

Beyond Addiction: The meaning of recovery

by William Moyers

President Obama set me up.

For one brief, shining moment the other day, the e-mail that plopped into my inbox from the big guy in the White House hijacked my common sense and filled me with hope that public policy about addiction finally was about to change.

The e-mail's subject line said it all: "What recovery means for you." I was convinced that this was the news that'd been too long in coming and that the president wanted me and a couple of million others like me to be among the first to know.

We could not help feeling expectant. A lot of us had been waiting impatiently for Mr. Obama to name the new director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. We were hoping the next drug czar would be somebody who knows personally what recovery is all about. Then America might end the failed war on drugs once and for all by favoring treatment over international interdiction and building more jail cells at home.

But even before President Obama named a top cop to that position this past Thursday, my formidable expectation melted into a puddle of disappointment when I opened the message from the president:

"William – The economic crisis is growing more serious every day, and the time for action has come." And then Mr. Obama laid out his case for treating a nation addicted to tax cuts and blinded by a long blackout caused by fighting wars unseen in Iraq and Afghanistan, gorged on Wall Street bonuses, and hung over from too many home mortgages sold to craving consumers on Main Street. The truth hurts when denial dies. It's called hitting bottom.

Oh, well. I should have known better than to expect President Obama to focus on any kind of recovery these days that isn't about fixing the worst economy since the Great Depression. At least his e-mail reminded me that I don't have an easy answer, either, when it comes to the meaning of recovery, especially from the ailment that spawns people to reach out for my help.

Dear Mr. Moyers: Excuse my ignorance, but I know very little about addiction except that it devastates people. I see the consequences of it where I'm training to be an emergency medical technician for a fire/rescue squad. Even in this rural community, drugs take a big toll, causing car crashes, fights, people to fall down stairs at home, etc. You always are writing that "recovery is possible," that they can get well. But what does that really mean? Is there true hope for these people? – Daniel S., Enterprise, Ala.

Dear Daniel: Yes, there is always hope. People can get well. But a single, concise definition of recovery is elusive. In fact, even among addiction treatment providers, there is disagreement about how to measure recovery as a benchmark of effective treatment. Many people equate recovery with total abstinence from all mood- and mind-altering substances. But some people, including those on methadone or anti-craving medication, only need to decrease their use to consider themselves in recovery. Socio-economic benchmarks, such as whether someone has a job and a regular paycheck, help to define recovery, as do improvements in family relations and quality of life issues, such as improved physical and mental health. Finally, for some people, recovery also means not returning to criminal activity.

And therein lies the irony in the economic stimulus package that will become law shortly. It includes little, if any, funding for addiction treatment and recovery initiatives. What better way to increase tax revenues, foster job growth, hold down the high cost of crime, and relieve the burden on health and human service agencies than to treat the costly problems of addiction? That's what real recovery means to millions of Americans like me who no longer drink too much or take drugs.

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