

Looking at Trauma During Recovery

Getting to the root of substance abuse

By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

Substance abuse is still very much prevalent in the U.S. In 2022, 48.7 million Americans ages 12 and older experienced a substance use disorder (including drug and alcohol abuse) in the previous year, according to www.addictiongroup.org.

The organization further states that only “9.1% of those with co-occurring mental health issues and substance use disorders receive treatment for both conditions.”

Mental health issues are not the only reason that people abuse substances.

Some people begin abusing drugs like fentanyl because of physical addiction to prescribed opioid painkillers such as after an injury or surgery.

Others experience untreated mental health problems stemming from trauma and end up using substances as a harmful coping mechanism.

“Trauma plays a significant role, but it is not the only cause,” said Jennifer Faringer, director of DePaul’s National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence Rochester Area and a credentialed prevention professional. “Trauma is a significant cause with many. Recognizing trauma and dealing with it can be a part of the whole counseling regimen and how trauma played a role in their mental health. We talk about trauma-informed care where you consider the impact of trauma and deal with the trauma.”

The organization focuses on prevention and operates an addiction counselor training program for candidates who want to become credentialed alcohol substance abuse counselors.

Identifying and treating trauma early can help prevent substance abuse later. Faringer said that it’s about understanding the risk. She added that it’s also important to educate the public about the myths and misconceptions about the danger of substance use and its potential impact.

“We’ve run a lot of ads in In Good Health on various drugs, alcohol and problem gambling to push back against misinformation out there,” Faringer said. “It’s risky, especially for young people. The earlier someone starts, the more likely they are to have a long-term problem with addiction. We try to interrupt it before it becomes a problem.”

Substance use does not have to include illegal drugs bought on a street corner. Some people believe that vaping or using marijuana recreationally is safe because it’s legal. Some self-medicate their anxiety or depression with over the counter or prescription medication that’s not their own or indicated for their condition.

“It may work for a little while, but they’re messing with their own neurological system,” Faringer said. “They rely on the drug to do things for them and they can’t decrease anx-



Jennifer Faringer is the director of DePaul’s National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence Rochester Area.

ety without that drug. It might feel like the drug is lessening anxiety but down the road; it does more harm than good. Addiction is biological, psychological, social and physical. It affects all parts of one’s life.”

For some people, lasting, effective recovery includes cutting off the negative social influences that pull them back into addiction such as places where they obtained substances, people who encouraged and supplied them and situations that triggered substance use.

Faringer said that learning to “do things with others that are sober” often helps, along with “the ability to have fun without drinking, drugs or gambling. Learning how to socialize in a sober environment is huge. If someone comes out of treatment and goes back to the same old same old and is surrounded by a negative environment, it’s a system but not positively supportive. It’s easy to

relapse if those around them are still using.”

CORE Center and Recovery Fitness represent two local organizations that provide help to people in recovery by providing alternatives to using substances.

“The biggest thing is to relearn or learn how to have fun without being drugged or drunk,

Faringer said. “Learning how to be social in a sober environment is huge for people.”

“You want to support the family as they’re going through a journey almost as difficult. We work with families and kids. We work with families whose loved one is struggling with addiction. We try to teach them about addiction and how that has affected their family system with the goal of breaking that cycle. The family needs health and healing and help for themselves.”