

Supportive Messages Female Offenders Receive from Probation and Parole Officers about Substance Avoidance: Message Perceptions and Effects

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Many women supervised in the community with a history of substance abuse lack social support from family and friends. Social support is help provided to a person who is in need. Probation and parole agents may serve as sources of social support for women and help them to avoid problematic substance use.

Questions about Social Support

What forms of social support do agents provide to women on probation and parole regarding substance use avoidance?

What is helpful, and what is not?

Our Study

284 women on probation or parole who discussed substance use avoidance with their agents.

- 73% on probation; 26% on parole; 1% on both
- Average age of 34 years
- Racially/ethnically diverse
 - 48% White; 32% Black; others were Native American or reported multiple races.
 - Many reported being Hispanic.

Women reported on what the PO said about substance use avoidance, whether it was helpful, and how it was helpful.

We examined five forms of social support that AGENTs provided women offenders:

- Emotional support: help provided to show care and concern
“She asks me questions and you can tell she kinda cares.”
- Informational support: help in the form of information or advice
“She told me not to hang out with people who smoke or drink.”
- Esteem support: help directed at improving the recipient’s self-esteem
“She be like, ‘I’m proud of you, you do good, and you stay good’.”
- Network support: help provided to improve the recipient’s social network
[She referred me to] “this Women’s Group, they’re like a support group.”
- Tangible support: help in the form of goods or services
“She advocated for me, you know, she called him up and spoke to him.”

Our Findings

Most frequently, agents provided women with informational support. Other forms of support (esteem, emotional, tangible, and network) were provided less frequently.

All forms of social support were seen as mostly helpful.

Female offenders thought that social support from agents had beneficial effects for their physical and mental health, and that it helped them to avoid substance use.

Women on parole benefited more from agent social support than women on probation.

Practical Application

Agents can help by providing clients with any form of social support, as all were seen as beneficial in avoiding substance use.

Agents can provide more emotional, esteem, network, and tangible support (when appropriate) to fill gaps in female offenders' networks.

Agents can pay special attention to providing social support to parolees, who are more likely to benefit than probationers.