

Western Pennsylvania Guide to Good Health

Health News You and Your Family Can Use

At Gateway Rehab Center, an Innovative Boxing Program Enhances Treatment for Substance Abuse Disorder

By Nancy Kennedy

There are many pathways to recovery from substance abuse, and at Gateway Rehab Center (GRC), one of those pathways leads right through a boxing gym.

Gateway Rehab's therapeutic boxing program is an innovative and effective approach to helping participants express their emotions and cope with stress, says Clare Morris, LSW, assistant director of inpatient programs at GRC. "The boxing program is very successful; we have had a lot of positive feedback. It has numerous benefits; it helps you release frustration and anger. It improves fitness and helps you manage stress. It teaches you to stay in the present moment. We believe that the program helps people stay in treatment."

The program was initiated five years ago by Dennis Harley, BA, SW, a therapist who has been at GRC for ten years and is affectionately known as "coach." He has been interested in boxing since he was a schoolboy in Chicago and a fan of local legend Rocky Marciano. He learned to box and eventually became a coach, teaching young men at a juvenile detention center. "Boxing makes you stronger; it improves coordination and balance. It can give you discipline and self-respect. When you know you can defend yourself, you have more confidence. It's a way to safely express anger. There's a lot of anxiety and anger in kids who are coming off drugs and boxing calms them down.

"Once they have tried it, they want to join the program. When they are experiencing withdrawal symptoms, it helps them feel better. It raises serotonin levels. They'll say, 'I need to hit the bags today, Coach.' They can take out their aggression when they put on the mitts and hit the bags; it's really a form of anger management therapy."

The GRC boxing program had a humble beginning in a large closet space inside a gymnasium. With strong administrative support from CEO Jim Troup, Harley expanded the program, procured grant money to purchase equipment and relocated the boxing gym to a converted garage on the GRC property. Now, the

courts and jails make referrals to the program, which was completed this year by 150 participants. The program has a sterling safety record: there has not been a single serious injury, and there is always a counselor or coach on hand.

All of Gateway Rehab's program participants can take the boxing program, explains Clare Morris, and participation is voluntary. "We offer a variety of program models, including inpatient, outpatient and halfway house options. Those in our long term program learn life skills and job preparation and have a twice-weekly community engagement program in which they perform activities such as cleaning up parks and wetlands. It includes outdoor activities and recreation. When you play, your mask is off and your guard is down. You can enjoy your treatment when you find focus and activities that you can really get into, such as boxing. Our program helps participants with whatever is holding them back; it raises their self-esteem and provides them with hope.

"We provide our patients with long-term rehabilitation lasting up to 120 days, as well as short-term acute treatment lasting up to 28 days. Our dedicated team of clinicians and behavioral counselors work together to ensure that substance abuse disorder treatment is delivered with compassion and patience. At Gateway Rehab, we believe the benefits of inpatient treatment centers should cover all levels of recovery, including physical, psychological, spiritual and emotional.

"Our intensive inpatient program focuses on early recovery and self-awareness skills to not only overcome drug and alcohol dependency but to give patients a new sense of direction and purpose. Those that have completed the inpatient program also come away with a deep understanding that addiction is a disease, and they are not alone in this struggle. Gateway Rehab offers residential inpatient drug and alcohol treatment for both male and female patients."



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