



Promises, Promises

While some of its amenities make skeptics question its legitimacy, Malibu rehab center **Promises** insists that it takes A-list attendees 12 steps in the right direction.

By Scott Huver

DON'T CALL IT "RESORT REHAB."

With the steady stream of Hollywood stars struggling with addiction in recent years, and court-ordered detox increasingly the focus of entertainment headlines, Promises—the ultraprivate addiction-recovery center set high above the Pacific in the mountains of Malibu—has come under the scrutiny of the celebrity-scandal-hungry public. Media coverage fans the flames, often depicting Promises as a kind of chic country club for cosseted celebrities with substance-abuse issues.

But unlike its imitators, Promises isn't just a superficial setting for sobriety. Boasting literally thousands of success stories over two decades (in both Malibu and a West LA outpost), the facility is far from four-star, and its approach to recovery is as serious-minded as it can be, no matter how rich, famous, powerful, or privileged the client.

Dr. David Sack, Promises CEO and a veteran board-certified addiction psychiatrist, understands where the eye-roll-inspiring public image comes from: "People look at the celebrities—they're sort of the American royalty—and say, 'How can they be suffering when they have all this money and all



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—DR. DAVID SACK,
ADDICTION PSYCHIATRIST
AND CEO OF PROMISES

and about their treatment. This is an invitation that basically says, Come on board. We’re going to help you get there. It’s a big part of what we do.”

Despite being situated above the elite enclave, the facility isn’t ostentatious. It consists of two homey residential structures (modest by Malibu standards) set far from a secluded hilltop road, and a third home down the street for those who’ve earned the freedom to come and go as they resume their lives. There are amenities, yes—a tennis court, pools, Jacuzzis, and a top-shelf culinary staff among them—but the clients (never more than 24 at a time) are quickly, firmly, and consistently given to understand that they bear responsibility for their own recovery.

Within a setting that includes group and individual sessions encouraging support and accountability, the tried-and-true Twelve Step system is taught and reinforced, behaviors and consequences are analyzed, and contributing psychiatric disorders, medical conditions, and concurrent addictions such as sex and gambling are addressed. Those unwilling to participate in the therapeutic activities after an appropriate adjustment period (“They can pout or they can go to group,” says Sack) are typically referred to another treatment program. Internet use and off-site business contacts are discouraged (“We really try to remove as many distractions as possible”), and clandestine drug use is grounds for dismissal. (“We don’t tolerate drug use. There’s no real middle position there,” says Sack, noting that “someone always has to test those rules.”)

Sack recognizes that from the outside looking in, some of Promises’ approaches might seem overly indulgent: yoga, for example, sounds like a day at the spa, but it teaches those in recovery methods for finding focus and controlling anxiety and other overwhelming impulses. “It’d be easy to mistake that for entertainment,” he says, “when in fact it’s really a core part of the treatment because [lack of focus, anxiety, and the like constitute] such a common problem.”

this opportunity? Look at this one: She’s beautiful, she’s worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Why is she addicted? And she gets to be treated in this beautiful place up in Malibu!”

But while the public has ample reason for suspecting the rich and powerful of evading responsibility for their indiscretions, Sack is quick to point out that Promises offers not cushy respite but real help with addiction in an environment these people understand. “People worry that affluent folks are using treatment systems to avoid consequences,” he says, “but what I think is far more true is that affluent folks who get in trouble because of their addiction often get into treatment and recover as a result of being treated in settings that are appropriate for them. The setting is not irrelevant to how people feel about themselves

Another activity outsiders are quick to lampoon, he says, is the “equine-assisted therapy,” in which clients interact with horses. “People assume that it involves riding. Why are they paying to go [horseback riding] when they need to be working on their addiction? But it really involves relating to horses around trust issues. How do you get a horse to allow you to examine it, to touch it, to relate to it when you don’t have verbal cues and you don’t have language to really assist you? Many of our clients suffered terrible abuse and neglect as children and [it’s very difficult for them to] communicate nonverbally, to find ways to relate. When you’re working with an animal that has basically never harmed you, I think it forces you to look at some of those trust and communication issues.”

It stands to reason that many who can afford to check into Promises are accustomed to having the world revolve around them. Add to that the fact that they often arrive unwillingly—via court order, intervention, or a life-altering catastrophe—and it’s no surprise that the staff sees quite a bit of nonchalance, ambivalence, and even anger. But, Sack says, “clients quickly realize that the setting is a veneer on a very serious program. They don’t feel mollicoddled.” It’s “get with the program or get out” until they’re ready to deal with their demons.

Family members, he says, often have an even harder road. With so much attention lavished on the person who may have been causing collateral damage, loved ones may feel resentful. “They’re beyond fed-up, and now their relative is here, and the center of attention,” Sack says. “It would be a mistake to assume that family members are as happy for their relatives as we’d sometimes like to see them, because they’ve usually suffered more. They’re so disappointed or hurt or exploited that they’re looking, on some level, for retribution. That’s why we have family therapy every weekend, because we’re trying to help families get a better understanding of the illness and what an appropriate way to relate to it is.”

But it’s media perception that’s hardest to manage, especially when the paparazzi invade hoping for a shot of a fallen star in what appears to be an indulgent environment. “Any time a very famous person is here we have to take special steps and special efforts to try to protect their privacy because there are more people looking,” says Sack. “But it is harder because the level of curiosity is higher.”

“The paparazzi are relentless,” he says, and occasionally a patient will pull publicity-seeking stunts. “There are people who probably think that’s a good thing, who think that they should come to a place *because* of that kind of notoriety. We want people to choose to come here because we help people recover and we take our work very seriously.” ★