

Barriers To Treatment and Recovery

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Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing face a number of barriers when seeking help and support for a substance abuse problem. A number of factors, some of which are listed below, can make it difficult for a person who is deaf or hard of hearing to access treatment services and to maintain a sober lifestyle upon completion of treatment.

Recognition of a problem

Within the Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities, there is a lack of awareness about the problem of substance abuse. Many individuals in these communities have not had access to the recent widespread efforts to educate people about the dangers of drug use and abuse. Public service announcements may not be full accessible. Education/prevention curricula in the schools has not accommodated the communication needs of deaf or hard of hearing children and have often been insensitive culturally. Because of the awareness lag, alcohol continues to maintain a protected status as compared to other drugs and the abuse of chemicals continues to carry a stigma which discourages individuals from admitting a problem. Naturally, as with any other minority community, these communities work to present a positive image and, in so doing, may be reluctant to admit to problems.

Confidentiality

For many years, a grapevine-like system of communication has kept deaf people informed of community news across the country. Frequently, deaf individuals who live in one area of the country socialize and communicate often with deaf individuals in other areas. Individuals from the Deaf Community often express concern that sharing information in treatment will mean putting one's life story into that grapevine. Resultant loss of respect and status in the Community is feared by many people who struggle with their chemical use. The confidentiality which is such an integral part of treatment conflicts with the grapevine part of the culture.

Lack of Resources

Deaf and hard of hearing individuals have few resources for help with alcohol and other drug problems. Few treatment programs exist which offer deaf and hard of hearing people the kinds of services necessary for them to access and benefit fully from the program. Services such as counselors fluent in American Sign Language, accessible wake up alarms, flashing lights and video phones are not commonly found in available programs. After treatment the picture remains bleak in many areas of the country where interpreted Twelve Step meetings are rare if they exist at all; where interpreters are

difficult to find or pay for; where the recovery person must resort to writing notes back and forth to communicate with his/her sponsor; and where few recovering community members are available to serve as role models and guides on the path to recovery.

Enabling

Often concerned people around the deaf or hard of hearing individual don't recognize the signs and symptoms of a chemical use problem or fail to confront the individual on his/her behavior. Behaviors related to the person's use sometimes end up being attributed to the hearing loss. Family and friends, in a sincere but misdirected effort to help, rescue these individuals from the consequences of their behavior, robbing them of the opportunity to see how their alcohol or other drug use negatively impacts their lives. Failing to hold an individual accountable only serves to prolong his/her willingness to seek help.

Funding Concerns

Programs that meet the communication and cultural needs of deaf and hard of hearing individuals and which supply the missing educational pieces related to substance abuse are expensive. They require specially trained staff that are difficult to find. Because of the low incidence nature of this group, local treatment is often not cost effective and often individuals must travel long distances to access appropriate treatment services, adding to the cost of the treatment. The funding issue is further complicated by a lack of understanding and the special needs on the part of funding sources, whether these are public or private funds. Frequently, the process for accessing funds presents another barrier by its complicated nature and the need for an interpreter.

Lack of Support in Recovery

Generally, pursuing a lifestyle free from mood altering substances means leaving old friends. Often, few deaf or hard of hearing people reside in the same geographical location, and at the present time, the numbers of deaf or hard of hearing people in recovery are also small. Even after completion of a treatment program, many people need and benefit from ongoing education and support from counseling, therapy and support groups. Finding this kind of service that is accessible to a deaf or hard of hearing individual presents an additional obstacle.

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