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Substance Abuse and Deaf People

Contributed by Jackie Schertz

We have every reason to believe that alcoholism and drug addiction is at least as common among deaf as among hearing people. Deaf children seldom participate in meaningful drug abuse prevention programs in school. Many deaf students have one or more of the well researched risk factors for drug abuse—school failure, low self esteem, child abuse and neglect, alienation from the family, and the expectation of unemployment. In spite of the progress generated by the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there may be no minority group in the U.S. today having less access to tax supported and private alcohol and drug abuse treatment than deaf people. This is a major concern for deaf addicted job seekers who cannot benefit from ADA Title I job discrimination protections unless they are in a drug abuse treatment program.

Incidence

If the incidence of alcoholism and drug addiction is roughly the same among deaf and hearing Americans, it is estimated (McCrone, 1994) that there are approximately:

- Over 28 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the U.S.
- 200,000 deaf alcoholics
- 3,505 deaf heroin addicts
- 31,915 deaf cocaine users
- 5,105 deaf crack users
- 97,745 deaf marijuana users

Substance Abuse Warning Signs

The deaf addicted individual may:

1. neglect his or her health.
2. frequently miss school or work.
3. be losing weight without trying.
4. have trouble handling relationships.
5. have trouble handling responsibility.
6. have explosive bouts of anger.
7. have physical symptoms like red eyes, dilated pupils, constricted pupils, sleepiness, chronic runny nose, and/or needle scars.
8. be socially withdrawn.
9. try to borrow money for drugs.
10. have memory problems.

Barriers to Treatment

What are some of the major obstacles to meaningful accessibility for deaf people needing drug abuse and alcoholism treatment?

- First, there can be a stigma assigned to deaf people with alcoholism and drug abuse problems by the deaf community. This perception of “moral weakness” can lead to a reluctance among deaf alcoholics and addicts to come forward and seek treatment.
- Deaf people are widely distributed geographically. This can mean that deaf alcoholics and addicts live very far away from treatment centers.
- It is not appropriate to advertise addiction treatment program accessibility for deaf people simply because the program installs a TTY. Meaningful accessibility to treatment for deaf addicts focuses on results. Do deaf clients have at least the same probability of success in treatment as hearing clients?
- In addition, TV public service announcements about drug abuse treatment are not always captioned. Radio announcements are of no use to deaf people. Addiction treatment programs trying to properly serve deaf alcoholics and addicts find that there are still inadequate numbers of certified Sign Language interpreters and counselors trained in deafness and the communication methods of deaf people.
- Lastly, there are still very few specialty addiction treatment programs in the U.S. for deaf people only. In the Rochester area, we are the exception. The John L. Norris Addiction Treatment Center is an inpatient facility for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. (716) 461-0410 V, (716) 461-4253 TTY

Deaf Consumer Advocacy Strategies for Effective Addiction Treatment

Deaf Citizens can make a difference in fighting for effective addiction treatment for deaf addicts. What can be done?

- Don't judge deaf people seeking help for addiction problems. Help out. Offer to help them get addictions treatment. Don't cause deaf people with addiction problems to hide out because they fear being labeled as bad people in the Deaf community.
- Contact Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) by relay. The number for AA Central Office is (716) 232-6720. Ask for a listing of interpreted meetings.
- Contact Substance and Alcohol Intervention Services for the Deaf (SAISD). (716) 475-4978 V/TTY. SAISD works with public and private addictions treatment programs locally by providing them with information and training about deaf people, American Sign Language, the culture of deaf people, and resources for interpreting services. SAISD also does assessments and makes referrals.