

## 01-02-15 Road to Recovery Paved with Love

On December 9, 2011, the following column was published. I did not reveal at the time the source of my insight and empathy; the discovery of my own son's addiction to Percocet pills. It is agonizing to think about the roller coaster ride the whole family has taken since then. The emotional pain, including shame and guilt of loving parents, the attempts to help and the strange acceptance of what we cannot control. I now repeat the column with my acknowledgement and hope for my son, for, I believe, we need to be more open and talk more about this epidemic. I hope at least one person will benefit in some way from admission.

There's a heart breaking problem woven into the fabric of our society that is fairly invisible even though it is widespread. It starts off easy and cheap and ends up so expensive as to be unaffordable, that is, unless you steal or deal. It is quite often, but not always, prescribed by doctors. It often starts off with a socially acceptable excuse, "as needed for pain". In the end, it is drug addiction.

State and federal funds are paying millions each year for treatment of drug addiction, probation officers, law enforcement and tying up the judicial system; sadly, with a low level of success. The families' financial efforts for a hoped-for recovery at private institutions are not so easily included in the statistics. (In other words, what statistics are available to the public are greatly minimized, as they do not include the private data.) And then there are the volunteer efforts that have been going strong for decades now with a high track record of success. Branching off of the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Step Program, Narcotics Anonymous is on the rise, as addiction to opiates rises. These efforts are even more off the radar when it comes to estimating the costs and consequences of drug addiction in our country. Yet, one measure of the important and critical role they are playing in recovery is that hospitals, drug rehabilitation facilities and professional counselors specializing in drug addiction support and encourage the attendance at Narcotics Anonymous meetings in addition to counseling and other rehab programs. That tells you something.

The support by the medical and psychological field speaks to the limitations of their treatment and to the complexity of the problem. People who have become addicted typically need all kinds of support and help in order to successfully recover. In particular, they need the right kind of support. They need to talk with and meet with and learn from and eventually lean on, others who have been there. There's no pulling the wool over the eyes of a recovering addict. The story behind the story? They've heard them all. The reasons and excuses? They've heard them all. But they'll still listen and they'll tell their own story. And they will listen again and again, any time, day or night.

The support of those who have travelled down that crazy path of addiction and recovery cannot help others, though, if the ones needing their help do not make the first step by attending a meeting. Attendance does not require talking but, eventually, an addict needs to say that famous sentence, “Hi, my name is...(first name only) and I’m an addict.” After that important first step, it is “One Day at A Time”.

Before recovery and usually during the early stages of recovery, the alcoholics’ or the drug addicts’ path is one of self destruction. As agonizing as it is to watch people you love slowly destroying themselves, the destruction does not end there. Parallel to every addiction is a multitude of lives being torn apart by worry, stress, disappointment, financial loss, divorce, loss of child custody, arguments, lack of sleep, depression and mourning the loss of a loved one, even while that loved one is still alive.

The family of the addict ends up needing almost as much help as the addict. They need to learn how to help themselves. They need to learn how easy it is to enable an addict, despite good intentions. Enabling the addict comes in many forms, such as making excuses, bailing them out of jail and bailing them out of financial problems. By learning about addiction from knowledgeable counselors or by groups such as AlAnon or NarcAnon, and Learn to Cope, the family learns that they didn’t Cause it, can’t Control it, and can’t Cure it. They learn to love the person without offering support for their loved one’s destructive actions. We learn to say, “I love you; not the things you do.”

It sounds easy but it is not. It is torture to watch someone you love in denial of the seriousness of the problem. It is torture to feel so helpless. Over time, though, the family members who are learning how best to deal with addiction, realize that only the addict can actually do the work of asking for help, getting help, telling the truth, associating with non-users in recovery, making that call to the sponsor when the craving hits and day after day, not using drugs.

The main job of the family and true friends is to, from time to time, without notice, let him or her know your love. That’s about it. We call and say, “Hey, just thinking about you. I love you. Are you in a program? Yeah? Keep up the good work. Stay with it.” (or, “No? I hope you will. I love you.”)

As long as the deceit and denial continues, though, there has to be some distance between you and that addict you love. You might have to change your locks. You might have to say, “I am not comfortable with you in my space at that family party when you don’t tell the truth and there’s all that temptation of money in pocketbooks and meds in bathrooms. You can’t be there.”

It is a difficult process, showing that love and having boundaries at that same time. To participate in assisting a friend or family member to stay in a comfort zone of denial and to

actively prevent those loved ones from dealing with the consequences of their own actions, is not helping at all. It is, in fact, saying, “Let me help you stay away from recovery.”

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Join forces with others learning about dealing with addiction. Enough lives and marriages and children have been victims of drug abuse. Let’s learn how to show our love in ways that do not keep someone from their own recovery. This kind of love is really hard work but it is all worth it. It can save a life.

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