



## COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

### Bouncing Back From Tough Times

*“Storms make trees take deeper roots.” ~Dolly Parton*

In absence of healthy coping mechanisms, stress becomes the default response to the daily demands of a hectic life. After a while, the brain interprets the state of being stressed as normal and begins to interpret other stimuli as “stressful” in order to maintain this sense of normalcy. This is the same pattern that occurs with addiction, and like other types of addictions, over time stress causes physical and mental illness and “dis-ease.” In the long run, it is far more beneficial to develop positive coping strategies. Ever wonder why some people overcome difficult times relatively unscathed? How do they bounce back without lasting psychological or emotional scars? The ability to recover from the traumatic periods of life in a healthy, beneficial way is called *resiliency*.

In the field of medicine, resilience is the capability of the body to recover its size and shape after being stretched or compressed. In the field of psychology the concept of resilience is an individual’s ability to cope with stress and adversity. Resilience in evolutionary and ecological terms is the capacity of an ecosystem to respond to a disturbance by resisting damage and recovering quickly. Common to all of these is the concept of “bouncing back” and “staying power,” like the old adage “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” As we experience stress, much like the environment, we have a compromised system. Over time this compromise can devastate our inner environment, or immune system and psyche.

Viktor Frankl, neurologist, psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor wrote, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.” Individuals who psychologically make it through difficult situations in one piece have the ability to dig deep within themselves for the resources to cope and even thrive. Most of us “missed the memo” on what these resources are or how to find them. Instead, we developed coping strategies such as addictions to negative thoughts or emotions, and behaviors such as abusing alcohol or drugs. Rather than using these “negative” addictions to help them cope, individuals who exhibit resiliency have developed and practice “positive” addictions.

There are many definitions for addictions, most of them relating to compulsive behavior that continues despite negative or adverse consequences. These types of definitions are narrow, limiting the concept of addiction to those “bad” behaviors we have all heard about: overindulgence in drugs and alcohol, compulsive and destructive use of the internet or watching pornography, shopping, gambling, sex, etc. Scientists, doctors, and therapists in

fields such as neuroscience, education, mental health, and psychoneuroimmunology believe that we should expand our definition of addiction. A broader definition of addiction by neuroscientist Dr. Joe Dispenza is “something we cannot stop.”

Take a moment and think about the last time you got upset. Were you angry? Did you shout at other people or go on a ballistic mental tirade criticizing other people? Did you go into “poor me” victim mentality where you blamed other people for your emotional state? Whatever your response was, were you able to stop it? Were you able to breathe and consider the situation from other perspectives? Were you able to consciously decide how you would respond to the situation, or did it feel like you were a cork in the ocean unable to control the feelings, emotions, and thoughts that resulted?

It has been obvious for centuries that we can become addicted to exogenous substances such as drugs and alcohol. But what many people don't know is that we can also become addicted to endogenous substances such as neurotransmitters and other chemicals released with our thoughts or that create our emotional states. If we experience stress, anger, despair, and anxiety on a daily basis (and all of the thoughts associated with those emotional states), the cells of our body literally become addicted to them. Just like exogenous addictions, the cells of the body will crave the chemicals they are used to receiving. So, even if there is nothing going on around you to “make” you angry, if you are addicted to the chemicals associated with anger, you will FIND something to get angry about. In other words, you will make something up to get angry. Your thoughts will turn angry so you can satisfy the craving of the cells of your body. You will perceive the people around you as idiots or incompetent or threats so you can get angry at them. You have made yourself the judge and jury of other people's choices, personalities, and behaviors just so you can feel a certain emotional state because you are addicted to it.

If we are essentially “addiction machines,” what can we do? One possibility is to consciously decide to expand our cognitive and emotional “repertoire.” When you find yourself reacting to situations in the same way you always have, step back. Take a breath, and choose a different thought or a different way to respond. Realize that ultimately we have the choice to feel any emotion at any time. Start consciously deciding how you want to feel. Simply put, you begin to develop positive addictions.

If negative addictions are thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that continue despite negative consequences, then positive addictions would be thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that continue to perpetuate positive consequences. Some examples of positive addictions include:

- Consciously having thoughts of appreciation throughout the day

- Giving people the benefit of the doubt, rather than being critical of them
- Practicing mindful awareness throughout the day by noticing your thoughts, emotions, and surroundings
- Questioning thoughts that cause negative emotional states (why are you thinking something that is making you suffer?)
- Focus on solutions rather than problems (avoid “analysis paralysis”)
- Movement exercises: walking, hiking, dancing, swimming, etc.
- Practicing a routine of healthy eating
- Engage in relaxation techniques such as mindful breathing
- Become a kind and compassionate person
- Develop relationships with nonjudgmental, supportive friends
- Slow down and be fully present (not distracted) when you are speaking with other people

Life can be challenging at times. It is a roller coaster for everyone, constantly changing with ups and downs. The roller coaster can be exhilarating and exciting or it can be terrifying and nauseating. It all depends on your perspective. Developing positive addictions will help you recover faster from the terrifying and nauseating moments, and it will help you explore and enjoy the exciting moments with much more appreciation.

How do we develop positive addictions? Practice them. Daily. It’s not about trying to undo the negative addictions. Instead, focus exclusively on the new thoughts, the new emotions, and the new behaviors. Changing behaviors can take a long time, especially after years of practicing the old patterns. But creating a new behavior? A new thought? A new emotion? This can take place instantaneously, and with practice become a part of who you are within just a few weeks.

When sudden, unexpected situations arise, we will fall back on our old, negative coping strategies if we have not practiced and developed new, positive addictions. If we start thinking those negative thoughts again, the chemicals that are released won’t feel good but they will feel familiar. It’s really about trying to control how we feel when the rest of life seems out of our control and we don’t know how to respond to the situation before us in a positive and mature way.

The only constant in life is change. We cannot control change, but we can control how we handle it. If we use negative or destructive thoughts or behaviors to try to cope with change, we are developing a fictional sense of control because all negative addictions end up controlling us. Positive addictions, on the other hand, allow us to be resilient in tough times so we feel empowered, rather than victimized, by our lives.

Choose one or two new positive addictions you would like to develop. Practice them for at least a month and see for yourself how your resiliency increases!

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