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The negative effects of suffering from substance use disorder are many—failing physical and mental health, strained relationships with friends and family and troubles with maintaining employment and financial stability, just to name a few. However, having substance use disorder is not an end all. Many services and resources exist and can help individuals overcome addiction and recover. With treatment, family ties can be repaired, lives can be restored and good physical and mental health can be regained.

Although the road to recovery from substance use disorder is unique for each individual, there is one common thread—recovery is a life-long commitment requiring perseverance, support and access to adequate services and resources.

With this in mind, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) and its provider agency network offers county residents access to a host of drug and alcohol services and resources—prevention services, case management, residential services, outpatient treatment, detoxification services and more—to help them in their path to recovery.

In 2009, 4.3 million people in the U.S. received treatment for a substance use disorder. These individuals are mothers, fathers, friends, co-workers and family members trying to make a positive change in their lives and who may need services and resources to help them recover.

The stories of Mary and Rita serve as a testament that substance abuse treatment services are effective and people can and do recover from substance use. Both women overcame their addictions and reshaped their lives through the network of services DHS provides.



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Mary

For Mary, her path to addiction started out innocently. Mary was 11 years old and simply wanted to feel like she belonged.

“I always felt like I was different and I just wanted to fit in when I was younger,” she said. “I started partying once in awhile and that escalated into using hard drugs.”

However, once she began abusing substances, instead of gaining the friends and sense of belonging she truly desired, Mary became more and more isolated as the disease of substance use disorder consumed her life.

Although Mary believed her addiction was going undetected by her friends and family, she later learned they were well aware of her struggles.

“I thought I was doing a good job hiding my addiction from them, but towards the end when my addiction was at its worst, I lost some really good friends, and my family was worried sick about me all the time,” Mary said.

'Mary' continued from front...

When Mary was 19 years old, she realized the severity of her addiction. She knew she had become both mentally and physically addicted to the drugs she was using on a daily basis.

"I woke up just to get the next fix," she said. "I was using drugs just to feel better. I really couldn't even get high anymore. My whole life became just about using. I sacrificed my morals and values just to get my next high. I was exhausted and couldn't live like that anymore."

Mary had been through several out-patient treatment programs with little success, until one of her therapists suggested she try an in-patient, long-term program and referred her to POWER, a DHS-provider agency that tailors its services to the specific and special needs of women suffering from drug and alcohol addiction. Through themselves, the agency

provides screening and assessment, individual and group therapy, mentoring by staff members who were once addicts, psychiatric consultation, support for 12-step participation, art therapy, life skills development classes, yoga, tai chi, mindful meditation and more.

"That referral was the best thing that could have ever happened to me at that time," Mary said. At POWER, Mary was provided with a safe haven away from the lifestyle that made it difficult to fight her addiction.

"I worked with the staff one-on-one and in groups," Mary said. "Since it was all women, I felt comfortable talking about many of the more personal issues that come along with addiction."

Mary says POWER helped teach her how to become a functioning member of society and connected her with 12-step recovery meetings where she

met other people with the same goal as her—to stay sober. Once she was released from the in-patient program, she said it was difficult to not consume any drugs or alcohol, but she was strong-willed and able to preserve with the help of the tools she was provided by POWER.

"The biggest challenges at first were learning how to live without using and feeling comfortable in my own skin," Mary said. Now that Mary has been clean for 10 years, she believes her life has come full circle from the point where she fully realized her addiction at 19 years old.

"I've been clean since July 2001. Recovery has given me the ability to learn how to love myself again, be a daughter, a mother, a wife and today I am a woman with dignity," she said. "I plan to live one day at a time and be the best person I can be."

Rita

Like Mary, Rita's addiction started out with gateway drugs like alcohol and marijuana at the age of 19, but eventually she found herself experimenting with other substances and soon became addicted.

"I was addicted to any opiate you can name," she said.

For 25 years, Rita's life was consumed by her addiction. She was in denial and didn't believe she suffered from substance use disorder. Rita realized the severity of her addiction after she was participating in a methadone program at Tadiso, Inc., a DHS-funded provider agency, and was asked a simple question by an employee.

"She asked me 'I'm here because I work here, why are you here?' and that really stayed with me," Rita said. "Two weeks later I was determined to become sober." Rita began to look at her life with a new perspective. "I saw the evidence, the consequences, of my addiction," she said "It was a vicious cycle. Addiction ruined my life. It tore my family up and I lost my identity."

Rita explained her addiction as something you'd see in a film. "My life was a horror movie and I was the star," she said. With her newfound realization, Rita was ready to change her life, and her case managers were with her every step of the way. "They were helpful, understanding and always concerned about their consumers," Rita said. "They made sure I went through detox safely."

Today, Rita has been sober for more than 10 years and is forever grateful to her case managers and the role they played in turning her life around. "I'm forever indebted to them," she said. "They helped change my life." With her new sober life, Rita went back to school and got an associate's degree at the Kaplan Career Institute and then continued her education at Point Park University where she earned a bachelor's and master's degree. Today she works as a drug and alcohol therapist at a program for offenders.

"I learned a lot from my addiction and now I can help others overcome their own substance use disorder," said Rita.