

A Parent's Roller Coaster Ride into Recovery, Part 1

BY ANONYMOUS

My son is an addict. His addiction has had a profound impact on my life. Addiction—which includes alcoholism—is a disease, and it wreaks havoc on family members as well as the addict. Naturally, we seek and yearn first for the addict's sobriety, and we want to do whatever we can to "fix" the addict. However, I have learned that, due to the nature of the disease, we are powerless to fix the addict or cure him of addiction. My experience—and the experience of countless others—reveals that the addict's recovery cannot be forced or willed or controlled by family members, no matter how hard we try. But fortunately, thousands of addicts/alcoholics find sobriety and recovery. There is a way, and plenty of hope.

I have also learned that, regardless of whether the addict is using or not, we family members can learn to cope with a loved one's drinking or drugging or other addictive behaviors, and that we can even find a measure of serenity amidst the chaos and pain of it all, if we focus on the one thing we do control—taking care of ourselves. And by doing so, we often can contribute to the addict's recovery.

But I learned none of this quickly or easily. My journey with my son's addiction started in the summer before his senior year in high school, when he tested positive for drug use. It shook me up, for sure. At the time, Brian (not his real name) was a rising senior in high school, a few months short of his 18th birthday. He had been treated by a pediatrician for ADD since his elementary school years. Due to some changes in Brian's behavior patterns and school performance his junior year, the pediatrician suspected drug abuse and suggested that we drug test him. I was stunned when I heard that he tested positive. While I knew that drugs and alcohol were a widespread problem among teenagers,

I had never expected that the problem would strike any of my children. And it happened right under my nose without me knowing it. But now I could not deny it. My son's well-being was at stake. My wife and I were determined to find out the extent of the problem and deal with it.

We confronted Brian with the results of the test. Surprisingly, he did not try to deny it or evade it. Instead, he was defiant—he said he liked using drugs and did not intend to stop and didn't think it was a big deal. My wife and I knew that we were face to face with a huge problem. We loved our son with all our heart and we wanted the best for him. We resolved to fight for that. But the next several months tested my resolve and my love for him. It became a hellish journey for me.

To put all this in perspective, I need to first tell you about Brian before addiction. From the time he was a little kid, Brian had been a carefree, fun loving youngster, mischievous in a good sort of way, with lots of wonderful friends and a great sense of humor. He loved and enjoyed his family. Growing up, Brian and his little brother (who is two years younger) were very close; and Brian enjoyed playfully teasing his little sister, who is our youngest child. He enjoyed sports and skateboarding. He loved music. He had fun and interesting hobbies. He was a good student in school.

In the months after our confrontation, Brian's life rapidly spiraled downward before our very eyes. It seemed that no matter what we tried to do about it, we couldn't make it better, we couldn't change him. He began hanging out with a new group of friends. He stopped playing sports. He became increasingly apathetic about school. He was failing, or in danger of failing, all of his classes. His teachers had given up hope that he could salvage his senior year, and it was not for their lack of trying. This was a time when most seniors were applying to and visiting colleges. Brian had always planned to go to college. He loved figuring out how things worked or



were put together, and he had often talked about going to school to become an engineer. As parents, we placed a high priority on education, and of course we had dreams of college for Brian. But by the time he was well into his fall semester, as his addiction worsened, he seemed to have lost interest in college as well as any motivation to get there. We took him on a few college visits, but at some point he said, "Can't you tell I don't want that?"

Brian had become inconsiderate, angry, and defiant toward us. He frequently disappeared or failed to report in or come home when expected. A number of times he stayed out all night. That was particularly agonizing, not knowing where he was, my mind racing, imagining the worst. We continually tried all we could think of to get him to change his ways. We considered ourselves fairly strict parents. We had high expectations for our children when it came to respect for authority, truth telling, diligence in school, courtesy, and family citizenship. As Brian's addiction progressed, we ratcheted up the discipline, hoping that punishment—such as grounding and taking away the things that he liked and wanted the most—would stop him. But instead he just became more defiant and unmanageable, and was apathetic about the values we expected him to live by. He began spending more and

more time with his drug friends, or in his room with the door closed. When he wasn't in his room or out of the house, he spent hours on end on the family computer. When we got together with extended family or friends, he acted totally disconnected and disengaged. His isolating and dark moods progressed to the point that when you looked into his eyes, it was if he no longer had any soul.

We also engaged in the fruitless pursuit of drug testing him, thinking that if we had "proof," we would gain leverage over him and get him to stop. But somehow he found a way to pass those drug tests. (We later learned that kids knew ways to "beat" the drug tests.) At times when we confronted him about being obviously high, his reply would be, "Well, I passed the drug test." It was insane.

We tried to persuade him, reason with him, punish him; we tried all the tactics that might be expected to have some impact with most kids. But none of it worked. In fact, it often developed into heated arguments, and sometimes he simply ignored us or walked away. Brian just got worse and worse. He began to steal money from us to fund his drug habit. On his 18th birthday, Brian was arrested for shoplifting at a convenience store. We hired an attorney to represent him, fearing that his future would be harmed by a criminal record.

Brian's addiction and out-of-control behavior affected the entire family. We sought help from a family counselor, but the counselor did not have expertise with addiction and we realized we needed more specialized help to guide us. My wife began attending Al-Anon, a 12-Step support fellowship for people who are affected by the alcoholism or addiction of loved ones. It seemed that everywhere we turned, people recommended that we try Al-Anon. I had never heard of Al-Anon before and was not yet ready to go.

I was an emotional wreck. I alternated between anger *at* him and deep emotional pain *for* him. I would suddenly break into crying spells. A couple of times I even ended up curled into a fetal position, sobbing uncontrollably. I was sad, terrified for Brian's well-being, feeling lost and overwhelmed by my inability to change him. I had never experienced emotional pain this deep.

Up until this time, I had lived a happy, fulfilling life with no extraordinary hardship, emotionally, physically, or otherwise. The legal profession is all about identifying and

solving problems, and attaining high standards of excellence in meeting client needs and demands. We lawyers have developed knowledge, skills, and tools that allow us to solve major problems. We are used to being in control, fixing things by some combination of reasoning, persuasion and other techniques. But absolutely none of that worked with Brian and his addiction.

By early January, we decided Brian needed inpatient treatment. We found an appropriate treatment center and made the arrangements for him to go late January. It was hard waiting and living with the uncertainty as to whether he would agree to go to treatment once we told him of our plans.

During this time, I had two experiences which marked the gateway to my own journey of recovery from the effects of Brian's addiction on my life. One morning, my wife and I were engaged in what had become a common occurrence in our house—an argument with Brian about something he had done or not done or should do or shouldn't do. I was in my typical mode of expecting him to listen and obey, to just stop doing drugs and bad stuff and straighten up his life. I was angry at him, and I took his behavior personally, as if he were doing it just to make my life miserable. Brian eventually got up and walked out in the middle of my rant. In the first "moment of truth" in my own recovery, my wife said, "Brian's addiction is a disease, and it is understandable for you to be mad, but if you are going to be mad, you should be mad at the disease and not at the person." I had never thought of separating the person from the disease. It was an epiphany to me. It cracked open the door to seeking an understanding of the disease while also having compassion for the addict. It was my first step toward learning that Brian's behavior was not a personal affront directed at me.

A week after Brian's assessment, my wife and I attended a Saturday morning group meeting for parents of adolescent alcoholics and addicts. I found myself sitting in a world I had never dreamed would include me or my family. It seemed surreal, but the reality was beginning to sink in. I remember feeling a certain therapeutic element in the group, and it made me long for more encounters with other people dealing with similar struggles. We attended a talk by a physician who was a recovering alcoholic. He explained that addiction is a disease. He went over a lot of

medical and scientific aspects, and also spoke of his own personal experience with the disease as an alcoholic and a physician. This session was my first significant exposure to the disease concept. It fascinated me and left me yearning to learn more so I could be in a better position to understand and help my son. Plus, I felt a sense of relief from the idea that my son's substance abuse may be a disease rather than a moral failing.

But I still had not started going to Al-Anon. My wife talked about how much it was helping her, but for some reason I put off going. I was anxious for the arrival of the fateful day when we would take Brian to the treatment center, and I was filled with fear over the possibility that he might refuse to go. My crying spells became more frequent. I remember some mornings when I got all ready for work, but then broke down crying and needed my wife to calm me down so I could get up and go to work. I also noticed a decline in my stamina and ability to concentrate at work. I struggled to manage my workload, and in a few matters I failed to meet clients' needs on a timely basis. I even lost one client because of that.

When the day arrived to take Brian to the inpatient treatment center, I vividly remember feeling like it was the most important moment in our family's life. Would he agree to go? What would we do if he refused? We planned it out carefully. That morning, before school, we would tell Brian we had arranged for a 28 day stay. We also had an angel in our corner—Bill (not his real name), who was a family friend and had known Brian personally for years and who was a staff member with the Lawyer Assistance Program. Bill had a steady, calm demeanor, and we knew that Brian liked and respected him personally. Bill graciously agreed to join us that morning for our little "intervention." Bill's support, presence, and professional experience gave us strength and comfort, and it seemed to have the desired calming effect on Brian, or at least it kept Brian from turning the meeting into an antagonistic battle with his parents. Albeit with reluctant resignation, he agreed to go.

On the drive to the treatment center, Brian was surly and resentful. It was a rainy, dreary winter day's drive, but at one point along the drive, a rainbow briefly broke out. My wife and I will never forget that moment—we saw it as a sign of hope. Amidst the pain, chaos, and fear of dealing

with an addicted loved one, sometimes hope is all you have to hang on to, and we were learning to grasp for hope any way we could.

We felt a tremendous sense of relief checking Brian into the treatment center and putting him in the hands of professionals. At check-in, we also wrote a very large check for the cost of the program, adding to the ongoing list of financial and other losses we had suffered from Brian's addiction.

With Brian now away and in good hands, we were grateful for a break in the chaos. We put our focus on restoring some sanity at home with our other two children. So much of our energy and attention had been spent on Brian's addiction that we had allowed ourselves to be distracted from the needs of our other two children. Space here does not allow for all the details, but both of Brian's younger siblings were profoundly affected in their own ways by his addiction and his eventual recovery journey.

Even with the relief of knowing Brian was in treatment, I still felt ongoing deep emotional pain for him and great uncertainty as to his eventual outcome. I continued to have crying spells and problems with concentration and stamina at work. I often got distracted thinking about how he was doing at rehab. Looking back, I can now see that it was partly obsessive thinking, and partly an effort to intentionally feel a sense of solidarity with and support for him on his journey. It did not occur to me to focus on my own needs; it was still all about him getting well. I began having problems sleeping, something I had never experienced before. My wife convinced me that I was depressed and that I should go see a doctor. I went to a psychiatrist, who diagnosed me with situational depression. Between medication and therapy, I experienced an amazing relief of the depression symptoms. I have not experienced any depression symptoms since then. My experience left me with the strong belief that anyone with depression-like symptoms should seek a professional evaluation instead of just trying to shrug it off or slog through it.

My wife and I attended the treatment center's family educational program. It was gut wrenching, as I came face to face with the harsh realities of the disease and its consequences, with my grief over what the disease had taken from my son and our family, and the uphill battle a recovering addict faces. But above all, that family educational program was a major positive turning point for me. It

was the beginning of my awareness of how deeply addiction affects family members, friends, and others in the addict's life, and that we family members must focus on our own recovery. Before this, it never occurred to me that anyone other than the addict needed to work at recovery.

I recall a counselor saying, "The addict will not get into recovery until the pain of using is worse than the pain of not using." That wisdom has always stuck with me as a reminder that I need to be careful not to be an enabler. The leader also emphasized the serious nature of the addict's disease and that the addict's recovery process must be the highest priority. He drilled into us a fact which has been constantly reinforced to me in my years of recovery in Al-Anon since then: Addiction is a progressive disease which, if left untreated, will be fatal. Most of us at that family weekend program did not yet understand that fact. While we wanted our addict to get into recovery, we were also preoccupied with other things, such as would our addict finish high school and get into college. One lady expressed frustration that her son was missing school while he was in treatment, and she was anxious to get him out of there and back to school. The leader responded, "What good is a well-educated dead person?" Wow, what a dramatic and powerful way to say that *life itself* is at stake, and that recovery must be the number one priority for the addict.

I finally attended my first Al-Anon meeting. Like others back home in the months before, the leader of the family program encouraged us to go to Al-Anon, saying that the addict's recovery is up to him, and that we family members need to work on our own recovery from the effects the disease has had on us. I am grateful that I finally listened to all those voices and walked into that first Al-Anon meeting, because Al-Anon through the years has become a source of great serenity, strength, and hope, not only in dealing with my addict, but also in so many other aspects of my life.

Brian completed 28 days, and upon the recommendation of staff he agreed to stay for an additional 60 days in their extended inpatient program. We wanted him to get more exposure to recovery in this professional setting, and selfishly we were relieved to have two more months of life in our home before having to face Brian's return and all the uncertainty and anxiety that would entail. I

was grateful for this continued respite and I believe it allowed my family some good healing time.

During that time I began attending Al-Anon meetings on a regular basis. I was now convinced that I needed to make a commitment to working the Al-Anon program. Nothing I had done up to that point had cured my son, and my own life was dominated by pain, chaos, anxiety, obsession, fear, and exhaustion, all centered around his addiction. I admit that I first went to Al-Anon because I thought they were going to show me how I could cure my son's problems. Instead, they told me from their own experience that I cannot control or cure addiction or my addict. That now made sense to me, since I had been spectacularly unsuccessful at that despite my great efforts, and also because I had begun to learn more about the disease. But the Al-Anon folks also assured me that I didn't cause my son's addiction—it wasn't my fault, no matter how hard I had tried to beat myself up about it. They suggested that I instead turn my attention to the one person I can control—me. They encouraged me to focus on taking care of myself, so that I can have a chance to find some measure of serenity and peace in my life regardless of whether the addict is sober or not. They also posed this question: "You can see what the drinking is doing to the alcoholic. But can you see what it is doing to you?" So I trusted them and began to focus on that question and other basic Al-Anon principles. In those early days, I committed myself to regular ongoing Al-Anon work of attending group meetings, reading Al-Anon literature, and talking with others to learn from them and to process my own issues. I began working the steps and I began to get some real relief and peace.

This story will be continued in the next issue of the *Journal*. ■

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