

The Addict's Defiance: Friend or Foe?

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“Treating alcoholics ain’t for sissies,” Jimbo told me, with his cowboy boots propped on the desk, leaning back in his chair, hands behind his head. “You have to be willing to really get in their faces. That’s the only way some of them will even come close to hearing what you have to say.”

This was my first job in an addiction treatment center. I was

simultaneously fascinated with the challenge Jimbo was presenting me, and thinking that I was way out of my depth. Jimbo was my supervisor. He had been in recovery for 12 years and a counselor for 10 of those. His reputation was that of a hard-nosed, no nonsense, Big Book thumping counselor who, despite his hard exterior, really cared about his clients. In the treatment community, in and around Nashville, he was highly respected, and truth be told, most people who came to know Jimbo, loved him.

“The Addict’s Defiance” was written for the Los Angeles based recovery publication, *Steps for Recovery*.
www.steps4recovery.org/

In the months that followed, I learned a lot, including that I am not an “in your face” sort of guy. I tried for the first few weeks, as best I could, to emulate Jimbo’s approach, but it always felt like I was wearing clothes that just didn’t fit. To his credit, Jimbo try to help me tailor the clothes, rather than forcing me to wear them. Slowly, but surely, I began to explore what kind of a counselor I could be, and more importantly, what kind of a counselor I wanted to be.

In the years that followed, I spoke with, trained with, and worked with many counselors, ranging from the completely clueless to absolute masters. One thing remained constant, among all the counselors and treatment programs I encountered: the belief that in order to treat addiction successfully, we must confront and out wit the addict’s denial system, that we must meet the addict’s characteristic defiance head on. The best counselors were always the ones who “could see through your sh**,” the ones who could not be fooled, the ones who would say, “you can’t con a con.” I’m not sure if those things were ever entirely true about me, but eventually I had the reputation of being one of those counselors. “Go see Rutledge --- he won’t let you get away with anything.” I suppose I had found a way to tailor the Jimbo-clothes to fit me.

The addiction counselor clothes I wear nowadays bear very little resemblance to Jimbo’s (with the exception of my cowboy boots). I no longer believe that my job is to engage and destroy the addict’s denial, or to do battle with his defiance. At one time, I believed that the nature of addiction counseling was to wage that war, to enter into the power struggle with my clients, and emerge victorious. I no longer believe that.

Now I understand that the only victory for me in helping a client with addiction is found in my helping her to successfully deal with her own defiance. Whatever word you choose --- defiance, rebellious, contrary, resistant, stubborn, etc --- this powerful aspect of an addict’s personality is not something that we can --- or that we should --- destroy. It is not something that we can --- or should --- push into submission. In fact, it is something that can be quite useful in addiction recovery.

A friend of mine, someone who has been clean and sober for many years, was recently told by a therapist that she has a “defiant character,” and that until she understands why, her defiance will continue to stop her from accepting the help that she needs. I am reminded of something I once heard the author, Richard Bandler, say: “There is no such thing as a resistant client, there are only inflexible therapists.”

I understand what my friend’s therapist is talking about. On the client end of things, I have a long history of paying therapists, workshop leaders and treatment programs, good money, just before I did my level best to reject everything they were telling me. I’d fork over the money, then, tell them to go to hell, or I would suggest where they could put their help. Then, I’d fork over some more money, etc.

All of that began to change when I happened upon Linda, a psychotherapist who basically showed no interest in having a power struggle with me. When I would push, she did not push back. When I threatened to leave therapy, she did not try to convince me to stay. She neither counter aggressed, nor caved in to my defiance. Instead of seeing my resistance to the process of change as a problem, she expressed genuine curiosity in whatever I was saying. If I thought something was b.s., she wanted to know how I had arrived at that conclusion. Much to my surprise, she actually seemed open to my assessment, and was apparently not just trying to shoot my perspective down. Linda seemed at least as curious about what I was saying, as she was interested in what she had to say to me. At that time in my life I had been sober for several years, and in the counseling business for several years, but I had never encountered anything quite like this.

What Linda understood, that Jimbo and so many others had not, was that we shouldn’t be trying to get rid of defiance. We shouldn’t be trying to out smart it. Instead we should become curious about it, and we should be learning how to use this powerful energy, that fuels our resistance to change, to our advantage. In therapy with my clients these days, I call it “putting the f--- you in the right place.”

I recently told a client named Ben, who had been referred to me for alcoholism assessment, “I am really a lot more interested in what you think about your relationship with alcohol, than I think you will be about my opinion.”

“Yeah, that’s because we already know what your opinion will be,” Ben said, with that familiar edge of defiance in his tone.

“That you are an alcoholic? You’re pretty sure that will be my opinion?” I asked.

“Well, isn’t that true?”

“Probably,” I told him. “So, you can see why your thinking on the subject will more interesting than my predictable opinion, right?”

There was a longer pause than one might expect here. My best guess is that I had surprised him by telling the truth. I had already gotten enough information from the referral source to have formed an opinion that he was an alcoholic. There was no reason to destroy my credibility by pretending otherwise.

“What do you want to know?” he finally asked.

So I asked him the question that I have come to trust above all other questions in evaluation for addiction.

“I want to know if there has ever been any part of you --- even a very small part ---- that thought you might have a problem with alcohol?”

He looked down and shifted his weight in the chair.

“Even just a small part,” I reiterated.

He shrugged, kept looking toward the floor, and said, “I guess so.”

“That’s the part I’m curious about,” I told him.

And we took a few beginning steps to helping him deal with what I have come to think of as the necessary power struggle. If I do my job right, his defiance will not become a part of a struggle between the two of us. Instead I will help him to stand in defiance to the addiction, that left unchecked, will most definitely kill him.

Toward the end of our second or third session, Ben said, “I’ve been thinking about it, and I really do want to recover from this sh**.”

Accessing a fond memory, I leaned back, propped my cowboy boots on the chair next to me, and said, “Well, recovery ain’t for sissies.”



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Overheard...

Teacher: The secret to a long life is to avoid all unnecessary conflict.

Student: I think you are wrong about that.

Teacher: You’re probably right.



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Bob: You never know what’s going to happen next.

Todd: I knew you were going to say that.

Bob: So much for that theory.