

Many Factors

It's been said that substance abuse does not occur in a vacuum. With this stated, perhaps it is imperative that we begin to view one of our nation's biggest concerns from a contextual perspective. Factors like; family history, socio-economics, cultural norms, greed, politics, peer dynamics, spirituality, alienation, mental health, child-adolescent development, ignorance, and more, should be considered when seeking strategies to ameliorate the abuse of drugs. When resorting to shortcuts, politically expedient solutions and assuagement, the scourge of addiction often metastasizes or returns in another form. It is my contention that efforts to address substance abuse must consider multiple ingredients. This would allow for a more complete effort to combat the damaging effects of drug abuse.

Presently, the State of Rhode Island has taken some powerful and effective measures to address substance abuse. Like many other states, across the nation, we are in the midst of a horrific crisis brought on by opioid misuse. In an effort to reduce the significant damage caused by opioid overdoses Governor Raimondo has set up a proactive Task Force intended to help come up with strategies that curtail the staggering number of deaths caused by drugs like Heroin, Vicodin, Fentanyl and others. In addition, the Drug Court and a host of community-based efforts have begun to chip away at the problem. While all of these are incredibly important, much more is necessary. We have to look to root causes. We have to promote prevention and early intervention. We also have to look at how we live our lives (in terms of stress, anxiety, and pace of living).

On top of all this there are many who continue struggling with alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, benzodiazepines and other addictive substances. These addictions are often accompanied by a mental health condition. Again, we have come a long way in terms of recognizing and supporting efforts to lessen these concerns. My hope is that we will now begin to look at the myriad of causal factors that lead to these deleterious conditions.

Unless we begin to broaden our perspective to include additional prevention measures, the recognition of multiple societal/socio-economic concerns, and the locomotive train of stress/anxiety that has increased the pace of our lives, we will be like dentists filling in cavities without taking time to teach flossing, brushing, along with good eating habits.

We really need to look at the amount of time kids spend on technology. Yes, technology can offer wonders, but it can also lead to isolation and the erosion of social skills. We also need to look at helping young people critically think in order to discern all of the disparate information presently available. Some are calling for more History and Civics classes. Others are calling for more opportunities to create cooperation through additional team building activities in school. In short, the human element must be re-emphasized.

Certainly, Mental Health's connection to substances needs to be continually addressed. Equally important is evaluating the role medications play in our society. For those struggling with substance related concerns, counseling has to augment medication. Limited approaches (medication only) are short sighted.

We can go on and on (addressing our prison populations, need for in-patient services, the lack of viable adolescent treatment programs, changing attitudes towards marijuana, etc.) but the point I am trying to make here is simple—many factors must be considered if we are to continue making progress with the nation's substance abuse concerns. How we live our lives plays a key role. Reducing stress, enhancing relationships with community, and developing social norms that promote healthy lifestyles should be included.

Soon a call will go out for more, more and more. Many will assert that more money, counselors and medicines are necessary to address the numerous mental health and substance abuse concerns presenting us today. All of these 'mores' are powerful additions to our efforts. However, wouldn't a little more prevention be of help too? Wouldn't a little more thorough examination of why people are so anxious and stressed out these days be a welcome consideration as well? More reflection on our part is equally important. While we ask for a little bit more—maybe a call for a little bit less should also be factored in. Perhaps 'A Million Dentists' is what is in order.

A Million Dentists

A million dentists
All around but
Still those little holes
The decay that makes
Them is often sweet
Yet, we wish for more.
Oh those million Dentists

Taking care of a concern entails more than just filling holes.

See you soon. - Bob Houghtaling

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