

# Adolescent Drug and Alcohol Treatment:

## A Therapeutic Community for American and Russian-American Teens and Young Adults<sup>1</sup>

BY TANYA L. HEDGES, PATRICIA PERRY, KAREN CARLINI, AND WILLIAM FUSCO

In recent years, adult substance abuse and alcoholism treatment has been in the forefront of American popular culture. The subject is touched upon in television talk shows, soap operas, popular movies, newspaper articles, medical journals, and popular magazines. We hear recovery stories from television and movie stars, from singers, writers, friends, relatives, and political candidates. We know that substance abuse and alcoholism treatment is available for adults, and that it works for a large number of people. But what do we know about our youth?

While popular media images portray recovering adult addicts, they also show us violent images of careless, self-centered, drug-abusing youth and adolescents. To be sure, not every youth experiments with drugs, and an even smaller number become addicted, but adolescents from all walks of life have developed serious problems with drugs and/or alcohol. Substance abuse among adolescents knows no racial, ethnic, or economic barriers. Adolescents—like adults—are vulnerable to the effects of alcoholism and substance abuse. But what resources do we have to help our youth? What treatment types are available for adolescents? And how many parents know where to find help for their adolescent children?

To learn more about the treatment options that are both available and effective for adolescents, in October 1998 the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Substance Abuse Treatment,<sup>2</sup> funded an evaluation of 10 different treatment programs across the

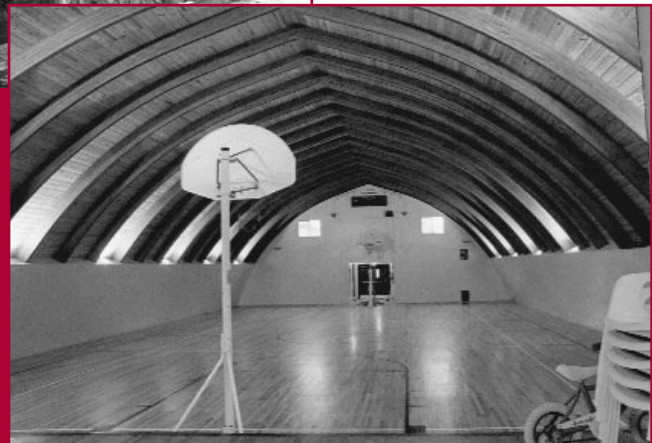
United States. The programs are currently being researched and evaluated for short- and long-term effectiveness. When the project concludes in 2002, the researchers will have collected extensive quantitative and qualitative data on each program's effectiveness and will have written treatment manuals that can be used to replicate the program models in other locations across the country and, if culturally appropriate and applicable, in other countries throughout the world. One program currently being evaluated is Dynamic Youth, a therapeutic community designed to work with adolescents from New York City.

### Tatiana Enters Treatment

Tatiana's story is typical. She was born in Chisinau, Moldova, in 1978. Her mother was a wedding photographer and her father was an officer in the Soviet army. Throughout her elementary school years, Tatiana was a model student with many friends. She enjoyed being popular and longed for her own stereo system. When she was 13 years old, Tatiana began to routinely meet a group



The youth members and staff designed and built the schoolhouse (above) and the gymnasium (right), which are on the grounds of the Dynamic Youth resident center.



Photos courtesy of Dynamic Youth.

of older students after school. She enjoyed the attention these older teens gave her and found it comforting to be part of the popular crowd. However, unbeknownst to her parents, these older students spent several hours a day drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. By the time she was 14 years old, Tatiana had tried heroin.

In 1992, when economic and job opportunities began to change, Tatiana's uncles, along with their families, moved to the United States. After many long hours of deliberation and



encouragement from friends and relatives, Tatiana's parents decided to join her uncles in New York City. Tatiana attended American schools with her Russian-American cousins and slowly began to learn English. She had no idea how to locate drugs in the United States, so she stayed clean and sober for a period of about one year. However, by the time she had turned 15, family difficulties resulted in Tatiana spending more and more time away from home. As they became accustomed to living in the United States, Tatiana and her cousins started going to parties every weekend night. They found drugs such as marijuana, ecstasy, and other club drugs at these parties. At the same time, they began to smoke marijuana every day after school. Eventually Tatiana stopped attending school, preferring instead to spend the days with her new boyfriend, getting high. She robbed her parents twice and ran away from home repeatedly. For a while she lived with her boyfriend. When they broke up, Tatiana lived on the streets, or went home with anyone who would take her in.

Tatiana's parents were beside themselves with worry, anger, frustration, fear, and a feeling of helplessness. It became painfully obvious that their daughter was using drugs, but they had no idea how to help her. Because they didn't speak English very well, Tatiana's parents began to search for help within the Russian-speaking community. As Tatiana's behavior at home began to gradually get worse, her parents' search for help became more frantic. One day as her mother stood in line at the grocery store, she heard two women in front of her discussing Dynamic Youth, an adolescent drug treatment program where several Russian-American youth had apparently begun to learn how to live a drug-free life. When she returned home, Tatiana's mother asked her aunt to accompany her to the treatment program to check it out. Two weeks later, Tatiana's parents told her she must either enter the treatment program or learn to live life on the streets forever, because the worry, anger, and fear they had endured over the past few years had taken a heavy toll on their already disrupted family life. They pointed out to Tatiana that her drug abuse was not only hurting herself, but her siblings as well. Tatiana agreed to attend the treatment program, although she initially had no intentions of staying.

### Therapeutic Communities

Dynamic Youth is a "step-down" adolescent and young adult therapeutic community drug treatment program based in Brooklyn, New York. The "step-down" approach means that treatment is composed of multiple phases that lead a person

sequentially from greater to lesser amounts of help. Thus, at Dynamic Youth, treatment is composed of three separate phases consisting of approximately one year each of residential, day, and ambulatory treatment. Therapeutic communities are based on community building principles, so, for example, adolescents who attend Dynamic Youth are referred to as members rather than clients and are treated as part of the larger communal family during the residential phase of treatment. Treatment itself centers around peer therapy groups, structure, work therapy, discipline, and individual counseling with Dynamic Youth staff.

Unlike other therapies which emanate from a medical model and employ psychologists and psychiatrists as therapists, therapeutic communities view addiction as a socialization problem within the individual and use a combination of recovered addict and academically trained professionals. Therapeutic community staff and members operate under the philosophy that substance abuse is a symptom—rather than the cause—of larger underlying problems. To treat substance abuse, one must work on these underlying problems, which caused the substance abuse to occur in the first place. Changing an individual's negative patterns of behavior, thinking, and feeling will help the individual to stop abusing drugs. Thus, group sessions, individual counseling, and the structure of daily life during the residential and day treatment phases encourage therapeutic community members to analyze their own personal life experiences and to understand how the feelings resulting from those experiences contribute to their drug use.

Recovered addict professionals are especially skilled under these circumstances because they bring "real life" experience and understanding to drug treatment counseling. Resistant teenagers may respond better to a counselor who has experienced the self-doubt, frustration, pain, and fear of drug addiction and recovery than to a counselor who has received extensive academic education, but has no firsthand experience. Consequently, a successful therapeutic community might include a combination of life-educated and academically-educated counselors. While psychiatrists and psychologists can certainly help implement a therapeutic community, the community would not be as successful without the real-life experience that recovered addict professionals bring to treatment.

All therapeutic community activities are integrated with one another to promote life change so that the longer the adolescents live in the community, the more their intrinsic attitudes, values, and beliefs change to meet community expecta-

tions and standards. The length of stay in a therapeutic community varies, but generally ranges from 12-24 months, and may last up to 36 months depending on the adolescent's circumstances. All treatment within the community is highly individualized, therefore counselors must have a good understanding of each member's personality traits and characteristics. For this reason, recovered addict professionals are essential in therapeutic community treatment.



The girls' dormitory, the newest building at the residential center, was designed and built by youth members and staff. It was completed in April 2000. There are both dormitory rooms (above) and shared common areas (right).

Therapeutic communities are currently flourishing in many countries, for this treatment methodology can be altered to fit various cultural needs and differences. For example, therapeutic communities are found in such diverse areas of the world as Brazil, England, Hong Kong, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. In 1999, representatives from Russia's public charity association—Spaseniye—along with other governmental agencies, made plans to open up a therapeutic community in the St. Petersburg area. This project will be assisted by Daytop International, a US-based therapeutic community, and will focus on implementing both treatment and preventive measures among young people in and around St. Petersburg.<sup>3</sup>

### Russian-American Treatment at Dynamic Youth

Over the years, as the neighborhoods in Brooklyn have changed, Dynamic Youth has adapted treatment to include different cultural and ethnic groups, most notably the Russian-American population. Since 1995, Dynamic Youth has seen a dramatic

increase in its Russian-American population. Currently about 30 percent of the members receiving treatment are first generation Russian-American immigrants. Fortunately, therapeutic community philosophy and teachings are malleable enough to be tailored to a variety of international and intercultural perspectives. The treatment seems to be working for Russian and Russian-American members as evidenced at a recent Dynamic Youth graduation ceremony, where 65 percent of the program graduates were Russian-American. This is a significant accomplishment, for many of these members spoke very little English when they entered the treatment program three years ago.



Youth members also helped choose the decorations for the girls' dormitory and its common room, shown above.

Photos courtesy of Dynamic Youth.

### Dynamic Youth Treatment Structure

After a brief intake period, members at Dynamic Youth progress through the program in a series of phases or steps. They live for one year at a residential facility in a rural setting 100 miles northwest of New York City. Members attend school at the facility, participate in group and individual therapy, and work to take care of the facility's buildings and grounds. Every facet of life in a therapeutic community is centered on promoting recovery; no single intervention can be considered the essence of therapy.

During the residential phase of treatment, members begin to learn from staff and each other how to function in an organized community, how to take responsibility for their own behavior, and how their individual actions affect the larger community as a whole. Thus, over time, members learn how to change their behavior by focusing on newly discovered strengths and abilities, and how to trust by talking about their feelings





in a supportive and safe environment with their peers and with staff.

While members are growing and changing at the residential facility, their parents are also attending weekly counseling sessions. Because young adults often live with parents and/or other relatives, therapeutic community providers believe that they must treat the whole family, not just the adolescent. Frequently adolescent drug abuse problems are both the result and the cause of larger familial and social structure problems. For adolescent treatment to be fully effective, parental emotions and actions must also be addressed. Therefore, before a member is accepted into Dynamic Youth, his or her parents must agree to attend the weekly parent group meetings at the Brooklyn Center. These meetings are conducted in Russian for those Russian parents who are unable to communicate fully in English and need culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions.

After one year, members return to New York City and their parents' homes. Initially, they attend the Brooklyn Day Treatment Center every weekday and go home in the evening. As they become more accustomed to living with their families, members are required to find a job or attend school three days a week and attend the Day Treatment Center three days a week. After members have completed approximately two years in the program—one year of residential and one year of day treatment—they transition to full-time school or work and devote an additional year to ambulatory group meetings twice a week. When members are fully ready to stand on their own and have demonstrated their ability to lead a productive, socially responsible, drug-free lifestyle, they attend a graduation ceremony marking their completion of the treatment program.

### Tatiana Today

Now, four years after she entered Dynamic Youth, Tatiana has achieved her recovery goals. Although her parents eventually divorced and her father returned to Russia shortly after Tatiana entered treatment, the Russian community involved with Dynamic Youth banded together to act as surrogate parents while her own parents took time to heal. This community gave Tatiana the support and love that she needed to enter into and stay in long term treatment.

It hasn't been an easy process for her—she has often deeply felt her father's absence from her life—but she has managed to stay drug-free and to learn how to deal with her anger, frustration, and pain in a productive manner. Tatiana's family has also

begun to rebuild their lives. Her mother, who now attends the program's weekly parent meetings, is learning how to handle her own anger, stress, and frustration—although she still finds it very painful to discuss her daughter's drug addiction. Tatiana graduated from Dynamic Youth just last year. She has completed her GED and holds an Associate's Degree from a New York state community college. She is currently working as an administrative assistant in an area company, and is enjoying life with her new husband. While the child she used to be in Russia is now gone, in her place stands an intelligent and composed young woman who looks forward to a bright future in her new country.

Additional information on the therapeutic community philosophy and approach can be found on the following Web sites: Therapeutic Communities of America, [www.tcanet.org](http://www.tcanet.org); World Federation of Therapeutic Communities, [www.echonyc.com/~wftc](http://www.echonyc.com/~wftc); and Association of Therapeutic Communities, [www.pettarchiv.org.uk/atcabout.htm](http://www.pettarchiv.org.uk/atcabout.htm).

### References

1. This article was supported by funding from the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US Department of Health and Human Services Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockwall II, Suite 621, Rockville, Maryland 20857, 301-443-5052. This article's contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the agency. Grant No: 6 KD1 TI11423-02. For more information about CSAT's current study, adolescent treatment manualization, or Dynamic Youth, please contact Tanya Hedges or Patricia Perry at the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, 1450 Western Avenue, Albany, NY 12203, USA; 518/485-1136.
2. US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Grants for Identification of Exemplary Treatment Models for Adolescents, TI-98-007.
3. see [www.echonyc.com/~wftc/win99p10.html](http://www.echonyc.com/~wftc/win99p10.html)

### Suggested Reading

- George DeLeon, ed., *Community as Method: Therapeutic Communities for Special Populations and Special Settings* (Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1997).
- National Institute on Drug Abuse, *Research Monograph #144, Therapeutic Community: Advances in Research and Application* (US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Rockville, Maryland, 1994).

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*Tanya L. Hedges, MA, is a research scientist and Patricia Perry, PhD, is the project's principal investigator and a research scientist at the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services; Karen Carlini is associate director and William Fusco is executive director at Dynamic Youth Inc.*