

Gender-Specific Treatment Rationale

Susan D. Wallace

Abstract

This article makes a case for the critical importance of gender-specific treatment protocols for adolescent female substance abusers. The rationale is born out of the years of working with females at Caritas House (see Note 1) and is applicable in any therapeutic setting that treats this group.

The Case of Andrea

Except for the scars on her wrist, she doesn't look very different from any other teenager. Fifteen year old Andrea (pseudonym) is temporarily in a facility for juvenile delinquents. As a status offending female, she has not been charged with a crime, but her behavior has been deemed out-of-control. She has a history of problems, and the list of attempts to help her list like a litany of social service agencies in the state where she resides. Looking at her doesn't tell one much; but if one made eye contact with her, they might conclude that she is in emotional pain which is readily discernible in her eyes. Her facade of wise-cracking, gum-chewing confidence belies her loneliness. She doesn't show her unwillingness to attach to people for fear of getting used or hurt by them. She angrily tells an adult to leave her alone. Pushing them away is her way to feel some power, yet she really wants to connect to people. She does not have the vocabulary, confidence, or awareness to state her needs.

Around age five Andrea came to the attention of a social service agency for being disruptive in class. She was reported to be bullying her age mates and was not able to play or work for any length of time. Early on, her marks began to slip, and she was unable to grasp even the basics of reading. Her problematic behavior continued throughout the elementary grades. At age 11, she got a reputation for "liking the boys too much," as she began to change friends and associate with an older crowd. This behavior continued through

the next few years. Family therapy and individual counseling were tried with Andrea, but nothing came of it. Andrea was seen as sullen as she refused to engage in therapy. At age 13 she was suspended from school for smoking in the girl's lavatory, and later that year she was suspended for using marijuana in school.

Family court intervened and she was again given individual counseling. This ended after a few weeks because she refused to attend any further. She began to skip school and run away from home. Sometimes she would be gone for a week at a time. Once, she spent a weekend in the hospital because she had acute alcohol intoxication. Again, counseling was tried but she refused to attend. She ended up at a psychiatric facility for a few days for ingesting a bottle of aspirin and cutting her wrists. She claimed that she was "upset" because her 23 year old boyfriend broke up with her. For a brief period she returned to school, attended counseling and seemed to be adjusting. A fight with her mother, however, triggered another suicide attempt. She then ran away from home again. She was found with three older males in a stolen car. At the time she was under the influence of drugs and became combative. Police referred her to family court where she would be labeled as wayward and disobedient.

Andrea's parents are divorced. Her mom has a drug and alcohol problem and has tried unsuccessfully to get clean. Her dad has been out of her life for eight years. When not working nights, her mom is out of the house constantly. Andrea claims that she hates

Susan Dwyer Wallace is the founder and Executive Director of Caritas House for adolescent females and Corkey House for adolescent males. Both of these programs are gender-specific residential programs that treat adolescent substance abusers and their families in a strict, structured, therapeutic environment. Caritas House, Inc. 166 Pawtucket Avenue, Pawtucket, Rhode Island 02860, (401) 722-4644.