

Brain Gym and Addiction Treatment

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We all know that the "Revolving Door" is all too common in addiction, alcohol and eating disorder treatment. We also know that relapses always demand more allocation of health care funds as well as continued professional intervention. The question is always "why do so many people struggle with continued relapses and return to destructive using, drinking or eating patterns"? Are there effective ways being used to interrupt these patterns that work. If so, what are the promising trends in today's treatment programming.

These questions have been bandied about in the treatment industry for years. Skillful positions have been proposed and argued as to the core issues involved and what could be done differently. One aspect that many acknowledge, but often do not necessarily know how to intervene on, is the effect on relapse created by unbalanced neurological conditions.

Neurological damage, long seen as a consequence of habitual usage, is directly implicated when it comes to individual relapse. Other realities such as family chaos, physical and sexual abuse, financial problems, PTSD, ADHD and depression have also always been concurrent risk factors for relapse. For those that already struggle with confusion and problems with memory and concentration brought on by years of usage, these additional challenges are often overwhelming. For years, medications have been a standard answer proposed to deal with these concerns, but we all know the risks encountered when addicted individuals are prescribed medications. There has to be a better way.

What if an individual new to recovery and dealing with the above stressors was introduced to tools that could help them become more balanced neurologically? What if these same individuals could practice these tools when they feel most vulnerable and are most at risk to use or engage in destructive eating or other compulsive behavior? How might this affect their success during times of stress and in those early, most vulnerable weeks of rehabilitation, especially right after treatment.

As they say, new times call for new solutions and the same is true in the world of addiction, alcohol and eating disorder treatment. The emergence of technologies such as Brainwave Neurofeedback Training,

EMDR(R), and Brain Gym(R) in recent years attests to the usefulness of balancing the neurology, whether the problem is medical, substance and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, educational or a combination of the above. In this paper I will introduce an approach called Brain Gym(R), a movement oriented technology that can be adapted to addiction treatment challenges. I will also suggest how these tools might be integrated into a typical treatment program, especially in inpatient and outpatient settings.

Brain Gym was created and developed by Paul Dennison over the last 25 years. Historically it has been used in educational and private individual settings to assist individuals dealing with ADHD, learning disabilities, aphasia, anxiety, depression, reading problems, as well as for enhancing function in cognitive, physical and emotional abilities. Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease have also responded with this approach.

Consisting of a series of 26 targeted exercises, the techniques are movement oriented and designed to enhance and strengthen a person's progress towards concrete and desired goals. Falling squarely within the field of educational kinesiology, the exercise movements are fun, light hearted and even silly at times, but the results are very effective. Tapping into the body's natural self-healing ability it uses the power of acupuncture points, energy meridians and coordinated movement and sound to balance and enhance communication between the right and left hemisphere of the brain as well as between the forebrain and the older, "more primitive" brain stem.

I believe Brain Gym may best contribute to substance and eating disorder treatment through its ability to integrate disturbing emotional and physical memories into awareness. In so doing, it eases the transition time between repression, disassociation and denial and the need for re-experiencing the painful memories and finally reaching acceptance. In working with a Brain Gym instructor, a recovering individual can expect to approach their emotions and fragmented mental functioning with precision, and actually cultivate, practice and integrate more preferred outcomes. Let me give some examples to clarify.

We've all seen the pattern of isolation from potentially meaningful social interactions that many active addicts fall into. Clearly, people in the throws of addiction do not want to give up their "using behavior", and being around healthier people is often experienced as a threat. In addition, many addicted individuals are all too familiar with being hurt, abandoned or used emotionally and are afraid of dealing with this in their present relationships. With few healthy alternative ways of relating and

functioning at their disposal, they do not know how to deal with strong feelings, especially those that revive similar feelings from their families of origin or past relationships. Simply put, they do not have the skills to modify, release or move through the confusion, fear, and emotional charge of their inner world. This is a set up for relapse.

Brain Gym gives them concrete steps to identify core thought patterns, often those held beneath painful emotional patterns that escape their scrutiny. An example might be to use kinesiology techniques to uncover blocks and resistances to the steps needed to develop a support group that would help the person in recovery stay sober. In this situation, new neurological patterns that support the desired behavior are identified, as are the specific techniques that will strengthen their development in the brain. These exercises are practiced in the session, and the subtle changes they impart on emotional or cognitive awareness is also pointed out and noticed. Noticing is key.

Individuals working with a Brain Gym instructor learn to sense subtle neurological patterns by noticing the effect they have on their awareness, the subtle ways they affect thought patterns and also how to intervene on these old patterns and implant new ones in their place. Individuals who become experienced in this approach will by nature become more aware, more "tuned in" if you will. The integration of basic instinctual drives deriving from the brain stem become moderated, contained and then integrated with the cerebral cortex. At the same time, as more and more balance and integration is developed, the precepts and guiding principles of the 12 steps and 12 traditions begin to make more and more sense. Eventually the two dovetail and the effects of Brain Gym enhance 12 step work as well as visa versa.

Skills such as setting boundaries, learning to accept one's limits, learning to make amends and say when we're wrong and learning to let go rather than trying to control so obsessively become easier when we are more balanced and have discharged some of our deeper guilt and shame. Brain Gym can target the core thought patterns and physiological responses that feed these old patterns and implant new, more functional ones in their place.

In my opinion, Brain Gym exercises should not be used early on in treatment, especially prior to detoxification. Once detox has taken place, however, issues like the physiology of urges, anxiety and fear responses and the damage incurred by repressing one's true feelings can all be approached. I also believe the technologies of Brain Gym can be best initiated in primary inpatient settings. In this relatively controlled setting,

the physiology of addiction, brief introductions regarding how the brain influences addiction and how these exercises can help could all be taught in concise modules. In so doing, participants would be more apt to buy into the usefulness of Brain Gym techniques; especially once they begin to understand how their brain function contributes to their usage or unhealthy eating. In outpatient settings, the counselor exposed to Brain Gym techniques or a Brain Gym instructor could easily integrate this work into classroom or targeted joint or individual sessions.

For practitioners or teachers of Brain Gym near you, contact the Educational Kinesiology Foundation at <http://www.braingym.org>. Many teachers will travel to locations where enough interest is shown.

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