Sexuality and Drug Addiction: a Tailored Intervention during a Rehabilitation Programme in a Therapeutic Community

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Abstract

Drug abuse strongly affects the sexual behaviour of abusers and it can be one of the main causes of many relapses.

The Authors describe an intervention method, designed in a Therapeutic Community, to promote a sound and non-destructive sexuality. The method was used on 76 male individuals, whose sexual characteristics were studied by means of a careful anamnesis and ethological observation.

The main results of this method were a significant improvement in the level of knowledge of sexuality, following the use of correct information, reflection on sexual stereotypes that prevent a correct interpretation of the male and female roles, and the transformation of the main source of the sexual impairment into resources that help to establish sound affective relationships and the use of non-destructive sexuality.

Key words: Drug abuse, sexuality, therapeutic community

Introduction

A study of the literature shows that, during studies on the relationships between substance abuse and sexuality, which is considered to be an integral part of relationships, researchers focus above all on the sexual dysfunctions linked with the use of drugs (Clayton e Shen, 1998), on the risks of sexually transmitted diseases (Fanning, 1997) and, more recently, on the use of drugs to improve sexual performance (Maroli et al. 2000). Moreover, these studies are carried out on samples of drug users that attend out-patient units and therefore have full freedom of movement. Instead, the subjects covered by this study were living in a therapeutic community and had therefore undergone a long period of observation and study in an environment controlled by a set of rules, and in which the patients developed interdependent relationships while in a state of consciousness (abstinence), and in a constant and coherent manner. This environment also provided them with the opportunity to establish numerous human relationships, and to experiment new lifestyles and roles that were usually different to those previously adopted (Soana, 1996).

In general, however, even Communities tend not to provide specific treatment for problems related with sexuality. For example, until 1996, the drug addiction treatment programme adopted by the Centro di Solidarietà di sexuality during treatment within a thematic group called , which tried to help participated in the at the end of the Community phase of the programme, within and outside the Communities, and as part of attempts to solve sentimental and affe-

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tive problems between couples and difficult relationships between the addicts and their chil-
dren.
Our numerous years of experience working with drug addicts have shown us that drug ad-
dicts acquire extremely painful and distorted ideas about sexuality, which is still such an im-
portant element of human life. Many youths were afraid, apprehensive and anxious about
participating in the Gruppo Sonda, because they had terrible recollections of failure, violence,
self-prostitution, and hidden anxiety that they had never allowed to emerge but had internal-
ized as something dirty and never to be shared with others.

2. The C.S.F.’s Programme on Sexuality

In the light of the above, it was decided to design a treatment programme to help promote a
process of growth and liberalization among the addicts, also with respect to sexuality, in the
same way that is done for problems regarding the family, alcohol and psycho-motorial reha-
bilitation.
In my capacity as a counsellor on sexuality, I was asked to prepare a programme which
looked at individuals as a whole, and thus also the link between sexuality and the other
spheres of human life. In other words, dealing with the theme of sexuality within the Pro-
gramme “Progetto Uomo” meant studying its essence as part of a wider context that includes
affectivity, family life and the psychological and relational traits of the users. Based on the
theory that sexuality provides a vital push and a privileged means for communicating, the
whole history of the users had to be re-elaborated so as to enable them to use it is a healthier
way in the future, and to avoid it from being, or becoming, a destructive tool (Checcucci,G.,
1999).

In fact, drug addicts often use violent forms of sexuality in order to hide fear and a sense of
inadequacy and inferiority that are not dealt with in an open and calm manner, either by the
couple or at the social level. In this way, a kind of behavioural triangle is created, marked by
a close link between sexuality, image and violence.
Even when drug abuse does not cause violent behaviour, it can produce forms of sexual de-
gradation, such as the use of prostitution – even among males – in order to obtain money. This
often strongly conditions the relationships between couples, especially if both partners are
drug addicts, because sex can be used for immediate gratification, to avoid responsibility or
to manipulate the partner. This leads to reduced respect for oneself and for the partner, and
creates frustration and loss of self-esteem.
These self-destructive behaviours, which are often the cause of relapses, are one of the most
complex problems that have to be solved during drug addiction treatment.

The aim of the Programme on Sexuality was to help the users to adopt a healthier and non-
destructive sexuality, whereby they respect themselves and others.
The work was carried out in small groups, and began during the preparatory period before
entering the Community, and continued until the end of the process of reintegration. The
Programme comprised three levels of treatment:
providing information: essential information was provided on the physiological features and
anatomy of the genital system and on the functions of sexuality, the concept of normality and
abnormality according to various codes, stereotypes and myths, masturbation, sexual fanta-
sies, the choice of the partner, the links between sexuality and drugs, sexuality and image,
vioence and image, violence and sexuality;
process of liberation: this was carried out during the Sexuality Group, during which space
was given to understanding, sharing and accepting and/or learning to live with one’s past, so
as to be able to identify personal problems and how to deal with them;
process of elaboration and re-orientation: this part of the Programme aimed at clarifying what had emerged during the Sexuality Group, and to use it to adopt new lifestyles. From the beginning of the Programme on Sexuality, data were collected on the user and followed, when possible, the diachronic and synchronic sexuality trends. The questions were formulated in such a way that one could lead on to another, while also leaving a trace for the addition of further information during the course of the entire Programme. It is almost impossible to create completely exhaustive cards: since sexuality permeates the whole life of individuals, it can present numerous facets that do not allow for a rigid classification, but only makes it possible to open a few windows from which it is possible to observe various different pieces of life, depending on the person with whom there is interaction (Giommi and Perrotta, 1994).

After a certain period of time, almost halfway through the stay in the Community, group work began involving information seminars that lasted for about two hours. After five meetings and the anamnesis, the users participated in the Sexuality Group. During this group work, the participants were helped to identify their most serious problems met during their affective and sexual experiences, concentrating on the problem to which each participant gave most importance. During this process, the participants were helped by the Group coordinators and their companions to overcome reserve, heavy pain, shame and regret, and to experiment potentially threatening situations in a protected environment. As the participants told and re-elaborated their stories, the Group coordinator drew information on the attitudes, resistances and limits of the single persons, which they used to design further re-educational therapy for the rest of the Programme.

3. The outcome of the Programme on Sexuality

During the three-year period 1997-99, when I conducted the Programme on Sexuality, I was able to follow 76 cases and collect the recounts of the Sexuality Group and their sexual anamnesis. This information was added to the information already acquired during the preparatory interviews and the elements that emerged during the group meetings.

A study on the attitudes and behaviours of these subjects in the spheres of sexuality and affectivity was then carried out, of which the most interesting results are presented below. For more specific information on the study, please refer to the publication describing the entire work (Checcucci, G. et al., 2002).

The studied sample comprised 76 male drug addicts, with an average age of 30.9 ± 5.8 years. The majority of them (72.1%) had only completed compulsory education and 76.0% had worked on a continuous basis. Only 58% had experienced serious problems with the law and, of these, only 16.0% had carried out a harsh prison sentence. There was a prevalence of single persons (90.8%), although 44.0% of the cases reported that they had a partner, and 18.4% had at least one child. The average duration of the drug addiction was 11.2 ± 4.9 years and the prevalent drug used was heroin. Sixteen subjects (21.1%) had not participated in the Sexuality Group because they had dropped out of the Programme before the Group actually started.

The sexuality anamnesis showed that the majority of the youths had not followed any course on sex, but had tended to acquire such information in a casual and much distorted way, above all from peers.

This situation is not specific to drug addicts, since Buzzi (1998) has also identified the trait in Italy’s general youth population. Nevertheless, among drug addicts this lack of correct infor-
information appears to be linked with a real lack of education in general, since it is not limited to knowledge on sexuality. In fact, the information collected regarding the personal life history of the drug addicts confirm yet again the results of a study on the families of the drug addicts treated in the C.S.F. (Checcucci, A. et al., 2000). While these families provided a comfortable environment from the material point of view, they appeared to have adopted inadequate educational tools, so that parental education had been substituted by a kind of self-education that was mainly influenced by the peer group.

The seminars on the morphology and functions of the reproductive system proved useful for correcting the incredible errors resulting from the lack of correct information which, in turn, were the cause of inadequate behaviour.

The means of discovering sex and the first sexual experiences, as well as precocious sexual relationships, seem to have produced in the subjects a fracture between practising sexuality and their life plans, whatever they may have been. Furthermore, the practice of sex appeared to be mainly based on instinct and influenced by stereotypes such as the “macho” male (physical performance, ability as a lover, the number of successful rapports), the male culture (women as objects, male superiority and the subordination of women, etc.), and by the urge to transgress.

This type of behaviour is also not specific to drug addicts. During a recent survey, Garelli (2000) was able to observe a current prevailing tendency to adopt precocious behaviours – without first gradually creating the conditions for significant relationships – and to have experiences that are not necessarily based on being faithful to the other person.

Among the addicts participating in the Group, precocious behaviour and the desire to have experiences seem to be part of a search for sensations. This has become one of the main driving forces behind such behaviour, which can also include the abuse of drugs.

Again the seminars and thematic groups made it possible to analyse certain stereotypes and myths, above all regarding gender identity and the different ways to interpret the male and female roles, together with what is is or is not permitted. Every one was able to reflect on the opportuneness of changing certain attitudes and, in some cases, it was possible to perceive the beginning of a change. Furthermore, the choice of partners and the forming of couples were examined as acts that are not linked to the usual form of dependence.

The drug addicts involved in this study confirmed the theory of various authors, according to whom the addicts had not been allowed to undergo a correct process of separation-characterization, and were therefore trapped in a kind of unaccomplished adolescence. Most likely, the lack of family education, together with a certain degree of inconsistency in the education provided by other educational institutions, which led to the continued use of adolescent attitudes and behaviours, is again not a specific feature of drug addicts. However, unlike their peers who have not had drug experiences, the addicts have used drugs since their adolescence and continued to do so for many years. Heroin has become the “only great love” on which their very existence depends, a kind of “good mother”, who is able to take them in, console them, reduce the pain, and help them to survive.

The use of substances, above all heroin, leads to the adoption of a lifestyle that is the outcome of two contrasting drives: the need to be able to dispose of the drugs, and their social prohibition. This means that for a long time the drug addict is obliged to use every means, both legal and illegal, to procure the substance while, at the same time, using all the means possible to hide the use of drugs from others.

We should also add to all this the effects that are slowly produced by the prolonged use of drugs, the progressive impoverished and degrading lifestyle which gradually reduces desires and makes it impossible to achieve any aspirations or driving urges.
It is not surprising that, in these conditions, it is practically impossible to have valid affective and sexual relationships, since any type of relationship is marked by the presence of a third element: the drug.

Once the main sources for the sexual impairment had been identified in the Group, the youths were helped during the rest of the Programme to start a process whereby their impairment was transformed into a resource to help them create healthy relationships and to adopt non-destructive forms of sexuality. The results of this study cannot be used to design a kind of therapeutic programme, also because nowadays – like never before – the traits of the users undergo such rapid change. Nevertheless, if nothing else, the Programme on Sexuality carried out in the C.S.F. may be useful for highlighting the most important aspects of drug addiction treatment and for providing some elements to be used when preparing future interventions.

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