

Conceptual Models for Understanding Chemical Dependency

Moral Model

Alcoholism and drug dependency are caused by failure of the will or by deliberate misconduct. In both cases, chemical dependency is the user's "fault."

- **Advantages/disadvantages:** The moral model represents social attitudes toward addiction rather than a conceptual model for understanding. It offers no advantages in terms of providing concrete tools for addressing chemical dependency problems; rather, it labels and condemns.
- **Relevance to child welfare:** The moral approach subtly colors people's attitudes toward families where chemical dependency exists. The Federal Office of National Drug Control Policy demonstrated a moral approach to chemical dependency in its 1992 drug control strategy. It stated that alcohol and drug problems result from "bad decisions by individuals with free wills". Such attitudes result in less emphasis on treatment or aftercare and more emphasis on law enforcement and court sanctions.

Disease Model

Individuals are genetically predisposed to alcoholism and perhaps to drug dependency. This theory holds that the dependent person cannot control his or her use of alcohol or other drugs and that the loss of control is a permanent condition. Therefore, abstinence is the only means for arresting the progression of the disease.

- **Advantages:** An important advantage of the disease theory is it objectifies addiction and therefore tempers the moral stigma formally attached to addiction. It is also much easier for people with chemical dependency to admit that they have a disease than it is for them to view themselves as morally deficient.
- **Disadvantages:** The disease model can be disadvantageous when it is applied too narrowly or inappropriately. For example, many specialists in the substance abuse field believe that it is a mistake to define addiction as only a physical disease affecting organ systems. In their view, addiction is a disease that affects all levels of the individual is functioning—behavioral, psychosocial, and spiritual—not just physical.

Critics of the disease model also object to labeling a chemically dependent person as "sick" because they believe it encourages the person to feel like a helpless victim.

Conceptual Models for Understanding Chemical Dependency (continued)

- **Relevance to child welfare:** Fundamental to child welfare professionals is respect for family members, the formation of strong bonds of trust with individuals, and avoidance of pejorative labeling. The disease theory lifts guilt and blame and therefore may allow the person to speak more openly and freely about experiences. The disease model also allows the caseworker and individual to form a partnership while s/he seeks help, whether through self-help groups or formal treatment.

Cognitive/Behavioral Model

Based on social learning theory, this model assumes that dependency is a learned behavior. According to this model, patterns of use can be modified through specific behavioral techniques and changes in life-style. Chemical dependency is not approached as a disease. Clients are taught how to attain and maintain sobriety or control problem drinking or drug use.

- **Advantages:** This model is straightforward and procedure oriented. The model recognizes the central importance of changing the using behavior and offers individuals clear, precise methods for maintaining sobriety that target behavioral and cognitive changes. This model objectifies addiction and avoids blaming them for their problems, while providing specific tools for avoiding relapse.
- **Disadvantages:** The major drawback to this approach is that it is based on the premise that the individual has the ability to control his/her use. Many AOD-dependent individuals cannot control their use. Repeated efforts to do so only compound their sense of failure and perpetuate addictive behavior.
- **Relevance to child welfare:** Both child welfare and behavioral/cognitive approaches are grounded in social learning theory, therefore are compatible in their theoretical approach, and applied techniques. Behavioral interventions as a part of maintaining sobriety can serve as a valuable resource for child welfare professionals, especially when integrated with other types of interventions.

Psychological Model

This is a view of addiction as a symptom of an underlying emotional problem or personality disorder. Until fairly recently, it was assumed that alcoholics and addicts were “self-medicating” themselves to avoid pain or anxiety caused by unconscious problems. Addiction was treated by individual and group psychotherapy, with a focus on developing insight into the causes of addiction.

Conceptual Models for Understanding Chemical Dependency (continued)

- **Advantages:** The current psychological model recognizes the primacy of dependency and paves the way for more holistic approaches to emerge. Holistic models recognize the fundamental necessity of changing the using behavior, as well as the cognitive self-messages and environmental influences that maintain the addiction.
- **Disadvantages:** Therapists have discovered that the traditional psychoanalytic view of dependency as a symptom of an underlying character disorder or emotional illness is ineffective. Dependency issues must be addressed at some point in therapy in order for people to benefit from traditional therapy.
- **Relevance to Child Welfare:** Child welfare professionals can learn a great deal from the transformation of the psychological model. It underscores the need for chemical dependency issues to be addressed if interventions to protect children and strengthen families are to succeed.

