

Exploring the Causes of Relapse among Drug Addicts: A Study of Drug Rehabilitation Centers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan



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Abstract: *Relapse refers to the condition when a person starts using drugs after a period of sobriety and recovery. The aim of the current study was to explore the causes of relapse among drug addicts. The nature of this study was qualitative. The participants of the study were officials of drug rehabilitation centers and substance users who have been relapsed after a period of sobriety and were admitted to drug rehabilitation centers in the district of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Data were collected through an interview guide from 14 respondents and each respondent was selected through a purposive sampling technique. After the collection of data, a thematic analysis was employed and themes were developed from it. The study found three main responsible factors which are associated with relapse i.e. easy availability, lack of family support and peer influence. The study recommends that law enforcement agencies should implement stricter policies to control the availability of drugs in society and develop family-based intervention programs to enhance family support in the recovery process.*

Keywords: Relapse, Causes, Drug Addicts, Drug Rehabilitation Centers

Introduction

Drug addiction is conceptualized as a multifaceted "bio-psycho-social" phenomenon, with relapse during treatment being a frequent occurrence. Relapse, within the context of drug addiction, is defined as the reversion to prior addictive behaviors following a period of detoxification, triggered by a confluence of psycho-social and other contributory factors. It represents a significant obstacle in the management of behavioral disorders, characterized by its complexity, dynamic nature, and unpredictability (Witkiewitz & Marlatt, 2004; Buhlinger, 2000). Research has identified a myriad of factors associated with relapse, including psychological distress such as depression and anxiety, mood fluctuations,

societal pressures, adverse life circumstances, occupational stress, marital strife, familial discord, and insufficient social and emotional support (Hammerbacher & Lyvers, 2006).

In spite of advances in the treatment of drug abuse, repeated relapses and lack of control over frequent alcohol and other hard drug use remain fundamental and serious problems for the policy makers (Mckay, Rutherford, Cacciola, & Cajola, 1996). Rehabilitation experts argue that among drug users, relapse is a common phenomenon (Westhuizen & Marichen, 2007).

Relapse refers to the condition when a person starts using drugs after a period of sobriety and recovery (Allosp et al., 2000). During the period of recovery, relapse can happen at any point.

According to Allosp et al., (2000), relapse mainly occurs during the initial few months of abstemiousness and throughout early recovery. This is because starting it again after detoxifying can increase the risk of a severe or fatal overdose. Likewise, relapse may cause you to re-addict. It can be frustrating for the addicts and their family members when they return to a lifestyle of addiction (Allosp et al., 2000). Therefore, preventing relapse is a significant issue. Even though numerous theories about relapse, recovery, and abstinence, research has failed to identify the main reasons for failure and success in the long-term recovery process. Studies in the west mostly found the inclination to relapse to be caused by certain factors, such as self-pressure, emotional stress, social environmental stress, such as family support, peer support, and societal support (Razali & Madon, 2020). In addition, the inclination to relapse scenario among addicts in Malaysia is also significant based on social environmental factors, personal stress, emotional stress, and interpersonal conflict, leading to the increase in the number of repeating addicts every year (Razali, Pauzi, Ravindaran, Maraya, Shamshudeen, Razali & Luqman, 2023). Previous studies prove the inclination to relapse is not only caused by cognitive factors, but also by social environment such as family support, peer support, and societal support. These factors are closely linked and interplayed in the environmental system. This indirectly shows the importance in the role of the individual and the people around them, such as parents, peers, and members of society, in ensuring former drug addicts are successful in overcoming their desire for drugs (Wangithi & Ndurumo, 2020).

In Pakistan, the challenge of drug addiction and the associated relapse rates have been a focal point of several studies, revealing intricate socio-cultural and psychological dynamics. A holistic perspective towards addiction recovery in Pakistan emphasizes the significance of indigenous factors, suggesting that a comprehensive understanding of the local ecosystem, including all stakeholders involved in addiction and recovery, is crucial for effective treatment approaches (A Holistic Perspective

towards Perils of and Pathways to Addiction Recovery in Pakistan) (Khalily, 2010). The intricate socio-cultural and psychological dynamics prevalent in the country call for a comprehensive understanding of the local ecosystem, including all stakeholders involved in addiction and recovery (Zafar et al., 2013).

Objective of the Study

This study was carried out with the following objective;

- To dig out the causes of relapse among drug addicts in drug rehabilitation centers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Methodology

The nature of the current study was qualitative and conducted in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The participants of the study were officials of drug rehabilitation centers and substance users who have been relapsed after a period of sobriety and were admitted to drug rehabilitation centers in the Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. A purposive sampling technique was performed for the selection of the respondents. Furthermore, an interview guide was used as a tool for the collection of data and interviews were continued till the saturation point. Additionally, the researchers obtained consent from the participants before each interview. After the collection of data, a thematic analysis was employed to see the common pattern in the response from the experts. Each interview was observed thoroughly to collect the relevant information concerning a particular theme and marked with a unique code of reference.

Results

Causes of Relapse

The participants of the study were asked about the causes of relapse among substance users. Based on the information provided by the participants during the interviews, it is concluded that a multiplicity of causative factors are responsible for the occurrence of relapse. These causative factors are categorized into three themes i.e. easy availability, lack of family

support and peer influence.

Theme 1: Easy Availability

The majority of participants recorded that the illicit drugs is easy available everywhere so when a person detoxified and join back the old group he/she lapse and then relapse.

One of the participants of this study stated that;

“I was a labor and was unloaded trucks. I started the use of ice and hashish. My father and my elder brother take me here (DATCs) for treatment. After the treatment I did not take drugs for 15 days, but one day during work my friends set me in a circle and started taking drugs and at that time I could not control myself and started taking the drugs again.” (Respondent no. 04).

Another respondent reported that:

“...Mostly when the drug addicts detoxified from here (Drug Rehabilitation Center) they go back to the old environment where their old friends compel them to take drugs. So first, they lapse and then relapse.” (Respondent no. 01)

Similarly, another respondent told that:

“Causes of relapse are different; however, the main cause in which the relapse is occurring is due to peer pressure/old drug addict friends. Most of the patients tell us that they relapsed because they have joined old drug addict friends and they insist we take drugs.” (Respondent no. 10).

It is evident from the above statements of the participants in the study that the availability of drugs in the society is one of the primary causes of lapse and relapse in the drug treatment industry. With a particular emphasis on cultural acceptance and peer influence, the data from different centers highlights the theme of drug availability and its impact on drug abuse and relapse. The ease of accessibility to a substance, noted by Jan, Khan, Asad & Khan, (2021) is well known in addiction studies, as it not only facilitates the individual use of it, but also contributes to the normalization of it within a culture or society at large. In this manner, drug use can increase, as substances perceived as harmless or normal are more likely to be used.

As a result, easy access can also increase the risk of drug abuse, as people are more likely to abuse substances excessively if they are readily available.

Theme 2: Lack of Family Support

Rehabilitation process is a challenging stage for any drug addicts hoping to free themselves from the chain of drug abuse problem. Support from family members is critical at this stage by providing them the necessary motivation thus ensuring a successful recovery. Majority of the participants in the study were of the opinion that one of the main causative factors for relapse is the lack of support of family members.

One of the participants told that:

“After the detoxification, we put the client on track, now, it is the responsibility of the family to keep him/her on the track, if the family owns the client then the chances of relapse are rare but if the family does not care the chances of relapse will be high.” (Respondent no. 11)

Another respondent reported that:

“Sometime the family members multiple times ask and tease the patient that your facial expression and behavior shows that you have started the drugs again which develop a mistrust between them” (Respondent no. 02).

In this study, we demonstrate the importance of family support to the rehabilitation process of drug addicts, especially regarding the risk of relapse that may occur. This study indicates that relapse is commonly associated with a lack of family support and that is one of the most significant factors leading to relapse. Participants' insights reveal that after detoxification, the responsibility of maintaining the momentum of recovery shifts to the family. As stated by one respondent, the likelihood of relapse diminishes if the family is actively involved and supportive, whereas relapse is more likely to occur if the family is indifferent or neglectful. The study concludes that relapse prevention relies heavily on the role that the family plays. Having a positive, trusting, and supportive relationship with your family can significantly reduce the likelihood of relapse, whereas a lack of such a relationship can

significantly increase the possibility of relapse.

Theme 3: Peer influence

Peer pressure often plays a role in substance use and addiction. When everyone else is doing something, it can be difficult for us to refrain from joining in. We often surround ourselves with peers who share interests and hobbies. As such, if you are a big drinker or a drug user, you likely have friends who drink or using drugs as well. Peer influence is also one of the important factors in relapse. One of the drug addicts shared his story of his as below;

“I have been working with my father’s medical store where I had started the Combinol-D syrup on the insistence of my friends, then I had been admitted to DATC twice times. After recovery, whenever I was back to my workplace where I met with my old friends, they insisted me every time to take drugs with them like Hashish, Combinol-D syrup etc. So I had been relapsed due to my friend’s insistence.” (Respondent no. 09).

Another addict stated that;

“When I detoxified from here I went back to my village and met with my old friends where they were taking drugs. I could not control myself and take a sip from the Charas and then I had regularly started drugs” (Respondent no. 14).

One official stated that:

“One of the major causes of the relapse is that when patients are rehabilitated from here, most of them join his/her old community from where they had come, I mean they join their old circle of drug addicts friends, where they could not control and they relapse” (Respondent no. 12).

The peer influence of youngsters can be an effective tool to convince them to participate in risky activities, such as being introduced to drugs. According to the data provided, peer influence plays a crucial role in substance abuse, addiction, and relapse, particularly in the context of relapse. It is well known that peer pressure can shape behavior significantly, especially in environments where substance abuse is prevalent. There is a tendency for individuals to associate with groups of people who share

similar interests and habits, including the use of drugs or excessive drinking. When people are surrounded by peers who share similar interests and habits, it is harder for them to abstain from these behaviors, particularly if these are normalized to them by peers. As shown by the personal stories of the respondents, peer influence has a significant impact on relapses. An individual who was relapsing as a result of peer pressure from his colleagues at work to use drugs illustrates the difficulty of resisting peer pressure in familiar environments.

Discussion

The present study was conducted to explore the causes of relapse among substance users in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study explored three responsible factors for relapse to drugs i.e. easy availability, lack of family support and peer influence.

Easy Availability

The study found that one of the responsible factors is easy availability. One of the primary challenges is the easy availability of drugs in the community. The researchers Jan, Ali, Niqab & Iqbal (2022) and Jan, Alam & Khan (2021) have shown that the availability of drugs significantly affects the usage of drugs and the acceptance of drugs in a cultural setting. It is clear from participants' experiences that returning to environments where drugs are readily available is often one of the reasons why individuals relapse, which is echoed in their experiences of relapsing. It is well-documented in addiction research that the availability of drugs has a significant effect on the rate of relapse.

Lack of family support

Based on the findings of the current study, lack of family support with drug addicts after sobriety leads to relapse to drugs. The absence of family support is a key factor that leads to relapse for them. This lack of support, whether as a result of mistrust, neglect, or misunderstanding, creates a challenging environment for recovering addicts and significantly increases the risk of relapse as a result. In addiction recovery research, it has been found that a lack of family support can be a

significant factor in relapse and is a recurring theme. Researchers such as Mamnuah, (2021) and Copello et al., (2005) have emphasized the importance of the involvement of family members in the recovery process in studies that they have conducted.

Peer Influence

Substance use relapse is also influenced by peer influence, which plays a significant role in the recovery process. There is no doubt that the personal stories shared by respondents in the current study illustrate how difficult it can be to resist peer pressure, particularly in environments where drug use has become normalized. The impact of peer influence on substance use and relapse is well-established in the literature. Research conducted by Barati, Bashirian, Mohammadi, Moeini, Mousali & Afshari, (2021) and Hawkins et al., (1992) demonstrates how peer groups significantly influence substance use behaviors. These studies suggest that individuals are more likely to engage in substance use when it is a norm within their peer group, underscoring the importance of addressing social networks in rehabilitation programs.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study found that there are responsible factors which are easy availability, lack of family support and peer influence. Based on the current results, the study recommends that law enforcement agencies should implement stricter policies to control the availability of drugs in the community, involving coordinated efforts between law enforcement, and community leaders to reduce the accessibility of illicit substances, develop family-based intervention programs to enhance family support in the recovery process and create programs to help recovering addicts build new, healthy social networks. This could include community-based support groups or activities that foster positive peer interactions.

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