

## **Abstinence Contract and Journal**

Ashley E. Gartner

Wake Forest University

CNS 765: Addictions Counseling

Dr. Philip Clarke; Jena Plummer

July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022

## Abstinence Contract and Journal

This is a compilation of the assignments I submitted throughout the Addictions Counseling course regarding my abstinence contract and journal.

### Abstinence Contract and Reasoning

We entered into an abstinence contract to experience what often occurs with abstinence from substances of choice. Though it is impossible to replicate being in recovery truly, the hope with this assignment is that we would gain some empathy and understanding for our clients with addiction who enter into abstinence.



### CNS 765: Addiction Counseling

#### ABSTINENCE CONTRACT

I, Ashley Gartner, agree to give up and be free from the following habit, substance, or behavior of my choice for part of the Summer 2022 Semester (Ex., Summer 2017):

My substance of choice that I will be giving up is "junk" food. This food is operationally defined as those that are high in fat, sugar, and sodium, but provide little nutrition or fiber. The foods that fall under this umbrella that I will specifically abstain from include highly processed sweet and salty snacks such as chips, fried foods, candy, baked goods, cured meats, and soft drinks.

In addition, I will add the following positive behavior in place of the habit, substance, or behavior I am giving up is to replace the food with raw vegetables or fat-free Greek Yogurt. I also plan to go for a 7-minute walk every day.

I plan to enlist the support of these 3 individuals in my life to help me in this process my husband, my mother, and my aunt.

I understand that entering into and upholding, as best I can, this contract is part of the abstinence experience for this course and will assist me in further developing my empathy skills for current and future clients.

Student's Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ashley Gartner', written over a horizontal line.

Date: 6/25/22

### **Journal Entry #1**

I am abstaining from junk food, operationally defined as snacks that are high in fat, sugar, and sodium and provide little to no nutrition or fiber. Specifically, the foods that I am abstaining from include highly processed sweet and salty snacks, such as chips, deep-fried foods, candy, baked goods, cured meats, and soft drinks. I chose to give up this food because I am trying to lose weight using the Noom program and these foods are the ones that I find myself craving the most. I felt giving these up for this assignment will go a long way to helping me reach my goals.

My main support person is my husband. He is definitely my biggest cheerleader in this process and understands my motivation behind wanting to lose the excess weight that I have gained over the past decade. He helps to hold me accountable and is the first to hand me a bag of sugar snap peas (my main substitution) or suggest I go for walk when I am in the midst of a craving. My other two support people are my mother and my aunt, who I work with and also struggle with their weight. My aunt is currently on a diet as well, so we are supporting each other by keeping fresh fruits and veggies available at work. My mom supports me by encouraging me to keep up the good work and discouraging others (like my dad) from hindering my progress.

The substitutions that I already have in place are to grab pre-portioned fruits or veggies to help with the satiety factor. If these do not help reduce the craving, I go walk for seven to ten minutes. This helps to carry me through the craving by distracting me and getting me out into nature. Lastly, I drink a lot of water to help me feel full. Walking also helps to increase my water intake, especially since it is starting to get hot and thirsty, so I drink quite a bit more than I would usually.

My thoughts and feelings regarding this project are that I can see both sides of the argument regarding required abstinence as a way help us empathize with something our clients

may be experiencing. Initially, I chaffed at the idea that I would be forced to give up something that I enjoy for a class, but since I was already in the process of giving up junk food, I figured that I would use this opportunity to change something about myself that I did not like. Then I took a closer look at the project from another angle and found myself agreeing with the philosophy behind it. It made me appreciate how difficult it must be for persons with addiction to make the same decision that I had to make.

### **Journal Entry #2**

I have definitely been experiencing some cravings for potato chips when I am studying or watching a movie. These times are typically when I would gorge on junk food it is not entirely surprising that I would experience these as triggers. I did break down and eat a bag of popcorn which is just on the “healthy” side of junk food, as it provides fiber. The defense mechanism present in this action is in part rationalization. Under my operational definition of junk food, popcorn would not necessarily be included, but I can see myself using rationalization to talk myself into eating a forbidden food. I know that had I had any chips in my house at that time, I would have likely eaten them.

Other defense mechanisms I find myself using is compensation. If I do really well at eating my healthy foods, my brain tells me that I deserve an unhealthy snack. I can typically talk myself out of it, but I can foresee this causing issues when it comes to cravings. Lastly, I use the suppression and avoidance defense mechanisms often. If I feel a craving, I will try to push it down until I can no longer stand it, which ultimately brings me within the realm of relapse. I also have worked really hard to remove any junk food from my house, so that I can avoid any interaction with the food.

The most challenging aspect of this project has been removing and not purchasing more junk food, especially if I am hungry. To overcome this, I try to do my shopping when I am full and focus on healthy things that I find satisfying. For example, I discovered some great, inexpensive peaches that are gratifying and tasty. I am also conscious of going to the grocery store instead of grabbing fast food if I forget my lunch. Near my work, the local grocery store is literally across the street from McDonald's, so it would be effortless to turn right and sit in my car as I go through the drive-thru, but I make the conscious decision to turn left and walk into the grocery and grab some fruit or veggies instead.

### **Journal Entry #3**

The people in my life are super supportive of my lifestyle change. They are happy that I am working toward a weight loss goal that will decrease my likelihood of heart disease, increasingly high blood pressure, and diabetes. No one is enabling my habit or minimizing the difficulty in what I am doing. They are helpful by offering encouragement, holding me to my decision, and suggesting my substitutions when I mention having a craving. My husband has been accommodating by not offering to pick up junk food or stopping to get dinner from a fast food place. He knows that doing either would tempt me unduly.

Emotions that have come up recently around my not being able to eat my most comforting foods are irritation and wistfulness. I try not to take these feelings out on anyone, but my dogs probably get a little bit of it because they are the only ones with me when I get hit with cravings.

I had one incredibly close call on my way home from work this week. I had had a terrible day and was feeling really low and depressed. I felt betrayed and heartbroken and just wanted the hot, greasy, salty, crispy goodness of McDonald's french fries washed down with a regular

Coca-Cola. But, as I went to turn it, I stopped myself and told myself no. I realized that I was able to break my abstinence contract, which I did not want to do, so I said to myself that I could make it home and have some popcorn. By the time that I got home, I was still feeling depressed, but the craving for comfort food had passed, so I snuggled down with my dogs and watched some TV. This experience showed me how easy it would be for someone in the same position to use their substance of choice in a situation when they are feeling sad or depressed and how important it is that they learn alternate coping strategies.

#### **Journal Entry #4**

With my relationship and family history, I feel like I am very empathetic toward people with addictions. However, because of this experience, I find myself gaining a different perspective that is widening that empathy. This new perspective sheds a light on how difficult it is to power through cravings, especially without a planned alternative behavior or action. I drive past fast food places and convenience stores constantly and often find myself thinking, “oh, I can just pop in and grab a snack,” and immediately reminding myself of this assignment and how I actually cannot. As I experience this situation often, I find myself comparing it with someone who is abstaining from drugs or, especially, alcohol.

I have really started seeing how pervasive drug and alcohol references are in our culture. There are bars and liquor stores everywhere. Gas stations sell beer and wine and many states, and some can even sell it cold. Commercials, billboards, and other print advertisements extol the virtues of alcohol. Nearly all television shows and movies show either partying, using alcohol or drugs to relax, or even just having a glass of wine with a meal. It is everywhere! With these constant reminders and temptations, I cannot imagine how difficult it would be to stay sober, especially from alcohol. Without this experience, I do not believe I would have gained the same

perspective, nor would I have been able to see the cultural phenomenon in the same way. The total experience has made me realize how easy it would be for someone to slip, even if they did everything “right” coming out of rehab. If I had not had my substitute plan in place, I know I would have slipped by now.

My substitute plan has been the most effective way for me to ride out my cravings, especially when I am studying. When academics are already taxing my brain, decision fatigue hits extra hard, so it is nice to have a pre-made list of alternatives. The substitute activity I use the most is to eat veggies and dip instead of junk food. I engage in this alternative daily. This alternative is my go-to because when I crave junk food, it is the salt and the crunch factor I want, not necessarily the food itself. Sugar snap peas dunked in ranch dressing offer the same qualities. I think the only thing I would change for this alternative in my plan is to choose five specific food alternatives so that I have even less of a decision to make in those instances.

Occasionally, I would go for a walk when a craving hit, but since it has gotten decidedly more hot and humid (dangerously so up here), I am doing that less. When it was an option, it worked as an alternative because I removed myself from my trigger, allowed some time for grounding, got out into nature, and burned off some anxiety. All of these combined to help eliminate the craving. If I were to do this again, I would set some temperature stipulations and figure out a way to create the same helpful factors in an alternative activity.

### **Journal Entry #5**

My biggest trigger is studying and negative emotions. I often eat my feelings or use food to fill tedium or boredom, which is part of the reason I was 60 lbs overweight. I have also noticed that other external triggers like commercials, going into a convenience store, or driving by a fast food restaurant when I am already hungry are also triggers. However, I am able to

disregard the siren call at these times, so the reason is not as strong as strong as is studying or eating junk when I am upset. When triggered because of these things, the best thing that I can do is urge surf or replace. Even my replacement behavior of taking a 7-minute walk does not do much to dissuade the urge to eat because it increases the hunger hormones.

Some of the most notable aspects of this project were realizing the importance of having a plan to combat cravings, helping to make me aware of the vast array of both internal and external triggers, and feeling for myself the helplessness that can result from feeling those triggers. Increasing my awareness in these areas helped them to go from concepts to a personal experience. I understand now how difficult it is to abstain from something that seems like it helps in the moment. Because of this project, I feel like I am more prepared for a client who is struggling with abstaining or a client of someone who is struggling with abstaining or addiction.

My plan moving forward to continue to try and reduce my usage of junk food. Unfortunately, I will come across situations where I cannot avoid eating bad (i.e. – my upcoming road trip for graduation). I will have to eat out or grab snacks while I am on the road. There are also other times where I can foresee junk food being the only option (i.e. – family barbeques), but these instances should be few and far between. I chose to abstain from a substance to which I have an addiction, but is beyond pervasive in our culture, especially my southern and midwestern culture (I mean, Indiana *is* known for it's deep-fried pork tenderloins). However, it was leading me down a path of physiological disease and I want to change that about myself. I still have a long way to go before I overcome my junk food habit, but over the past 6-weeks, I feel better knowing that I can do it. I anticipate that avoiding this type of food will become easier in the future, especially after graduation. I am happy that this project has helped me to break the habit



and brought awareness of my reasoning behind what I choose to eat, but I will likely still stop in and grab a burger or fries (or both) from time to time.