

Addictions and Aftercare in the Information Age

By John S. Shegerian

As with virtually all areas of medicine, advancements in technology have provided tremendous benefits to treatment professionals and patients alike in the world of behavioral health. Specifically, the internet, much maligned (perhaps fairly) due to its use as a tool to accommodate, perpetuate and enable a variety of addictions, has surprisingly emerged recently to become one of the most useful tools available to the addicted community at all stages of recovery, from the pre-treatment struggle to the aftercare maintenance of a quality life.

For so many addicts getting started is, of course, the hardest part. Dealing with the guilt and shame and making that first outreach – whether it be to a family member, friend or addiction professional – is the longest yard. The Internet has enabled hundreds of thousands of people struggling with addictions take the initial steps in the privacy of their own rooms in their own homes. Researching, learning, and finding a connection to treatment, reading about others with similar addictions and how they got better, discovering the variety of treatment modalities – all at the flick of a switch and a few key strokes. And while there are many distractions and much misinformation on the internet, there is also that shining portal, or easy first step, to recovery, rendering the net the newest and perhaps most important tool available.

But what of aftercare -- that essential post-treatment aspect of recovery where so many recovering addicts fall out of their program or lose touch with their group or spiral back into the waiting claws of addiction? Can the internet play a significant role as a tool to help specifically those who have undergone treatment for addiction but are struggling through the aftercare process? I believe strongly that it can.

I think one of the great things about the internet is that not only does it help addicts find treatment, but it can also help them stay sober.

We started the Addicted.com website with the goal in mind to more effectively connect the addicted community with professionals, centers and each other. As we built the site, we tried to cover all the bases regarding what would be useful to those who needed an internet weigh station where they could anonymously ask questions of high profile professionals, type in their zip code and find out where the nearby treatment centers and professionals were located that specifically deal with their kind of addiction; and even take self tests and read through articles at no charge. One area we knew that we needed to place an emphasis on as we developed the site was Aftercare. We have designed what we call our Online Aftercare Program, which allows the recovering addicts to log on to our site and chat in real-time with the alumni and counselors from their previous treatment stay. This gives them instant access to help that they are familiar with – from the comfort of their own home at any time they need help -- 24 hours a day.

Each of the professionals on our site are not only there to answer questions regarding addiction and how to overcome, but also how to stay clean and maintain sobriety.

The forums, not just on our site, but throughout the internet in general, are a great place for recovering addicts to share stories about their past struggles and what they did to get and stay sober. By reading these forums, those going through aftercare are able to see that others are dealing with the same issues and learn what they did to overcome them.

On our site, we also implemented a Support Network which allows users to build relationships with others that are dealing with the same life issues. This kind of an exercise helps recovering addicts build unique relationships so that they don't feel alone – even when they are at home alone -- and lets them know that there are people out there – everywhere -- that understand what it is like to be an addict and become sober and have the urges to use again.

We feel that the internet's potential for helping in the aftercare process is so dramatic that at Addicted.com we are currently working on expanding and customizing the AfterCare section of the site for Treatment Centers and Groups around the country with whom we work and partner. This will allow support and discussion groups that were built in treatment to continue meeting after their residential program is complete – even if there are enormous stretches of geography between members of the group. Online meetings are something that can help with consistency and stability after a treatment program has ended and the recovering individual is on his or her own. Our vision is to have these private meetings fully customized for each Treatment Center or group that wants to build one while maintaining each online group's privacy from outside visitors --allowing for each group member to feel comfortable and be fully honest without the fear of exposure.

These programs that are offered on Addicted.com and other internet resources are just the beginning...the tip of the iceberg. The internet is an extraordinarily powerful communication tool and, used properly, can be an essential component to a successful recovery for many addicts and will hopefully be embraced and encouraged by those of you who are helping these people get better.

John S. Shegerian is Co-Founder and Chairman of Addicted.com (www.addicted.com). Shegerian brings to Addicted.com a uniquely successful track record developing organizations that are fiscally successful and socially responsible. Shegerian is driven by his commitment to innovate and develop companies that benefit others. As Co-Founder of FinancialAid.com, founder of Homeboy Industries and Chairman and CEO of Electronic Recyclers, Inc.,(www.electronicrecyclers.com), he has time and again exhibited an impressive ability to quickly convert socially meaningful start-ups and endeavors into large, highly successful business enterprises.