

FAMILY SUPPORT HELPS CURE DRUG PROBLEM (1ST OF 4 PARTS)

In the many years I have been working with addicts, the biggest problem is found in accepting that indeed there is a problem. People behave in rather strange ways when faced with drug and alcohol problems. Nobody denies that drug addiction and alcoholism are two deadly diseases. In fact alcohol and alcohol related diseases kill more people than you can imagine.

Still, we tolerate loved ones who drink too much. Many families have a member or relative who is a drunkard who doesn't function very well, but is tolerated and whose vice is financed by the family. If he had a touch of cancer, he would be rushed to the hospital whether he liked it or not. But nobody moves to help him. The family somehow learns to live with him and his self-destructive disease that is slowly killing him. It is as if nobody cares or dares to force the issue into some kind of resolution. So the guy continues on his merry alcoholic way, dying a bit more each day.

The same is true of the drug problem that hits a family. When the parents get wind of a son or daughter using drugs, they launch into a sermon about the evils of drug addiction. Then they hope that somehow the problem will go away. But it doesn't.

After a while, they learn of more and more drug use. His marks are dropping like a rock. He quits his job. He's out all night and sleeps all day. He isolates himself. He's stealing from his own family, is disrespectful and generally just doesn't care anymore. Still the family doesn't move. Perhaps it's because of shame. After all there is a stigma attached to drug use. Even if everybody already knows about his addiction, they keep denying and pray that somehow a miracle will happen he will get well on his own.

The miracle doesn't happen and he gets worse. Until there is truly serious crisis and they are forced to act. When they finally move to help him, he has already walked far down the road to addiction. He is already badly damaged and the rehab process will necessarily take a lot longer. There are even families that give up and let the family member be.

What is clear to me is that the family, the parents, the spouse are key to the addict's recovery. Without their strong support, the chances of recovery drop dramatically. When, however, the family members mobilize themselves and form ranks together and make up their minds that their loved one will get well, his chances rise and remain good for as long as they stay strong in their resolve.

We addiction therapists have noted that those addicts who enjoy strong family support stand the best chances of success. So much so, that we at the Nazareth Formation House will not accept an addict who does not enjoy family support. This is because experience has taught us that, chances are, he won't make it and we are not interested in failing.

FAMILY SUPPORT HELPS CURE DRUG PROBLEM (2ND OF 4 PARTS)

When the 28-year-old drug addict arrived at our Nazareth Formation House in Batangas, one of the first things he said to me was, "I want you to know that I really don't want to be here." I knew that and told him so.

Then he looked at me with eyes that showed great determination and said, "I have used drugs for 15 years and I don't intend to stop now. When I leave here, I'm going to keep using." He made a strong statement with those words, and I believed him

When a drug addict is in the greatest need of help, this is when he wants it the least. Most people think that when you're sick, you naturally want to get help.

Not the addict. Remember that even if the addict is slowly self-destructing, the fact remains that he keeps looking for more drugs. And the more drugs he finds, the better. His foremost concern is how to continue to finance his habit.

If you don't know much about addiction, you will find it difficult to understand why the addict is so set on doing himself in. Why is it that he won't stop his drugs when he knows they are silently killing him? Sure, he's trapped in his addiction, but why does he have to be dragged into rehab?

It's because drugs serve him well. They are the escape mechanism he uses to run from his problems, his insecurities and his fears. Besides being very pleasurable, his drugs make him feel good (at least for a while) when he feels lousy. They help him to face the world when he is so afraid of it. They make him feel like he is somebody when he feels like nobody. They give him the courage to do things he would not do without them.

In the process, they become indispensable to him. Not only is he addicted to the pleasures of drug taking; he is addicted to the lifestyle that is very different from people in mainstream society. It is a dark world of crime, shady characters, lying, stealing and incredible manipulations of every kind.

Remember that drug addicts are criminals, even if they don't get caught. When you successfully rob a bank again and again, you are a criminal on the loose. The same is true of the addict. He commits a crime every time he takes his drugs. When he shares or sells his drugs, he is technically a pusher.

Because of all this, he needs to lie and hide his activities. He becomes paranoid because he is constantly looking over his shoulder and worrying about getting caught. It is a stressful life and the tension simply causes him to all the more look for comfort in continued drug use.

It should not surprise you then if he doesn't want to change. Oh, he will tell you he wants to get well, but when you suggest rehab he will say, "I'm not an addict." Or, if he can no longer deny his addiction, he will tell you, "I can get out of it by myself." He will say and do anything to say out of rehab because, in truth, he does not want to stop his drugs.

If you want to get him help, you will have to force him into recovery. He won't do it on his own because he can't.

A DRUG ADDICT MUST WANT TO CHANGE (3RD OF 4 PARTS)

When the addict arrives at Nazareth Formation House, he is often high on drugs. We know this because tests reveal that he is positive for shabu or marijuana. Many times he comes to us from a detoxification facility in a clinic or the basement of a hospital. Usually, he is quiet and submissive. Once in a while, he is aggressive. When he arrives, he is given time to settle in and become familiar with his surroundings.

If it is his first time in rehab, he might worry about being beaten if he does not follow (some rehab centers do resort to violence to keep their people in line). He soon learns that it isn't so at Nazareth. There are no walls, no guards, no guns on the sprawling five-hectare facility. The addicts are called residents, not patients. They are well-dressed, clean cut and look so normal that he might find it difficult to know who is a member of the staff and who are residents.

The environment is more like that of a seminary. There is a church on a hill and adoration chapel in the woods. The residents pray often and there is a priest on the staff who says mass daily and hears confessions every week. There are retreats on First Fridays and lots of prayer throughout the day. The women always dress modestly. He is surprised to find how caring both staff and residents are.

Still, as good as all this is, he isn't convinced that he needs to change his way of life. He likes his drugs and lifestyle too much and is too insecure about facing the world without them to want to change.

So the first job of the staff is to convince him to want to change. Or, more precisely, to WANT to want to change. And that is no small challenge. If only we could give the addict a pill that would do the job, that would be great. But we cannot because there are no shortcuts when it concerns drug rehab.

How long will the process take? Nobody can tell. Think about it. Some have been using drugs for five, 10, 15, 20 years or more years. Thinks about how deep their addiction is! Think about what it will be like to turn them around after so many years.

Most residents suffer from multiple addictions besides from their drugs, many are also alcoholics. They could be into heavy gambling, and many are addicted to sex. Some have very strong family support. Others have less and still others come from very dysfunctional families, which vastly complicates the rehab process.

Some have greater motivation to get well while others stubbornly cling to their old thinking and fear change. As the process unfolds, the staff keeps finding problems and issues that lay hidden, and they have to set about dealing with them, too.

Anyone who can tell you how long it will take to rehabilitate an addict is either incompetent or a liar. He doesn't know because he cannot know. Only god knows, and He remains quiet. The staff spends hours and use a vast array of methods to convince the addict to want to want to change. Even though

he is quick to say he does want to do so, it will take time for his words to go from manipulations to a sincere desire to make a new life.

A DRUG ADDICT MUST WANT TO CHANGE

We know from experience that old habits die hard. They die hard precisely because they are old. The more you repeat an action, the stronger the habit becomes. This is why we parents and educators work so hard to get our children into good habits. We know that it is only through repetition that habits take hold.

What you need to understand is that we also get into thinking patterns that are just as difficult to break. In fact, I believe that thought patterns are even more difficult to break than behavior patterns.

You can push a person into a routine that controls his actions, but, even if you succeed in doing so, there is no guarantee that his thinking is in line with what he is doing. In fact, he might even be cursing you in his head and under his breath even as he smiles and follows.

That is what is so hard about rehab work. Unlike medicine where x-rays, blood tests and the like will tell you what is happening in the body, in rehab there is no such thing that allows you to scan a man's thinking. It isn't pure science at work, but mostly an art. Sure, there are tests and some psychological tools you can use to measure what is going on in a guy's head, but that is very limited. You cannot give an injection and expect that suddenly the addict will start thinking straight.

Instead, there are long hours of hard work that are designed to chip away at those hardened thought and behavioral patterns. When we staffers see a little bit of progress, we rejoice because we know that rehab is a journey of a thousand steps. Any movement forward is cause for rejoicing. Any progress gives an adrenaline rush. Just as medical doctors get their rush when the patients get well, we get ours when the addict makes even a little progress to recover.

Even if he follows the routines very well and doesn't complain, that does not mean he is truly progressing. Addicts are great manipulators. They are good at faking behavior and telling you what you think you want to hear. Look at how they lied to their families and did so much foolishness when their loved ones were not looking.

Progress is marked by consistency in thought and behavior. If the resident is faking it, sooner or later he will slip back into his old ways. Then we know that the new way has not struck well enough to prevent him from sliding back.

Rehab is all about replacing the old with the new. It's about easing the resident into the new while pulling him away from the old. It isn't at all easy, but it's the only way he will have a fighting chance to get well.