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How Naivety About Drug Addiction Ruins Lives

By Marilyn Murray

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In the early 1990s, as Russians were climbing out of the wreckage of the Soviet collapse, they were looking at a landscape without the veil of the Iron Curtain. Many were in shock as chaos, violence and confusion rose from the rubble with a roar.

The stability of the Soviet system regarding housing, employment, education and retirement dissolved overnight. Enormous battles ensued as people fought for control of the assets of the entire country.

On a personal level, safety often became dubious — and not only from violence in the streets. Men, women and children knew nothing of their rights as separate individuals. Boundaries and the ability to say "no" often were not in their realm of comprehension. They were naive and lacked education regarding the potential dangers of the new opportunities now available to them. As a consequence, many were easily victimized.

Scam artists took advantage of them by promising large investment returns in fraudulent schemes, and many Russians lost their life savings.

Casinos sprung up like wild mushrooms in the forest. Gambling rapidly gained popularity as it promised miraculous returns as an enticement for those working in menial office or factory jobs. Thousands became addicted and quickly sacrificed their savings and wages to gambling's hungry jaws. When I arrived in 2002, I saw six mini-casinos from my apartment window in an average Moscow neighborhood. While the government closed them en masse in 2009, the addictions remain, as do underground casinos.

Alcoholism had been a problem in Russia for centuries, but drugs were not a hazard until recent years. Many of the young conscripts who came home from the devastating war in Afghanistan in the 1980s were addicted to heroin. Then, with the fall of the Soviet system, organized crime groups flourished as drug traffickers swept in huge profits from this new, untouched market.

Afghanistan has continued to play a role as its production of heroin flows into Russia via Central Asia. Russia now can claim the title of the largest consumer of heroin and the fastest growing drug traffic in the world, with about 5 million drug users, an increase of 60 percent since 2000.

In addition, the small towns and villages strewn across the country that once depended upon Soviet industry are now decaying with poverty and joblessness. Thus, the people living there, especially the young, are vulnerable to the deadly call of drug addiction.

In 2002, a new killer of Russia's youth emerged called krokodil. An easily made designer drug used as a substitute for heroin, krokodil is three times more powerful than heroin and up to 10 times cheaper. The lethal components include gasoline and paint thinner, both extremely poisonous when injected.

Krokodil's narcotic ingredient is codeine, which until recently was readily available without a prescription in Russia. This accessibility transformed krokodil into a primarily Russian drug. Krokodil first appeared in Siberia and the Far East but then spread throughout the country.

Krokodil now is probably the most destructive of all addictions. It destroys the brain and literally eats the body. Photos on the Internet show hideous scenes of rotting flesh literally falling off of teenagers and young men and women, even exposing bones. While the average life expectancy of an active heroin addict is five to seven years, a krokodil addict faces a grotesque future of agony and death within one to three years. Only 1 percent of krokodil addicts have been able to become sober, and they carry the long-term damaging effects of permanent brain damage with speech and motor skill defects.

Despite widespread knowledge of codeine's contribution to krokodil, a law making codeine prescription-only did not become effective until June 1. Hopefully, this will now reduce the devastating reign of krokodil in Russia's drug culture. But, unfortunately, the venom of drug addiction will continue to drive addicts to find another substitute.

The Russian government basically tells drug addicts, "Get into treatment or go to prison." Regrettably, there is poor availability of competent treatment centers.

Successful treatment for any addiction needs to address not only helping the addict to become sober but also to discover the root cause of his or her behavior. Unless the core issues of pain, fear, hopelessness, abandonment, rejection, shame and worthlessness are also made a primary focus of treatment, recovery will only be temporary, and the addict will return to the primary addiction source or simply shift into another type of addictive cycle.

Education covering a broad spectrum of the consequences of addictions needs to be a national focus.

One of my colleagues recently shared that as a university student in the early 1990s, he and his friends knew nothing about drug addiction and its destructive aspects. He regarded the 19 other students in his class as close friends and, like them, he was curious when one of the friends introduced the rest to drugs. He tearfully related that only four of the 20 are still alive today, including the dealer. Sixteen young Russian men died in their prime because they were naive and because one of them was a greedy hedonist without a conscience.

Upon hearing this story, another colleague related that her cousin had 10 close friends in university when he graduated in 1994. When he decided to study for his graduate degree in another country, his family worried that he would come under harmful influence there. But when he returned to Moscow years later, all 10 of his friends were dead of drug overdoses or street violence. Leaving the country had actually saved his life.

Addicts are male and female, young and old. They become addicted for a multitude of reasons: out of curiosity, from peer pressure, to cover pain, to get a high or out of boredom. Not everyone who uses drugs or alcohol once or a few times becomes an addict, but many do become hooked into a lifetime of despair, destruction and often death.

If a foreign enemy threatened the health and welfare of Russians, the government would instantly commit billions of rubles to combat the treacherous foreigners. Yet education and compassion regarding the devastating and deadly effects of addictions on Russian individuals and families has been sadly lacking. Apathy instead of action continues to be the order of the day.

Addictions will increase unless a major campaign is undertaken to educate the general populace and to provide effective treatment programs.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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