

A new relational perspective to healing from addictions

Addiction has commonly been thought of as a problem of the individual, whether out of moral failure, an addictive personality, or a disease of the brain.

As a result, most treatments are also targeted at changing the individual, with a secondary interest in his or her relationships.

This individualistic perspective grossly overlooks the relational foundation of addiction. From birth and even before, we are deeply immersed in the give-and-take of relationships. Our brains are formed from the nourishment, affection, and stimulation of social interactions early in life. Ruptures in primary

human relationships, as in abuse, physical and emotional neglect, loss and abandonment during a child's sensitive developmental years, can create distress and deficits that mark a lifetime. Recent addiction research has borne out the prevalence of childhood maltreatment in the history of those with addictions. Since

psychological pain is real, it is not surprising that addiction to substances or processes like gambling and sex can serve as a form of self-medication that soothes for a while.

Fortunately, we do not have to succumb to fatalism. Relationships and experience change brain patterns. Our future is not determined from birth. This is the good news of therapy — a way to make deep-seated changes using the power of human relationships. Humans are gifted with the capacity to be aware, to choose, to relate differently. In my research and clinical practice, I use the relationship I have with clients to create new awareness and communication patterns in the therapeutic context.

My preferred way of working is to engage the addicted individual with his or her significant other, if there is one in the picture. Many people with addictions are alone. They have burned their bridges with friends and loved ones. Ironically, research also shows a risk factor in addiction is social isolation and being single. Enduring relationships are a most precious asset in recovery. Why? The road ahead is easier when two walk together. A rope with two or more cords woven together is stronger than one. The fellowship offered by 12-step programs like AA and Alanon fulfills this yearning for deep human connection. Working with a couple or family members together, I can

facilitate a safe place to share their intertwined stories and repair broken bonds.

Recovery from addiction is an arduous journey made easier with mutual understanding and acknowledgment. One person's addiction affects at least seven other people. Can the same ripple effect be true for recovery? Failure of communication and trust in the family environment often have existed even before the addiction took hold. The question is not about blame, but it's finding the key

to change deeply ingrained patterns of being and relating, which could have run in families for generations. "You get me!" is a liberating feeling! Behind every addiction is an untold tale of suffering and isolation. I often choose to work with the couple as the primary unit because psychological and relationship patterns are played out and open to reshaping. I create new bonds among family members and then work myself out of the picture. Patterns used by couples with

each other in communication, problem-solving, and mutual support, are what they bring to parenting and the workplace. I have had so many graduated couples tell me about job promotions, better relationships with in-laws and thriving children after they have worked through their blockages. When there is a listening ear and understanding, we find shelter in life's storms. Addiction as a way of getting succor, energy, and euphoria is a poor substitute. A relationship framework makes my

work as a therapist easier and more effective. We change not only the individual, but the context and ongoing supports toward a full life worth living.

We are currently recruiting problem gamblers into a study with Congruence Couple Therapy. For more details, contact bonnie.lee@uleth.ca or call Dr. Bonnie Lee (403) 317-5047.

Bonnie Lee is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Addictions Counselling Program, University of Lethbridge



THE PUBLIC PROFESSOR

Bonnie Lee

The Public Professor is written by faculty at the University of Lethbridge. It runs Saturdays.