

Perspectives and Prospects for Former Drug Dependents

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Let me express my joy at being assigned the subject I am to share with you today, that of “Perspectives and Prospects for former Drug Dependents.” I believe more than ever now that I have been destined to be an instrument for youth development and this is a great God-given honor for me. I am both a medical technologist and an educator. How honored can anyone get. I am privileged to use both roles in helping the Filipino youth to be our country’s parents and leaders of the future. I have just emerged from two national youth conferences in my country and with my sharing with you today, I am happy to also touch base with our international youth and friends. Together, we can be enriched and leave Brunei more ennobled, more determined to produce a drug-free society in our lifetime.

In preparation for my talk today, I have prepared an honest-to-goodness research paper and after presenting it, you may want to give me a passing grade. Anyway, I am bold enough to request it. If you wish to make the grade a truly high one, then this educator-student before you will be more highly inspired as he leads the youth to combat drug and substance abuse.

In Trinity University of Asia, I handle classes composed of Med Tech students in their sophomore year and Nursing students in their freshman year. They are the products of their generation. They are into these times. So taking advantage of their circumstances and expertise, I made them the respondents of my study for presentation to you. So these data are as fresh as can be. I designed an instrument which would cull out, straight from their young heart, mind and spirit, their own perspectives and prospects for former drug dependents.

(Delivered at the 17th ASEAN- IFNGO Workshop, 4 December 2007 in Brunei. Mr. Ebuén is an Associate Professor 3 of the College of Medical Technology of Trinity University of Asia, PRO of the Philippine Council of NGOs Against Drug and Substance Abuse (PHILCADSA) and Adviser of PHILCADSA-Trinity University of Asia Chapter, Vice President for the National Capital Region of the Philippine Association of Campus Student Advisers, Board Member of the Philippine Association of Medical Technology/Medical Laboratory Science Schools and Public Health, Inc., and Member of the Philippine Association of Medical Technologist.)

My research instrument had four questions as follows:

What are the reasons why drug dependents and those who plunge into vices increase in number?

How do you think society would treat you if it is found that you were once a drug dependent?

How do you think should you be dealt with if you were a former drug dependent?

What do you think is the appeal of a former drug dependent who would like to change and go back to a normal, useful life?

The questions may be difficult but they could have easy answers. Or maybe the questions are easy, but the answers could be difficult. But whether the questions are easy or difficult, I believe that the answers of the respondents are something that will hit all of us real hard. The respondents are male and female, between the ages of 16-21, taking up Bachelor of Science in Medical Technology and Bachelor of Science in Nursing in their sophomore and freshman year respectively at Trinity University of Asia or TUA, a 44 year-old Christian institution managed by the Episcopal Church in the Philippines. It is located in Quezon City. Our Med Tech students would usually pursue a career in Medicine, or with our Nursing students work in hospitals in the country or go abroad to also share their expertise in an international setting. The respondents in this study would have to make any of those decisions sooner.

The question, “*What are the reasons why drug dependents and those who plunge into vices increase in number?*” elicited answers where respondents cited four avenues where drug dependence is found. These are school, community, workplace and family. Let us first take a look at the school. Here are why drug dependence thrives and increases in school:

- Curiosity.
- Peer pressure.
- Stress in studies.

- I want to be “in”.
- I am exposed to drug dependents and drug pushers especially in school.
- I am not interested in my studies.
- The gang made me do it.
- It’s because drug dependence is considered a status symbol.
- Many teachers lack consideration and are insensitive to the needs of students; not even bothering to see if they have problems so they continue to make their students suffer, even getting angry with them.

Let us take a wider range and look into the community where our students live, where the family home is planted, whose influence shapes to a great extent the personalities of students. The answers are as follows:

- There is a lack of a drug awareness program.
- Bad and disorderly surroundings result to negative influence.
- Media also has a negative influence.
- Lack of job opportunities for youth and adults.
- Poverty.
- There is much drug selling around.
- Community members have gotten used to the kind of community they have.
- Lack of guidance and role models.
- Lack of education.
- Boastfulness and competitiveness with neighbors.
- Disorderly families.
- Just like in school where drug dependents act like they are the powers that be, these drug dependents feel everybody is scared of them, and they enjoy this feeling with a big high.
- The government lacks a population program which results to increase in number of drug dependents and those plunged into vices.

Let us get into this, how our students perceived why drug dependence thrives and also increases in the workplace:

- Job competition is stressful.
- Competition in the workplace brings much stress.

- It is hard to accept that one is retrenched from one's job.
- Fatigue is too much.
- Drug dependence is a past time.
- Drug use takes away fatigue.
- One finds in drugs the satisfaction he doesn't find in his job.
- In order to earn more income, one uses drugs to make waking and working hours longer, like when work is in a call center.

The same question is now directed to the foundation of society, the family. Why is the family also a point of origin for drug dependence?

- The family is broken.
- There are wrong child rearing practices.
- Children are not given the right attention.
- Parents hurt their children.
- The family does not give proper guidance.
- The elders do not set the right example.
- Drug abuse can make one turn away from problems.

It seems the core thought of the answers is that drug abuse is an outside system that holds the youth or the drug victim hostage. An external force grips him, citing to him justifications to stay there, for good if he is attracted enough. The youth grows up in an environment he expects to be responsible for that growth. He expects to have these turn him into someone with a positive and constructive goal and when this doesn't happen, he takes things into his hands. He turns the other way and somehow would not take any responsibility to himself. Take it on the school, the community, the workplace and the family.

The youth expect that the school, community and family to be their mentors, for who else would they turn to at this stage of their lives? Simply put, what they are saying is, "We need guidance. We need role models. We are not yet ready to face life on our own. Be there for us until such time when you can let us go and we can fend on our own. But to the extent that you make yourselves available and be willing to witness how your children bear their

own fruits, we need you.” The answers to the first question say it when this demand is not met.

The second question is, “*how do you think society would treat you if found that you were once a drug dependent?*” Let us allow ourselves a deeper look at the replies:

- I would be discriminated against.
- There is still a possibility I could be accepted.
- I would be understood.
- People would seek help for me.
- They would worry.
- Friends would turn away.
- Treatment would not be fair.
- There would be lack of respect.
- I would be the talk of the town.
- No opportunity for employment.
- You’d be considered a bad influence.
- You’d be considered stupid and dumb.
- You’d be under surveillance and a suspect when something wrong happens in the neighborhood.
- In the workplace, what is noticed is the wrong you do, not the right.

The perception would generally be negative, although there could be some tint of hope that others would be sympathetic and give the victim a second chance through a helping hand. But the helping hand could still give some discomfort and a threat to one’s self esteem as one should know that at the heart of it is pity, a value extended to a hapless person. Accept it or not, that is what a drug dependent is, and when he becomes a former one, there are still some remembrances among people. It is this particular perspective that should haunt any prospective drug dependent and inspire him to get away from drugs. Would he want to be an outcast? Would he want to explain till his mouth runs dry and still leave a great doubt? Your past is their basis. Try convincing them that your future should not be judged by the drugs you took in the past.

To the third question, ***“How do you think you should be dealt with if you were a former drug dependent?”*** there seems to be an empowering tone. This is the time for one to imagine, to crave, even maybe demand, that he be given a second crack at life and the future. Let us look at the answers together:

- I should be given attention.
- Befriend me so I don't think of going back to drug abuse.
- I should be treated as a normal, regular person.
- There should be a second chance; there should be trust.
- Show that I have value.
- Understand, accept and give me enough help.
- Don't laugh at me.

There you are. The scream could be a silent one and therein lies the urgency. If a drug dependent thinks that he turned away because of society's neglect, he now turns to them and asks that he be accepted after the leaving. He sees himself willing to come home. He must have seen that when he left, society didn't change for him so he would go back. He must have seen that his development and adjustment to society demanded his self-empowerment so he could share in initiating whatever changes he wanted to implement. He left without their permission and now he wants their permission or their acceptance of him, so he could go back. Where would he go from here? What would he ask of society?

Let's take a good look at the answers to the fourth and last question, ***“What do you think is the appeal of a former drug dependent who would like to change and go back to a normal, useful life?”*** Let us hear his one last appeal:

- Help me change and don't be scared of me.
- Conduct more seminars on the causes and effects of drug abuse.
- Control movies with violent messages and bad influence on viewers.
- Educate people more carefully on the harmful effects of drugs.
- Provide job opportunities and welfare activities.
- Don't make me the subject of your rumors and suspicious thoughts.
- Give me a chance to change.

- I know I have done so much wrong but please trust me again.
- I ask for another chance but that can only be possible if you will do it.
- Don't judge me!

This is real empowerment! We envision a former drug dependent who wants to go back home and to society, but there is the strong voice of self-direction. Yes, he now knows what he wants and how to attain it but still, he voices out that he needs significant others to make him reach that goal, for surely he has a goal. Upon reflection, when someone goes into drugs, and is able to find himself, should not society participate in this homecoming? We all are in an age of ever powerful technology whose purpose we'd like to believe is to make the world smaller and make life more comfortable. But sad to say, it is also during these times that we are losing our loved ones to drugs.

These have been the perspectives, but happily, there are also the prospects. On one hand, we have the realities that await someone when he chooses to "leave" and create a world of his own, even one that destroys him, but wants to be whole again and be back. Maybe we all want something permanent in this temporary world. And I believe that permanence should be a world where we hold the hand of a lost loved one, taking the responsibility that, in the deepest recesses of our hearts, each of us has much to do with this loss to drugs. The beautiful thing about it is that it is within our power to make these perspectives turn into prospects. We ask society to understand and help rebuild their future. We ask former drug dependents to empower themselves and prove that society could be wrong when they are judged.

Let us all tell ourselves that we will be the great losers if we don't join this gamble, let us be patient and persevere, this is our prayer.

