An Exploratory Study of Male Recovering Substance Abusers Living in a Self-Help, Self-Governed Setting

Leonard A. Jason, Ph.D.
Joseph R. Ferrari, Ph.D.
Barbara Smith, B.A.
Patricia Marsh, B.A.
Paula A. Dvorchak, B.A.
Erik J. Groessl, M.A.
Margaret E. Pechota, M.A.
Margaret Curtin, M.A.
Peter D. Bishop, Ph.D.
Eva Kot, M.A.
Blake S. Bowden, Ph.D.

Abstract

Adult men (n = 132; 92% of the population) with histories of alcohol/drug use disorders were interviewed upon their entry to 11 Oxford Houses located in the state of Illinois. Individuals still in residence at a six-month follow-up (n = 48) were reinterviewed; prior to the follow-up interview, 42 men had left voluntarily and 42 men had been evicted for abuse or disruptive behavior. The men remaining in residence tended to be older (M age = 37 years), were disproportionately African American (56%), and were less pessimistic about their future. At the intake interview, individuals who would be evicted reported a lower expectation for abstinence social support from the other residents in Oxford House. The Oxford House model of social support for recovery from alcohol and drug dependence appears to help some residents maintain sobriety.

Longabaugh et al.\textsuperscript{1,2} proposed a model for posttreatment that states that alcohol and drug abuse abstinence is predicted by a person’s social investment in a setting. Abstinence is a function of both one’s psychological functioning and the presence or absence of social support that advocates

Address correspondence to Leonard A. Jason, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, DePaul University, 2219 North Kenmore Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614-3504.
Joseph R. Ferrari, Ph.D., is a visiting assistant professor at DePaul University, Chicago.
Barbara Smith, B.A., is a graduate student at the University of San Francisco.
Patricia Marsh, B.A., and Paula A. Dvorchak, B.A., are students at DePaul University, Chicago.
Erik J. Groessl, M.A., is a graduate student at San Diego State University.
Margaret E. Pechota, M.A., is a graduate student at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.
Margaret Curtin, M.A., Peter D. Bishop, Ph.D., and Eva Kot, M.A., are graduate students at DePaul University, Chicago.
Blake S. Bowden, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral fellow at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center.
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sobriety. Abstinence-specific support by others in the person's environment can reinforce abstinence. In essence, the model proposes that abstinence social support increases the likelihood that recovering substance abusers maintain alcohol- and drug-free, but only if they commit or invest themselves to the social network. Research indicates that recovering substance abusers desire and can remain abstinent in supportive social settings with other recovering addicts. Jason and Kobayashi argued for the need to create settings where individuals who are recovering from addictions or illnesses can experience an enduring sense of community.

Oxford House, a relatively new form of alcohol and substance abuse treatment, well illustrates this community-based, social support approach. Oxford House was founded in the mid-1970s by a group of recovering substance abusers. Oxford Houses offer individuals a community where they can live without any length-of-stay restrictions. Houses operate democratically with a majority rule, and they maintain financial responsibility with each member paying rent and doing chores. Deviation from these rules, or resuming drinking or drug use, results in eviction. Each house has "officers" (e.g., a secretary, a treasurer) for six-month terms, and there are no professional staff. All costs for the program are covered by members of the separate Oxford Houses. In 1988, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed by Congress, allocating federal funds to any state for the start-up alternative housing such as Oxford House. Each house may request $4,000 in an interest-free loan to begin an Oxford House. The house is a rented, multibedroom dwelling for same-sex occupants. To date, there are 536 houses within the 48 contiguous states (J. Paul Malloy, personal communication, July 1996). Oxford House may be a facility that provides a "working lab" in which to explore the framework of Longabaugh et al.'s abstinent social support model. The present study did not assess this model directly but provided an overview of the characteristics of an Oxford House so that future studies may be developed that evaluate this alternative communal-living treatment facility. On the basis of this exploratory study, it would be possible to ascertain some useful information about less expensive alternatives to traditional forms of treatment that may have some implications for long-term outcome based on Longabaugh et al.'s model.

Furthermore, the present study focused on a six-month follow-up of this sample. Unfortunately, no tracking information of former residents was collected; therefore, direct assessment at six months was only possible with the continuing residents. However, comparisons were conducted among persons who remained in their house, former residents who left voluntarily, and those former residents who were evicted by consensus of the other residents on demographic items and their sense of hopefulness of the future. In addition, six-month continuing residents were asked several other open-ended questions about their initial expectations and actual experiences while living in an Oxford House.

Method

Participants and Setting

There were 132 men (\(M\) age = 33.5; \(SD = 9.4\)) who participated in this study,* which represented over 93% of available statewide residents at the time of this study. At the initial measurement session, each member had been a resident for at least two weeks, but no more than six weeks, prior to participation in this study. Most participants were Caucasians (62.9%) who had never been married (56.1%). In terms of education, approximately equal numbers of these men had a high school education or less (50.3%) or had begun or completed college (49.7%). Most participants were

* This article describes data on men because there was only one woman's house in Illinois when the data were collected. The authors recognize the different needs of women, and women with children, in recovery and how communal living may benefit this population. Data on a sample of women were collected, and in future publications men and women residents will be contrasted.