

NEBRASKA LICENSEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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Pain Management and the Health Care Professional

Members of the “helping and healing” professions need to intentionally take care of their own health and wellness. Day to day professional work often consists of demanding work, long hours, and physical stress and strain. As with everyone else, health care professionals can have health-related issues to manage while they are working. In some cases, they may even have to manage their own physical pain while doing their job. Trying to function well on the job while managing pain can be a frustrating and exhausting process.

There are many pain management options or treatments. These include exercise, physical therapy, biofeedback, meditation, acupuncture, and medication. The most common treatment is pain medication because it can provide substantial and ongoing relief from pain. Prescription pain medications, usually narcotics, are generally safe and effective when used appropriately. However, use of most narcotics will result in dependence if taken for an extended period of time. In some cases, dependence on this type of pain medication can evolve to an addiction.

Individuals who have developed problems related to their use of pain medication demonstrate various signs and symptoms. One of the most common is appearing impaired while at work. Eventually, there can be evolution to more drug-seeking type behavior symptomatic of addiction, such as obtaining multiple prescriptions for drugs, fraudulently obtaining prescriptions, diversion of drugs from work, or making frequent emergency room visits to obtain drugs. Many addicted individuals do not seek the treatment they need due to the complexities of a pain medication drug addiction, including the difficult fear of dealing with pain without drugs, and denial of a drug problem.

Acknowledging that a drug problem may exist is the starting point for resolving the addiction. Information on the difference between drug dependence (appropriate use of medication, may include dependence on the medication) and drug addiction (destructive consequences of misuse or overuse) can be extremely important. The NE LAP can help employers, colleagues and healthcare professionals themselves identify and respond to the difference between dependence and addiction.

Medical care professionals can prescribe “safe” medications for those who have an addiction or are at risk for addiction. A person who has already been diagnosed with a substance use disorder should be considered at high risk for more serious problems, or a relapse if they have already had treatment and are in recovery from addiction. Many individuals have relapsed after taking prescribed pain medications following a dental procedure, an episode of back pain, a migraine headache or a surgery. These who have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder, should make their medical care provider aware of their addiction and utilize safe pain management options.

If you are interested in learning more about the difference between dependence on pain medication versus an addiction to pain medication, or would like assistance maintaining recovery from a drug addiction while managing medical care, please contact the NE LAP at (800) 851-2336 or (402)354-8055 or visit our web site at www.lapne.org. Please ask for Judi Leibrock, NE LAP Coordinator or Michelle Hruska, NE LAP Counselor.