

The Teen Challenge Approach to Treating Drug Addiction

By David Batty

As we start this discussion of addiction today, I hope we can find some common ground as we look for ways to help those who are struggling with addiction.

We all recognize that there are different schools of thought on the causes and treatment of addiction. Some believe there is a medical cause for addiction which requires a medical treatment. The psychological approach is very common in many drug treatment programs. Another approach is the educational treatment model. Others say that addiction at its root is a spiritual problem and a spiritual solution is the best way to help a person find freedom from their addiction.

The Medical Model

The medical model of treating addiction starts with the premise that there is a medical cause to drug addiction and a medical solution or treatment for addiction. Today Methadone is one of the most common medical treatments for drug addiction. Initially this was used as a means of detoxing off of other drugs such as heroin or cocaine. But this medical treatment as morphed from detox treatment to “Methadone maintenance.” When used as a maintenance treatment, it builds on the premise that drug addiction is a chronic disease from which one is never fully cured, and just like other diseases, it will require medical treatment for the rest of one’s life.

Extensive research continues on the medical effects of drugs on the brain, and there are a variety of perspectives on the best medical treatments to use on drug addiction. It is important to not assume that the entire medical community is unified around one medical approach to treating addiction.

Today there are a variety of medical treatments used in medical detox facilities to help wean a person of whatever they are addicted to—alcohol, heroin, cocaine, prescription drugs, OxyContin (oxycodone), methamphetamines nicotine, etc.

Today in many countries high risk teens are being treated with different mood-altering drugs as a means of treating their problems, going far beyond the scope of simply treating an addiction.

The Psychological Model

The psychological model of treating addiction builds on the premise that there are psychological causes to addiction and consequently there are psychological solutions or strategies that can be used to treat addiction. A large number of the drug treatment programs today are built on this treatment model.

One of the common practices in a program using this treatment model is to look at what they do in their intake process. One of the first things they do is a detailed psycho-social history on the addict. Their perspective is—how can we help you unless we first understand what are the problems in your life. Group and individual counseling provide the core treatments for those in this type of a program.

The Educational Model

The educational model builds on the premise that given the right information, a person will make the right choices for their life. The educational model is often used in the prevention phase of addressing drug abuse. But it also is frequently used in many drug treatment programs. In these programs, classes focus on helping the addict understand how drugs affect the mind and the body of a person.

These classes have had an unintended consequence on many who have attended programs using this model. Many addicts have left these programs stating that they learned new ways to get high, and came away better equipped to be a drug addict than when they entered.

There are two significant problems with the educational model of treating addiction.

1. Education does not provide the motivation to change.
2. Education does not provide the power to change.

Education by itself rarely provides motivation for a drug addict to change. Their path into addiction was not carefully chosen with logical, sound reasoning. To simply give an addict information on how to overcome an addiction is rarely effective. The power of addiction is such that logic alone will not change their behavior.

Even if one is motivated to change, education does not provide the power to change—particularly for a drug addict. The bondage of addiction is not overcome through a magic wand solution of information. The power to change for an addict in most cases will need to come from some other source than education.

In many countries, drug prevention education which starts at an early stage, before the child has started to use drugs, has been very successful. However, if the drug prevention training does not start until the person has already become an addict, then it will likely see very little success in helping that addict overcome his or her addiction.

The Christian Discipleship Model

Teen Challenge has over its 50 year history used the Christian discipleship model in treating addiction. For those who have worked in the secular drug treatment field, they may have never heard of this model of treating addiction. Further, they may be quick to reject it as a legitimate option in treating addiction. However, Teen Challenge today is one of the world's largest

programs in treating drug addiction with over 1,100 centers in 91 countries, with over 26,000 beds in their drug recovery programs. The 10s of thousands of addicts who have found freedom from their addiction at Teen Challenge provide a preponderance of evidence that this treatment model is worthy of consideration.

A broad overview of the Christian discipleship model offers several distinctives that differentiate it from the other three models. The Christian discipleship model builds on the premise that the key to overcoming an addiction is to establish a personal relationship with God. God will provide the power to overcome the addiction. The next steps involve learning how to take the truths in the Bible and apply them on a daily basis, developing new life skills. This model involves putting out of one's life certain practices, attitudes, and beliefs, and developing a whole new way of living.

The typical Teen Challenge residential program is about 12 months long, in a structured and restricted setting. The Christian discipleship model is built on a holistic approach to helping a person, and not just focused on the addiction issue.

Is drug addiction a disease?

There are some who do not agree that drug addiction is a disease. Others are strongly committed to the position that drug addiction is a disease. Arguing about whose position is right and who is wrong is not my goal today. Can we set aside that disagreement for a few minutes and agree on this—no matter what is the root cause of addiction—a medical problem or a spiritual problem—addiction causes damage. Addiction causes incredible damage, not only in the life of the addict, but often great damage in the lives of people around the addict.

Even if God himself came down here today and gave us the whole truth on the causes of addiction, and pointed out who is right and who is wrong on the debate—it would not change the damage that addiction is causing in the lives of millions of people around the world today.

The Teen Challenge Model of dealing with addiction

Teen Challenge started working with addicts over 50 years ago in New York City, and today there are over 1,100 Teen Challenge centers in 91 countries around the world. In the last 50 years we have seen tens of thousands of drug addicts find freedom from addiction. Decades later, most of these individuals are continuing to live productive, meaningful lives in society, free from the destructive damage their addiction caused earlier in their lives.

Teen Challenge from the start has taken a holistic approach to helping drug addicts, recognizing that there is a medical component to their problem, and a psychological component, and a nutritional component, and a social component, a physical component, and last but not least, a spiritual component. Teen Challenge has developed an approach to treating addiction that integrates a variety of strategies that bring into consideration a wide spectrum of causes and treatments for helping each person get on a path that moves them to healthy living. When I say

healthy, I mean that in the broadest sense of the word—where they are experiencing life to the full potential.

Though Teen Challenge is most known for its work with drug addicts, we do not restrict our focus to drug addiction. Our approach is to address all the contributing factors that are affecting this person, not just their drug addiction. This includes other addictions, the need for remedial education, family counseling, and addressing their criminal background issues, and much more.

At Teen Challenge we see addicts coming from all kinds of backgrounds with all kinds of damage. Our experience has raised the question, “Is addiction the root problem, or is it a symptom of other problems?” For example, over 90% of the women coming to Teen Challenge have a background of sexual abuse, and in many of the men’s centers, 75% of the men have a similar background of abuse. This one issue by itself causes catastrophic damage in the lives of these abuse survivors. Many of the women started their drug use after being sexually abused. Drugs became a means of self-medicating the emotional pain caused by the sexual abuse. To simply deal with the drug addiction issue is to miss the other major life-controlling issue of sexual abuse in their background.

At Teen Challenge we believe that the spiritual component is one of the most important parts of the solution for the addicted person. If the spiritual component is ignored or rejected, it dramatically reduces the success potential for that person to overcome the destructive elements of their addiction.

At Teen Challenge we do not see the spiritual component as a “magic wand solution.” We do not offer a quick fix that can solve one’s problems with a magic wave of the hand. What we offer is a spiritual component that is based on two major steps. Step one is to admit one’s need for God’s help, and ask for his help. We call this step “developing a personal relationship with God.” We also make it clear to those who come to Teen Challenge that we use the Bible as our source of spiritual truth—not any or all religions of the world.

The second step of the spiritual component we call “Christian discipleship training”. This involves taking the teachings from the Bible and learning how to apply them in one’s daily living. Our focus is not on “addiction education” but on “healthy living education.” We have classes that deal with attitudes, temptation, personal relationships with others, growing through failure, love and accepting myself, family relationships, and much more. These classes focus on healthy living, which for many of those in Teen Challenge is radically different from the dysfunctional family setting where they grew up.

This “Christian discipleship model” focuses on getting them on a new path which will take them away from the destructive elements of their lifestyle when they were living in their addiction. At Teen Challenge we teach them the importance of developing new boundaries in their life. It is not just about stopping destructive, dysfunctional behaviors—it is also about developing new

and healthy living patterns. These new healthy living patterns are not based on what society says is “normal” but on what the Bible says are the characteristics of healthy living.

It would take a much more detailed consideration of this to explore the full implications of the Teen Challenge approach to working with drug addicts, but let me point out the results. Over the past 50 years, tens of thousands of addicts from young teenagers to those 65 and older have come to Teen Challenge and found freedom from their addiction. For those who may disagree with the Teen Challenge approach to treating addiction, they need to consider the results.

In 1976 the US Federal Government published the first independent study of Teen Challenge, looking at those who had been out of Teen Challenge for 7 years. Of those who graduated in a one year period, 97% of these were interviewed and administered a urinalysis drug test. Over 70% were confirmed to be drug free, and the extensive interview of these Teen Challenge graduates indicated that they were functioning in society as productive citizens, in sharp contrast to the lifestyle they were living before entering Teen Challenge.

Since 1976 other independent studies have been done in the USA of Teen Challenge programs, and similar results have been observed.

For more information and sources for Teen Challenge research, contact: DBattyTC@gmail.com or visit www.iTeenChallenge.org

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