



Blog

Eradicating ‘Sickness of Silence’

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[Cheryl Brown-Merriwether](#) has dedicated her life to serving others and is passionate about eradicating addiction, which she deems a “sickness of silence.” “Only by erasing the stigma associated with addiction will people be free to live their best lives both at work and at home,” she notes.

Cheryl brings over two decades of experience in corporate HR management at AT&T, addiction recovery awareness, and adult education to the [International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education \(ICARE\)](#). Based in Orlando, ICARE is a Center of Excellence for developing programs to overcome today’s unprecedented societal challenges of substance misuse and addiction. As VP and Executive Director, she oversees and directs the administration, operations, and student support services for ICARE’s three divisions, Strategic Sobriety Workforce Solutions™, International Association of Professional Recovery Coaches (IAPRC)

and NET Institute, which just won the [2021 Best of Orlando award for Addiction Training Education](#).

With the onset of the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic, the crisis of mental health and substance misuse became regular headlines and was declared a “pandemic within a pandemic.” The pandemic has created a surge in mental health and behavioral health issues including drug and alcohol abuse both at home and in the workplace. Salonpas sat down with Cheryl to learn more about her life’s calling on addiction recovery awareness and education:

What led you to focus on addiction recovery?

I first learned about addiction as a child growing up in a home with an alcoholic parent. Then later, as a young adult, I agonized while watching a dearly beloved brother struggle, suffer and eventually die from alcohol-related health issues. Then, for almost two decades, I was married to a husband, whose untreated behavioral addiction contributed to the dissolution of our marriage and jeopardized the stability and emotional well-being of our family. Throughout all that time, I never met anyone who was in recovery from an addiction. I finished grad school, changed jobs, received promotions, but still, I did not know where to turn for help. Then I met a counselor who became my mentor and my friend. And slowly things began to change for me. I stopped trying to fix others, embarked on my own healing journey, and have now personally experienced the miracle of recovery. The work I do now as the Vice President and Executive Director of [ICARE](#) allows me to combine my addiction and recovery-related life experiences, education, training, and professional accomplishments to help others find their way to wholeness, healing, and recovery.

What role has the pandemic played with people with addiction issues?

Substance misuse and addiction are not new phenomena. They have been around since the beginning of time, affecting people worldwide, across all cultures, races, religions, socio-economic and demographic groups. The lingering COVID-19 pandemic, and related consequences, have caused a dramatic increase in substance misuse, addiction, overdose, and what some have termed “deaths of despair,” which are sadly expected to continue for years to come. While the pandemic forced isolation on many, others were locked down in close quarters, sometimes under unsafe or unhealthy conditions. People experienced the loss of family members, friends, loved ones, and jobs, resulting in financial and economic instability and insecurity. Others were labeled ‘essential workers’ and were

required to work under dangerous and stressful conditions. Because treatment for addiction is most often tied to company-sponsored benefit plans, when individuals lost their jobs, they lost access to EAP services, clinical treatment and other mental or physical health benefits. COVID's impact on the workforce and has cost US companies over \$740B in lost productivity to date. Suffering people will always look for ways to alleviate pain and cope with their distress. To help mitigate this, ICARE, launched a new division last year called [Strategic Sobriety Workforce Solutions™](#), which provides tools and processes to helping businesses assess risk and promote recovery among employees. For a deeper dive into how businesses can help their employees, please read my recent article on [Sober Curious Moves to the Workplace](#).

Why are people ashamed to admit they have an addiction problem?

This is a great question. And if you ask this question of people who work in the addiction industry, they most often talk about the 'stigma' that is attached to 'addiction.' One dictionary defines 'stigma' as "a mark of disgrace," which is a terrible thing. There is nothing good, positive, uplifting, or constructive about that. It is a scarlet letter, which sentences the recipient to a lifetime of isolation, loneliness, shame, sorrow, depression, and even death. Specific to addiction, stigma is caused by ignorance, misinformation, stereotypes, and fear. People fear that which they don't understand. Media magnifies and perpetuates the most tragic images of addiction in the minds of people, and many consider it to be a 'moral failure' rather than the brain disease that it is. As a result, most people struggling with addictive behaviors don't dare reach out for help. They don't feel safe to do so. Already misunderstood, they fear they will be judged, retaliated against, or punished. Consequently, they will continue to suffer in silence...unwilling or unable to obtain the much-needed help they so desperately require for themselves or others.

What can workplaces do to help employees with addiction issues?

Most employers offer EAP counseling services, in addition to in-and-outpatient clinical treatment for employees struggling with substance misuse and addiction through their employee benefit programs. But they can do so much more. To break the silence caused by stigma, employers must work to create a psychologically safe workplace culture. In these workplaces employees can proactively seek assistance or access resources without fear. This effort must begin with, and be supported by, senior leadership. Empathetic leaders can encourage the creation of 'sober-curious' or 'recovery friendly' workplaces. These

workplaces promote addiction awareness education, through *Lunch & Learns* or other training workshops for all employees. Company-sponsored events can feature non-alcoholic beverages, while corporate health and wellness events can highlight vendors, activities, or programs that focus on stress management, healthy lifestyle choices and other topics that influence mental / behavioral health and addiction. Most exciting are those companies that are expanding Diversity and Inclusion initiatives to include Employee Resource and Affinity Groups led by employees seeking to work in and promote a ‘sober-curious’ or ‘recovery-friendly’ workplace.

Tell us about a typical day in your life; from when you arise to when you retire.

After many years of early rising and scrambling through traffic to get kids to school and myself to work, I am thankful to now be able to awaken naturally. As the Vice President and Executive Director of an online educational institution, I have worked from my home office for the last 10 years. A typical day in my life begins comfortably with a daily devotion, and a 30-minute walk through my neighborhood that helps me stay centered, get some exercise, and review my schedule for the day. My personal and professional roles and responsibilities are extremely diverse and require me to wear many different hats. For example, I can answer emails as the Executive Director of the NET Institute, respond to texts as mom, sister, or friend, and prepare a slide presentation for students who I teach all within an hour’s time. Occasionally, some of my responsibilities spill over into the evening hours, but on those nights when I am free, I enjoy an after-dinner movie from the comfort of my couch, with my dear husband of 10 years by my side.