

## **Hooked on Recovery**

Friday, April 2, 2004

*It's Easy to Abuse an Abuser*

I've had a long fascination with words. And language. I've dabbled in all kinds of writing. And now as an advocate for recovery, I have found myself engaged in friendly debates as to the proper use of a specific term. In a workshop I've done over the last few years called "The Language of Recovery", I have spent a lot of time discussing some of these terms. There are a few that are pet peeves, but the one that is the most grating is *substance abuse*.

First of all, the term is not technically accurate. Back in the day, when I was running, and my cocaine habit had reached fever pitch, I was close to certifiably insane. My behavior was the most erratic, my appearance the most ghastly and my next move the most unpredictable. Yet during this time, I never once abused my substance. My cocaine was the **ONLY** thing I took care of. I knew where it was at all times, it was clean, well-groomed, safe and dry. I loved my cocaine. It was my love potion. It never occurred to me to abuse it.

So the term substance abuse is not technically accurate. However, the real harm in this term is what it does to the one dependent on the substance. First, it implies that some use is OK, however the person simply didn't possess the moral strength or character or will power to not cross the line into abuse.

William White, author *Slaying the Dragon, History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* and Senior Research Consultant at the Lighthouse Institute/Chestnut Health Systems, says, "Of the words used to describe addiction and recovery, the "abuse" terms are among the most ill-chosen and pernicious. Terms such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and substance abuse all spring from religious and moral conceptions of the roots of severe alcohol and other drug problems. They define the locus of the problem in the willful choices of the individual, denying how that power can be compromised, denying the power of the drug, and denying the culpability of those whose financial interests are served by promoting and increasing the frequency and quantity of drug consumption. To refer to people who are addicted as alcohol, drug, or substance abusers misstates the nature of their condition and calls for their social rejection, sequesterization, and punishment," adds White. "There is no other medical condition where the term abuse is applied."

I wish I had come up with the line "It's Easy to Abuse an Abuser", but that credit goes to Bob Curley of Join Together who wrote an article "*Wrong" Words Used to Define, Defame Addiction and Recovery*". William White also wrote an amazing paper called *The Language of Recovery Advocacy: An Essay on the Power of Language*. We have this paper available on our website [www.ccar.us](http://www.ccar.us).

The next time you hear the term substance abuse used in a conversation, remember; "it's easy to abuse the abuser".