

President's Column

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A 2020 Vision for SMART Recovery

Growing our organization has been a slower process than most of us would like. We are a stable organization which celebrates this month 5 years of operation under the name SMART Recovery(. But we continue to be dwarfed by AA's 96,000 meetings worldwide, not to mention the thousands of meetings sponsored by approximately 300 additional 12-step organizations.

How can we stay motivated under these circumstances? I have several suggestions, and they all involve having a clear and long-term vision of where we are headed. 2020 vision is an eye doctor's standard. Perhaps there is some guidance in this standard for us.

In the approximately 15 years I have been in the field of addiction treatment, I have witnessed substantial change. But because much change has been needed, I estimate that it may be about 20 more years before US addiction treatment is where it needs to be. Despite the well-deserved US reputation for sophistication in many endeavors, addiction treatment is not one of them. Other countries set the pace that the US needs to follow.

What will US addiction treatment and support look like in 20 years, if all goes well? Of particular interest to us is that it will be a diverse affair, not like the present, where 93% of treatment programs, and possibly an even higher percentage of support groups, are 12-step oriented. In 20 years SMART Recovery(will have grown dramatically. I will optimistically estimate that our groups will number 20,000. Other groups, like Women for Sobriety or Moderation Management, will also have grown, and groups not in existence today may also be present.

I believe that 12-step groups will also have contracted, because their attendance now is inflated by a phenomenon called path dependence. Path dependence refers to the fact that for now 12 step groups are the easiest to attend because these are the groups most others attend. Once some product or service establishes itself as a standard in a field, it becomes entrenched there not because it is necessarily best, but because there is safety and convenience in doing what others do. Many have suggested that hi tech products are excellent examples of this phenomenon. On the basis of ease of use and sophistication, most users would probably choose an Apple computer. But most personal computers run Windows, because using Windows makes it easier to work with other users. In a world of uncertainty we are desirous of standards, even if the standards aren't the best.

In the case of 12-step groups, they are the easiest to attend because there are more of them, and flipping it around, there are more of them because they are the easiest to attend. I often tell legal authorities that if someone wants to attend SMART Recovery(instead of 12-step, it's a sign of motivation not resistance, because it takes more effort to attend SMART Recovery(. First the individual had to find us, and then get to a meeting. Although there is a 12-step meeting probably within a few blocks (in any metropolitan area), the SMART Recovery(meeting is likely to be at a distance, if it's there at all.

A significant number of 12-step attendees are there to get a court card signed, which provides verification to the court of their attendance. If there were 96,000 SMART Recovery(meetings in the US, most of these individuals would attend SMART Recovery(. The court ordered don't care as much about the program as they do about how convenient it is.

As SMART Recovery(increases in number of meetings, there will come a point when it is just about as easy to attend SMART Recovery(as it is 12-step. Convenience (a form of cost) is a factor in any decision. When convenience is about equal, other factors become significant. Under these circumstances, SMART Recovery's(program will appeal to many, and we will see a major increase in membership. We might at that point also take the lead and stop signing court cards. When a 12-step group signs a court card it is essentially an anti-trust practice, because it makes it extremely difficult for a smaller organization to overcome the inconvenience factor. As stated, those who attend SMART Recovery(now are highly motivated, but not everyone checking out support groups is.

So this is my 2020 vision for SMART Recovery(: 20 more years, 20,000 meetings, with the major increase in meetings happening later rather than sooner, when the gradual increase in meetings eventually brings attending them into a convenience zone such that individuals can easily choose a meeting on the basis of the program, not the address.

Given that 20 years is a fairly long time away, this is a good time to remind you of the 4th point of the SMART Recovery(4 point program, balancing momentary and enduring satisfactions. For those of us who are still around to watch the transition of SMART Recovery(into a "major player," I expect the satisfaction will be high. In the meantime, there remains the satisfaction of the personal encounters we have with the many individuals we are serving already.