

From Inside the Walls
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SMART Recovery[®] News & Views Newsletter
by Barry DeLeon

A wise man once said you can define the full measure of a man by the way he handles adversity. One might judge the measure of a man by the way he handles incarceration. Today, incarcerated individuals just don't measure up to this standard. I think that although people are themselves the problem, they are also the solution. To increase self-esteem, boost self-worth, and promote self-determination, incarcerated individuals must be taught to have "Unconditional Self-Acceptance" and to help them define and identify their "Purpose and Meaning" in life.

It's amazing the clarity of my life which has come through incarceration. Actually, living in a 6 x 9 cell, facing years of isolation from family, friends and society in general has given me an incredible self realization of what challenges life has to offer and what failure has to teach. Incarceration is such a challenge.

The ordeal of being in prison does not have to be fatal, the end all. Rather, it should become one's beginning. One must never forget that there is a reason to go through an ordeal -- some value to be found in adversity. We gain depth. We find inner strength.

Rational thinking and contemplating the consequences of every action and the benefit of every decision will truly shape the rest of my life. I can find true success from this failure. SMART[®] has taught me this.

REBT, the components, tools and techniques which make it up, and the positive ideas upon which SMART Recovery[®] is based can be a valuable piece of the puzzle which can reduce recidivism. Society could obtain true crime-minimization instead of lock-em-up forever law and order. The current "solution" is "crime reaction" rather than "crime prevention," and preventing crime can be achieved in great amounts by preventing released offenders from re-offending. I believe in what Chief Justice Warren Burger once said that "to confine offenders without trying to change them is an expensive folly."

Some of the behaviors which I see as replete among those throughout jails and prisons is low self-esteem, lack of self-worth and a complete absence of a meaning or a purpose in one's life. Many that I've met these past three years seem to have grown up utterly disregarded – by fathers who disappeared, mothers who were overwhelmed; by teachers with overcrowded, unmanageable classrooms; by a world in which they learned from TV and the rap of the street that they don't count for much. Crime gathers for them, if only momentarily, an impressive audience. The Judge who sentences them, the lawyer who visits, the cops who hunt them – even in some cases the victim who, for an endless, terrified moment could not discount them. Then they find themselves in ruts so deep that there's not a ladder in the world tall enough for them to climb out.

So, the aggrandizing lifestyle that they believed to be a statement of what life was about is gone and what's left is emptiness, loneliness, and uncertainty about the future. This is the tangential point where offenders must be taught how to think thereby changing the way they act. They must be shown how to pull themselves out of their hopeless outlook to believe that life matters and that their life has worth. If one values his own life, he will be more likely to value others.

Unconditional Self-Acceptance is one way to begin the process of enhancing one's relationship with self and others. That is, humans, if they choose, can accept themselves unconditionally as having worth by virtue of the fact that they exist, despite shortcomings, mistakes (which in my case, brought about incarceration), or bad behaviors. Offenders especially must gain a positive sense of "self" rather than accepting themselves as being totally bad or worthless. Once an individual accepts him/herself as having worth, they'll be inclined to invest in their self and define a meaning and a purpose in their life. At that point, rehabilitation and recovery is possible.

Recovery, I believe, is being able to reflect on your past and how it contributed to your identity, both positive and negative, without allowing the negative to control your present life. It is finding new meaning in your present life by ridding yourself of the contamination of the past. It means claiming your circumstances instead of letting your circumstances claim you. I remember my Mother once saying to me, "How sad would be November if we had no knowledge of the spring." I often ask myself how many people are there in prison who really believe in their future rather than are just indifferent to what each day might bring, much less each year. I often wonder how many could find meaning and purpose in their incarceration itself and truly realize that, like my Mother's saying, "spring is ahead".

Editor's Note: Barry would welcome your letters and thoughts regarding this and previous "From Inside the Walls" columns. Letters may be addressed to: Barry DeLeon, #131953, G.S.Y.C.F., PO Box 11401, Yardville, NJ 08620.