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FRIENDSHIP AS RESILIENCE

Learning from the challenges and triumphs experienced by people with addictions who are building supportive friend networks BY HEATHER DICKSON, RCC

“I’m not here to make friends; I just want to get some more tools to put in my toolbox.”

I work as a clinical addictions counsellor at a men’s treatment centre and, as the old saying goes, “If I had a nickel for every time I have heard a client say that, I’d be a millionaire.”

We work with men who either have never experienced the attunement necessary as children to understand bonding or who have been bullied and rejected during their formative years and have never had a friend. In adult life, they may have lost friends through their addiction or been marginalized for other reasons such as mental illness. The worst transgression of all is that as a result of some or all of the above experiences, these men have “unfriended” themselves. Their utter disgust, shame, and loathing for self as the result of behaviours during their substance use do not bode well for connection with

others. If you hate yourself, why on earth would you expect that anyone else would want to know you?

Sometimes the statement, “I’m not here to make friends” is a defense against wanting friends badly but fearing failure. The Adlerians would call this “buying double insurance.” If you don’t try, you can’t lose and you can’t get hurt. If you don’t make any friends, that’s fine because you didn’t want them anyway.

WHY ADDICTION BECOMES A FRIEND

When one of my sons was seven years old, he was feeling anxious about starting at a new school and making friends. His younger sister who was five years old said, “Don’t worry, you just have to walk up to someone and say ‘Hi’ and you’ve got a friend.” Theoretically, she had it right, but where do you begin when your life has been complicated by any or all of the above factors as is the case with my clients.

For the men who struggle with connection, it is not going to work for us simply to tell them to come and talk to us if they need support. We need to walk towards them.



I remember a past client who, when he came for his first appointment, fixed me with a rigid stare for the better part of 15 minutes. He finally asked, “Am I staring too much?” I had to admit that it was a bit unnerving, and he explained, “I’ve been in jail for the past two years, and I don’t know how much eye contact to make anymore so I’m practising.”

His comments helped me to appreciate what it must be like for the men who come through our doors lacking even the most basic connection skills. They come into an environment of 40-plus men and 20-plus staff and are told that making connection with others

will be one of the most significant things they can do for their recovery.

Their bravery astounds me. Many of them have lived in isolation for months, if not years, alone with their substances, trying to fill the void. And yet they stay. A strong part of our culture at the treatment centre is to welcome the new men as they sit in the lobby waiting for their intake. Many tell us later that this is the one thing that kept them sitting there. They felt welcomed and wanted. They helped me to understand that for the men who struggle with connection, it is not going to work for us simply to tell them to come and talk to us if they

need support. We need to walk towards them.

We are social beings, and if we don’t have the tools to meet those needs through connection with others, we will attempt to meet those needs in artificial ways through alcohol or drugs or sex or any of the other process addictions. As one client put it, “I took drugs because I didn’t have any friends. Then drugs became my friends. Then I no longer needed friends because I had drugs.”

When you have been bullied or rejected by the world, a slot machine or a case of beer can be an attractive alternative. It’s always there for you,

HOW TO BE A FRIEND

I offer this list, borne out of my own life experiences and from these warriors with whom I walk.

1

Be unapologetic about who you are.

2

Your authenticity will be appreciated.

3

Be open to finding friends in unexpected places.

4

Don't assume that you're the only one feeling nervous.

5

Try to alleviate someone else's anxiety.

6

Sometimes people won't be receptive; don't give up.

7

Show interest in others.

8

It's okay to make the first move.

9

If they don't "get you," they're not your people.

10

Believe in yourself.

never talks back, never puts you down, and never rejects you. Do those not sound like the qualities of a good friend?

But what once was a solution becomes a problem, and the chasm of loneliness widens even more. The superficiality and abusiveness of these "relationships" becomes apparent and, at that point, everyone else has gone home.

STARTING THE PROCESS

I honestly can't imagine how an individual in such despair has the strength to make it to our doors. On intake day, we see individuals waiting in the lobby with their worldly possessions, looking like deer caught in the headlights. One of the videos we show the men in their first week of treatment is Gabor Mate's "Brain Development and Addiction."¹ In this film, he speaks about certain aspects of brain circuitry that don't develop in infants if they have never had the presence of a non-stressed or loving caregiver. He further states that if that individual's only experience of that feeling of attunement comes through a drug, it will be very hard to give up the drug. He explains that what will be helpful to this individual in giving up these harmful drugs is an experience of love and connection — the exact lack of which led them to drugs in the first place.

So, when clients and staff stop and welcome these gentlemen and assure them they are in a safe place, we are, in a sense, beginning the process of re-parenting them in a positive way. They are often unrecognizable within a few days as their demeanour softens and their eyes brighten.

The other men in the house who have been there longer make it

okay to be frightened. It's not only okay to be vulnerable but is also highly recommended. Many men are confused by this approach. They are expecting to be treated with distrust and disrespect. Instead, as an old friend of mine used to say, they are "love bombed" when they walk through the door. Some are suspicious and in abeyance waiting for the other shoe to fall. One client got quite angry thinking our compassion and genuine caring was a sales pitch just to make ourselves look good — a profound illustration of how little regard he held for himself and how unaccustomed he was to being treated with respect and kindness.

THE MAN CODE

It is a generalization to say that men resist being vulnerable and are socialized to "suck it up" and get over it, but it is sure is common. In spite of themselves, the "I'm not here to make friends" crowd often begins to connect through an activity of some sort: a game of cards or pool or working out at the gym. Not an intimate tête-à-tête where they discuss their hurts and fears but a connection nonetheless.

In a Ted Talk by Justin Baldoni (the actor) entitled "Why I'm done trying to be man enough," he speaks about male culture and describes a time when he needed support from his male friends. However, instead of speaking with them directly, he organized a camping trip, and it was only on the very last day that he summoned the courage to speak up about what was bothering him.²

I have had men tell me, "I didn't come to group this morning because I might have cried in group." I can reassure them all I want about how it's okay to cry but it's not until the



guy in the group who is identified as the most “manly,” says, “I cry all the time and I’m not ashamed of it” that they feel they now have permission to break the man code.

When I first interviewed for this job, I was asked to speak about male culture and what challenges it might pose for men in treatment. One of the answers I gave was that they might be resentful if you came across as too caring. My answer clearly resonated with the interviewer and he asked me to explain. My response was that it might be interpreted as me perceiving some weakness in them and an inability to cope. Indeed, it has proven to be correct in some instances.

Whereas women relish deep and nuanced relationships with one another and generally have few qualms about reaching out to friends for support, men are less likely to do so and often pay the price for holding onto those emotions.

As a confirmed, albeit-reluctant introvert myself, there’s something terribly ironic about me guiding men through the intricacies of adult friendships, let alone writing an article about it. Twice in my life, I have made major moves across the country and put myself in the position of being totally friendless. Negative schemas born of critical and judgmental relationships in my past helped little to enable me in

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reaching out to make myself known. Slowly but surely, I built up a friend base but, more than anything, these experiences helped me to understand and empathize with my clients who face far greater obstacles than I did.

And yet they persevere.

LESSONS IN RESILIENCE

The past two years of uncertainty in the world have been challenging for everyone, particularly in the area of connection with others. But these men live with uncertainty all the time, and we have much to learn about resilience from them. People often ask, “Does your program work? Does anybody ever get recovery?” The question they are really asking is “Do they stop drinking and doing drugs?” In their minds, that is the only measure of recovery.

It needs also to be mentioned that one of the challenges for these men in building friendships is the devastating

losses from the opioid crisis. They fear connection for fear of yet another loss. As counsellors, we too have recognized our own fears about connecting with our clients because the losses have been profound.

As clinicians, we stand in awe of the risks these men take to achieve wellness. To see them building intimate friendships and allowing themselves to be vulnerable in front of other men is nothing short of a miracle and a large part of what we see as recovery.

Another amazing thing happens. The men fear that if people really knew them and heard about the darkness inside of them, they would walk away in disgust. These feelings originate in shame. I explain that shame is like a mould that thrives in the dark but does not survive in the light. I encourage them to bring it into the light. They find that when they speak about the source of their shame, rather than

people distancing from them, they gravitate towards them in gratitude for paving the way to be able to speak of their own shame. Paradoxically, this fear and shame that has kept them isolated brings them friendships when it is released.

When I tell the men these relationships forged in recovery will be some of the deepest and most intimate relationships that they will ever form, I reflect on the intensive group psychotherapy sessions that were part of my art therapy training. Our final project was to present our personal case study of our own process in therapy. I tell the men that although I have not seen some of these colleagues in a number of years, we would immediately reconnect because we were there for each other in our most vulnerable moments. Similarly, these men dare to take their masks off and connect in authentic ways with one

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another. In other words, they begin to make healthy adult friendships.

I would wager that there are very few people, particularly men, in our society who ever attain such authenticity in their friendships.

BEING PART OF THE PROCESS

As a clinician, it is tremendously rewarding to work with this population. As a mother of four boys, I thought I had a fairly good understanding of male culture, but my knowledge has expanded exponentially walking alongside these men. Many of these men have not met the markers of what stands for success as a male in our society. They have not been able to provide for their families. They don't have the expensive truck or home or any home for that matter. They have lost more than they have ever owned. On the other hand, there are men who have met all the markers and lost it all. The fall is great and both groups are riddled with shame.

Clients have shared that it is often difficult to have a male counsellor, because they fear being judged as a failure in another man's eyes. They are surprised to be met with only compassion and respect. However, it is one thing for a clinician to be reassuring and quite another for a fellow client to say, "Buddy, I have one buck in my pocket and the clothes on my back and that's it. But my kids are talking to me

again, and I'm starting to get some self-respect back. The other stuff will come – this is where you need to be."

And when words don't work and social anxiety is too high, I offer a tactic that has been extremely helpful in my life. My two huskies have been certified through Pets and Friends, an amazing organization, and I am able to bring them into the centre to interact with the men. By being benign attachment figures, they have been invaluable in drawing out the most withdrawn of men. They were also very helpful during the worst of COVID-19 when the men were unable to spend time with their families.

In conclusion, here is a well-known quote from Johann Hari, author of *Chasing the Scream*, that nicely sums up the significance of friendship as a mark of resilience. "The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection."³ ■

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Asia (left) and Raven (right) are Heather Dickson's two therapy dogs. By being benign attachment figures, Asia and Raven have been invaluable in drawing out the most withdrawn of men.

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