



Developing a Better Understanding

RECOVERY IN PRISON SETTINGS

Understanding the prevalence and impact of substance use disorders and mental illnesses in the prison population highlights the urgent need for comprehensive treatment programs. By addressing these issues head-on, we can improve rehabilitation outcomes, reduce recidivism, and ultimately create a safer and healthier society.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), all prisoners should be screened upon admission by trained personnel for mental health and substance abuse problems. When the screening detects possible mental health or substance use conditions, prisoners should be referred for further evaluation, assessment and treatment by professionals.

Recovery can be a challenging journey, but with the right support and resources, individuals can overcome these challenges and lead healthier and more fulfilling lives, both in prison, and once they return to the community.

One of the key components of recovery is having access to professional help from a therapist, counselor, or psychiatrist who specializes in addiction and/or mental health. They can provide personalized treatment plans, therapy sessions, and medication management to address both substance use and mental health issues. Unfortunately finding the appropriate workforce for prisons can be difficult at times, especially now when the entire mental health and addiction field is facing a workforce shortage.

Now, more than ever, with the increase in awareness and training of peers, individuals can and do, benefit from having peer supporters while in prison. Often individuals in early recovery are much more likely to listen to a person who has lived through the same thing they are experiencing, and this can be even more important in a prison setting due to the other issues the individual trying to recover is dealing with. Why are peer supports so valuable? This mutuality—often called “peerness”—between a peer support worker and a person in or seeking recovery promotes connection and inspires hope. Peer support offers a level of acceptance, understanding, and validation not found in many other professional relationships (Mead & McNeil, 2006).

Additionally, support groups can also be very beneficial for individuals living with mental illness and/or addiction in prison. These groups offer a safe space in prison for individuals to share their experiences, receive support from others who have been through similar struggles, and learn coping strategies to help them stay sober and manage their mental health.

Recovery from substance use and mental health issues also involves making lifestyle changes, such as adopting a healthy diet, staying physically active, getting enough sleep, and avoiding triggers that may lead to relapse. It's important for individuals recovering in prison, to surround themselves with positive influences and cultivate a strong support system of peers who are understanding and encouraging. To be effective for this population, treatment that begins in prison must be sustained after release through participation in community treatment programs, and by being connected with others who are in recovery. By engaging with others in recovery, and support groups or a therapeutic process, people can learn how to avoid relapse and stay away from a life of crime, and from recidivating. It will be extremely important that inmates in recovery develop a plan for how they will have a strong support system when they return to the community.

Peers in prison can also be a great way to help other inmates see that there is hope! Hope that they can change their lives, becoming healthier and happier regardless of their present living situation. Peers can also help other inmates believe that they can change. Believing one can change can be the difference between working through the tough parts of recovery and giving up. Having hope for the future, and a belief that one can change helps to make recovery not only a possibility, and a desire.

Ultimately, recovery is a lifelong process that requires commitment, patience, and perseverance. By staying motivated, seeking help when needed, and practicing self-care, individuals can successfully overcome their challenges and live a fulfilling life free from substance use and mental health issues; not only in prison, but in the community when they return.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse

- There are high rates of substance use within the criminal justice system.
- 85% of the prison population has an active substance use disorder or were incarcerated for a crime involving drugs or drug use.
- Inmates with opioid use disorder are at a higher risk for overdose following release from incarceration.
- Treatment during and after incarceration is effective and should include comprehensive care (including medication, behavioral therapy, job and housing opportunities, etc.)
- Despite the cost, treatment in the criminal justice system saves money in the long run.
- Research is underway to find better solutions.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

- About two in five people who are incarcerated have a history of mental illness, about 37% in state and federal prisons
- About three in five people 63% with a history of mental illness do not receive mental health treatment while incarcerated in state and federal prisons
- Given these rates, America's jails and prisons have become de-facto mental health providers, at great cost to the well-being of people with mental health conditions.
- Individuals with a mental disorder are often held in prison longer than those without a mental illness who have committed the same or similar crime.

“For us, hope is job one, and we will continue to do what we can to provide hope for our population and encourage them on their road to recovery. We want to send people home as healthy as possible. With the support of our staff and partners like OhioMHAS and OACBHA, we embrace the efforts of incarcerated Ohioans to change their lives by committing to recovery.”

~ ODRC Director Annette Chambers-Smith at the Recovery is For Me Too event at Chillicothe Correctional Institute in June of 2024.



Sources: National Alliance on Mental Illness National Institute on Drug Abuse