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April 2019

# The Relational Effects of Alcohol and Substance Use



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# Problem

- Young adults and adolescents are a high- risk population for substance use, particularly during the current opioid epidemic.
- The literature on opioid usage is lacking on discussions of the role of family members in adolescent opioid usage.
- The literature on prevention and treatment is mostly individualistic in nature.
- There is a need to better understand the systemic dynamics of opioid use among adolescents and young adults.

# Problem

- Modalities for treatment of opioid usage varied, however, family therapy was rarely discussed as an option for treatment.
- Family-based treatments are beneficial in treatment of adolescent substance use; however, family is usually not incorporated into adolescent opioid use specifically.
- After an in-depth review of the literature, researchers found that family involvement in treatment can yield more successful results.

# Case Example

- An African American, heterosexual couple-selected for analysis due to dual alcohol and opioid use negatively impacting their relationship
- Generalized Anxiety and Major Depressive Disorder.
- The reliance of alcohol and substance use to cope with relational stressors and mental health systems was detrimental to the relationship.
- The clients initially presented with trust issues stemming from infidelity; throughout the course of treatment.
  - It became apparent the alcohol and substance use was hindering the couple's ability to repair trust and meet their other clinical goals.

# Case Example

- The couple struggled to find alternative means of coping outside of alcohol and substance use, exacerbating their toxic patterns of interaction.
- Ben's continued substance use throughout the relationship interfered with the couple's ability to establish clear boundaries, repair trust, increase positive communication, and intimacy in the relationship.
- This study displays how therapeutic interventions can be implemented to create change in a couple system.

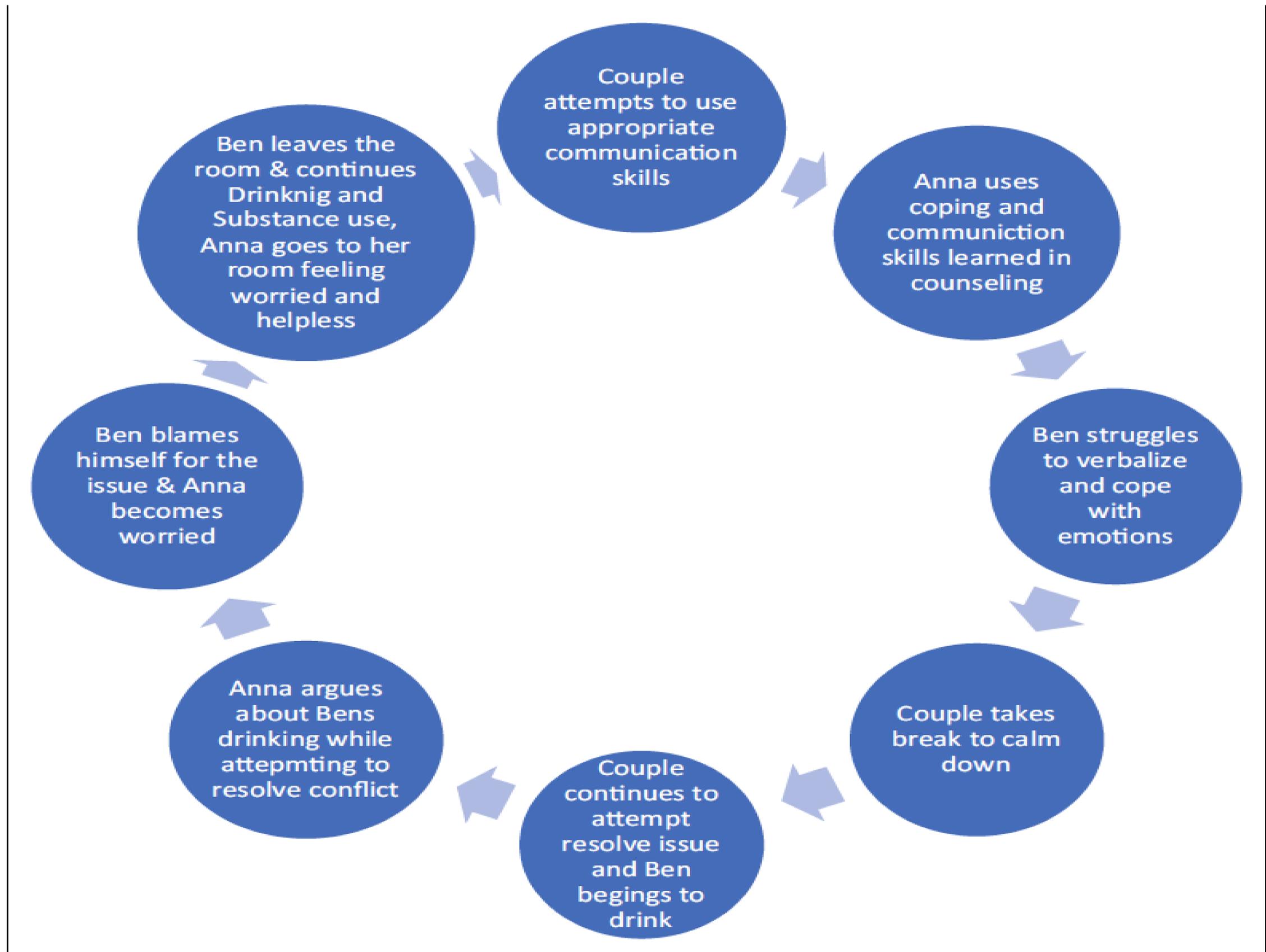
# Initial Systemic Hypothesis



# Treatment

- The clients' negative individual and relational beliefs were challenged
  - Allowing for healthier problem-solving and communication.
- The systemic hypothesis noted the couple's difficulty resolving conflict as needed suppresses emotions and thoughts when a crisis arises with alcohol use.
- The client's difficulty expressing thoughts and emotion in a positive manner combined with individual insecurities regarding the relationship become overwhelming.
  - The couple reported utilizing alcohol and substance to cope and “move past” conflict.
- The couple's negative self-efficacy aided to the distance and lack of communication within the couple system.
- The couple noted negative core beliefs and worry of abandonment by their partner fueled their withdraw/pursue pattern.

# Final Initial Systemic Hypothesis



## Treatment Outcomes

- The clients presented with difficulty resolving conflict, lack of intimacy, sense of disconnect, rigid and inconsistent boundaries, and difficulty creating a relational structure which were exacerbated by alcohol and substance use.
  - The couple struggled to make joint decisions and reported “tense” conversations
- Ben and Anna’s negative core beliefs motivated negative patterns of interaction and reluctance to become vulnerable and clarify boundaries.
- As individual negative beliefs were challenged, the couple felt more comfortable clarifying boundaries, needs, and desires.
- The couple reported feeling more secure in the relationship and comfortable communicating needs as the alcohol and substance use declined.

## Treatment Outcomes

- The clients reported increased intimacy and having a fulfilling sexual relationship
- The clients also noted increased success resolving conflict and making joint decisions regarding wedding planning, finances, and future family planning.
- The couple noted attempts to clarify expectations, roles, rules, and responsibilities in order to determine appropriate boundaries and hierarchy in the couple system.
- Addressing alcohol and substance use in addition to presenting relational concerns assisted the clients individually and relationally.
- Ideally, if the couple abstained from substances completely, there would be further progress in reducing relational issues.
- The couple's inability to maintain sobriety during the course of treatment impacted their systemic hypothesis and reduced effectiveness of treatment interventions.

# Conclusion

- Family-based treatments are beneficial in treatment of substance use; however, family is usually not incorporated into treatment.
- After a review of the literature, it was found that family involvement in treatment can yield more successful results.
- It is recommended that clinicians and students assess for alcohol and substance use from the initial session through the termination session.
- Substance abuse treatment for couples is most effective when couples counseling and abstinence from substances are simultaneously in effect (Fals-Stewart, O'Farrell, & Birchler, 2004).
- Alcohol and substance use served as a function in Ben and Anna's relationship, it was discovered to be a bonding activity between the couple.
- They also initially explicitly stated not wanting to reduce usage. With further assessment on the impact of alcohol and substance use on individual and relational functioning, the couple was able to gain insight on the negative impact of using alcohol and substances to cope.
- The couple avoided conflict due to individual and relational insecurities, leading them to use alcohol and substances. The continued alcohol and substance use increased their difficulty to resolve conflict as well as fueled their toxic relational interactional patterns.
- The couple was unsure how to end their dysfunctional pattern and noted "drifting further apart."
- Therefore, addressing addiction concerns is necessary in order to work through relational issues, which ultimately ensures long-term growth and change.

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