

Beyond Addiction: Back to basics

by William_Moyers

No politics, no pontification over policy, and no sparring with public officials. This week's column goes back to the fundamentals of helping people get help.

Dear Mr. Moyers: Professional treatment is not the only way to get sober. For people who can't afford or won't go for treatment, why don't you refer them to Alcoholics Anonymous? It works! Be sure to tell them to go to a lot of different AA groups so they get to know many sober members and see that there are many different kinds of AA meetings. It's in those meetings that people find the encouragement and help they need from a sober AA member to do it one day at a time. I've got 28 years of sobriety, and it is the sober people I found in AA meetings who helped me when I was really desperate. â€” Al M. in Wilmot, Wis.

Dear Al: It sounds as if you are a prime example of "how it works" in AA. Indeed, I do encourage many people to seek out 12-step meetings in their communities, especially if they don't have the funds for treatment or there aren't facilities located in their areas. But sadly, many addicts and alcoholics do require professional help to address their problems and get on the road to recovery. That is because today's drugs of abuse tend to have a longer-lasting or more severe impact on users, and just going to meetings may not be enough. Also, many addicted people suffer from other "co-occurring disorders," such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anorexia and depression. They need medical attention, psychiatric treatment and counseling from trained professionals. The good news is that once people get treatment, the 12 steps are an invaluable road map to stay the course in recovery. In fact, about 50-60 percent of people in 12-step meetings today first learned about them through treatment facilities. So treatment and the 12 steps are partners in steering people to hope and help.

Dear Mr. Moyers: Our daughter is 35. Recently, she was hospitalized for pancreatitis, which was caused by her severe drinking problem. Her doctor is recommending gall bladder surgery, but only in conjunction with alcoholism treatment because that is what he says her biggest problem is. She insists that the problem will go away once her gall bladder is removed. Besides, she claims, she can't go for help because she's got two cats at home and needs to find a job so she can keep paying rent on her apartment. At the moment, we're paying for her health insurance. What should we tell her? â€” Carole R. in Denver

Dear Carole: Tell your daughter in no uncertain terms that she is going to die with or without a gall bladder if she doesn't agree to get help. She's not the doctor. She's not going to find a job, much less hold on to one, if she doesn't address her alcoholism. And the cats couldn't care less about whether she's around or not. Her drinking has just about reached the point that she is out of options. Though she shouldn't need to be convinced of that, alcoholism is an illness of denial. I urge you to use a carrot-and-stick approach. Tell her you will not continue to pay her insurance premiums unless she gets help to stop drinking. Work with her doctor to help her understand the dangers and the opportunities facing her. It's pretty simple. Tell her she can't have surgery or health insurance if she says no to the biggest problem she's got: alcoholism. But do continue to make those payments on her behalf for at least the next few months, even if you threaten otherwise. Too many sick people can't get help because they don't have insurance these days. Your daughter is lucky to have it, because she's going to need it.

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