

Continuing Care as Part of a Continuum of Care for Addiction Recovery By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Addiction treatment operates best within a continuum of care. Severe substance use disorder is viewed as “addiction” and often requires an acute level of care, where a mild level of severity of substance disorder could potentially be handled through lesser levels of professional help. Acute care could be varying levels of inpatient or outpatient treatments. Unlike what many assume, treatment isn't just a physical location, medication, therapy, or spiritual journey; it encompasses a range of therapeutic services.

Addiction treatment may begin with stabilization, where detox often takes place. It is a part of acute care. Stabilization can also involve medical services for acute mental health symptoms as a part of a co-occurring disorder.

Detox, as a treatment service, involves professional supervision to remove the mood-altering substances from the body. Sometimes, to prevent severe physical complications, tapering doses of a similar or the original drug are administered.

Inpatient or outpatient treatment services assist individuals with substance use disorder to acquire skills to resist cravings, maintain abstinence, and alter behavior patterns. Clients learn to acknowledge their condition, navigate life's challenges while remaining sober, and develop essential life skills such as managing emotions, reducing stress, and boosting self-confidence. The ultimate aim is to restore full functionality across all aspects of their lives.

Following treatment for acute issues, whether in an inpatient or outpatient setting, recovering people continue to be treated on a continuum of care. The focus shifts from eliminating distressing acute symptoms to a level of

care focused on sustaining abstinence in environments where triggers abound. It typically involves support groups like AA/NA, outpatient counseling, or formal aftercare programs, focusing on maintaining behavioral changes and preventing relapse. Acute inpatient treatment serves as an essential starting point, focusing on interrupting addiction's momentum and providing necessary detoxification and stabilization. While continuing care supports ongoing recovery demands such as skill-building and addressing underlying issues beyond the initial treatment phase. Seeking help and achieving abstinence mark merely the beginning of recovery. Recovery extends beyond mere abstinence to a comprehensive return to health and effective functioning across various life domains.

The "Continuum of Care" reflects the observation of addiction as a chronic, relapsing illness. Addiction, like other relapse-prone chronic illnesses, necessitate a lifelong approach to recovery and treatment. Similar to managing conditions like diabetes or hypertension, addressing addiction requires professionals to cater to its multifaceted nature, aiming for optimal health and functionality.

It's important to remember that treatment is not a singular event but a system of services within a continuum of care, adaptable to the person's evolving needs throughout their recovery journey. Research underscores its importance, showing that more extended engagement correlates with better outcomes.

Relapse rates post-inpatient discharge are very high, with the majority occurring within the first year, particularly within the initial 90 days. Those who follow through with AA or NA attendance without aftercare do better than those who do not follow up with any level of recovery support. Still, those who follow up with both 12-step recovery and continuing care have a much higher probability of sobriety one year later and extending into sustained recovery.

In summary, addiction recovery thrives within a continuum of care, with continuing care serving as a linchpin in sustaining long-term sobriety and overall well-being. Continuing care offer support in additional skill development, relapse monitoring, and reinforcement of behavioral

changes conducive to long-term recovery. By emphasizing addiction education, emotional support, lifestyle modifications, monitoring, and intervention, continuing care helps individuals navigate the lifelong journey of recovery with resilience and sustained progress. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**

