

Help in the World of Addiction

Peter McVerry SJ is a well-known social activist, who works on behalf of homeless people in Ireland. He writes about the harm reduction approach the Peter McVerry Trust takes to addiction.



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Pope's Intention: We pray that those suffering from addiction may find help in their need.

Why do some people become addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling or other things?

Every person has a story. Every person's life is a story, a story that is unique. Every story contains some pain, often the pain of bereavement, or perhaps of the breakdown of a relationship, the loss of employment or the loss of a home.

The story of each person who becomes addicted tells of a unique

path into addiction. In many cases, a person's story is full of pain with

which they have been unable to cope. Some stories tell of the loss of a loved one, a parent or young child. Other stories recount multiple childhood traumas, such as sexual abuse, violence, neglect; traumas that were never addressed.

The counselling that they required was not available, or came too late to rescue them from addiction. Some drifted into homelessness, another trauma to add to all the others. Some

end up in prison, yet another trauma.

Addiction can often be an attempt to escape from the reality of a life full of emotional pain, but in the longer term only becomes yet another trauma to be addressed.

Hence addiction is often only a symptom of much deeper problems, and those deeper problems have to be addressed if the addiction itself is to be addressed. Our experience is that simply detoxing someone from alcohol or drugs or gambling or other forms of addiction is rarely successful. In our detox centre, we strongly encourage people to go directly into our treatment centre on finishing the detox. There they will get the counselling that they need to address those deeper issues. Those who choose not to go into treatment will probably return again for another detox a few months later!

Need for Support

There are many forms of addiction. Gambling can be the most destructive of all, as it is very possible to spend one's whole weekly income in half an hour, leaving a family in dire economic distress. But it is drug and alcohol addiction that disturbs people most, as the behaviour of those under the influence of drink or drugs can be very threatening or frightening. Those with addictions are not bad people, though they may sometimes do bad things. They are people in need of help and support. Nothing prevents a person seeking help for their addiction more than the experience of being rejected and excluded by those

around them. There is a need to help the public understand the nature of addiction and the need to replace rejection by encouragement and support to seek treatment.

Need for Help

Many of those with addictions require professional help, but most treatment centres have long waiting lists. There is nothing more dispiriting for a person who wants to address their addiction than to be put on a three-month waiting list! If we are to help those with addictions we need a substantial investment of public resources in treatment programmes. For example, in 2005, in the mid-term review of the first Drug Treatment Strategy, it was recommended that 'appropriate treatment should be provided to problem drug users no later than four weeks after assessment'. Fifteen years later, this recommendation is still as aspirational as it was then. Indeed in many parts of the country, there is simply no treatment at all available for drug users.

Negative attitudes to those addicted, blaming them for the predicament they are in, reduce the pressure on government to provide more resources for treatment programmes. But it is in the interests of both the public and those addicted that treatment be more readily accessible. Less crime would be committed and so there would be less victims of crime, less hospital admissions and so less time spent on trolleys. And many who are addicted would become productive citizens and have their sense of self-esteem restored. 