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HOW TO HELP THE REHABILITATED DRUG ABUSERS NOT TO RELAPSE TO DRUGS AGAIN?
A SUCCESSFUL CASE - HONG KONG

by

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How to Help the Rehabilitated Drug Abusers Not to Relapse to Drugs Again?

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Introduction

High relapse rate is a serious problem in the rehabilitation of drug abusers and it is a challenge to be overcome by drug rehabilitation agencies. Since 1988, the present writer has conducted research projects on drug abuse and rehabilitation and discovered that many drug abusers have been addicted to illicit drugs, especially heroin, for many years. They have relapsed to heroin addiction again and again for a long period of time.

The purpose of this paper (research report) is to examine the causes leading to high relapse rate of many drug abusers. One of the causes is that drug abusers cannot stand the physical pains originated from the withdrawal symptom. However, the physical pains can be overcome in 7-10 days with or without proper medications. On the other hand, drug abusers can be psychological dependent on illicit drugs which can allow them to escape from life problems, pressures and frustrations. They are addicted to the feelings of comfort and relaxation given by the abused drugs. Certainly, social causes like the influences and pressures from bad companions, usually drug abusers, are also important causal factors.
High relapse rate of ex-drug abusers is a universal phenomenon. However, different rehabilitation agencies for drug abuse would use different standards and methods to measure their success and relapse rates of drug rehabilitation. It is more accurate and reliable to use a longer period of time for measurement, such as 5 years or longer after the completion of treatment. For 5 years after rehabilitation, the relapse rate has been 98% in the PRC. However, in Hong Kong, we use a shorter period of time after rehabilitation for measurement, namely 1-2 years. Fortunately, this writer has found a voluntary agency, the Wu-Oi Centre, in Hong Kong which can provide a statistical record of its service in the past 20 years - the Wu-Oi Centre.

From 1976-95, there were 1,169 male drug abusers successfully completed the rehabilitation program in the Wu-Oi Centre and 674 of them have not relapsed to illicit drugs (57.7% success rate, and 42.3% relapse rate). They are now living a productive life and commit no criminal offences since then. From 1993-95, 20 teenagers (male) successfully completed the rehabilitation program and 16 of them are still drug-free that they either returned to school or went to work (80% success rate and 20% relapse rate).

**Causes Leading to Relapse to Illicit Drugs**

The present writer completed a survey research on the rehabilitation of drug abusers and discovered that there are several factors leading to the ex-drug addicts’ relapse to drugs again. They are as follows:
1) Ex-drug addicts usually have a strong feeling of inferiority, insecurity and alienation. Although the ex-drug addicts have completed their drug rehabilitation, they still carry the label as drug abusers or drug addicts. They worry that they can hardly find jobs as many of them are manual labourers or unskilled labourers. They worry that they will be looked down upon by others being as ex-drug addict, suspected as still addicting to illicit drugs. As a result, they will try to isolate themselves from others.

2) The alienation, isolation and rejection by relatives, friends and former workers. While the ex-drug abusers were addicted to illicit drugs, they borrowed, cheated or even stole money from their relatives and friends. It is natural that the ex-drug addicts are suspected to come for money again. After being suspected, alienated and rejected by others many times, the ex-drug addicts have no other choice but to return to their former associates, including drug addicts. Very soon, they will relapse to illicit drugs again as a means to retreat from being isolated and rejected by others.

3) The ex-drug abusers begin to use tranquilizers, such as smoking cigarettes and drinking alcoholic beverages: Based on the experience of ex-drug abusers who had been successfully rehabilitated in the Wu-Oi Centre, they stated that smoking cigarettes and drinking alcoholic beverages are acts of seeking retreatism from problems and pressures, and they will seek stronger material and ways to escape from their problems soon, i.e. to abuse heroin.
The Strategy of Drug Rehabilitation of the Wu-Oi Centre

It would be interesting to examine the whole program of drug rehabilitation of the Wu-Oi Centre, including its aftercare services and its characteristics.

The Wu-Oi Centre, founded in the mid 1970's, adopts a strategy of rehabilitation which includes re-socialization of its patients by means of Christian ethics, complete modification of their life-view, change in personality, attitudes and behavior modeled after the Christian faith (although the patients are not required to be Christian), and isolation from the criminal and the drug subculture. Afterwards, they are required to return to live in society and expected to keep themselves isolated from the drug subculture. The Wu-Oi Centre, which was funded by voluntary donations, is staffed by successfully rehabilitated ex-drug addicts from the Centre.

Theoretical Framework

Because the Wu-Oi Centre was founded by a Christian clergyman and a group of rehabilitated drug addicts, the strategy of rehabilitation comes mainly from the experiences of the latter and not based on any theoretical framework of social sciences. However, after close examination, the strategy of rehabilitation is closely identical to that of the central thesis of Sutherland’s Theory of Differential Association. According to Sutherland’s Theory, “criminal behaviour is learned through interaction with others in intimate personal groups. The learning includes techniques of committing criminal acts, plus motives, drives, rationalization, and attitudes favourable to the commission of crime. A person becomes
delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to violation of law over definitions unfavourable to violation of law.” In any society, the two kinds of definitions of what is desirable in reference to legal codes exist side by side. Sutherland called the process of receiving these definitions “differential association”, because the content of what is learned in association with criminal behaviour patterns differs from the content of what is learned in association with anti-criminal behaviour pattern. “When persons become criminals, they do so because of contacts with criminal behaviour patterns and also because of isolation from anti-criminal patterns.”

Methodology

The present investigator was involved in interviews with 54 ex-drug addicts who also had criminal records. Each underwent rehabilitation in the Wu-Oi Centre and each participated in the Centre’s activities during 1988. In addition, questionnaires were solicited from 52 former patients. The theme of both the interview schedule and the questionnaire was focused on four main areas, namely, the patients’ attitude and reaction towards the Wu-Oi Centre, its staff, the strategy of rehabilitation, their evaluation of the Christian faith and their present life situation.

Strategy for Rehabilitation at the Wu-Oi Centre

According to Merton, drug abuse is an example of retreatism in that drug abusers and addicts attempt to escape from reality, and problems and pressures of everyday life. In doing so they abandon both cultural and prescribed goals and means. Interviews with former drug addicts
confirmed that these former drug addicts used drug addiction as a means to escape from life problems.

The data collected indicate that nearly 95 percent of the successfully rehabilitated drug addicts with criminal records admitted that it was their former association with members of the triad societies (the illegal, secret underground organised crime organizations), and other drug addicts who induced them to try heroin and other kinds of drugs. Curiosity, pressure to be accepted and later to escape caused the ex-abusers to try different dangerous drugs and later to become addicts. As drug addicts these individuals learned the techniques of abuse as well as the motives, rationalizations and attitudes appropriate to such abuse.

Having participated in the activities of the Centre for nine years (1988-96), the present investigator believes that the philosophy behind the strategy of rehabilitation of Wu-Oi can be summarized as follows:

1. Non-criminal behaviour is learned through interaction with others in intimate personal groups.
   A criminal can be rehabilitated to become a non-criminal through an environment which is highly unfavourable to violation of law;

2. Criminals become non-criminals, by contacts with non-criminal behaviour patterns and by isolation from criminal patterns.

The rehabilitation strategy places strong emphasis on the re-socialization of drug addicts through intimate interactions and association with the staff and graduates of the Centre. This strategy includes:
1. Isolating patients from criminal behaviour patterns.

2. Re-socializing patients with Christian values, and norms through interactions with staff in intimate personal groups.

3. Requiring patients to modify their personality, attitudes and behaviour.

The operation of rehabilitation of the Wu-Oi Centre can be summarized as follows. After a drug addict is enrolled in the Centre and shows willingness to accept its method of rehabilitation, he will be scrutinized by the staff and will be sent to a rehabilitation village which is located in a restricted and remote area where outsiders cannot enter. The selection of the village location is based on the experience of the staff, who are rehabilitated ex-drug addicts. They believe that the village should be located in a place where the patients can stay away from the temptations of drug abuse, pressure and frustrations of life’s problem. In addition, in the village, the patients will be cared for by a group of staff who understand the problems they met and would be sympathetic to them. Since the staff are rehabilitated drug addicts from Wu-Oi and have similar socio-economic status and experience as the patients, they are the most suitable people to work with the patients and are easily accepted by the latter. Besides, the staff themselves are the best example and encouragement to the patients and they can prove to them that drug rehabilitation can be an achievable goal. According to the experience of the staff, the change of the life-view of a drug addict is crucial to the success of drug rehabilitation. The Christian faith and ethics can provide such a change, with a set of new values, norms and ethics. Such a change of the life-view requires intensive re-socialization for the patients who were brought up in an environment and subculture which are very much different from those of the Christian. Therefore, the period of re-socialization will require a considerable length of time that the Wu-Oi Centre insists the patients to stay in the village for nine months. Besides, if heroin is taken away from a drug addict, something
better should be offered to him. Psychologically, a patient must learn to cope without drugs. In this case, religious faith and ethics can be a good substitute. The learning of Christian ethics can gradually transform the life goals and purposes of the patients who can also show modifications of their attitudes and behaviour (Schock, 1988).

In the village, intensive personal counselling is given by the staff and other successfully rehabilitated patients to the new comers. Goal-oriented, realistic, positive counselling reveals what a person needs. The learning of Christian ethics is the most important part of the process of re-socialization. The care and concern of the staff and the patients themselves are the most powerful force for behaviour modification. Being isolated from the criminal and drug subculture, patients are re-socialized by means of a code of ethics which is strongly against drug addiction and criminal behaviour. For those drug rehabilitation can be an achievable goal, the staff and graduates of Wu-Oi are living models for them.

Drug addicts stay at least for nine months in the rehabilitation village. Patients are in close, intimate contact with the staff. Vulgar language, smoking and drinking are prohibited, while attitudes and behaviour are modelled after Christian ethics. Patients are re-socialized to reject their former deviant behaviour, including drug abuse.

After a patient has completed his rehabilitation program for 9 months in the village, he is required to stay for 2 months in the halfway house as the Period of Testing. In this period, he will be tested his ability to face the temptations from the larger society, such as relapsing into drug use or associating with former drug addicts. Then he will return to live in the rehabilitation village again for 2 months and enter into the Period of Examination. He will try to discover what were his strengths and weaknesses while he lives in the village. He must try
to overcome his weaknesses. Finally, he will enter into the Period of Independence in the halfway house for 1 month and prepare himself to return to live permanently in the larger society.

After the completion of the whole drug rehabilitation program, the Wu-Oi graduates are encouraged to keep close contact with the Centre and participate in church activities. Many graduates worship in a Christian church located in the halfway house of the Centre. The great majority of the church members are Wu-Oi graduates and their family members.

The drug rehabilitation program of the Wu-Oi Centre can be summarized in the following stages or periods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages or Period</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>halfway house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detoxification &amp; Rehabilitation</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>rehabilitation village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>halfway house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>rehabilitation village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>halfway house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous re-socialization</td>
<td>continuously &amp; permanently</td>
<td>Christian churches Wu-Oi Church Wu-Oi Centre</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The experience of three typical graduates of the Wu-Oi program demonstrates its success.

**Case One**

A 23-year-old revealed that he had become addicted to heroin for seven years when he first tried it at the age of 16. The causes of his drug abuse were boredom, curiosity and the
influences of bad companions. He had six documented criminal offences, including drug addiction, larceny and aggravated assaults. His parents had been too busy to take care of him, and the parents were strict with him when something went wrong. He had no interest in studying and later was befriended by companions of similar background. When his parents discovered that he had become addicted, they tried many methods to help him, including living in Mainland China and rehabilitation in other facilities. He tried eight times to kick drug addiction, but abstinence did not last long. The causes of this failure were a lack of a sense of belonging, loneliness, boredom and not having trust.

After he was admitted into Wu-Oi, he established faith in God and had hope in the success of his rehabilitation. He felt the care and concern of the staff and their success in rehabilitation had given him encouragement and the hope of success. He realized that he could not depend on himself to achieve success as he had tried this many times before. He enjoyed his stay in the rehabilitation village when the patients got along well with one another. Besides, everyone is important for him as well as other patients to maintain connections with Wu-Oi as a life-line after their departure to keep them free from drugs and to enable them to live a normal life.

Case Two

A 34-year-old stated that he was a skilled worker before his addiction. The causes of his drug abuse were that he felt empty, bored, frustrated, and heroin could give him a feeling of satisfaction and happiness. He tried to kick the habit several times himself but failed. Later on, he tried methadone and still felt empty, bored and isolated from society.
Later, he met a former addict who had been rehabilitated in Wu-Oi. He was amazed to see the latter's changes and realized that drug rehabilitation can be an achievable goal. Then he decided to enroll in Wu-Oi. In the Centre, he saw the testimonies of the successful ex-drug addicts, their peace of mind and joy. Also, he felt the concern and care among the staff and patients for one another, which he seldom saw in society.

Having successfully gone through the rehabilitation period in the village for six months, he admitted he had changed a lot as he had become optimistic, positive and happy. Concerning his future, he said that the Centre would arrange a job for him in a Christian agency which will separate him from the drug and criminal subculture.

**Case Three**

A 31-year-old revealed that his drug addiction was due to his broken home. His parents were separated and he did not have love in the family. Therefore, he went out on the streets and made friends with delinquents and drug peddlers. He first used heroin at 18 and was an addict for the following ten years. He tried to kick his habit many times but only succeeded in places where he could not buy heroin, such as in China and Canada. He also joined the triad society which had easy access to dangerous drugs.

Later, he entered Wu-Oi and succeeded in his rehabilitation. However, he met his former girl friend and ran into trouble because of his love affairs. In order to escape from frustration and reality, he took to heroin again. He was permitted to enter the Wu-Oi rehabilitation village the second time for a longer period of time, namely one year.
He said that in the Centre he found true friends among the staff who really cared for him. He experienced a sense of brotherhood and love. He found the real meaning of love and developed new life goals. He overcame his feelings of inferiority and regained his self-respect. The Centre became a source of power, strength and happiness for him.

**Strategy of Aftercare of the Wu-Oi Centre**

Aftercare services for ex-drug addicts are very important and essential for the success of rehabilitation. It is common for someone to judge a person's future performance by his past one. People are suspicious and skeptical as to whether the ex-drug addicts have been thoroughly and completely rehabilitated. The mistrust, suspicion, avoidance and rejection from family, friends and society can push an ex-drug addict back to his deviant or criminal subculture and association once more.

The strategy of aftercare of the Wu-Oi Centre includes the following:

a. To isolate ex-drug addicts from contacts with criminal behaviour patterns and drug addiction

b. To encourage “graduates” to interact closely with one another and with the staff of the Centre

c. To surround “graduates” with Christian teachings which are unfavourable to the violation of law
In order to achieve these three objectives, Wu-Oi strongly encourages its graduates to participate in church activities in which they will associate with law-abiding citizens and will be accepted and find new friends and associates. Besides, the Centre will try to find employment for them in Christian agencies, such as schools, social service centres, churches, etc, where they will be isolated from drug subculture and associates.

This investigator also conducted a survey research on the aftercare services of the Wu-Oi graduates in 1988. Questionnaires were randomly distributed to its graduates and 52 responded. Among them, 45 (86.5%) participated in the activities of the Centre constantly and 7 (13.5%) participated in church activities regularly and 5 of them (9.6%) participated occasionally. Thirty-seven of them (71%) were baptized and became church members.

The Wu-Oi Church

As the Wu-Oi Centre has using the Christian faith as the dominant spiritual force to modify an ex-addict’s life-view, personality, values and behaviour, it is essential to continue to keep the “graduates” in contact with the church so that their faith can be enforced and strengthened. This researcher interviewed ten “graduates” in April 1992 and discovered that most of them had problems with being accepted and integrated into a local Christian church, partly due to their own feelings of inferiority, their criminal sub-culture background and their unsociable-social character. They revealed that they preferred to participate in a church mainly composed of Wu-Oi graduates and their family members. In early 1992, a church was established in the halfway house of the Wu-Oi Centre, and two-thirds of the participants in that church have been the Wu-Oi graduates and their families. They will feel much more comfortable attending
such a church, as the members are mainly composed of their own kind. The pastor can also focus his teachings and services to the special needs of the Wu-Oi graduates who can easily accept one another.

Therefore, the Christian church located in the Wu-Oi halfway house has played an important role in the continuous re-socialization of the Wu-Oi graduates. It can continuously enforce and strengthen their Christian faith to resist the temptation of drug abuse and isolate themselves from association with drug abusers, triad members and the criminal subculture. It can also become a social centre and bulwark for the graduates to meet one another and share their life experiences, their problems as well as their success in life. They can meet one another, especially those who are still single and aged. It has played an important role in the continuous re-socialization of the Wu-Oi graduates into the Christian sub-culture and Christian group.

Summary and Discussion

Nearly all the ex-drug addicts who had been interviewed, revealed that they wished to kick the drug addiction which ruined their lives. However, most of them could not overcome their psychological dependence on the drugs and the physical pains of the withdrawal symptoms. While many of them had been successful in their rehabilitation physically, they ran into considerable frustrations and obstacles when they returned to the society at large. Eventually, they may return to drug addiction for escape.
The Wu-Oi Centre has achieved considerable success in drug rehabilitation in Hong Kong. The purpose of this paper is to examine its characteristics, positive and negative, and see if useful hints can be derived. The Centre has given strong emphasis on isolating its patients from drug subculture and associates and resocialize them with Christian ethics through intimate association with its staff in primary group settings.

Its strategy will be extended beyond the completion of the rehabilitation in the Centre. One of the weaknesses of Wu-Oi is that the socialization and internalization of the Christian ethics are difficult for some patients because they were brought up in a sub-culture which has very much different views from those of Christian ethics. However, the success of Wu-Oi in its strategy of rehabilitation can be summarised as follows:

1. **The tactics of re-socialization.** The tactics of re-socialization adopted by Wu-Oi includes the isolation of the ex-drug addicts from the drug and criminal subculture and emphasizes intimate associations with law-abiding citizens during the processes of rehabilitation in the village and aftercare services in society. Generally speaking, it is difficult to isolate the patients from drug sub-culture in society and even more difficult to make the ex-patients become accepted by members of this society. Therefore, the Centre attempts to put the ex-patients to work in Christian agencies and participate in Christian church activities where they can be isolated from bad companions and, on the contrary, when they will be accepted by a group of law-abiding citizens who will care for them and accept them as friends and associates. The acceptance of ex-drug addicts by society is crucial to the success in their abstinence from future drug abuse.
2. **The content of re-socialization.** It is essential to have some actual content for re-socialization of the drug addicts to insure the success of their rehabilitation. According to the experience of drug addicts, if drugs are taken away from them, something better should be offered. Based on the data collected by this investigator and other researches, drug abuse and addiction are attributed to the abusers' curiosity about the drug and psychological dependence on it as a means to escape from frustration and pressures of the criminal world. Therefore, since Wu-Oi has adopted the Christian faith and ethics as the contents of re-socialization for the ex-drug addicts, it has become effective for those who are willing to accept such a method. Besides, the Christian faith has become a source of power to change their attitudes, goals in life and acted as a solace to pressure and frustration. Christian ethics has become the guideline for their behaviour and a foundation to modify their attitudes, behaviour and personality. Besides, the acceptance of Christian faith will mean the elevation in social status.

3. **The agents of re-socialization.** Even though an agency has adopted effective tactics and useful materials for drug rehabilitation, it is the agents, namely the staff and counsellors, who carry out the actual operation of rehabilitation. Wu-Oi adopts the strategy of using its own "graduates" to do the work. Because the staff and the patients have similar socio-economic status and background and experience of drug addiction, it is much easier for the former to be accepted by the latter. Besides, the former have a better understanding of the problems and experiences of the patients since they were also drug addicts before. Besides, the success in drug rehabilitation of the staff can give the patients strong encouragement which can prove to the latter that drug rehabilitation can be an achievable goal. It is the care, concern and sacrifice of the staff that actually lead to the modification in behaviour, life-view and personality of the patients.
One significant feature of the Wu-Oi drug rehabilitation strategy is its continuous re-socialization efforts to keep its graduates from the temptations of drug abuse and isolate them from contacts with drug addicts and the criminal subculture. The Centre has replaced the patients’ dependence on drugs (as a way to escape from life problems) with Christian faith. The graduates can now depend on their faith to confront and solve their life problems, instead of retreating into drugs. This investigator is greatly impressed by the renewed, positive life attitudes, life styles and behaviour of the graduates modelled on Christian ethics. Many of the graduates, especially the staff, have a very strong desire to help other drug abusers to live a drug-free life.

The strategy of rehabilitation of the Wu-Oi Centre is closely identical to the central thesis of Sutherland’s Theory of Differential Association. It has isolated the ex-drug addicts from the criminal and drug subculture and on the contrary re-socialized them through intimate relationships with the staff in primary group settings with Christian ethics. The internalization of Christian ethics by the patients can become a moral strength to resist the temptation of drug abuse and a solace from frustration and pressures of life problems.

Lastly, the successful case of Wu-Oi gives us insight on the practical aspect. As its strategy of rehabilitation has been proved as valid and useful, other rehabilitation agencies may learn of its tactics and strategy in the hope of effective results.
Endnotes

