

Dually diagnosed individuals find support in DDA groups

Bob Nikkel

June 4, 2006

It's an old idea with an exciting new energy behind it. And it holds promise for as many as 3,000 persons in Marion and Polk counties.

Let's start with the idea: Nearly 20 years ago, when I was a clinical supervisor for Marion County, three mental health caseworkers approached me with similar client problems.

They said they had trouble keeping people who faced both psychiatric and addiction issues — what is called a “dual diagnosis” — in traditional 12-step programs.

Our solution was to start an informal “double trouble” group for these dually diagnosed individuals, and for years it met successfully in a downtown Salem church.

Now, flash forward to today: A formal organization called Dual Diagnosis Anonymous, adapted (with permission) from the successful Alcoholics Anonymous model, has created 24 Oregon chapters in six counties including three that meet at Oregon State Hospital. One chapter meets twice a week in a public space on the hospital campus, and another has just begun meeting in Polk County.

Oregonians can only benefit if these self-sustaining groups organize and grow in every community.

They are backed by the energy of Corbett Monica, himself a dually diagnosed alcohol and drug counselor who knows what it's like to spend time in a locked psychiatric hospital. Corbett, who started DDA, travels Oregon to plant successful new chapters.

For psychiatric patients discharged from state hospitals and some inmates released from prisons, these groups support their success in the community.

Like other 12-step programs, DDA is a peer-driven group of people with common experiences. You won't find physicians, therapists or caseworkers there unless they've been invited to stop by to observe.

At one of these meetings, I remember a man using colorfully direct language to tell another, albeit in a kind manner, that what he was saying was unproductive. Even if mental health professionals could get away with using that language (they can't) they probably wouldn't be as effective as a peer who comes to the conversation from a shared experience.

The population of dually diagnosed individuals who can benefit is larger than you might think. Of the more than 60,000 adult Oregonians who annually receive services for mental illness, at least half have companion problems with alcohol or drugs.

When Corbett Monica tells the story of why he started DDA, it sounds similar to the experience we had in Salem two decades ago: As an alcohol and drug counselor, he had a client named Ruben who rocked, mumbled and paced at traditional 12-step meetings. These symptoms of his mental illness made others uncomfortable, and eventually he was asked not to come back. As a result, Corbett started DDA. If you struggle with both mental illness and substance abuse, or if you know someone who does, then become a part of this new energy behind a proven idea that improves lives.

Bob Nikkel of Salem is mental health and addictions administrator in the Oregon Department of Human Services. Anyone interested in learning more about DDA groups may contact Corbett Monica at corbettmonica@yahoo.com or at (503) 737-4126.