

Treatment centers change with the times

As more kinds of addictions become known, more people admit what they are going through.

By KENDRA GENTRY Jan. 15, 2007

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Thirty-five years of alcoholism cost Ed two marriages, friends and his three sons, he said.

He became the kind of guy who went from couch to couch in his friend's places. He cursed God. He drank a half case of beer a day and sometimes suffered violent blackouts.

"My addiction came first, before everyone and everything," he said.

By the time he got help, Ed was living above a bar. He said it took his boss finding him at home on the floor, so drunk that he couldn't even drink water, before he ever checked himself into rehab.

Ed, whose last name has been withheld for privacy, has now been sober for five years. He credits other recovering addicts for his salvation.

Addicts, though, need more than just mentors nowadays, doctors say. They also need professionals — medical doctors and psychologists — who keep up with the many changes in the field, according to William Lorman. He's a doctor at the Livengrin Foundation, a private drug and alcohol treatment center in Bensalem.

He said the types of drugs being abused have changed. The typical addict has changed. And even the people who help the addicts kick the habit have changed. To keep up with the trends and increase in clients, treatment facilities also have changed.

The Pennsylvania Association of County Drug and Alcohol Administrators estimates that approximately 38,000 people in Bucks County need drug and alcohol treatment. In 2004-05, 3,982 Bucks residents were admitted for either drugs or alcohol, the Pennsylvania Department of Health said.

Livengrin, which celebrated its 40th anniversary last year, has evolved from using mostly former addict volunteers treating male alcoholics to a staff of professionals working with men and women alcoholics and drug addicts, many with mental health problems, according to Rick Pine, Livengrin's president and CEO.

As more kinds of addictions became known and more attention was focused on addiction, more people came to admit what they were going through, said Keith Mason, a Livengrin employee. In response, professionals in drug and alcohol abuse had to swing open their doors wider, he said. And add more doors.

Livengrin just opened its fifth outpatient clinic in Middletown. The others are in Doylestown, Fort Washington, Allentown and Northeast Philadelphia. "We can't seem to run out of customers," Mason said.

THE CHANGES

Livengrin treated only male alcoholics when it opened in 1966. As time went on and more types of drugs and addictions surfaced, Livengrin broadened its treatment to accommodate new kinds of addicts.

In the '70s, alcoholics as well as people of both genders high on marijuana and cocaine were admitted, Mason said.

In the '80s, professionals such as doctors and lawyers started coming in for treatment, he said.

“It’s nothing new that a lawyer, doctor, etc., had pills in a desk drawer,” he said. “But now, TV, NPR [National Public Radio] and the media, which hired science writers, started talking about addiction and more people are admitting they have a problem.”

College students, housewives and teenagers also started to admit alcohol and drug abuse. And those treating the addicts have to keep up with what’s on the street, Mason said. Treatment and addiction are a parallel highway, Mason added.

Treatment centers are on one side, trying to catch up with the changes in drug culture — from marijuana to binge drinking, designer drugs and painkillers, Mason said. He said with each new addiction, new treatments have developed.

When people started abusing inhalants such as air fresheners or glues, Lorman said facilities had to look at how to treat addiction to over-the-counter products, which are easily accessible, especially to youth.

In recent years, facilities have started to treat addicts who also have mental health problems. Lorman said these patients require intensive treatment because they are more common to relapse or even leave a treatment facility.

THE MENTORS

Most of the first Livengrin staff members were volunteers who had completed rehab, Lorman said. Now most of the staff is made up of professionals who have formal training. Lorman said medical backgrounds, such as degrees in medicine and nursing, assist professionals when offering psychotherapy, prescribing medicine and facilitating the process of detoxification — cleansing the body of illegal drugs.

Allen and his family have been helped by both professionals and volunteers during rehab for decades.

Allen said alcoholism was a family affair. He said his mother eventually died of her addiction, while he, his son and his brother all battled the disease through rehabilitation — at least 30 days of clinical treatment and coaching from reformed addicts.

“Our recovery has changed the trend that may have gone back generations,” he said, adding that all three men are still sober.

And though professionals helped him, Allen said his mentor, a recovered addict, was the most vital difference in his recovery. Treatment professionals agree.

Lorman said mentors help patients “maintain continued sobriety” by sharing past experiences — pitfalls and triumphs.

That is why Allen gives back to those in need. The Doylestown resident is now a member of PRO-ACT, Pennsylvania Recovery Organization — Achieving Community Together. He meets with inmates at Bucks County prison to talk about their drug or alcohol related addictions and crimes.

Ed also said mentors offer a better insight into the recovery process than doctors can.

Ed began his sobriety in 2001, when he went to Good Friends, a halfway house for recovering male alcohol and drug users. He now spends much of his time at the Morrisville center talking about his alcohol and drug abuse with others. Ed also accompanies men to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in Lower Bucks.

And then there's John, who meets with Livengrin detox patients once a week.

"I come here because I don't want to be a drunk again," he said. "They help me more than I help them."

John, who said he's seen friends die from alcoholism, has been sober for decades. He said he remembers the day when he realized his drinking might land him in jail, a mental institution or the morgue.

"I have a disease that tells me I can drink and be OK," John said.

For the last two years, John said, he has been volunteering at Livengrin. He said that although recovery is a long, difficult process, the reward is being a healthier person — mentally, physically and spiritually.

"This is a marathon, not a sprint," he tells those in rehab.

IN BUCKS

John also tells patients that addiction doesn't discriminate — and troubles affect not only the abusers but their family and friends, a sentiment many public health experts echo.

The American Journal of Public Health estimates one in four families in the nation is affected by drug and alcohol abuse.

This statistic is one reason why Lorman said Livengrin also provides families of patients with education programs and therapy. Family support is critical to the recovery process, Lorman said.

Pat Benninger, a Yardley psychotherapist who has recovering clients, said individual therapy is another form of treatment that would help patients from relapsing. Each year, more local people become drug users and soon drug addicts, she said.

"Drug abuse in Bucks County is rampant and out of control," she said.

The county's growing addiction problem is a pressing issue, said state Rep. Gene DiGirolamo, R-18.

"Drug and alcohol addiction is the No. 1 problem that we face, not only in Bucks County, but nationwide, on a social level," he said.

DiGirolamo is lobbying to develop a state department that would specifically coordinate all of the drug and alcohol treatment and prevention programs in Pennsylvania. The department would also allocate funding to the programs. DiGirolamo said the department would increase awareness about the importance of drug and alcohol recovery because it would be just as prominent as the state Department of Health.

Ed, John and Allen agree with DiGirolamo's plan.

Together, the men have 57 years of sobriety.

John said he hopes the public realizes that drug and alcohol rehabilitation provides salvation for patients. He

said treatment is critical for society, too.

“It saves lives, jobs and marriages,” he said.