Recovery: What's a Coach Got To Do With It?

By Bill Ryan, BRI-1, RAS, CLC

In our world today, getting sober may be easier than staying sober. Talking about addiction recovery has finally come from under the rug, yet mainstream media’s sycophantic view of addiction is still focused on celebrity mistakes in tabloid and analysis on TV talk shows. It’s no secret that sensationalists sellers newspapers and increases ratings. Getting the attention funnel to recovery success stories still has a ways to go.

For any newcomer it’s the “living part,” after treatment or detox — where things get tricky. Fearing and becoming part of a 12 step fellowship has worked since Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson met some 70 years ago.

It was recommended when I first got sober to find a sponsor, and surprisingly, I didn’t know what that meant. I was hesitant to ask anyone, because my pride kept me from “looking at it if I didn’t know.” I soon overcome that mistake and was introduced to a woman whom I still consider instrumental in making my first few years of recovery bearable — and eventually fun. Today, in addition to having a 12 step sponsor, many people are choosing to enhance their growth with the help of a recovery coach.

We wanted to share with you reasons why someone might choose to have a coach through an interview with our colleague, Bill Ryan. Bill is not only a recovery coach and mentor, but also an addiction specialist and interventionist.

— Barbara Nicholson-Brown, Publisher

What is a Recovery Coach and how do they differ from a 12 step sponsor?

The first thing to understand is that a recovery coach is not affiliated with, or a representative of any 12 Step program. Coaches act as advocates for anyone and all programs, depending on the needs of the person — basically what they and the recovery team believe will work best for a successful start on the path to recovery.

Just like a sponsor, coaches are not paid to take anyone through the 12 Steps. Nor do they demand anyone work a program to stay clean and sober. This is a decision that must be made by the addict or alcoholic. If they truly want help, they will need to commit themselves to doing the work. Any responsible member of a 12 Step fellowship would never accept money to do what is clearly defined as service work.

It is the joy of giving back what has been so freely given to them. As is the case with many of the best addiction treatment professionals, a majority of recovery coaches are members of 12 Step programs themselves. They have a true understanding of abstinence and recovery based on their own experience. To quote a phrase from the basic text of Narcotics Anonymous: “the therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel.”

A sponsor is a person who has been abstinent for an extended period of time and Recovery Coach continued page 9

Some Reflections on Suffering

By Jeffery C. Friedman, MHS, LISAC

In 1911 the pioneering psychoanalyst Carl Jung wrote, “All neurosis is a substitute for genuine suffering.” Jung’s insight of a century ago may have more value for us today since the conditions from which the readers of TogetherAZ recover — addictions, chemical and behavioral addictions, depression, anxiety and trauma — are neuroses. Neuroses are a category of disorders that include the ways the nervous system can respond to stress and trauma as well as the myriad of maladaptive behaviors we resort to to re-route the pain of living. So often, the ways we choose to escape our unacceptable suffering end up creating a headline of trouble – a headline that can sweep away careers, families, even lives.

Some or later, many of us realize that our self-generated pain has reached an existential watershed. We see that our ego-generated suffering finally outweighs that of accepting the unavoidable pain of being human. This is the crossroads many of us find ourselves at as we take our first tentative steps in recovery. And if we are truly able to engage in the recovery process, and if we are gifted with a little grace, our suffering may be transmuted into spiritual awakening and emotional resilience. Such a transformation can occur in the context of treatment, a religious or spiritual experience, or by the mundane and gradual weaning of cocoon—step—by—step rehab the familiar to members of the 12 step groups.

Readers of TogetherAZ may think that a commentary on suffering is an unusual offering for a publication whose focus is hope and whose motto is “inspiring success on the road to recovery.” But suffering is a subject to which my mind often turns. I suspect that the reason I think about suffering so much is that I make my living as a behavioral therapist. I work in a field where I have regular contact with people who are in pain — and I am professionally obligated to help them find ways to suffer less. If there is a single skill that expresses the most useful art of helping others, it may be the ability to empower those with whom we work to find within themselves the flexibility, acceptance and courage to be with their suffering more presently and mindfully, and by taking this brave path, to suffer less. Those few who have a special genius for helping others this way are especially blessed. They make great therapists out.

Therapist Potency

Now I am a decent therapist but not a great one. I know this because I work with some truly gifted therapists and every day I see them doing something that I can never quite pull off. With their words, their silences, their gestures and their stillness; but ultimately by their wise, calm and powerful presence, these truly skilled ones create healing insight and heart’s ease in those with whom they work. After years of walking among and studying the qualities of great clinicians, I have come to a conclusion about what makes people like those so singular. It is something called therapist potency. All great healers have it and a rare few have it in spades.

In the field of counseling the term potency is used to describe a vital quality that Native Americans have for millennia known as medicine. Medicine, sometimes referred to as "mas," is a kind of intrinsic spiritual power, an insatiable wisdom and presence that is one with the possessor's being. Medicine, in this

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Our ability to live a mindful, measured and compassionate life, rather than what we think we might know about recovery, could be the key to empowering any care we might offer.

But, sadly, suffering does not always perfect the sufferer. We all know people who, overcome by their own pain, have turned only meaner and more irritable as a result. To achieve therapeutic potency, must those of us who enter the healing professions run the risk of being searched by our own pain? If the answer to this question is yes – and I think it might be – then it may become anyone whose calling is to help others to approach their own suffering mindfully and skillfully, and informed by a spiritual practice in which they have faith.

But for those who prefer a more vivid answer, the closest thing I have so far found came on an evening a few years ago when I was walking in front of the TV, not really paying attention. I was jolted into presence when I heard a guy speak a simple declarative sentence; but it is one that I will take to my grave. A San Francisco AIDS worker who had endured the worst years of that city’s HIV epidemic was being interviewed on the news. He had spent over a decade working 24-hour days giving palliative care to hundreds of dying AIDS patients. Soothing, soft-spoken, slight, he had to lean in a bit to catch his words. When the interview was over, with a tone of respect rare to news shows, asked the guy from what magic place he summoned the strength to sacrifice so much. Attending to the physical and emotional needs of terminally ill young men and women, he paused thoughtfully before saying in a calm and even voice, “Sometimes, when the heart breaks, it breaks open.”

I would love it if I could truly wrap my brain around that kind of spirit, that brand of bravery, selflessness and modernity. But then I’m the decanter — not the gifted liquor. The old Apache would have gotten it through. Separated by a century and a thousand miles, a warrior surely would have recognized another Guminoi knew among medicine when it saw it.

Since the mid-1970s, the Franciscan Renewal Center Counseling Ministry has provided counseling services through a staff of professional counselors, all of whom are licensed by the State of Arizona Board of Behavioral Health. Counselors take time to develop practices and values to counsel individuals, families and couples with one-on-one sessions, as well as facilitate support groups that deal with a variety of adult issues. Though Catholic in tradition, counseling services are not faith based, and people of all faith and people of no faith are welcome at The Casa. Individual sessions are available mornings, afternoons and evenings. Monday through Friday, and require an appointment. For all counseling services, a suggested donation is appreciated at the ministry's self-supporting. But no one is ever turned away due to an inability to pay. Grounded in the concepts of peace and personal dignity, the Franciscan Renewal Center Counseling Ministry provides an opportunity for its volunteers to serve others. As "wounded healers," the Ministry has the privilege and responsibility to actively participate in healing those who reach out for hope and care. The presence of this Ministry is a response to a call of solidarity with those who are poor and emotionally wounded.

See the next section on page 8 for a list of support groups currently being offered. For more information for you or your clients, call Monica through Friday evenings, 4:30 to 12:00 Noon, Judith McIlhenny, M.A., L.C.C., Counseling Director, 480-948-7460 x 13.