

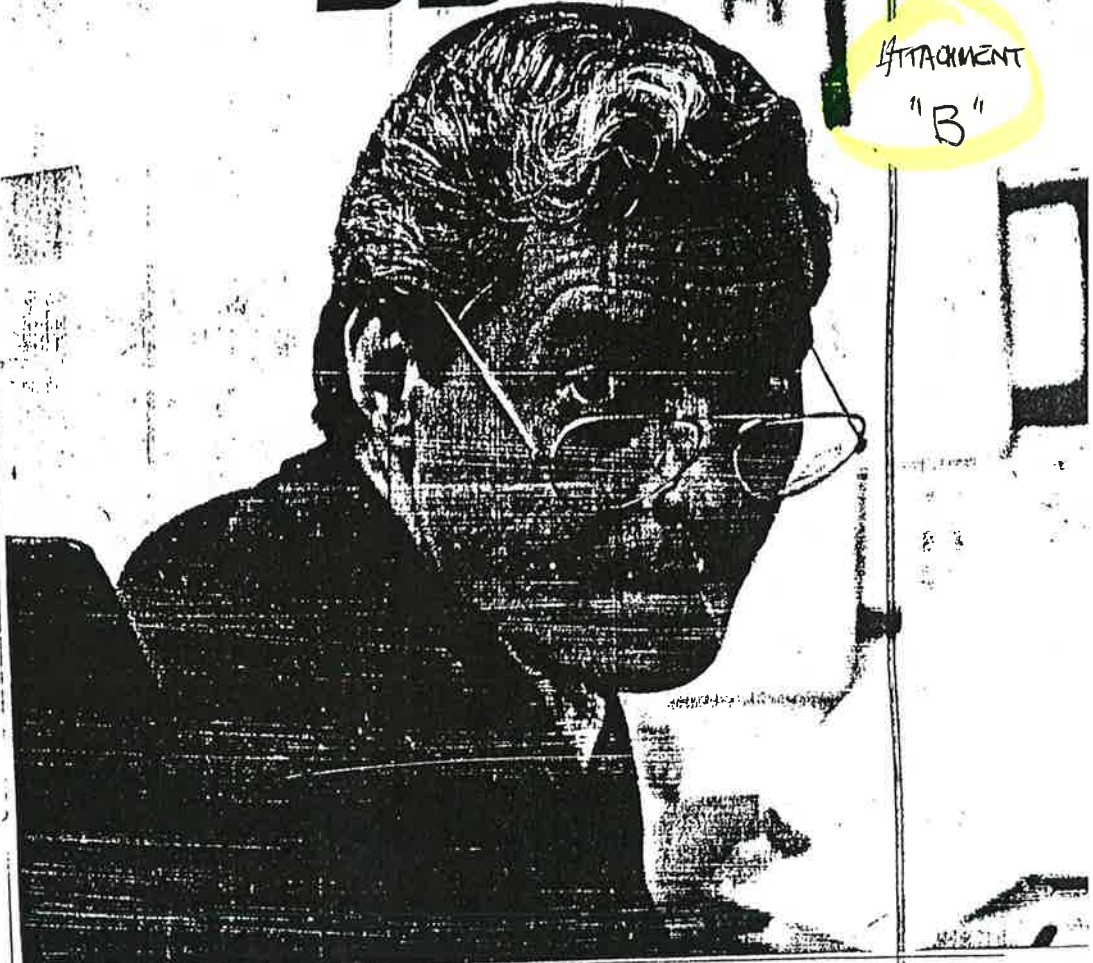
FEBRUARY 1976 ONE DOLLAR

psychology today

ATTACHMENT
"B"

Issue's unique contribution, how-
 comes from a former nun and a
 slon Ph.D., both now at an Alabama
 school. Eileen and Charles Slack
 found that almost nobody seems to
 ge a bad habit such as shoplifting or
 ing without the help of at least two
 r people. Working with only one other
 on, whether psychologist or teacher
 reacher, merely sets up an ego
 ggle. The missing element in most
 situations is not the psychologist or
 er but the ex-deviant, somebody
 ha the problem but got over it.
 he Slacks report their finding in "It
 es Three to Break a Bad Habit." I'm
 vanced they have spotted what goes
 ng in most therapies, in many class-
 ms, and in public programs designed
 elp people caught in habit traps. If the
 ck model holds up in the other studies,
 ybe we'll celebrate next New Year's
 in triads

T. George Harris



Charles W. Slack
and Eileen N. Slack

46 **Triad Therapy: It Takes Three to Break a Habit** A program for delinquent girls teaches that to change behavior, a psychologist must team up with a third person who has had the problem and licked it.

FEBRUARY, 1976

Triad Therapy

IT TAKES THREE TO BREAK A HABIT

At an Alabama state prison for delinquent girls, three people work on an inmate's problem: the inmate who has the problem, another inmate who used to have the problem and got over it, and the naive psychologist, who provides the insights and beliefs of straight society.

by Charles W. Slack
and Eileen N. Slack

IN THE SUMMER OF 1973 Eileen became the new Superintendent of the Alabama State Training School in Chalkville near Birmingham, an institution for young women (12 to 18 years old) convicted of delinquency. It wasn't long before we became aware of an unfocused rage that permeated the entire place.

For people with troubles, the most ordinary act of the day could turn into a provocation. If one inmate was allowed to go home briefly because of a serious family crisis, and another was denied time at home during a seemingly similar situation, blind rage might erupt. Or a staff member, no matter how able and dedicated, might inadvertently seem to slight someone. Rages over injustice, real or imagined, could break out anywhere, anytime. Some teenagers smashed windows in their rooms. One unscrewed the drawer slide in her dresser and turned it into a deadly spear. Coke bottles turned into hidden weapons, and the school's long-established habit of frequent room searches always turned up caches of broken glass, rocks, sticks, and other instruments tucked away for attacks on staff or other inmates, or for self-defense. The dining room offered a thousand and one opportunities for aggression. You could let the plate fall on the floor, throw food, or spill hot soup on anybody you didn't like.

"Mr. Lockall." As in most institutions problems like these were not solved they were confined. Whenever a girl got too far out of line, a man known to all as "Mr. Lockall" would round up the security guards, slap on the cuffs and cart the offender off to solitary to up to two weeks, with just a mattress for sleeping and a number-10 can for number one and number two. One unrepentant soul in solitary had built local legend by heaving the contents of her number-10 can into the face of a school official.

Mr. Lockall warned Eileen that if she released "those people" from solitary



Philipe Weisbecker

would cause riots. It did, but they were small riots. Every time we lifted the lid in any way, the pressure cooker-blew. Sudden hope is unsettling, and so far as we know most of the riots in the major prisons have come when conditions were getting better, not worse. The young women in solitary at the Training School were there because of their problems, and just letting the women out without dealing with the problems left an unstable situation. But Eileen knew the effects of prolonged solitary herself, as a novice in the Sisters of Charity, a Catholic order; she could not stand for anyone to be indefinitely left alone. It didn't help.

So she formed special groups of inmates who had once been in solitary to meet every day with each girl confined in solitary to decide if she were ready to be let out. We soon found that the key to progress was finding someone in the group who had been through the same emotional problem, or one like it, that had driven the inmate into trouble. The groups would talk until someone would say that she, or someone she knew, had been through such and such. If a girl had thrown a knife in the dining room, she might have had a father who threw things around at home. We found that we needed to match the sources of the rage, the real problems, rather than the specific behaviors that put them into solitary.

The Handy Expletive. A pattern began to come clear. Charles spotted it because of his work in the early '60s with street gangs in New York. The boys there were killing each other in gang warfare until he hired two ex-cons as assistants. They were able, with his help, to stop the violence. Charles alone could not persuade a gang leader to quit killing. Neither could the ex-cons. Success required the meeting of three or more people, each representing a different role: the gang fighter, the ex-con and the social innocent (Charles) who had never had the problem.

Standard theory about rehabilitation leaves out the ex-con, the person who once had the problem and got over it. Traditional dyads, one-on-one, rely entirely on the professional helper working with the deviant. This becomes a test of will, a type of emotional arm-wrestling. But the presence of a third role, someone who personifies the solution to the problem, changes the balance of power and of knowledge. Charles found that Synanon, Alcoholics Anonymous, Daytop Village,

The death-try fad caught on. We had drinkings of floor wax, perfume, laundry bleach, and Sani-Flush.

and almost all successful therapy programs involve all three roles. He began to talk about triad therapy.

The groups working with our young women in solitary confinement gave us daily field tests of triads. M-F Martha hated adults. She used to stand at her window and scream invectives at us. "Dr. Slack, you M-F-ing bitch, and you, too, Mister Dr. Slack, you rotten, M-F-ing bastard. Damn you all to hell."

Martha had been beaten and raped frequently by her stepfather. Now, any adult who came near got zapped by her handiest expletive. When she finally stopped swearing, it was due to the combined influence of professionals and other girls who'd had bad fathers. They were in plentiful supply, since paternal rape is not uncommon. Just because your stepfather is a rapist, the girls made clear to Martha, does not give you the right to curse all mankind.

Staff members, who had never experienced her particular problem, could not get through to Martha by themselves. But the staff role was clearly necessary. Without solid, square citizens in the picture to represent social normality, the ex-problem people may not want to help others, or may backslide into the problem themselves. We saw it happen. Henrietta swore she'd never run away again. But when she was sent in by herself to persuade AWOL Melinda to return to the fenced campus, both Henrietta and Melinda disappeared.

Exes, as we came to call the ex-problem people, couldn't help us when a serious fad started. When each fad started a new behavior, we were often without people who had conquered the problems. Self-mutilation was a fad in mid-1973, and we could not start treating it until one or two rejected the novelty and became working exes.

The Suicide Fad. Then we had a tough-guy fad, the girls imitated Lady Kung Fu and talked like Bogart. And we had a Baby Jane fad, the girls sucked their

thumbs and called the staff "Mommie." We had a lesbian fad; nearly everybody pretended, and a few meant it, to be madly in love with each other.

Fads themselves became a fad, and the worst was suicide. It began with a girl whose mother refused to talk to her. She cut her wrists. Another, with a hard-drug problem, remembered her still-born child. She drank poison. But both got to the emergency room in time. When they came back alive and well, with exciting stories to tell, the death-try fad caught on. We had drinkings of floor wax (not particularly bad for you), perfume (mildly bad), and Sani-Flush (extremely bad). One drank laundry bleach so often she earned the nickname "Clorox." Wrists were slashed until bandages sprouted like orchids at a Junior League ball. It was mass hysteria. Even if a girl might not want to die, she could succeed. Thank God, no one quite made it.

The fad ended when a young woman who'd had enough arose to personify the solution. She had wanted to kill herself, but her cottage counselor spent hours convincing her that life mattered. "I feel that people care," she said. "Mrs. M. has helped me to see that other people depend on me. I need myself, too."

Another self-slasher admitted that she had not really wanted to die but just wanted scars on her wrists. She'd seen them as an advance beyond homemade tattoos, then popular. Eileen found it hard to believe that most of the slashers wanted to die.

"Yes, they do," said Sandra. "They'll try again, and so will I."

That angered the group. They said Sandra was just making trouble, not really depressed. "You just want attention to your bandages and scars," someone said.

"Who're you to mouth off? You do, too," Sandra retorted.

"Not any more, sister."

"Tell us why not," said Mrs. E. As the staffer, she knew how important it was to grasp for our first true ex in the suicide problem.

"Someday I might have a daughter of my own and when I do I don't want her looking at my wrists and asking, 'Mommie, tell me what's all those scars?' I mean, what could you say to your own daughter?"

That remark, widely quoted, helped end the suicide fad.

Being an ex is a social role, and how people perceive you is as important as

how you perceive yourself. While we worked to build squads of exes for each specific problem, we tried to build the different stages of exes for the general role of the Training School inmate who could graduate into normal life outside.

Barbara the Brick. Cosmetics helped. We worked on tooth repair, make-up, clothes, hair styles and tattoo removal. Most of the girls refused such treatment at first, often with such determination that one dentist resigned, saying he had been bitten so often he'd contracted V.D. But soon the skin, hair, smiles and styles became more attractive. Lucy had all her homemade tattoos removed and looked charming. "Dracula" with the canine fangs became "Tracks" in her teeth braces. She went home to high school and now dates a handsome fellow; she is a dramatic ex. If she can make it, anybody can. Lily Bogie, who had once threatened to crack her teacher's head with a coke bottle, is also back in school and made a B-minus in math. Each success story added credibility. Barbara the Brick, hard as the rot-gut she and her whole family were busted for brewing, is married to a detective in Baton Rouge. These fabulous exes—about half black and half white, like the inmate population—keep coming back to provide concrete evidence of success and take their ex-roles in the ever-changing triads on specific problems.

But their progress as exes steadily moves them out of that category: they become more and more like people who never had the problem. They begin to belong to the other leg of the triad stool, the never-had category often filled by psychologists or other representatives of normal conduct. Eileen used to have many visits from nuns and priests moving into civilian life, but fewer and fewer clerics now see her as an ex-nun with special experience in the transition problems. She is becoming like anyone else, almost a never-been.

The Dumbest Role. Trial and error let us nail down clear definitions of the three kinds of people, the three social roles, that interact to get results. First, there are those who now have a problem. Second, there are those, often staff or professionals, who never had the problem. Third, there are the gap-bridgers who used to have the problem but now do not. These ex-offenders are the missing links in most efforts to change behavior. They personify the solution, and they understand the full emotional

Where we once suffered neglect of our institutions, now we hurt from oversupply of organization.

grain of the problem in a way that the professional outsider never can. They are hard to con, and they often come up with the germ of the idea that the other two can work with.

The professional may feel like an insufficient contributor in the never-had role. In a sense, he or she plays the dumbest role of the triad, the naive outsider. Knowledge of research becomes, in this light, merely a collection of previous cases and how they turned out. Knowledge of a specific technique such as behavior modification can be very helpful, but this know-how merely reflects how others became exes. It, too, is but an accumulation of previous case experiences organized into a theory. Professional knowledge was gleaned from people like the one with the problem and the ex-offender, and the professional understands the experience in the head rather than in the gut. In fact, an amateur who volunteers to work in triads as a never-had may represent the larger society with greater conviction than a professional.

The professional lacks the specific motive that drives the ex-offender. You can see it at work in Alcoholics Anonymous, the granddaddy of all rehabilitation. AA members, led by a nonalcoholic physician who is president, keep from drinking by working on others who have the problem. Criminologist Donald Cressey explained how such a process works among criminals. When criminal A joins with noncriminals in order to reform criminal B, it is A who is reformed the most. So he tends to give the most. In the triad, the beautiful part is that you both give and receive help. The patient becomes the doctor, and the amateur leads the professional. **Stubborn Bureaucracy.** When triads succeed where the pros have failed, the inflexible professional may become jealous. As the triad idea spread outside the Alabama school, often depending

on amateur never-hads, threatened professionals have tried to impose impossible requirements on triads, and used enough red tape to choke spontaneity. Nothing wilts the altruistic spirit of the volunteer, we've noticed, like the personality questionnaire or the psychiatrist who diagnoses good will as a symptom of abnormality.

Bureaucratic organization resists the problem-sharing that brings real change. A bizarre example shows what usually happens. A policeman who moonlighted as the school's security guard exposed himself as an exhibitionist. Because Sergeant Flasher, as we call him, picked our school to show his stuff, Charles thought he might be looking for help, but he didn't get it. Reports from the staff and inmates carried no weight with the police captain, and other policemen refused to speak up. In place of treatment, Flasher got promoted off the beat. His bureaucracy could not allow him to be a man with a problem to share; he had to be a functionary with no flaws.

In a broader sense, the malady of our day is organization itself, the altruistic bureaucracy. Where we once suffered neglect of our institutions, now we hurt from oversupply of organization. The message of the triad is: help yourself by helping others. The message of the bureaucracy is: we will decide what is good for you even if we don't know who you are. Implemented with the full power and funds of Government, the bureaucratic message can drown out the triad hope.

In Alabama, the new State Youth Services Department offers an opportunity to create triads, and the agency's director is determined to prevent institutionalitis. Only when top administrators are themselves involved in daily triads, working with problem and ex-problem people; do you break through the isolation of bureaucracy and begin to appreciate the special wisdom of the ex-offender. The test of any agency one day may be the number of exes who move up through its ranks from its client population, the customers who got the help they needed.

Implemented by a dedicated staff, the triad idea can transform an organization. Eileen runs a group meeting every day at one o'clock, once the quiet hour when all inmates were locked up. Secretaries, a recruiter of volunteers, a teacher, social workers, and cottage

(Continued on page 93)

Triangle (Continued from page 50.)

counselors run other groups at the same time. They cover problems from stealing and truancy to hostility, prostitution, drugs, and lying. After the problems are specified, they are alleviated by the combined efforts of those who have the problem, together with staff and the experts who once licked the problem.

Downright Helpful. The school at Chalkville is now vibrant with a move into coeducation. Hair styles, clothes, conversations and cosmetics will move still closer to normal for the outside world. The artificiality of reformatory life will be set back another step. "If Vassar, Princeton, and Yale can do it, so can we," says Eileen.

The test of how the triads work will be unchanged. M-F Martha, now in a half-way house and soon to be released from custody, explained it all with her favorite expletive.

"I bet you're glad to get out of here," Charles said to her.

Martha said nothing.

"Or, underneath, maybe you like it here. Maybe you love the place."

"Oh, I hate the place," she answered, and then she whispered, "but some of these M-F people have been downright helpful." □

Charles Slack is a professor of research in education at the University of Alabama Medical Center in Birmingham. He received his



Ph.D in psychology from Princeton University and has taught at Harvard University, Brooklyn College, New York University and Columbia Teachers College. Eileen Slack has an Ed.D. from Columbia Teachers College. She has taught for 16 years at all educational levels. The Slacks have been working



as a team since their marriage in 1971. Charles supplies the theoretical basis and Eileen tests the theories in the reality of the State Training School. Together they are writing a book on the Chalkville

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