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# Universal Design and Cognitions of Choice: An Integrated Approach to Effective Substance Misuse Treatment Efforts

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# Universal Design and Cognitions of Choice: An Integrated Approach to Effective Substance Misuse Treatment Efforts

## **Description**

Having the ability to exercise critical thinking at a conscious level of choice versus impulsively responding may support the difference between health and continued substance misuse during periods of vulnerability. Cognitions of Choice offers twenty four critical thinking skills that are connected to three levels of developmental choice that engages self-dialog between automatic thinking, meta-thinking, and conscious thought patterns. By the time many individuals make their way into treatment and recovery programs the likelihood of their presenting with physical disabilities and mental health conditions is heightened. Incorporating the principles of Universal Design into program development allows for full access for all participants.

## **Keywords**

Universal Design of Instruction, Cognitions of Choice, cognition, substance misuse, addiction, critical thinking, choice, confidence, recovery

## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Disability and Equity in Education | Education | Educational Psychology | Family, Life Course, and Society | Medicine and Health Sciences | Mental and Social Health | Other Sociology | Psychiatry and Psychology | Psychology | Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology of Culture | Special Education and Teaching | Student Counseling and Personnel Services

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## **Universal Design and Cognitions of Choice: An Integrative Approach to Effective Substance Misuse Treatment Efforts**

**Clarissa E Steffen, Ed.D., CADC II**

### **Abstract:**

Having the ability to exercise critical thinking at a conscious level of choice versus impulsively responding may support the difference between health and continued substance misuse during periods of vulnerability. By the time many individuals find their way to treatment and recovery programs the likelihood of their presenting with cognitive or physical disabilities and mental health conditions is heightened. Providing services that are sensitive to these needs by constructing programs that offer accessibility, accommodations and modifications may make the difference between whether or not an individual benefits or stays in the program. Each individual has the right to make life style choices, but may have come to a crossroad where they perceive their relationship to substance(s) may no longer be a choice. Offering them the tools to connect or reconnect to choice at a personally relevant level may be instrumental in their ability to retain learning and connect to their recovery process. We understand that addiction is a disease process in which normal brain function involving choice may be impaired. We also have insight into brain functioning involving the limbic and pleasure reward system that triggers the ongoing use of substance regardless of loss or consequences. Cognitions of Choice (COC) © provides a neural developmental approach to intervention by assisting the individual into moving into deeper critical thinking levels by neutralizing negative thinking patterns by reprogramming neural hotwiring and constructing healthier social perceptions and life choices. COC offer twenty four critical thinking skills, concepts, or percepts that are connected to the three levels of developmental choice that engages self-dialog between automatic thinking, meta-thinking, and conscious thought patterns. It is suggested that the Creating Confidence Thinking Assessment© be used for ongoing assessment and evaluation of the individual's development of confidence related to choice.

### **Introduction: Why Combine Universal Design and Cognitions of Choice© in Constructing an Effective Substance Misuse Treatment Program?**

When working with an individual we attempt to connect on an empathetic level that allows us to assist in meeting their individualized needs. How we achieve this is multifaceted in that each individual comes with a unique combination of social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs. Ultimately, we need to concern ourselves with developing programs and constructing environment whether brick and mortar or virtual that address the individual's needs in a holistic fashion. Being mindful of these holistic needs can be seamlessly addressed by building programs that incorporate the principles and guidelines found in Universal Design. The concepts related to Universal Design (UD) were initially constructed by a group of architects, product designers, engineers, and environmental designers at North Carolina

State University. UD found its way into the educational system, and is slowly making its way into mental health and therapeutic circles. The UD *principles* are not only aspirational but also speak to application: *Equitable use, Flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance of error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach for use* (Bergstahler, 2012). When applied to design the principles ensure respect for the needs of all learners. The UD *guidelines* are performance indicators that can be applied to many products and environments to improve individual accessibility and outcomes: *educational or therapeutic climate, interaction, physical environment and products, delivery methods, information resources and technology, feedback, assessment, and accommodation* (Bergstahler, 2012). When followed and practiced, the general guidelines ensure the methods applied will successfully address the needs for each individual.

In planning substance misuse programs that fully address the needs of all individuals we may need to necessarily consider implementation of accommodations and modification. The table below suggests that type of accommodation and modifications that may be added to educational and therapeutic programs to ensure that the needs of all individuals are met. This information has been adapted from IDEA law pertaining to public education. Not all of these points apply in every circumstance, but are offered for consideration in situations where they may be appropriate to consider given the full range of services that may be self-referred through court mandate and may involve educational, intervention and treatment programs that have clearly define outcome measures. Regardless of the setting and the type of program it is generally beneficial to consider accommodations and modifications to most effectively meet the needs of each individual seen for education, intervention or treatment.

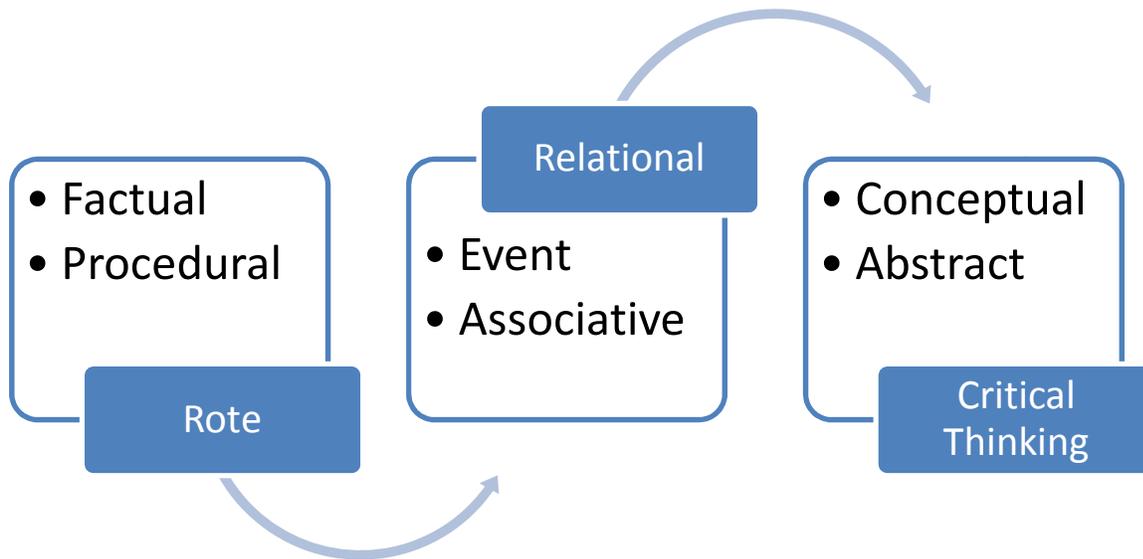
Accommodations	Modifications
<p><b>Accommodation:</b> Is a change in course, standard, program preparation, location, timing, scheduling, expectations, individual response, and/or other attribute which provides access for a client or patient with a disability to participate in a course, standard assessment or program <b>which does not fundamentally alter or lower</b> the standard or expectation of the program, test/assessment.</p> <p><b>Accommodations:</b> Good teaching strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Pacing</b> (extending/adjusting time, frequent breaks, varying activity, omitting assignment, etc.)</li> <li>• <b>Environment</b> (preferential seating, minimizing distraction, sign language interpreter, etc.)</li> <li>• <b>Presentation of Material</b> (multi-sensory and hands on approach)</li> <li>• <b>Materials and Equipment/Assistive Technology</b> (highlighting material, note taking assistance, providing typed material rather than note taking from the board, using calculator, computer, etc.)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Modification:</b> Is a change in the program, standard assessment, program preparation, location, timing and scheduling, expectations, individual response, and or other attribute which provide access for an individual with a disability to participate in a program.</p> <p><b>Modification:</b> Involve Structural, Cognitive change in the level of the material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Presentation of subject matter</b> (utilizing specialized curriculum written at a lower level of understanding)</li> <li>• <b>Materials and Equipment/Assistive Technology</b>(simplifying text, modifying content, simplifying vocabulary and concepts and principles)</li> <li>• <b>Grading</b> (Modifying Weights of Examinations)</li> <li>• <b>Assignments</b> (lowering reading level of assignments, adapting worksheets, packets with simplified vocabulary)</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Grading</b> (giving credit for projects and program participation)</li><li>• <b>Assignment</b> (give direction in small, distinct steps, change format of the assignment)</li><li>• <b>Reinforcement</b> and Follow Through (providing peer tutoring, having individual repeat &amp; explain the directions, etc.)</li><li>• <b>Testing/Assessment Adaptations</b> (reading test verbatim to individual, shortening the length of test, changing test format, etc.)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Testing/Assessment Adaptation</b> (reducing reading level of test, adjusting time, eliminating distractions, etc.)</li></ul>
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This program offers a bridge by introducing UD and Cognitions of Choice (COC) © in a combined approach to offer more effective prevention, intervention, and treatment methods. Blending Universal Design and Cognitions of Choice offers the next step in supporting relational meaning to target limbic system involved in learning to increase the skills or percepts that involve choice. Learning experiences that relay through the thalamus and hippocampus and ignite the limbic system increase the likelihood of long-term memory storages being activated. We learn best by involving the limbic system in the learning process. Developing choice is a necessary step to allow the application of personal meaning in the acquisition of new choice while not losing sight of aspirational or outcome goals. The combination of UDI and COC is seen as a promising approach to substance misuse because it addresses the necessary link between learning in a manner that touches the limbic system and provides personal meaning for the individual.

### What are Critical and Creative Thinking Skills?

Learning involves a relational process and for learning to be most effectively retained information much have personal meaning. In education and treatment programs, educators and therapists intentionally target learning efforts to include the acquisition of rote (factual and procedural) information along with relational information which is specific to people, situations, or events and can be associated in memory. Critical and creative thinking involves a process that taps into higher cortical thinking patterns that allow us to process abstract concepts at a deep level, to integrate complex information, and construct solutions to problems or generate new ideas or intellectual pursuits. *Critical thinking* involves a reflective process in which we analyze and challenge assumptions, examine input or information in a contextual manner, and explore alternative solutions. Ultimately we want to develop a healthy level of skepticism that supports our continued ability to analyze, reflect and explore solutions. *Creative thinking* allows us to apply many of the same cognitive processes involved in critical thinking but to take it to another level by creating alternative explanations, solutions, or new approaches or ideas. In both processes we utilize judgment and interpretive skills to scrutinize information through our personalized context and filters that stem from life experience which allow us to associate our social memories in a personally relevant way.



## Transferring Information in New Acquisition Learning

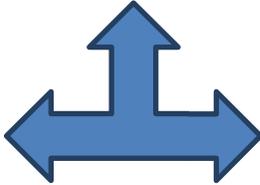
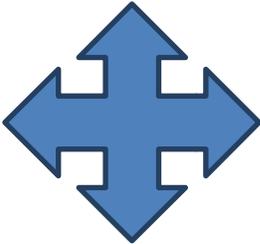
### What is Cognitions of Choice©?

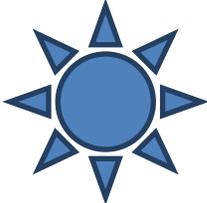
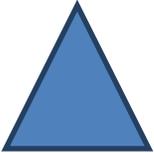
**Cognitions of Choice © (Steffen, 2012)** offers a network of neural programming that engages self-dialog between automatic thinking, critical thinking, mindfulness, and integrated life-choices. It evokes an active process of resilience and a healthy respect for self and one's ability to learn. Cognitions are not just the thoughts we hold, but incorporate the actions we take based upon these patterns of thinking. Cognitions connect to our values and personality traits that create our neural hotwiring or programming that construct our social perceptions and learning choices. Our cognitions guide our habits of being and life philosophy. Choices can require a simple yes/no response or be complex and multifaceted. For some individuals and for anyone in certain situations even the simplest choice can be difficult. Choice is connected to a larger domain-making of behavioral skills related to decision-making. Because choices are influenced by learning and a set of responses we store in our memory bank; we can learn new responses and develop skills to create new choices. Many choices occur in response to automatic thinking. If the individual's automatic thoughts are negative and unhealthy, it will limit their available options to choose and create a more satisfying response. As the individual gains more freedom in their ability to make choices and knows more about personal limits and boundaries; choice can be a more readily accessible skill. When the individual become more familiar with the manner in which they engage in choice, make-decisions, process information, and create options they have a wider range of responses available to them. In time, the individual can be assisted in experiencing a higher level of comfort and move away from a mechanical automatic response to choices that involve critical thinking at a conscious level. Not all choices require deep critical

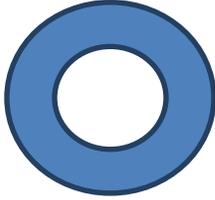
processing; but when faced with decisions that require this; the individual will feel more confident if they trust their ability to make choices accurately with confidence and efficiently.

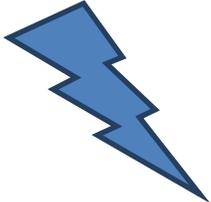
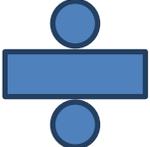
Choice is aligned with freedom which is highly valued in Western Culture. When an individual has freedom to choose they are less likely to experience anxiety or depressive symptoms. Trusting one's skill and ability to choose may result in a higher level of confidence. Accessing critical thinking generates a wider range of choices which is the stated intent or purpose in acquiring skills to generate confidence in the development of new choice thinking skills. Cognitions of choice are used to neutralize negative self-defeating cognitions that interfere with self-harmony and creating holistic balance. These cognitions not only offer patterns of thinking that may be deeply programmed or engrained at the level of core identity, but also offer intuitive guideposts for making healthier choices. If they are not already present within the parameters of thought, with practice they can be taught at varying levels of cognitions and become a part of the integrated life filter or functional force as a means of offering psychological immunity.

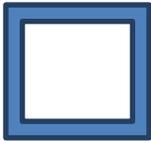
**COGNITIONS OF CHOICE~ PHILOSOPHY FOR LIVING**

COGNITION	IMAGE	MOTTO	ASPIRATIONAL GUIDEPOST	✓ DISPOSITION I PRESENT
<b>Consider Options</b>		<b>Motto:</b> There are always choices!	Slow down and review, while exploring possibilities	
<b>Create Alternatives</b>		<b>Motto:</b> Let's see another way I can look at this!	You can always create a plan B, and think ahead, and even in life situations where you can't you still have choices	
<b>Discernment</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I can discriminate between healthy and unhealthy choices	Remain true to your values and respect personal boundaries for yourself and others	
<b>Altruism</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I am giving back because I am grateful!	It is not about seeing others as less fortunate; it involves understanding loss and trauma can happen to anyone	
<b>Positive Mental Attitude</b>		<b>Motto:</b> Things have a way of working out !	Life is an exceptional gift to be appreciated at all levels of functioning	

<b>Cultural Appreciation</b>		<b>Motto:</b> Aesthetics are present in all aspects of life	Appreciate the differences because that is where real natural beauty exists	
<b>Open Communication</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I want to connect to you!	Listening occurs only when we are present and receptive, without this no intimacy occurs	
<b>Commitment</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I am here for the long haul!	Being connected allows us to prevent isolation and anxiety, and is an opportunity to validate one another	
<b>Congruency &amp; Compatibility</b>		<b>Motto:</b> Things need to fit to maintain wellness	Complimentary views or perspectives can exist within us and between others, it creates harmony	
<b>Transcendence</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I can see the future!	We need to live in the present while being mindful of the future; without this we can become vulnerable to discouragement	

			or despair	
<b>Future Orientation</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I am hopeful!	Passing the baton allows the rely to occur between generations and creates continuity in life	
<b>Seeking Solutions</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I Investigate life with an open mind and heart	Investigation with an open mind and heart goes beyond simple problem solving, it involves relational joining	
<b>Respect for Equality</b>		<b>Motto:</b> We all do the best we can and have something to offer	We don't all have the same abilities or gifts but on a human level we all matter and contribute to life	
<b>Integrity</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I will do the best I am able and respect all living creatures ~ I give you my word!	Being authentic and representing what you communicate to others with consistency offers a solid foundation	
<b>Sharing</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I have more than enough!	One of the greatest joys is giving to others willingly and not expecting anything in return	
<b>Reciprocal Joy</b>		<b>Motto:</b> We matter to each-other!	Learning to appreciate another beyond our flaws is a reason to celebrate	

<b>Protective Bond</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I am there for you with love, acceptance, and forgiveness	I will nurture you and release when you communicate you are ready to go forward	
<b>Courageous Acts</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I will take a reasonable risk!	We all have limitations because moving forward and being able to ask for help when needed allows us to live a successful life	
<b>Harmonious Balance</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I live life in balance	Life will through us curve balls and we can feel off balance, but protecting our core allows us holistic wellness	
<b>Whimsical Spontaneity</b>		<b>Motto:</b> Life is fun~ Let's see what happens	We need to learn to laugh at ourselves, and enjoy others who grow from doing the same	
<b>Fearless Conviction</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I am ready!	Fearlessness is being committed to trying and being in a state of readiness to learn	

<b>Charisma</b>		<b>Motto:</b> My authentic self is the best version of me!	Accepting ourselves, forgiving our limitations, and loving ourselves provides us with a magnet that will draw others who focus on living in wellness toward us	
<b>Self-Encouragement</b>		<b>Motto:</b> I got this!	The world doesn't always offer ready-made encouragement or self-empowerment, we have to learn how to find it to progress and stay well	
<b>Self-Respect</b>		<b>Motto:</b> It is my time!	For everything there is a season and understanding that we are worthy and deserving allows us to live authentically	

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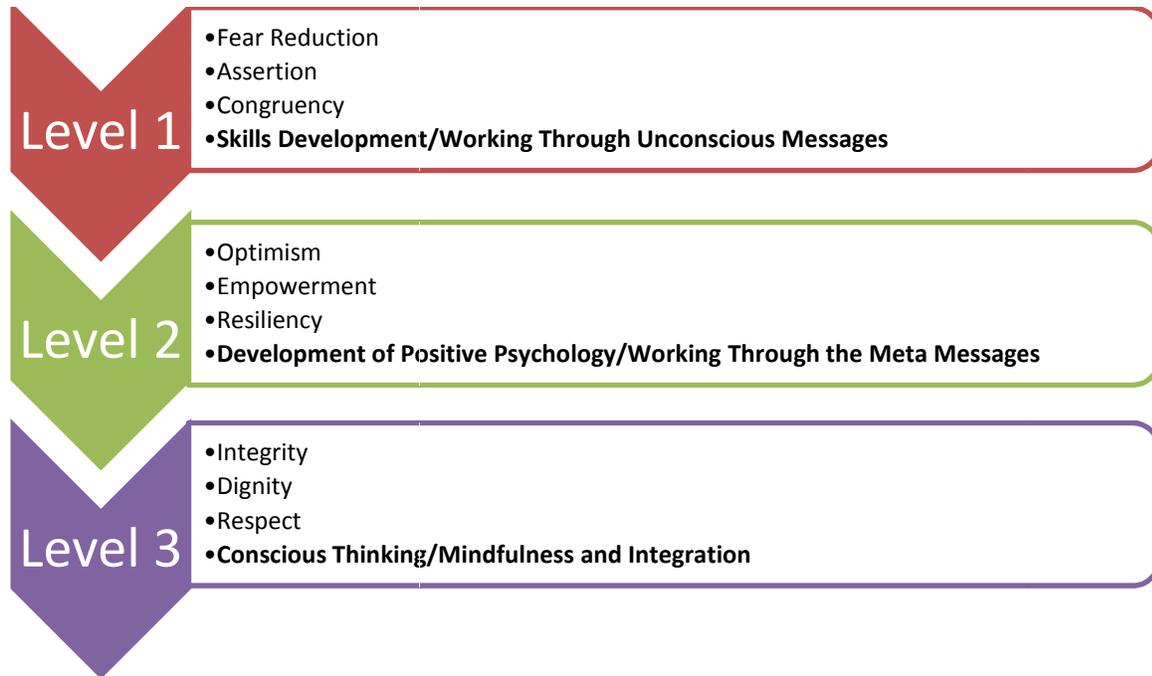
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### **Levels of Choice:**

A three tiers level approach is offered which involves a step process toward deeper critical thinking that are social memories, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and underlying beliefs that can be learned or are the result of feedback and perceptions. Thoughts and feelings (cognitions) influence underlying beliefs and behavioral choices. It is these cognitions that drive the belief structures that influence beliefs and behaviors; therefore, the interest in exploring the individual's cognitions of choice. These choices are made from a composite of life experiences the individual has integrated into their definition of self or identity. Some choices are healthy others may be unhealthy and can influence the perception of self, empowerment, and view of position in the world.

Level one choices focus on specific cognitive-behavioral skill. This option is to move from fear-driven response patterns toward assertive engagement which result in congruency between thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and underlying belief structures. The goal at this level is to create congruency and a more open channel in which choice making can be experienced. At Level two the individual is moving away from automatic negative response patterns they engage with a healthier meta-perspective or positive psychological thought process. The goal of level two is to build resiliency in the individual to allow them to experience movement in creating choice at a meta-conscious level. At level three the individual consciously focuses on aspirational goals that transcend previous perceptions that caused fear, anxiety, or limitations. The goal is to move toward a collective consciousness with respect for self and all living things, and to incorporate healthy conscious thoughts into their choice making process.

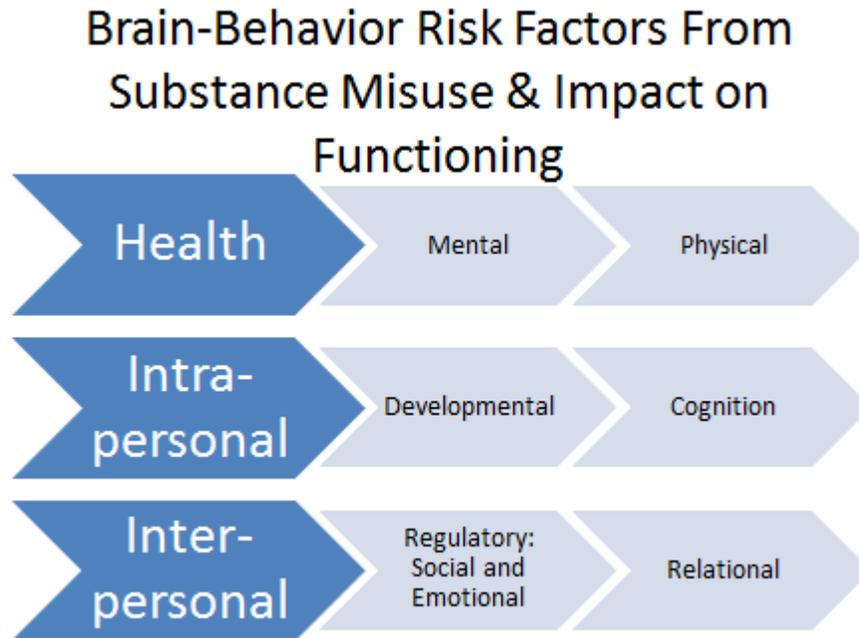
Each of the lower levels one and two is a fundamental building block toward level three. Not all learning choices require level three thinking; however, accessing critical thinking at a wider range of response allows for a broader locus of control for the individual. Knowing when to act and make a choice (timing) can be the difference between having a desired outcome and a door closing on an opportunity. The more an individual is armed with the information about their choice making ability, and they practice and rehearse the skills of choice making, the more confident they will become and the better they will be at making choice. Knowing when to pull back can prevent someone from becoming over-whelmed. We are often bombarded by choices; and having a clear sense of one's ability may eliminate unwanted stress or anxiety. Having a model to apply in situations that evoke choice may assist the individual in assessing the situation, consider the required level of choice, and determine whether or not a decision of choice needs to be made.



## Critical Thinking in the Development of Choice

### Why Teach Critical and Creative Thinking Skills in Prevention Through Recovery Programs?

Choice has long been debated in respect to how it applies to the lives of individual who struggle with substance misuse problems. The age-old argument as to whether addiction is a disease is becoming less argued about as we gather more insight into brain functioning and the pleasure reward system. Some may pose that *choice* has little to do with behavior in those who suffer from addiction. It has been recognized that at times the substance of choice can provide insight into aspects of brain function, whether or not the individual might be self-medicating, or underlying or comorbid pathology. By the time the individual enters treatment they will likely have sustained multiple losses in various areas of their life related to their health, inter-personal and intra-personal life. Ideally, we may be able to apply effort to more effectively prevent these high levels of loss by implementing prevention, and early intervention programs that target critical thinking skills involving choice.

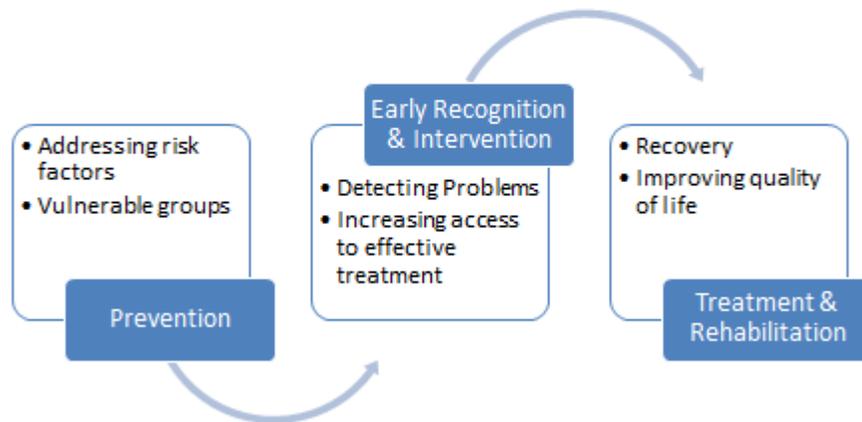


Frequently as a result of substance misuse the individual's relational life will be in chaos; in which they have sustained multiple losses sometimes resulting in a lack of emotional support. Oftentimes, individuals who enter recovery programs will express an inability to trust their own judgment or decision making process which may be related to years of inappropriate choices and decision making. They may lack confidence in their ability to recognize healthy choices or how to take the necessary steps in making a healthy choice. Many of these individuals may be disconnected to own thinking process involving: analyzing, exploring, scrutinizing, reflecting, and creating alternative options and they may experience dysregulation. They may state that they do not know where to begin the process, and feel uncertain they possess the skills to make or engage in healthy choices. Introducing COC will provide them a developmental approach to building or rebuilding choice thinking skills and move them through stages or levels that connect them to their own thought process (meta); and assist them in bringing choice to a conscious level in which they can take responsibility and ownership of their own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and underlying beliefs connected to choice in a relational manner.

Cognitions of Choice can be used to improve prevention, alongside current treatment and intervention programs utilizing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), as well as applied ongoing through recovery efforts. These well established approaches to treatment assist the individual in correcting unhealthy thought patterns (CBT), while learning to take personal responsibility for their behavioral choices and actions (DBT). This process may necessarily need to be tempered with acceptance of self that allows one to continue to remain committed to health (ACT). These

tried and true approaches combined with UD and COC may offer a more complete approach across the entire spectrum of care models.

## The Continuum of Care

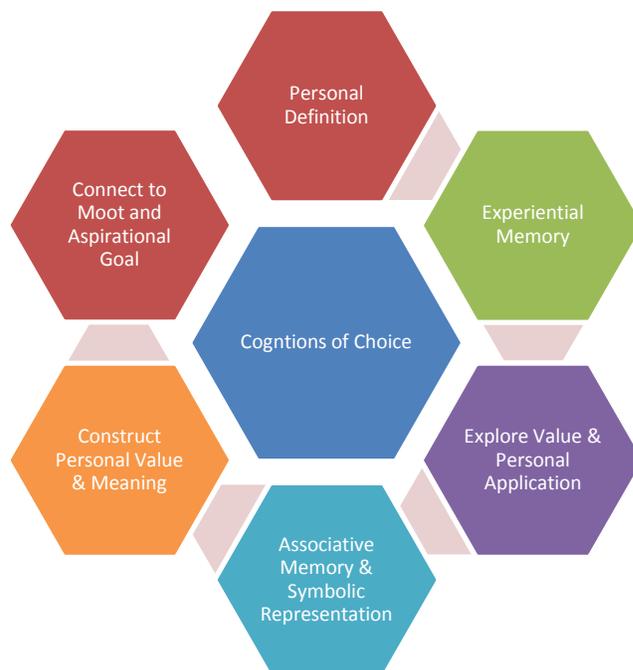


### How Do We Build Critical and Creative Thinking Skills Utilizing Cognitions of Choice©?

The twenty four choice constructs can be learned across skills development, meta-communication skills development, and used in effort to bring the individual closer to conscious thought in relating to choice. The twenty four choice constructs are flexible and can be applied within the three levels of skills in making choices. Throughout the three levels (Level One: Skills development; Level Two: Meta-Communication Skills Development; and Level Three: Connecting to Conscious Thought; there are nine behavioral subsets that support the development within each skills level. The nine behavioral subsets 1) Skills Development: Fear Reduction, Assertion, and Congruency; 2) Development of Meta-Choice: Optimism, Empowerment, and Resiliency; and 3) Conscious Thinking: Integrity, Dignity, and Respect are targeted in treatment to construct a higher level of confidence in choice. The COC neural training program is designed to guide the individual to connect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to underlying beliefs in a relationally meaningful manner. Because choice needs to connect to personal meaning, the twenty-four constructs need to be flexible concepts that can be utilized across the three levels of choice.

**Method/Program Steps:**

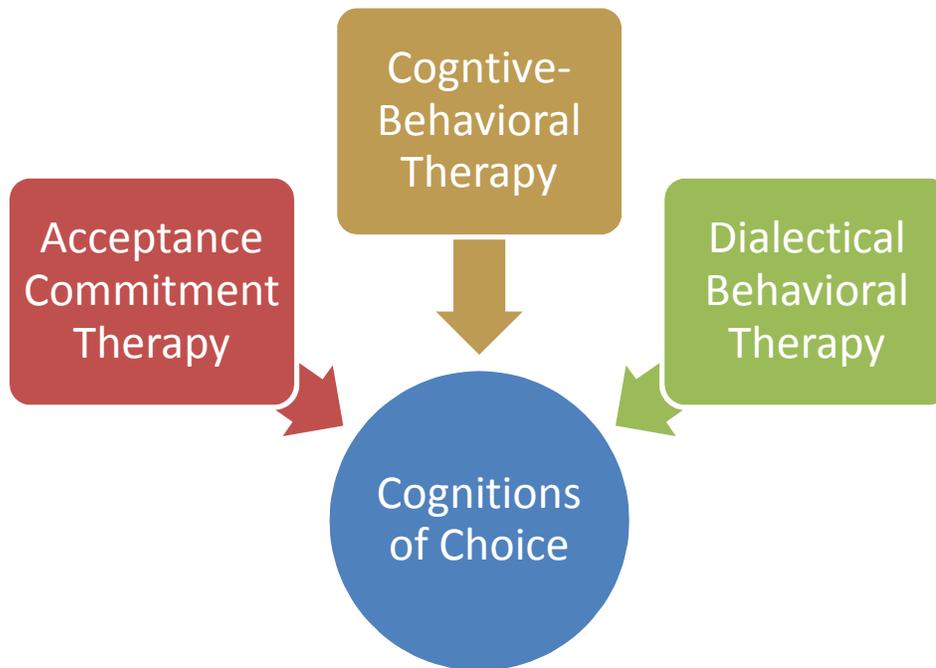
- 1) Initially the individual will be asked to personally define each of the twenty-four choice constructs and provide a specific and detailed example of a time they either applied or experienced choice related to that concept.
- 2) They will be guided through a discussion to explore the value of each of the twenty-four choice concepts in effort to determine how they might apply to their life in a personally meaningful manner.
- 3) The symbolic representations that connect to each of the twenty-four choice percepts are designed to visually align the choice construct to personal values and meaning that the individual has associated in social memory.
- 4) The individual will be taught the motto and aspiration connected to each of the twenty-four choice constructs that mnemonically reinforce each of the choice percepts.
- 5) This process will be applied, repeated, and refined across each of the three levels and within the specific nine subsets that are a focus of education, treatment, or interventions within each of the three levels: Skills Development, Meta-Choice Thinking, and Connecting to Conscious Choice Thinking.



**Neural Program for the Development of Choice**

The widely recognized and utilized methods of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), and acceptance-commitment therapy (ACT) fit alongside

the Cognitions of Choice© model and allow COC to provide a significant addition with current models and to be utilized in prevention, treatment, and recovery programs and facilities. Choice is always present whether acknowledged, or denied; however, bringing it to a conscious level allows increased freedom in learning and in life decisions.



### **Integrating Cognitions of Choice© into Current Prevention, Intervention and Treatment Programs**

#### **How is Confidence Learned in Making Choice?**

Trait theory suggests that each individual possess a combination of traits that make up their personality which uniquely defines them. Some traits are central to the development of the personality and are considered to remain constant; others are secondary and a reaction to a situation. Central traits can be defined as habitual patterns of behavior, thought, or emotion. The age old nature-nurture argument persists in questioning whether or not biology or environment more strongly influences our development. An individual may possess the traits of or disposition toward the ability to exhibit confidence, but not have developed a high degree of confidence due to environmental factors, learning opportunity, traumatic events, loss, abuse, or any number of situations that may have interfered with the development and maintenance of critical thinking skills that support healthy choice. Cognitions of Choice offers a model that is presented in a three level approach to correct the neural programming that interferes with the utilization of higher critical thinking skills that result in healthy choice or decision making skills. The Creating Confidence Thinking Assessment© is designed to analyze the individual's relationship to choice to provide a window as to where to begin confidence thinking skills development.

Choice is connected to higher critical thinking involving decision-making and is a skill that can be developed by building a foundation for confidence thinking. In decision making the individual gathers input at a sensory and critical thinking level, which may then be integrated into a plan of action. An assessment to explore *confidence thinking* from a three-tiered level approach is offered as a tool to bring definition to an individual's level of functioning in the critical thinking skills involved in choice. Level one thinking skills are focused on cognitive-behavioral skills development; level two at the development of positive psychology skills and meta-choice thinking, and level three at the development of conscious thinking at a transcendent level. This assessment tool is at a preliminary stage and will require further development to bring reliability and validity, but currently offers a 150 question test that taps into nine traits related to levels 1-3 confidence thinking that is involved in the development of critical thinking skills related to choice. The model Cognitions of Choice© offers twenty-four critical thinking skills, percepts, or concepts that are connected to the development of choice. The levels approach is meant to assist the individual in moving into deeper critical thinking levels by neutralizing negative thinking patterns, reprogram neural hotwiring and construct healthier social perceptions and life choices.

The nine traits (Level One: Fear reduction, Assertion, and Congruency; Level Two: Optimism, empowerment, and resiliency; Level Three: Integrity, dignity, and respect) are sub-divided into three categories that define the level of confidence thinking in choice to begin exploration in defining the individual's current level of functioning. Each of these nine domains fall under a broader category of decision-making (Levels 1-3) used to examine the development of confidence skills for choice-making.

Let's take a look at how gathering this information may be useful in developing confidence for choice making.

**Decision-Making:** A critical thinking skill in which an individual gathers input at a sensory and critical level which is integrated to create a decision or plan of action, i.e. in this case "confidence for choice making."

The *Levels of Choice* involves a step process toward deeper critical thinking that are social memories, thoughts, feelings, behaviors and underlying beliefs that can be learned or are the result of feedback and perceptions. Thoughts and feelings (**Cognitions**) influence underlying beliefs and behavioral choices. It is these cognitions that drive the belief structures that influence beliefs and behaviors; therefore, the interest in exploring the individual's "cognition of choice." These choices are made from a composite of life experiences the individual has integrated into

their definition of self or identity. Some choices are healthy others may be unhealthy and can influence our perception of self, empowerment, and view of our position in the world.

Because choices are influenced by learning and a set of responses we store in our memory bank; we can learn new responses and develop skills to create new choices. Many choices occur in response to automatic thinking. If the individual's automatic thoughts are negative or unhealthy, it will limit their available options to choose and create a more satisfying response. As the individual gains more freedom in their ability to make choices and knows more about personal limits and boundaries; choice can be a more readily accessible skill. When the individual becomes more familiar with the manner in which they engage in choice, make-decisions, process information and create options they have a wider range of responses available to them. In time, the individual can be assisted in experiencing a higher level of comfort and move away from a mechanical automatic response to choices that involve critical thinking at a conscious level. To accomplish this, the individual may require the assistance of a counselor or therapist to provide the necessary feedback to challenge inaccurate, limiting, or unhealthy perceptions of self.

Not all choices require deep critical processing; but when faced with decisions that require this; the individual will feel more confident if they trust their ability to make choices accurately, with confidence, and efficiently.

Sometimes in life we are over-whelmed by having too many available choices. Having the ability to discern what may lead toward results that yield options that are satisfying, results in safety, or create desirable outcomes is optimal. Some choices pose dilemmas that may involve moral decision-making or tap into aspirational values that allow the individual to face a challenge or stretch to grow and transcend beyond engaging in unhealthy choices. Choice at this level may exist at a more pure conscious level and afford a higher degree of freedom, and emotional intelligence.

Admittedly, no one assessment can possibly measure and define individual confidence in choice-making. This is offered to provide the individual with a tool to better understand their ability to engage in choice with confidence, assess their level of decision-making with choice, and set goals for developing critical thinking skills that open the door for them to experience more freedom to choose at a conscious level. Although categories may never truly be entirely discrete; the levels are presented in this manner for didactic purposes and for ease of teaching the concepts that will allow the individual to learn or aspire to develop the skill set in each category.

**Creating Confidence Thinking Assessment Purpose: The acquisition of critical thinking and decision-making skills to assist in the generation, and development of confidence within making new choices (see attachment to view assessment tool).**

**Level 1:** Choices at this level focus on specific cognitive-behavioral skills. This option is to move from *fear-driven response* patterns toward *assertive* engagement which result in *congruency* between thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and underlying belief structures. When there is congruency the pathway offers a more open channel and less anxiety, or stress may be experienced in choice-making.

**Level 2:** As the individual moves away from automatic negative response patterns they engage with a health and wellness perspective or positive psychological thought process. The goal in this level is to develop an *optimistic* viewpoint and see oneself as having options that create desirable outcomes. Moving toward *empowerment* of self and others in a healthy manner promotes a wellness mentality. Ultimately, as the individual gains more freedom to choose; a higher level of skill and confidence and trust in their ability to make choices will emerge and they will align with empowerment and replace automatic thought patterns that may be self-destructive or unhealthy. Optimally, this new found positive perspective is meant to reduce anxiety or stress and support a congruent perception within thoughts, feelings, behaviors and underlying beliefs that they have acquired in working through Level 1 skills development of confidence thinking. The goal in Level 2 is to build *resiliency* in the individual to allow them to experience movement in creating choice at a meta-conscious level. In moving out of feeling trapped into making automatic responses (challenged at Level 1), they are guided toward creating choices at will that enable them to experience positive psychological thoughts that fortify a healthy self-identity and move toward a higher degree of confidence with respect for life.

**Level 3:** This involves aspirational goals for living at a level that transcends the unhealthy choice. Often in life we are faced with challenges that involve existential themes, i.e. love/hate; life/death, etc. Although our day to day existence may not always present these themes so apparently; they exist in our thoughts at an unconscious level and may color our experiences and responses to choice. In moving toward relying on higher level critical thinking the individual may experience some initial increase in anxiety; therefore, support from a trusted therapist or counselor would be beneficial. The challenge at this level is to stretch the boundaries and expand thinking to go outside the box and to aspire toward living on a higher plane in which healthy choice becomes more connected to automatic thought at a conscious level. In our individualistic Westernized culture we expect many freedoms that do not always translate into a collective consciousness of *respect* for all living things.

Societal values may impose judgments or perceptions that result in “us/them” thinking that does not necessarily translate into viewing all living creatures including self as worthy of *dignity*. Finally the integration of living with the consciousness of dignity and respect for all creates *integrity* that guides the individual toward choice that transcends mechanistic or automatic thoughts, goes beyond the self-concept of empowerment which is a necessary building block to the development of higher consciousness and transcendent thinking.

**The Levels Approach:** Each of the lower Levels 1 & 2 is a fundamental building block toward Level 3. In therapy or counseling the goal may focus on development of Level 1 or 2 as the end objective. Not all individuals would desire to work on the development of Level 3 confidence/choice/critical thinking. Not all life choices require Level 2 or Level 3 thinking skills in order to make a healthy choice with confidence. Regardless, having an understanding or framework for choice development may be a healthy life-skill. Accessing critical thinking allows a wider range of response, and a broader locus of control. Knowing how to make choices, and applying basic decision making surrounding who, what, where, when, and why can prevent unwanted life experiences from occurring. Knowing when to act and make a choice (timing) can be the difference between having a desired opportunity or not available to you. The more an individual is armed with information about their choice making ability, and they practice and rehearse the skills of choice making, the more confident they will become and the better they will be at making choices. Knowing when to pull back can prevent someone from becoming over-whelmed. We are often bombarded by choices; and having a clear sense of own's ability may assist in eliminating unwanted stress or anxiety. Having a model to apply in situations that evoke choice may assist the individual in assessing the situation, consider the required level of choice, and determine whether or not a decision of choice needs to be made.

Recognizing that not any one model is perfect and imposes inherent limits will allow for an honest and accurate assessment of this instrument. It is only a tool, and one means within the experience of therapy or counseling. The individual may gather more self-information. When recognized within the limits that are present; it can be a valuable teaching too to assist the individual in self-development of the skills of confidence, positive perceptions, and conscious thinking to make healthy life choices and promote a wellness mentality. As a foundational model for the development of critical thinking skills for confidence in choice making it explores the individual's cognitions of choice, how they connect to choice at a personal level, and see themselves in their ability to apply choice with confidence. It is a fluid model that moves from a mechanistic view of self to a highly conscious and transcendent view. This model is based in the thinking that since unhealthy thoughts and behaviors can be learned; they can unlearned. It offers a hopeful approach to treatment that allows and promotes the individual to engage, acquire new skills and thinking to be applied in a variety of settings, and experiences so that it will generalize and be maintained at the newly acquired level of consciousness in choice and decision-making.

Many times when client or patients came into treatment they do not recognize they have options or the ability to choose. Sometimes they simply lack the skills necessary to make a choice. This assessment will provide them a starting place to work with their educator, therapist, or counselor. Knowing there is a solution and a pathway to learn a skill or set of skills that will address an identified problem can provide comfort. Recognition and validation from a trusted therapist or counselor for effort to change unhealthy behaviors can spur motivation to learn and change unhealthy patterns of behavior. As stated, this is a foundational model that

provides three tiers or levels of critical thinking for confidence thinking in choice-making that is viewed under the broader umbrella of decision-making. The nine traits; three at each level ascribe factors that are used to define each level of critical thinking to offer better understanding and bring definition to their skill in choice making. Although there may be many factors that align with each level of critical thinking in the development of confidence in making choices these variables have been carefully chosen as they are considered the primary focus within each level of choice. Limiting each level to three conceptual traits assist in teaching these concepts to the individual that will promote ease of understanding in committing the concept to memory, and applying these concepts to everyday life experiences.

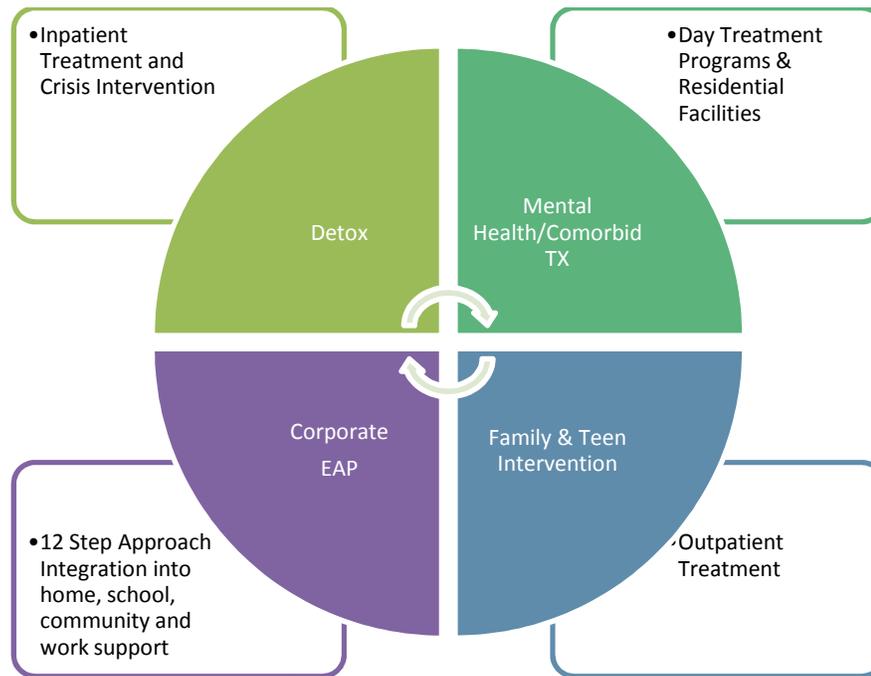
### **Assessment and Evaluation of Cognitions of Choice**

As in any program, Cognitions of Choice© should be subject to ongoing assessment and evaluation measures. It is recommended that the Creating Confidence Thinking Assessment © be administered initially and either at the close of education, treatment, or periodically used to measure any change in development related to choice with increased levels of confidence. This confidence measure is in an early stage of construction but at a minimum can provide a window to individualized thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and underlying beliefs related to choice. At this point there are no statistical data to support validity and reliability; so results are best analyzed on a case by case approach. In time it is hoped that the Creating Confidence Thinking Assessment © tool will find its way to a broad range of educational and therapeutic environments.

### **Conclusion:**

Our first line of defense in the containment and elimination of disease is prevention efforts. Through prevention efforts we hope to reduce incidence rates, but when that fails we move into early intervention, again in effort to halt progression of disease or loss. When prevention or early intervention efforts are not effective we move into treatment mode, and focus on long-term recovery efforts. There is a wide array of program in which substance misuse intervention is provided (see figure below)

## Intervention Programs: Where UD and COC Can Be Utilized



By combining the principles and guidelines of Universal Design we offer full accessibility for all individuals across prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery. Providing the necessary accommodations or modifications to address personalized needs may allow for improved outcomes. In mindfully addressing accessibility we introduce the development of choice thinking skills at the appropriate level to address the individual level of functioning. The Cognitions of Choice model assists by teaching choice constructs or percepts that can be utilized at whatever level of functioning the individual presents. This developmental model employs a three tier approach that focuses on nine skills that assist in building confidence in choice making skills. The Creating Confidence Thinking Assessment © is offered as a tool to gather preliminary assessment and evaluative information pertaining to the individual's skills in confidently exercising choice thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and beliefs.

This integrative approach (UD and COC) to substance misuse prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery provides a full spectrum of options in assisting clients or patients in the relational development of choice. Choice is viewed as an important critical thinking skill that provides opportunity to connect to healthier choices in life style or in the recovery process. Cognitions of Choice can be utilized at all levels of functioning and across development by providing a neural network or program that connects visual, mnemonic, and associate social memory experiences to learning new choice thinking. This model allows the individual to create personal meaning to each of the twenty-four constructs or percepts connected to choice thinking skills. This personalized approach allows the individual to create individualized meaning to their prevention, intervention, treatment or recovery process. Critical and creative thinking skills are

developed that support the neural connection to limbic system involvement, and may slow processing that rapidly ignites when the limbic and reward pleasure system fire when faced with situations that trigger a desire to use. When the individual integrates the tenets of Cognitions of Choice into thoughts, feelings, behaviors and beliefs it becomes a portable program that may become a self-monitoring and regulation tool. Ongoing assessment and evaluation of confidence as it relates to choice supports continued development across the levels of functioning involving skills development, meta-choice development, and conscious thought involving healthy choice. For individuals who have experienced mild to severe loss pertaining to health, inter-personal and intra-personal relationships; building or rebuilding choice may allow them the freedom to reconnect to self and others and begin the healing process, or simply choose to create a healthier life-style.

Universal Design and Cognitions of Choice©: An Integrative Approach to Substance Misuse Prevention, Treatment and Recovery Efforts. Clarissa E Steffen, Ed.D., 2013

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