

From Inside the Walls
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by Barry DeLeon

"Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest." Mark Twain

In reviewing my column from the April 1998 News & Views, I sensed that readers might interpret my position as being that of one who finds himself in prison yet feels he does not belong there: that using the pronouns he and they, rather than I and we, expresses a position of separation; that I might consider myself different than others in prison. The only veritable difference between myself and most others that I've met is my incessant desire to better myself, make rational thinking second nature, and to turn my life around. The most important aspect of anyone's life, whether in prison or not, is to have meaning and purpose in their life. For those of us incarcerated, which make up the setting from where I obviously write, finding meaning and purpose in our incarceration is the first step in finding meaning and purpose in our lives.

I've written before about lack of opportunities for those in prison to address their addictive behaviors and compulsive thinking. I've expressed feelings that the prison system merely holds a man, punishes a man and often defeats a man without changing a man. One must desire to change for change to take place. One must make positive changes happen but the programs must be offered for those who are willing to make the effort. SMART Recovery[®] is such a program.

Psychologist Albert Ellis started a revolution in the way people solve their emotional problems, overcome problem habits, and gain control over their lives when he developed Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) (SMART Recovery[®]: A Sensible Primer, page 23). SMART Recovery[®] can help a person develop a belief system. This will empower us all to improve our lives and the lives of those around us.

REBT is a proven method that develops the basics of a belief system. Our beliefs significantly govern our feelings, actions and life, and in most cases, directly contributed to causal factors behind most of us behind bars ending up here. Now considering the outcome, it's probable that our belief system needs adjustment. REBT helped me overhaul my belief system and this is why I have been so supportive of SMART Recovery[®], which uses a simple ABC method as a pathway to positive change. SMART Recovery[®] can help many others in jails and prisons to quit addictive behaviors and avoid returning to drug use or crime. That is why I believe so wholeheartedly in SMART Recovery[®]. It is simple. One doesn't have to learn the psychology behind REBT. The simple ABC method gives participants true steps to change. There are many good programs to help one achieve life-changing behavior adjustments, but for many who are incarcerated, the need for a basic yet effective self-help program is essential.

The ABC system is simple with effective possibilities. A stands for an activating event, something that has sufficient intensity to provoke an emotional or behavioral response. Prison has more activating events than an hour has minutes. B stands for our beliefs – our responses to activating events come from our beliefs. The evaluations we come up with and the instructions we give ourselves strongly influence how we feel and what we do. Rational beliefs are critical in prison because being influenced by negativity is self-defeating, especially to one who is trying to change one's life. C stands for consequences and in prison, like in society, they come in different forms: behavioral consequences and emotional consequences. If one feels disrespected by another prisoner, has an urge to assault him and believes he must give in to that urge, then assaults him and goes to lock-up, he has behavioral consequences. When one thinks he can't stand another's view of not standing up to disrespect and honorable tension of walking away, and feels a sense of necessity to fight, he has an emotional consequence.

It is too simplistic to say that expanding SMART Recovery[®] in prisons will be a cure-all for recidivism. But the prison environment is plagued with dysfunctional belief systems perpetuated by our talk-show culture and the negativity that surrounds prisoners, not to mention addictive compulsive personalities. If we can show these men a simple, proven technique that can become second nature, then there will be more positive reactions to the many activating events that occur in this setting. It will become a safer place for prisoners and staff. It will become a place to turn one's life around rather than the proverbial end of the road.

For most behind bars, there is little contemplation of consequences, especially for those who have centered their lives on alcohol and drugs. It's widely accepted that up to 80% of incarcerated individuals have some sort of drug or alcohol history. So, there is an enormous advantage to addressing this issue in prisons, where drug and alcohol is not supposed to be as readily available and there is the "freedom" incentive to change. At this point the benefit of change is not remote or uncertain because slamming gates and barbed wire are a constant reminder as to why change is appropriate.

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.