

From Addiction to Understanding: Self-Compassion as a Strategy in Addiction Treatment

Author:

Jessica Epifanio Ferreira¹

¹Odyssey House, Sydney, Australia.

Presenter's email: jessica.ferreira@odysseyhouse.com

Background: Individuals who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are at risk for substance use disorder and addiction. Individuals who had trauma exposure often use alcohol and other drugs to manage overwhelming stress originated by trauma exposure. These behaviors are frequently misunderstood and stigmatized, leading to significant feelings of shame and creating formidable barriers to recovery. Understanding substance use as a behavioural adaptation to overwhelming stress can reshape approaches to treatment and support.

Description of Model of Care/Intervention: This presentation highlights the importance of integrating self-compassion into trauma-informed care for individuals using substances as coping mechanisms. The intervention involves reframing addiction-related behaviours as survival adaptations, thereby reducing associated shame and promoting recovery. A key component include educating practitioners on the trauma-substance use connection to assist their clients to understand their adaptive behaviours and promote self-compassion.

Effectiveness/Acceptability/Implementation: A comprehensive literature review demonstrating how ACEs pose individuals at a higher risk of substance use as a way of coping. In clinical practice, there has been high acceptability among practitioners when this approach is performed to build self-compassion, leading to enhanced therapeutic outcomes.

Conclusion and Next Steps: The understanding of substance use behaviours, alongside with the promotion of self-compassion approaches into addiction treatment can bring further therapeutic outcomes, such as reducing shame, and enhancing psychological well-being.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Implementing self-compassion interventions broadly in clinical settings can significantly improve outcomes for individuals grappling with addiction. Policy makers and practitioners could:

- Promote training programs for professionals on understanding the use of substances as a survival-driven behaviour to attempt regulate intense and overwhelming emotions. This awareness is to promote self-compassion.
- Encourage a shift in public and professional perspectives to view substance use as a survival strategy, reducing stigma and enhancing support systems.

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