Outpatient therapy: peer pressure used to aid drug abusers

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Odyssey House says we see ourselves better in the eye of a brother. Therefore, the brother must open his eyes and speak honestly about what he sees.

In Odyssey's program for drug abusers, patients are expected to help each other shape up by calling it as they see it. Odyssey uses peer pressure to help drug abusers turn their lives around.

Peer pressure is integral to the outpatient program at Odyssey House Shreveport, 1540 Irving Place.

Twenty-five people go there once a week for group therapy supervised by the Odyssey staff. Male and female, they are expected to confront themselves and each other openly and uncompromisingly in the three-hour sessions.

According to director Peter Bunce, the in-patients have a drug problem but do not require the security of a residential therapeutic unit such as Odyssey has in New Orleans. They are capable of functioning on jobs or in classrooms, he explained.

"These are indicators that they do not need the protection of the therapeutic community to work on their problems," said Bunce. "As out-patients they can do one or the other in their own time and meanwhile get the counseling they need."

Paul Kopacz, Odyssey paramedical, said the program can be useful to parents who cannot afford private therapy.

The outpatient program is in addition to Odyssey's ongoing in-patient program for drug abusers. They are sent to the New Orleans residential facility for treatment and rehabilitation. In late July, 23 Shreveport-inducted abusers were in treatment there.

The out-patients come to Odyssey voluntarily or through the courts. About 80 percent are on probation for drug-related offenses. They are mostly "poly-drug abusers," ages 17 to 35.

These days, Kopacz explained, the drug scene is characterized by the simultaneous or sequential use of legally manufactured medicinal drugs, often mixed with alcohol. "Poly-drug abuse is what we're seeing now."

Kopacz said Odyssey is seeing a lot of "needle freaks" today. He was referring to heroin, "Needle freaks" about up with amphetamines.

Drug abusers must have a full-time job or be in school to be in the outpatient program. They also must be drug-free. To make sure they are, Odyssey requires urine specimens three times a week. It also requires the out-patients to pay for the urine screening at LSU Medical Center.

They follow the same line of rehabilitation as the residential therapeutic community in New Orleans. They are expected to advance through levels of emotional growth until judged capable of leading self-supporting drug-free lives. The course runs 18 months.

"Odyssey treats the underlying problem that drug abuse presents," Bunce said. "We use behavior modification and peer pressure in the early stages, psychotherapy in the latter."

Out-patients start with evaluation and orientation. During the first 30 to 60 days they are given a physical examination and a battery of psychological tests. Odyssey determines whether they really want to change, and they learn how Odyssey deals with that.

The tests, as well as treatment, are assigned by Dr. Pat Sutker, drugs researcher and diagnostician, who flies in from North Carolina. Dr. George Siden, local psychiatrist, advises Odyssey Shreveport on implementing the treatment.

Siden meets with the staff two hours a week and sees patients as needed, Bunce reported. Like Sutker, he is a paid consultant.

The second phase (Level 2) introduces out-patients to the group process. The purpose is to produce a secure relationship with others.

"We're dealing with a problem of isolation, of alienation," Bunce commented. "Here, we're trying to move them out of that."

Odyssey gives three months to this phase, said Bunce. It follows with six months of intensive group therapy, testing the question, "Can I change?" This is Odyssey's Level 3: the responsive stage. The patient has committed himself to getting well; here is where he shows whether he can pull it off.

At this stage he is supposed to learn to use group therapy in setting his goals toward a drug-free future. The group helps him set those goals and work on his problem. Level 3 is supervised by Patricia Malone, a part-time counselor with a master's degree in social work.

Bunce is in charge of Level 4, the re-entry phase. The ex-addict has completed treatment, but he is not yet ready to go on his own. For the in-patient, emerging from residential treatment, this is the halfway stage. He is given a certificate but not set free. Bunce said the in-patient needs this time to reorient himself to society, to test whether he can succeed outside the rehabilitation program.

Inpatient or outpatient, when Odyssey decides a former drug abuser can go the rest of the way on his own, he is graduated from the rehabilitation program.