

From Active Drug Addiction to Recovery: Is It A Possibility?

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The empowering role of faith in the recovery from hard drugs is an under-explored area. From an experiential approach, the writers explore how drug addicts from Muslim backgrounds have used various aspects of Islamic worship to break away from the vicious cycle of drug addiction. They discuss the emotional and social realities of drug using experiences and argue for a change in perception towards drug addicts and the inclusion of faith-based training for drug services.

When we hear of drug related problems, often there is a strong sense of hopelessness, sorrow and some times anger directed towards drug users. Drug users are rarely thought of in a positive or empathic light. Even the term 'drug user' provokes strong assumptions in our minds. These assumptions are usually accompanied by horror stories of broken family dynamics, crime and violence. Social warnings are also transmitted through many public mediums. They inform us that drug users are a menace to society and that they should be kept out of sight. The media has perhaps been the most influential factor in maintaining this prejudice, while our ignorance has also played a part. This negative view has often prevented awareness of success stories in which, drug users have helped themselves become free from addiction. While community drug services may not hold derogatory views of their users, they have not been active in their attempts to acknowledge or counter the stigma. This has led drug services of different types to come under some degree of criticism.

Despite these setbacks, another side has been emerging; a side where some drug users have broken through. These drug users have successfully challenged the generally held stereotypical view that psychosocial problems associated with drug use are terminal. Their inner life experiences; their remarkable stories of recovery, remain valuable sources of information for drug services and an inspiration to many suffering from addiction to drugs.

Life in Active Drug Addiction

Long term drug addicts often live in a very isolated world, cut off from mainstream society. Their whole life is centered on drugs in one form or another. At first, using drugs may be for fun or to gain social acceptance. It then becomes a habit and finally a necessity for survival. Drugs are relied upon to carry addicts through in life. The grip of addiction is such that it has the power of placing addicts in a state of complete denial of their problem. Only in desperation does the seeking of help occur. When others tell addicts that they have a problem, addicts may remain convinced that they themselves are right and the rest of the world is wrong. They often find themselves forced to manipulate people and control things around them in order to have the drugs at all cost. When they are alone they are often consumed by feelings of fear and loneliness and the ability to love others is therefore greatly reduced due to the use of drugs.

Many addicts have, at some point in their lives, attempted to stay clean or use in moderation, but this often fails, causing pain and misery. This occupation makes them unemployed or non-employable. Helplessness, emptiness and fear can then become an addict's way of life. This leads to a constant search for an answer - a person, place or object that will make everything all right. Only too often addicts have distraught emotional pasts or social circumstances. This results in the need

for gratification (or distraction) of some kind. Gratification is then found in drugs because of their mind-altering properties and as they successfully cover unwanted feelings. Drugs also have the potential to stimulate feelings of warmth and security, albeit short-term and somewhat false.

The Transition

Despite the bleak picture, the cycle of addiction can be arrested and recovery is possible. Once addicts come to realise that they are powerless over their drug addiction and life is unmanageable, they become open to seeking alternative forms of help. After this surrender, the most difficult part of coming off drugs is perhaps the physical withdrawal. While this is a traumatic experience even under medical supervision, the psychological consequence of maintaining abstinence thereafter is a completely different ball game. Given that drugs plays a major part in helping addicts cope with life difficulties, the very abstinence of such a coping mechanism can equally raise feelings of desperation and anxiety. This change, is described by many as a total loss of coping skills and the sudden unveiling of many emotional difficulties that may have been otherwise buried. This insecure and lonesome experience causes many addicts to relapse (returning back to drug use), while motivating others to seek alternative ways of gaining help.

These initial stages of recovery are periods of extreme vulnerability. Many addicts experience mixed feelings. They may feel cut off from their previous culture and drug using peers, which now have become potential risks towards relapse. Feelings of guilt and fear can accompany this desertion of friends. The environment as a whole can appear quite different and at times, threatening. This experience can make addicts re-experience old feelings that were felt during drug use, and cause a loss of perspective. While this emotional distancing can lead to confusion and social withdrawal, it is not constant. Abstinence has its rewards too. Many also describe feelings of awesome awakening of their senses and a desire for active and meaningful living. Freedom from drugs is experienced as freedom from enslavement of some kind. This is when addicts become ready to explore new and healthy ways of coping. They begin to look for support in a community that is different and accepting. Many turn to psychotherapy, support groups, after-care hospital meetings, yoga, Buddhism and others reach out to Islam.

Life in Recovery

Those who turn to Islam for recovery often have a unique story to tell. Their personal willingness towards change, together with a new found idea of trust (*tawakkul*) in God (Allah) becomes the driving force that fuels the recovery process. The vacuum in the addicts life now starts to fill. The rebuilding of coping skills and social networks is found in the learning of Islam. Mosque environments and study circles give addicts a sense of belonging to a group conscious. This is built upon mutual support and companionship, which enables addicts to replace those insecure feelings of abandonment and guilt with confidence and stability. Islam offers them an opportunity to get in touch with their inner feelings and regain a meaningful purpose for existence. It becomes a medium to make a fresh start.

Here are some of the ways in which Islamic ideas are conceptualised. Due to the obsessive nature of drug addiction, addicts may have behaved in an inappropriate manner, leaving them feeling guilty, exposed and ostracised. This can often prevent them from mentally moving on and reintegrating back in society. This has been helped with verses in Quran such as: "And whoever does evil or wrongs himself but afterwards seeks Allah's Forgiveness, he will find Allah Oft-Forgiving, Most

Merciful" (4:110). Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (on him be peace) also provide a way forward: "Whoever says, 'Subhan Allah wa bihamdihi,' one hundred times a day, will be forgiven all his sins even if they were as much as the foam of the sea" (Bukhari). This helps addicts regain Allah's acceptance, which enables them to overcome feelings of guilt and self-victimisation.

Addicts often assume that their past drug using behaviour is significantly sinful that it will prevent them from doing any acts of good and so hinder the recovery. This has been supported by the verses: "And as to those who believe and do good deeds, He will pay them fully their rewards; and Allah does not love the unjust" (3:57) and "The good deed and evil deed are not equal. Repel (evil) with what is better.." (41:34). This encourages continued efforts towards self-development (tarbiyya), while working through unwanted experiences of the past. It is important to highlight that the mentioning of sins in the verses are not always negative, as the position of sins can be taken as a motivation towards change. Nor is asking for forgiveness from Allah a shortcoming. This understanding can also be a way of gaining encouragement in the seeking of Divine help, while keeping in touch with ones inner thoughts.

Other verses in the Quran also provide emotional security and spiritual guidance such as: "(Allah says) Remember Me and I shall remember you.." (2:152) and "...I am indeed near to them. I respond to the prayers of my supplicant when he calls upon Me" (2:186). Along side these are also Bukhari hadith such as: "I am as my servant thinks of Me...and if he draws near to Me a hand's span, I draw near to him an arm's length... and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed" and "Two of the qualities which Allah loves are gentleness and self-restraint". The following hadith Qudsi (divine hadith) also has significant meaning for those in the early part of recovery: "When Allah decreed the Creation He pledged Himself by writing in His book which is laid down with Him: My mercy prevails over My wrath" (Bukhari). Intimacy with Allah and endurance in recovery is further strengthened from what Allah says about those who remain grateful of His blessings: "If you give thanks, I will give you more" (14:7). This helps with the constant remembrance of Allah's presence and the need to stay connected with Divinity. These spiritual principles help addicts find a way to draw nearer to Allah for respite and rehabilitation. This awareness helps them discover a Higher Power that is constant (the Al-Hai), to which they are able to turn to for support and recognition.

Another important role that Islam plays in recovery is through its social organisation, where a great deal of emphasis is placed upon togetherness (*jumm'ah*) and regular meetings at places of worship, such as mosques. This fulfills a number of purposes. Among these are learning to interact/relate to others as well as exchanging life experiences. For the addict, this social meeting becomes a stepping-stone towards gaining social acceptance and integration into society. Along with this, invitation (*da'wah*) to others to the way of Islam is also an aspect that is promoted. This encourages people from various parts of society to become actively involved in different branches of Islam in their local community. This activity often empowers addicts to take on roles and responsibilities. Essentially, this becomes a way of putting back into the community that which was once taken out. This engagement helps addicts develop a network of social support and participate in community development initiatives. Equally, this also inspires them to become organised and learn new life skills, leading to a change in the quality of one's thinking, feeling and being.

Addicts are often asked to contribute in this medium because of their life experiences and the ability to empathise with social problems. They soon start to become valued and are seen as positive

example for others to learn from. Their transformation speaks volumes about the role of Islam and the importance of peer support - the brotherhood (*ikhwan*). The need for supportive brotherhood cannot be emphasised enough, as self-will alone cannot carry one through the recovery process. The role of supportive and tolerant families is also crucial. They play a pivotal role in the addicts motivation towards the maintenance of change and reinforcement of growth. Ultimately, having experienced the awakening message of Islam, addicts then start to carry and take the message of hope to others who suffer from addiction to drugs.

The Way Forward

Despite our prejudice, we must view all addicts as having the potential to reintegrate into society and live meaningfully. We need to share with them success stories of other recovering addicts, offering choice and different strategies for coping. We need to feel confident in ourselves first that Islam does work and has a lot to offer in terms of drug rehabilitation. Drug services are crucial contact points for addicts. They need to expand on their professional knowledgebase by actively harnessing the experiences of recovering drug addicts in their planning and delivery of services. Every drugs project can benefit greatly from such support. This exchange of expertise can assist them become more inclusive in their approach. Along with this, we need to educate drugs workers in the Islamic concept of sin (*ma'siyah*) and forgiveness (*istighfar*). Awareness on the psychological and spiritual implication of recovery also needs to be incorporated into their training. This way of working can only deepen understanding and enable a sense of closeness towards real life experiences of this community group. Just as Islam requires us to have a positive outlook on life, so must we hold firm in our hearts and minds that recovery is, without a doubt, a sure reality!

We should not also forget that those who have recovered from the afflictions of drug abuse, have done so only by the help of Allah *aza wajjal*, Who is the Infinitely Good, the Most Merciful.

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April 2002
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