

One size does not fit all in drug rehabilitation

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With the continuing interest in ‘celebrity rehab’ it is timely to make some distinctions between types of drug treatment – because in this case, one size definitely does not fit all.

Tuning in to pay TV will provide an opportunity to see a stream of ‘celebs’ as they go into ‘rehab’, sometimes in plush surroundings with all the benefits that money can buy. When they fail and return to substance use, there is an assumption that treatment doesn’t work – that it’s a waste of time and money.

Well not all treatment has to cost the amounts which the celebs are willing to fork out, and arguably the ones that don’t cost that amount probably have a better success rate.

The treatment programs we see featured on TV and in the popular press are usually around 28 days long, and are often favoured by people looking for quick solutions to difficult problems. They will rarely provide the outcomes needed for ongoing recovery.

On average, short term residential treatment programs are of 28-56 days duration. Programs of this length are often provided within the private health sector. Outcome success will be dependent on a number of issues – the severity of the substance use and dependence, the age of the person, co-occurring problems and the level of support and aftercare following the period of residential treatment. In the big picture of addiction, 30 days is just long enough to dry out, get the drugs and alcohol out of the system and only scratch the surface of living without addictive substances and behaviours.

Studies have consistently shown that length of time a substance user stays in a treatment program is one of the most important predictors of successful treatment outcome. In this regard, research has demonstrated that better outcomes are associated with treatments that last for 90 days or more.

Longer term residential treatment is typically 60 or more days, varying by 30 day increments (such as 60 days, 90 days, 120 days, etc. and usually up to one year). Residential treatment of this kind, particularly within a therapeutic community setting, is generally the most effective because of the longer time spent within the residential treatment setting, the period of abstinence from illicit drugs and alcohol and the continuation of a prosocial lifestyle for an extended period of time. It is particularly recommended for those who have more severe dependency issues. For example, someone who has had a dependency for 10 or more years, including during the younger and more developmental stages of life, would be a perfect candidate for a longer term residential therapeutic community.

Some programs are based on 12-step philosophy, and certainly the ones the celebs head to often fall into this category. AA and NA have been difficult to research – they don’t lend themselves well to randomised control trials. Nevertheless, research both here and overseas has shown benefits for people undertaking 12-step programs. For instance, an Australian longitudinal study showed that 40% of new members had maintained at least weekly self-help attendance at 12-month follow-up, resulting in a four-fold reduction in alcohol and drug use and improvements in social support.

While all residential treatment services have some commonalities, there are a range of program-types coming from different philosophical underpinnings. Generally, programs incorporate therapeutic and educational interventions which include living skills training, parenting skills, case management and counselling using a variety of therapeutic interventions, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or Motivational Interviewing, all of which have proven validity in working with substance-using clients. Most programs would also use groupwork as part of a structured program.

Therapeutic communities do this within the context of a program in which the 'community' is the method – ie. they emphasise a holistic approach to treatment and address the psychosocial and other issues behind substance abuse. They also recognise intergenerational issues and incorporate families into the treatment process.

If we accept that drug dependency is a chronic illness, and similar to other chronic illnesses, relapses may occur during or after successful treatment episodes, then we must also accept that prolonged treatment, as well as multiple episodes of treatment, will be needed to achieve long-term abstinence (if this is the goal) and fully restored functioning. Participation in self-help support programs during and following treatment will assist in maintaining abstinence.

One size does not fit all in drug rehabilitation. Pharmacotherapies will play a role, as will 12-step and residential treatment options.

Recovery from dependence is a long-term process and may require frequent or repeated opportunities for treatment. All treatment opportunities are therefore beneficial – and in Australia we are lucky to have a range of options across the treatment spectrum.

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