

**ABSTRACT: UNDERSTANDING SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG NURSES**  
**HELPING NURSES REMAIN SUBSTANCE FREE**

**Author:** Heather K. Machado, RN, MS

**Purpose and Rationale:** To explore and identify the path addicted nurses travel to remain substance free.

**Research Question:** What process do addicted nurses go through to remain substance free?

**Synthesis of Review of Literature:** The literature reveals nurses and the profession are reluctant to admit weakness and acknowledge nurses can succumb to addiction. The research shows a series of events that lead nurses to addiction and a defined process that nurses endure to remain substance free. The web of denial by the addicted nurse and the profession often leads to moral and ethical dilemmas identifying, treating and controlling addiction. The research also reveals authorities follow two paths in dealing with addicted nurses. Several States have adopted Diversion Models that promote recovery using a less punitive approach while other States maintain a more traditional punitive approach. The literature focuses on the characteristics of the impaired nurse, including signs and symptoms, both physical and behavioral, implications for EAP programs and State and Federal guidelines, and the methods for reentry into practice through probationary periods and supervision. The research promotes and encourages a holistic treatment approach just as they would non nurse patients.

**Methods/Procedures:** This study used the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.106.). The researcher collected data during individual interviews, observation of group sessions, and from a written questionnaire. The sample population consisted of eight nurses recovering from substance addiction. The research began with semi-structured interviews aimed at understanding the process used to remain substance free. Before the interview each participant completed a demographic questionnaire and the researcher used a four question guide. The researcher also attended two Nurses for Nurses group meetings which included six of the eight nurses interviewed. Following observation of the two meetings the researcher reviewed and discussed the meetings with the group leader who was also an addicted nurse.

**Results:** Nurses suffer emotional and physical pain, leading to addiction, manifested as social and psychological isolation. Addiction emerges and manifests itself in suffering behaviors, diversion, apprehension, and realization of the disease. Healing, the basic social/psychological process begins through union with others. This healing leads to opportunities for growth and recovery defined as; awareness of self, connectedness to others, spirituality/transcendence, renewal of life/meaning, and giving back.

**Discussion/Application to Practice:** Addicted nurses have a great gift to offer nursing. Personal adversity brings individual and professional growth producing improved interactions with patients and peers. Recovering nurses know vulnerability, physical and emotional pain and isolation. This knowledge fosters empathy, humility and understanding human weakness. The research reveals the healing that occurs when two or more people connect by expanding boundaries that creating new meaning. Additionally, greater acknowledgement of the phenomenon of addiction by professionals and educators will set the tone in guiding new nurses,

as well as experienced practitioners, to the resources available for those who need direction in the recovery process and help eliminate moral labeling.

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