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Q: What is community reinforcement approach?

A: Community reinforcement approach (CRA) is a multifaceted behavioral treatment for the achievement and sustainment of alcohol abstinence. CRA involves making major lifestyle changes across all domains (e.g., relationships, recreational activities, vocation). Treatment sessions focus on monitoring alcohol use, prioritizing problems, and setting clear and specific target goals. Alcohol avoidance, alcohol refusal, problem-solving, and assertiveness skills are taught. Treatment is collaborative and customizable to individual patient needs. It is delivered through 60-minute, individual counseling sessions over 24 weeks (Budney & Higgins, 1998).

Q: What is the treatment model underlying CRA?

A: CRA is based on operant conditioning established by B. F. Skinner. Operant conditioning is a type of associative learning, in which the consequence of a behavior either increases or decreases the likelihood of future engagement in that behavior. Skinner found that punishment was not an effective means of changing behavior. Azrin (1976) applied these learning principles to the treatment of alcohol and created CRA. Reinforcing sober social networks and engaging in positive, alcohol-free activities was emphasized (Meyers, Roozen, & Smith, 2011).

Q: Is CRA recommended as a treatment for alcohol use disorder (AUD) in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A: Yes. The 2021 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Substance Use Disorders gives a “weak for” recommendation for CRA in the treatment of patients with AUD.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q: Do other authoritative reviews recommend CRA as a treatment for AUD?

A: No. Other authoritative reviews have not substantiated the use of CRA as a treatment for AUD.

Other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using similar grading systems as the VA/DoD CPGs. Most notable of these organizations is Cochrane – an international network that conducts high-quality reviews of healthcare interventions.

Q: What conclusions can be drawn about the use of CRA as a treatment for AUD in the MHS?

A: The 2021 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Substance Use Disorders suggests CRA for the treatment of AUD. Clinicians should consider several factors when choosing a treatment with their patient. Treatment decisions should take into account practical considerations such as availability and patient preference that might influence treatment engagement and retention.

References

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