

An Interview with John Reeck, Residential Clinician/Recovery Coach

John Reeck is living proof that hard work and determination pay off. Four years ago, he started an overnight position as a technician at The Recovery Place. From day one, he put in blood, sweat and tears to make his commitment clear to everyone around him. Before long, he was promoted to residential housing supervisor, a position that allowed him to develop the supervisory skills and systems to support the program's growth.

Knowing that helping addicts is what he wanted to do with his life, he started a course to become a certified addiction counselor. Hungry to learn and passionate about the work, he made his intentions clear: When the opportunity arose, he wanted to become a clinician. The management team at The Recovery Place, which had long recognized his gift for working with clients, asked him to start the residential program. Now, in addition to his clinical responsibilities, he plays an important role as a recovery coach.

Riding the Highs and Lows

Today, he is the picture of achievement, but it wasn't always so. Through adolescence and early adulthood, John was in and out of treatment for his own addiction. A native New Yorker, John realized he would either die or end up in prison if he didn't do something. He received a financial settlement as the result of an accident and used the money to move to Florida, where his two sisters lived. Once he got on the right track, he planned to buy a house, reconnect with his family and settle down.

His addiction had another plan. Drugs, Rolex watches, luxury cars – John was living the high life. In two years' time, he was homeless.

When his oldest brother passed away, one of his sisters tracked him down. Filthy, sick and squatting in an abandoned house, John knew he needed help. A friend's parent took him to dinner and worked with his sister to get him into treatment. Although he had been in treatment before, this time was different. Contrary to the state-run behavior modification programs of his youth, this center introduced him to the 12-Step model.

“The first day in treatment I met someone who gave me a lot of hope, and I haven't turned back since,” John says. “To this day, I believe in the 12 Steps with all my heart. It is by no means the only way to get sober, but there's no question it saved my life.”

Helping Addicts Find Their Own Answers

Part of John's inspiration to help other addicts stemmed from a close relationship he had with a therapist from one of the state-run facilities he attended as a teen.

“This man helped me build the courage to begin addressing the issues I'd avoided for many years. Working with him marked the beginning of my healing,” says John. “Last year, I saw him at an award ceremony where he was being honored. It was such a joy to be able to tell him what I'm doing with myself all these years later.”

Today, John not only has his dream job, but he has a relationship with his sisters, a loving wife and a 16-month-old son.

“People don't always get the kinds of opportunities I've been given,” John says. “Every day I feel so grateful to be here, working at a program that gives addicts exactly what they need – sincere caring and a team of supporters – and that gives me the chance to share the help and trust that have been given to me.”

John's personal experience of addiction and recovery informs every aspect of his work at The Recovery Place. Observing what worked for him and his clients, John uses a motivational interviewing approach to challenge false belief systems and help clients commit to their recovery.

“Every human being has good in them,” John explains. “Rather than imposing on them what they need to do, which brings up their defenses, I try to help clients break through barriers, come up with their own answers and formulate their own beliefs. I have seen clients make amazing progress when they connect with their own source of motivation.”

Although John is an avid member of AA, he doesn't force the 12 Steps or any other philosophy on his clients. Using the Stages of Change model, John helps clients figure out where they're at and what they need to do to move forward. For some, that includes the 12 Steps, for others it includes certain principles from the 12 Steps, and for others it is connecting with their own belief system that encourages them to take risks, work through their fears and release their denial.

Working directly with clients and their families is a real blessing for John. Even before he meets a client for the first time, John gets on the phone with the family to update them on what's happening with their loved one, gather background information and provide the family with resources that can aid in their own healing.

The Difficult First Week of Treatment

As a clinician at The Recovery Place, John's particular areas of strength lie in crisis intervention, rapport-building and motivational interviewing. His primary goals are to get clients stabilized

and keep them in treatment during the difficult post-acute withdrawal period.

“During this stage, not all of our clients want to be here,” he explains. “They may be struggling with denial, withdrawal or the roller coaster of emotions common in the first week of treatment.”

Although it depends on the age, gender, culture and personality of each client, John builds rapport by listening and empathizing. His own experience in recovery, and the fact that he has been where many of his clients are, makes him uniquely relatable. When clients are angry or resistant, he rolls with the resistance and comforts them through this difficult time rather than meeting them with more resistance.

“Clients know if you’re sincere,” says John. “They’re judging you from the moment you sit down with them, and if you’re not coming from a place of care and concern, you’ve lost them.”

Give Up? Never!

From the early days when John started working at The Recovery Place, the clinical director gave him a fitting nickname: relentless. John never gives up. Often when clients want to leave treatment, they only need to get through one more day before they have a change of heart. Knowing how critical each day is, John goes to great lengths, including chasing clients down and getting their families involved, to make sure clients don’t give up on themselves.

John embodies the same principles that he tries to instill in his clients, namely humility, gratitude, motivation, sincerity and helpfulness. Where does his incredible drive come from? At first, John admits that he was driven by a desire to catch up in life. He got sober in his early 30s and felt the need to make up the time lost to his addiction.

As he has grown, what drives John is his personal understanding of the disease of addiction and his deep concern for his clients.

“For those who don’t get this, I know what lies ahead. I have seen too many people overdose and die from this disease,” John says. “Anything I can do to help someone not have to go through the living hell of addiction, that’s what I’ll do.”

John is also determined to break the cycle of addiction that has plagued his family for generations so that he can give his son a fresh start.

“The beginning of a new life – that’s the gift that’s available for those of us who suffer from addiction,” John says. “I know an active addict could never fathom that they could be happy, but the gift is there for each and every one of us. You just have to accept it and go down that path. I am living proof that life gets better – there is happiness in recovery.”