A Novel and Harmonious Approach to Severe Substance Use Disorder Treatment

" Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent." Victor Hugo 

Undeniably, lasting recovery from severe addiction, particularly opiate addiction, is a long-term (at least 12 months) process. The process must address emotional, psychological, social, medical-psychiatric, and neuro-biological issues that all severe addicts experience to a significant degree. There is a tragically exploding scourge of life threatening opiate and serious addiction in the U.S. …(statistics)

The existing addiction treatment systems throughout the U.S. are notoriously fragmented, woefully unsuccessful and typically over focused on the most commonly monetarily reimbursed component: Acute detoxification, which is obviously an important, but the least critical phase of treatment in predicting twelve month sobriety. Treatment modalities might include residential rehabilitation, intensive outpatient programs, individual and group addiction counseling, co-morbid mental health counseling and psychopharmacological treatment, and/or daily avid 12-step meetings. Indeed, the seminal task of the substance addiction treatment clinician is engaging their clients in durable treatment and then monitoring and facilitating treatment compliance.

Although estimates vary, 12 month sobriety/recovery rates after initial treatment in the general population of opiate addicted patients in the U.S. is discouragingly low- between 5-20%. Many factors contribute to this disheartening statistic, such as: cost containment priorities of payers, public rejection of the "disease-model," over-reliance on very short term treatments (less than one month), very limited supervision of clinicians, and rare use of objective measures of compliance such as random urine drug screens and a paucity of evidence-based approaches to treatment. The current treatment system appears too paralyzed by its legacies, presumptions and lack of ability to execute thoughtful change. Providers, payers for care, and patients and families are desperate for an effective and economically viable system of durable addiction treatment.

The Founders and clinicians of Recovery Unplugged determined at its formation that the chief goal was create a treatment program combining the best and well-founded models from decades of experience in addiction treatment with novel approaches meant to authentically reach and engage the struggling and “revolving door” patient. In addition, it was deemed critical to provide a high level of evidence-based medical care of co-occurring mental health conditions and direct biological treatment of the substance use disorder. The primary treatment facilitation tool, to which the program owes it’s name, is the integrative use of music and established music therapy concepts throughout the treatment experience.

Music interventions are well-established therapeutic tools used for decades in medical and mental health treatment to address physical, psychological, cognitive and/or social functioning for patients of all ages. It is clearly a powerful and non-invasive technique that can result in unique and lasting outcomes- even in those who are resistive to other treatment approaches.

The traditional cognitive and talk therapies, often centered around 12-step concepts, are certainly instrumental but often limited and prone to repetition and dwindling effect. Every substance use disorder clinician is familiar with the classic patient retorts: “I have heard that stuff a hundred times before. I know all the reasons I need to quit. It all makes sense in here but when I leave…” Therefore, an emotional and perception based modality to facilitate the cognitive treatment makes ultimate sense. Addiction treatment patients present with a host of psychosocial, affective, cognitive and communicative challenges. Some will engage very fruitfully with reason and psycho-education, some more with fellowship and connection, and many with a deep and spiritually-emotionally based intervention such as listening and/or creating music that they can connect with surviving pain and developing lasting hope for healthier-sober self. Music is a form of sensory stimulation that provokes responses due to the familiarity, predictability and feelings of security associated with it. Musical interaction is a means of communication and expression that allows many patients to develop relationships, make important revelatory associations and address issues they may not be able to address using words alone.

Our experience thus far indicates that the musical component to the treatment program allows patients to genuinely explore personal feelings and therapeutic issues, such as self-esteem or personal insight. They experience making positive changes in mood and emotional states without substances and develop a sense of control over their lives and mood states. They appear to enhance their awareness of self and environment, develop more coping and relaxation skills, more easily cultivate healthy feelings and thoughts, and improve reality testing and problem solving skills. The music program facilitates social interaction and comfort and appears to improve concentration and attention span. We believe the changes resulting from the intervention are lasting and useful in the critical task of achieving longer-term and durable sobriety.

Clients need not have a music background to benefit from music therapy. About 25% of prior Recovery Unplugged patients have had some significant background in music creation and performance. Most of the treatment program day at Recovery Unplugged has some significant component of music. The morning dedication group does not start with 12 step quotations, but with a number of carefully chosen, or requested or newly written songs about change. Many treatment programs utilize a life Time Line construction to track triggers and use patterns, among other things. At Recovery Unplugged, the patients construct a life song time line they associate with stages and phases of their life and addiction history. Of course, there are some classic music therapy tools, such as drum circle and “singing bowls” meditation- but more importantly, music is woven into the individualized treatment plan. For example, most patients develop an entire song list of music they have identified to reduce anxiety or that they associate with hope. There is a board-certified music therapist on fulltime clinical staff as well as a host of recovering performers providing frequent writing and performing groups and small concerts- including co-founder and rock music legend, Richie Supa.

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