

Alternative Clinics Offer Holistic Ways To Beat Addiction

Bill Beilhartz had run out of options. At age 44, this father of two had just spent two weeks in the hospital for alcohol-induced ulcers in his esophagus and stomach. He'd registered a nearly lethal blood alcohol level of .675. He'd had two failed marriages. His tall, once-handsome frame was withered from years of drinking a half-gallon of vodka a day. Yet, his first stop after leaving the hospital was the liquor store.

Three days later, after being rushed to the hospital again, this time for internal bleeding, he began desperately flipping through the phone book, searching for something beyond what three previous treatment centers had offered – something that might actually work. Each time, he'd voluntarily checked himself in, paying as much as \$10,000 per stay.

"They all had the same approach," says Beilhartz, an international casino consultant from Denver, Colorado. "They tell you, 'Don't drink.' That is pretty much [all] the education they give you."

A Yellow Pages ad for a Fort Collins, Colorado, treatment program named InnerBalance Health Center jumped out at him. The clinic takes a comprehensive holistic approach to addiction in its 35-day program, prescribing treatments such as nutritional counseling, intravenous vitamin therapy, yoga and exercise. "It was different from anything I'd ever heard of. And it all just made sense to me," says Beilhartz.

"Within a week of arriving, my mind was completely clear and I felt energized and motivated to get on with life. I hadn't felt like that since my early 20s," he exclaims. Within months he was the picture of health and hope, boasting more days of sobriety than in the past 15 years.

Battling Brain Chemistry

Beilhartz is among a growing number of addicts and alcoholics turning to complementary and alternative therapies to address the physiological underpinnings of addiction. These programs are rooted in the theory that addiction is largely the result of skewed levels of certain chemical messengers in the brain. Caught in a state of chronic imbalance, often from childhood, addicts turn to drugs and alcohol to self-medicate in an attempt to feel normal.

Most addiction experts agree that talk therapy and 12-step programs – considered the gold standard for addiction treatment for decades – are a necessary component of a successful recovery. But by themselves, such methods have not proven terribly effective. Health and wellness researcher Evelyn Grazini reports that studies show that 70 to 85 percent of addicts completing such programs will relapse within six to twelve months. Meanwhile, some alternative clinics that incorporate both physiological and psychological approaches boast six-month sobriety rates as high as 85 percent.

"If you have a broken leg and your bone is sticking out, you aren't going to want to sit around and talk about it. You are going to want to go to the emergency room, fix the physical problem and stop the pain first," explains Joe Eisele, clinical director of InnerBalance and a recovering alcoholic. "Then you can sit down and talk."

Reward Deficiency Syndrome

The notion that addiction is a biochemical disease dates back to the late 1980s, when Texas brain researcher Kenneth Blum coined the phrase “reward deficiency syndrome”. Blum theorized that for most people, the stimulus of everyday things like good food, sex or a funny movie sets off a cascade of feel-good neurotransmitters in the brain. But some people are born with either a kink in the delivery line or an inability to produce enough of these chemicals. For them, the cascade of reward is hindered and pleasure muted, if it comes at all.

“[Addicts] are always looking for a way to feel better, and when they discover certain mood-altering substances—those things that fit into the same receptors in the brain that the deficient ‘feel-good’ chemicals do—they feel like they’re getting what they’ve been looking for, but have never been able to find,” says Merlene Miller, an addictions specialist and coauthor of *Staying Clean and Sober: Complementary and Natural Strategies for Healing the Addicted Brain* (Woodland, 2005).

Today, experts accept the notion that faulty brain chemistry plays a role in setting people up for addiction. Yet for the most part, addiction researchers have focused on correcting that brain chemistry with pharmaceuticals, rather than addressing it holistically. Meanwhile, more clinics around the country are employing that same information in a different, more holistic approach.

Vitamin IV

Step into InnerBalance Health Center any Wednesday and you’ll find a room full of resident patients, from grandmothers trying to quit binge drinking to musicians wanting to kick a cocaine habit. They’re watching videos and chatting as orange liquid drips into their veins through intravenous tubes.

Alcoholism and drug abuse can ravage the gastrointestinal system, limiting its ability to absorb nutrients, so pumping vitamin C, calcium, magnesium, zinc and B vitamins directly into the blood has a more immediate effect than administering them orally, explains Eisele. And because underlying nutritional problems, such as hypoglycemia or B-vitamin deficiencies, often prompt cravings, IV therapy can often quell the withdrawal that leads addicts to early relapse.

At **Bridging the Gaps**, in Winchester, Virginia, patients begin treatment with a series of blood and urine tests to assess their liver and kidney function and nutritional status. They also fill out a psychological survey to determine if they might be lacking in certain brain chemicals. They then receive a customized cocktail of nutrients and amino acids – the building blocks for neurotransmitters – through an IV tube for six to ten days.

The amino acid given depends on which neurotransmitter appears to be lacking. For example, clinic staff members presume that addicts who prefer sedatives or alcohol lack the calming neurotransmitter GABA, so they give them its amino acid precursor. Someone who gravitates toward a drug like cocaine would get amino acids that stimulate excitatory activity in the brain.

At **Bridging the Gaps**, the staff have observed that medical journals have published few studies about the benefits of IV and oral nutrient therapy because most research dollars support pharmaceutical approaches to treating addiction. But their clinic has produced some promising data.

For example, one study surveyed newly sober patients about the severity of 15 “abstinence symptoms” (such as cravings, anxiety, depression, insomnia, fuzzy thinking and restlessness) both before and after six days of IV and oral nutrition therapy. It found that all 15 symptoms were radically reduced, making it easier for the patient to stick with the psychosocial counseling portion of the program.

Once the body is better able to absorb nutrients and the brain chemistry becomes rebalanced, patients at this facility are placed on a daily regimen of oral vitamins, amino acids, essential fatty acids and probiotics. At the same time, they receive nutritional counseling aimed at steering them toward lots of fresh fruits and vegetables; quality proteins such as fish, poultry and eggs; and nutritional oils, such as extra virgin olive oil and omega-3 fish oils. They are cautioned to stay away from junk food and refined carbohydrates, which can cause blood sugar to fluctuate wildly, aggravating cravings.

Such nutritional approaches stem largely from the work of Joan Matthews Larsen, whose groundbreaking book, *Seven Weeks to Sobriety: The Proven Program to Fight Alcoholism With Nutrition* (Ballantine, 1997), sparked many people to open clinics based on her Health Recovery Center in Minneapolis. One study conducted there found that 85 percent of the clients had remained sober six months after treatment. After three-and-a-half years, 74 percent were still sober.

Another success story is Ty Curan, 29, a recovering heroin addict who experienced dramatic results by changing his diet and adding a supplement regime. A drug user since age 15, he’d completed nine residential in-patient treatment programs before checking in to Bridging the Gaps. Recalls Curan, “I would go to treatment for a month, stay clean for a month, and fall back apart.” The difference this time, he says, is that after his stay at Bridging the Gaps, he’s been able to stay sober. “It truly is the best I’ve felt in a long, long time.”

Needling the Ear

Another key component at Bridging the Gaps is ear acupuncture, a method now being used in 800 federally-recognized addiction programs across the country. Chinese medicine practitioners discovered 2,500 years ago that when they manipulated certain points in the ear, they could relieve the discomfort of opium withdrawal. In the 1970s, Hong Kong neurosurgeon Dr. H. L. Wen revived the practice, after noting that when he delivered electrical stimulation to a certain acupuncture point in the ear for post-surgical pain relief, he also alleviated his patient’s opiate withdrawal symptoms.

When word of this aspect of addiction treatment made it to the United States, it took off, ultimately evolving into a protocol that calls for five needles to be placed at ear points said to regulate the nervous system, cerebral cortex, respiratory system, liver and kidneys. Today the nonprofit National Acupuncture Detoxification Association teaches this technique worldwide, and the federal government has granted millions of dollars to study its efficacy.

Research generally has produced mixed results, but some studies have shown that this method of ear acupuncture not only can quell withdrawal symptoms in notoriously hard-to-treat heroin and cocaine addicts, it has the added benefit of helping people stick with a treatment program.

For the past 30 years, Dr. Michael Smith, a respected physician and director of the Recovery Center at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, New York, has offered ear acupuncture to addicts awaiting methadone therapy for heroin and cocaine addiction at the clinic. He sees immediate results.

“One woman took the treatment, and after about five minutes her nose stopped running and she looked more comfortable. About a half-hour later she said, ‘I’m hungry. I want to eat something,’” recalls Smith. “No heroin addict in the middle of withdrawal ever says that. She ate a double helping.” Even more remarkable, she left without any methadone, but instead returned the next day for another acupuncture treatment.

Five years later the clinic stopped offering methadone therapy. Now it treats as many as 50 patients at a time with ear acupuncture, upping the chances that they’ll return for counseling. “You start it as soon as they arrive, because it helps people when they’re in crisis,” Smith notes.

While ear acupuncture is by far the most researched form of needling for addiction treatment, traditional Chinese acupuncture, which uses points all over the body, also can play an important role, particularly for pain relief.

Multiple studies from leading institutions studying a range of physical complaints show that acupuncture does effectively relieve pain, making it ideal for those trying to wean themselves off prescription painkillers. It also can help people deal with chronic health problems resulting from years of drug and alcohol abuse.

Don’t Stress Out

Once the body has begun to heal, keeping stress at bay becomes a critical factor in continued progress. Many clinics across the country offer classes in meditation and yoga and mandate a regular exercise program. But some also have begun to look toward a more novel approach to stress reduction called brainwave, or electroencephalogram (EEG), biofeedback. This computer-assisted relaxation technique helps patients learn to manipulate their own brainwaves. Research has shown that prolonged drug use can actually alter brainwave activity, prompting mental sluggishness or agitation, depending on the substance used.

“It’s almost like the brain is misfiring because [recovering addicts] have been using these drugs, and biofeedback helps them learn how to make it fire properly,” says Don Theodore, a certified addictions specialist who runs the brainwave biofeedback program at Cri-Help in North Hollywood, California.

For 45 minutes twice a day, clients lie in a comfortable chair with brainwave-charting sensors attached to their heads. As they make their way through visualization and relaxation exercises, a tone in their ear “rewards” them when they reach alpha and theta brainwave states, which are associated with calm and openness. So far, their research looks promising. In one 2005 study, addicts who underwent 40 to 50 biofeedback sessions, along with counseling, were far less likely to drop out of treatment. After 12 months, 77 percent were still clean.

Pulling it all Together

Back at InnerBalance, in Colorado, Beilhartz credits a combination of things for his long-sought recovery. The IV vitamin therapy and supplements helped him get through initial cravings. Both the nutritional counseling and mandatory three-day-a-week exercise class helped him recover his health, and group counseling provided much-needed peer support.

He subsequently left his job in the casino business, with plans to go back to school. His goal is to be an addictions counselor, specializing in a holistic approach. "I spent the last 44 years thinking only of myself," he says. "I'd like to spend the next 44 years returning favors and taking care of people."

For more information on InnerBalance Health Center, call 877-900-QUIT or visit www.InnerBalanceHealthCenter.com.

To connect with **Bridging the Gaps**, call 540-535-1111 or visit www.BridgingTheGaps.com.

For more on the Health Recovery Center, call 612-827-7800 or visit HealthRecovery.com. Cri-Help is at 818-985-8323, Cri-Help.org.

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