

The Stigma of Addiction: A Mother's Point of View

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Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance or person.

My son was an addict. Addiction is by far the most stigmatized disease in this country. I must say as the mother of an addict I had my own stigmatized view of who an addict was and I let my thinking be controlled by my misguided perception.

My son wasn't one of those people. He wasn't dirty. He didn't live on the street. He didn't sell his body to get his supply of drugs. He didn't shoot up in alleys or live under a bridge. Oh, God, how foolish I was not to realize that my son was one of those people.

Denial got me through the tough times and allowed me to believe that my son had a problem, but was not an addict. My own stigma, like a set of blinders kept me protected from seeing the chaos life had become. My denial allowed my son to abuse his drugs in the loveliest of places. A safe, warm home with a mother who would believe the lies told and turned a blind eye to the horrific tragedy unfolding right before her.

My son didn't have a problem. He was in control of his addiction. He was so good at convincing himself that he convinced me, too. He wasn't that addict. The one who steals and lies. The one who can't hold a job because he showed up stoned to work. The one who lives at home and let's his enabling mom pay his bills, buy his clothes, provide a roof and three meals a day without expecting anything in return. He was my loving son from a good family. I was a nurse. How could my son be an addict?

Being the mother of an addict is like being handed a life sentence for a crime you didn't commit and probably never saw coming. You constantly question what you did, didn't do, or should have done. Life now becomes caught up in lies, excuses and isolation. I worked hard to keep our secret safe, locked away, afraid of the stigma that would brand us forever.

Living with an adult addict is the most helpless, hopeless journey. You, the parent have no control. You scream, cry, bargain and threaten. There is nowhere to hide. Guilt somehow always found a way to seep into my mind. Was I a good mother, always looking for something to blame. I thought of a million excuses for behaviors. My stories conflicted with these behaviors now witnessed by family and friends. I never realized it then, but I was battling the stigma as the blinders were slipping from my eyes.

The stigma I believed regarding addicts was kind when compared to the public's view. Once I tried to get help for my son, I found most people really don't care about addicts. They are unworthy, disposable, unproductive people. When I finally came clean and revealed my son's addiction, I was shocked at how many so-called friends no longer called. How many dropped me from their invite list like I was a leper. After all, no one wants to hear about someone's addicted son. Too close for comfort. Not worthy of dinner conversation. If I told them my son had cancer I would have gotten support and offers of sympathy. Mothers of addicts get stares and whispers like we are dirty and unwanted, the elephant in the room that no one sees and would never acknowledge.

Experiencing the stigma first-hand made me angry. It also made me realize that addiction, as ugly as it is, deserves to be treated as any other chronic disease. I became an advocate for my son. Little did I know the medical community has its own bias against addicts. Finding a physician willing to treat an addict was like looking for a rose in six feet of snow. No one wanted the responsibility of having an addicted patient, except the pain management clinics

who are responsible for turning their patients into the addicts now dependent on the pills they hand out like candy, with no remorse in wrecking lives.

The insurance industry I found is also biased regarding the treatment of addiction. The allowable stay for most insurance providers is 28 to 30 days. Really, how generous. For most addicts 28 days is like spitting in the ocean. At 28 days, my son was just starting to feel human. Yet he was told treatment was over. It's time to move out of the safe, supportive environment and get thrown back into a society that will not support or hire an addict. Addicts are set up to fail. Relapses happen frequently. When I called for help, I was told he had to wait months to be able to return to treatment. It was like I was speaking a foreign language. I felt so helpless, knowing I had to get him into a program quickly while he was agreeable and willing to go, before withdrawal and panic set in.

In all my years of nursing I have never heard anyone ask a cancer patient what bad habits caused their disease. No one accusing them of smoking too much, drinking too much or eating unhealthy. Yet, I had to defend my son's disease. I was told that addiction is a self-inflicted disease. The stigma strikes again. Addicts use because they want to get high, loving the euphoria that only drugs provide. The public has no clue about altered brain chemistry and how your body turns against you after the first hit of heroin or a few days of opiates. I heard too many times that if my son wanted to stop, he would. Yes, at first I believed that, too. Until I watched him try to stop. It was a medical horror show. His body fighting his will to change. He didn't want to live the life he was trapped in. Cravings consumed his mind and pain wracked his body when those craving were not met. It's just too easy to blame the addict.

Treatment centers are run by professionals that need to step out of the comfort zone and fight for the addicts. Counselors need to have the power to ensure the addict receives adequate time in treatment. Insurance providers need to become educated. Research confirms allowable stays up to 90 days have been proven to decrease relapse events and help provide the addict necessary time to learn new coping skills, self-esteem and to restore their bodies to a healthy state. Cancer patients are never told they will get 28 days of treatment, then good luck you're out the door, and if you get sick again, you must wait for your insurance provider to approve another treatment admission.

Addiction is a life-altering, chronic disease. It needs to be treated with the same respect as any other disease. Addicts are dying every day because no one gets it. These addicts are people just like you and me. Sons and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers all deserving of life-saving, affordable treatment that knows no time frame. My son lost his battle, but I will continue my fight. This stigma must come to an end before the next generation is forever lost.

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