the site too! These quizzes take just a few minutes to complete and open a world of opportunity!

There are so many things loved ones can do to support someone on their Recovery journey. These are a few simple ways that can be greatly impactful. Using reward, language, managed expectations, reinforcement, and maybe most importantly practice. Practice isn't about being perfect, it's doing one thing each day to strengthen where you are going. It's also important to remember, this isn't about one person, when someone struggles with anything, illness, birth, death, etc. it impacts and shifts the lives of many, sometimes it leads to dysfunction for all involved, even if it wasn't directly happening to them. We change our lives for the people we love. It's important to recognize, finding wellness is often a journey for all of us.

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For more individualized help, reach out to your OASAS Family Support Navigator where we work to help you learn skills and tools, and also connect you to resources for your whole family, not only for a person struggling, but everyone in your family. Addiction has a family impact, and Recovery, is a family journey.

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