

# On Therapeutic Community

by Trenton Tompkins

## Therapeutic Community

The program I completed was called therapeutic community. I was assigned to it, against my will, because I answered "yes" regarding heroin use on a questionnaire.

And already, this brings me to two important problems with our "correctional" system. First, every part of the system rewards deceit. Every question has a right answer, every process needs to be "gamed". There is a time to shut up, a time to deny, a time to lie, and a time to feign contrition. In Pennsylvania, where maximum sentences are double the minimum, convicted persons who are honest and innocent <sup>(a statistical certainty)</sup> can expect to be punished for at least four times longer (the sentencing discretion range TIMES "maxing out") than their more-Machiavellian cohorts. In reality, most do life, as stacked consecutive penalties are dished out to those who exercise their right to trial.

Sociopaths are rewarded by our system, so it is no wonder kids raised in the system often end up sociopaths. While the naïve among them may feel they are "tricking" well-meaning counselors and parole board members, I believe something more insidious is going on. The system needs to protect its narrative. There needs to be witches to hunt, druggies finding Jesus behind bars, and some unrepentant Jeffrey Dahmer types to hold-up as justification for a prison system that has eclipsed our school system.

To promote these narratives, the system rewards, or at least offers to reward, those who say the right things and appear reformed and repentant. Those who will help it justify itself. In Pennsylvania, even weed dealers are expected to "show remorse" to be paroled. And the system needs these narratives, because what it doesn't have is statistics. "Programs" such as Therapeutic Community can be quantitatively shown to not work (the cherry-picked data they are forced to use to show otherwise is laugh-worthy). They survive on the notion that it would be good if programs did work. They are the "Ab Belts" and "Fat Freezers" of <sup>state</sup> government spending.

Which brings me to the second problem. During "intake" at SCI Camp Hill, I was asked if I wanted to participate in Therapeutic Community or needed drug treatment. I said no (this was 2 ½ years after my arrest and almost 4 years after I last used heroin). I was transferred to SCI Fayette, where my classification was "manually overridden" by a prison counselor to now require Therapeutic Community. No reason given, just decreed upon my arrival.

Why? If you guessed "money", I'd say your right. If you didn't guess money, I would encourage you to Google Fayette County, Pennsylvania. I am the economic activity in this region. Requiring completion of the four-month program means longer total imprisonment for those already near or passed their minimums (I was). That's thousands of dollars every month to Fayette County.

So what else is wrong with Therapeutic Community? For one thing, it doesn't work. The statistic they try to cite to show it is successful is: the success rate among people who are released AND STAY CLEAN FOR THREE YEARS. That goes beyond cherry-picking, it is scientifically invalid. It's like Trojan claiming its condom is 100% successful among women who don't get pregnant within the first three years.

And not only doesn't it work quantitatively (ie: the only way that matters), it doesn't work antidotally; which is to say, it didn't work for me, nor anyone else I know. From the outside, Therapeutic Community looks like it is doing impressive, albeit cult-style brainwashing. People recite mantras, write essays, hold Intervention©-esque confrontations against problematic members, and attend twice daily meetings.

Why doesn't it work?

Imagine for a moment: You win a free trip to China! On the plane, you are sat beside a Jehovah's witness. After a few polite attempts to rebuff him, you feign a headache, but not before he hands you a packet of literature on his faith. You arrive in Beijing, and customs finds the handout, and accuses you of illegally distributing Western literature, promoting superstitions, and "subversion". You are arrested, but before you can even Google the Chinese definition of subversion, your appointed legal representative says instead of 10 years in a labor camp, all you have to do is plead no-contest and complete a four month reeducation program.

Now ask yourself, how receptive are you going to be to court-mandated Mao-Marxist reeducation?

Since Therapeutic Community is essentially punitive, with emphasis on strict rules, it has to be mandated. But since it<sup>is</sup> mandated, people actively reject everything it tries to instill. Put frankly, the program is viewed as "bullshit for parole", and since everyone knows it's bullshit, everything is staged. It's nothing but a bad improv-class.

And ultimately, it is a poorly designed program, that seems to think the key to drug-free living (the non-optional goal) is army-style discipline. Not only is there little value to the curriculum, the program itself focuses little on drugs or education. To give an example, I was tasked with writing down news stories from TV, that someone else would read during twice-daily meetings. Purposeless activities like these comprised a decent chunk of the program. And that is truly poor design, because the time-wasted, of a literally captive audience, could have been used to save lives, by teaching basic harm reduction and CPR. Teaching things like how to get Narcan, or find needle exchange programs, or what to do if someone overdoses, could save people from dying in real life. Instead, everyone is made to play-pretend, and profess that they'll live a drug-free life, when the actual relapse rate is over 80%

How can prison programs be improved?

I think the first thing is to realize and accept the inherent limits of what can be "taught". Concepts like "remorse" and "abstaining from drugs" can't be forced upon people. Humans are well-evolved to resist ham-handed brainwashing, as one would expect considering our species propensity to enslave and oppress ~~others~~ each other.

I think the key to successful prison programs is that they are participated in voluntarily. That means they must be interesting, offer curriculum that is inherently useful, and perhaps offer certifications or college credit. As the success of religion proves, the same self-help and self-improvement programs that free people enjoy can be expected to appeal to prisoners.

That means successful programs can't be punitive, focusing on remorse and emphasizing the crimes committed. I also think, with drug dealing specifically, people need to realize those arrested were not necessarily ignorant or mistaken in selling drugs, but instead making rational economic choices given the free-market's inelastic (ie: insatiable) demand for drugs. That drug prohibition is a goal is hardly a foregone conclusion, and teaching otherwise while drugs laws are being successfully repealed poses a threat to democratic progress (or would if the current programs actually worked).

As long as programs are used as a requirement for parole, they will remain nothing more than hoops to be resentfully jumped through. In Pennsylvania, where there is no right to parole and huge differences between minimum and maximum sentences, programs impose capricious requirements, dictate ~~incarceration~~ length and cost taxpayers huge amounts of money for no measurable benefit in carceration.

People wishing to help better prison programs and increase reform opportunities need to make it known that current programs, with emphasis on pointless temporary discipline and teaching guilt simply don't work. Opportunities for college degrees or college credit are virtually nonexistent, and certainly not advertised, at the prison where I am housed. Not just educational opportunities, but access to actual computers and the ability to purchase laptops needs to be given to prisoners. The few degree programs I have found are all religious in nature, but everyone can't be a priest. There needs to be real career training available to prevent people from becoming institutionalized. A true prison-to-career path, with the ability to parole to employment, or parole to a campus, could finally lead people out of "the system".