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The Struggles & Solutions When Your Kid is Addicted

By Mike Speakman, LISAC

There is no other human relationship like that between parent and child. Although parents have the most power and influence over their kids, when addiction enters the picture, the situation mysteriously reverses — and the child is in the driver's seat. How does this happen and what can be done about it? This is the reason PAL (Parents of Addicted Loved Ones) was created. The following is a common story often heard in our meetings:

Up until a few years ago my husband and I felt we led a charmed life. We have a solid marriage, great jobs, beautiful home, good health, and are blessed with two sons. Our oldest son, John is 27, Michael is 23. As they grew up, we went through the typical struggles with behavior, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Both boys were involved in youth groups at church. John played music in worship bands and Michael was a leader in his group. Many of their friends seemed like positive influences. However, unlike his younger brother who always seemed confident and determined, John suffered from low self-esteem. He struggled with sports and was teased by his peers for his weight. Thankfully he was quite gifted in academics.

After years of trying sports and other hobbies, finding nothing he enjoyed, in 7th grade John picked up an old guitar we had, and immediately found his passion. It did not take long for him to start hanging around other kids who were into music; though some of them appeared to be the wrong crowd.

John loved music. He joined the marching band in high school and was featured on electric guitar when his school competed in contests. We were so proud of him we hardly noticed the changes in his behavior. He started to withdraw, smoke cigarettes and hang with a rough crowd. His grades were plummeting and we were not sure he would graduate.



Knee Deep in Denial

In his senior year, at age 17, we received a phone call from the mom of one his friends that would change the course of our lives. She informed us her daughter told her John was using prescription pills and most of his friends were concerned he would overdose. I can't begin to express the level of astonishment and shock we felt after hearing this. We knew something was happening with John; but we were knee deep in denial. We had careers in law enforcement and often dealt with people on drugs. Between the two of us — wouldn't we recognize a serious drug problem?

As we would learn later through our connection to Mike Speakman, founder of Parents of Addicted Loved ones (PAL), our son had become a master manipulator and drug addict. After receiving that dreadful phone call, we immediately confronted John demanding he provide a urine sample for a drug screening. Opiates were confirmed in his system. He continued to lie, manipulate, insisting

there was something wrong with the test kit and of course, us. For the next several years we were in and out of addiction doctor's offices, as well as forcing him to be evaluated by a psychologist.

John then legalized his drug abuse by taking Suboxone and Methadone, but we discovered he was using heroin, meth, spice, and bath salts. Our son was no longer influenced by the "bad crowd," he was the bad crowd.

Over the course of the next few years, he lived at home, saw specialists, floated from job to job, and worked diligently to work us against each other in order to stay in his addiction. Like most parents of addicts, we thought we could help him overcome the addiction. We worked tirelessly on his recovery "for" him.

Living in Despair and Hell

Both mentally and physically exhausted, we struggled to keep our focus and work together as a couple. As parents, we maintained hope our younger son was on the right track — he graduated high school and went on to college. Unfortunately, due to our preoccupation with John, we failed to notice the obvious signs he was headed down the wrong road. Michael dropped out of college, lost his job and what we feared most became a reality....both children were now addicts.

At this stage all of our efforts to "fix" either one of them had not only failed but John was now an IV heroin user. Michael informed us he thought smoking marijuana was perfectly acceptable and like his brother was using meth and heroin just like his brother.

We reached the breaking point and finally asked for help — our way was not working. In a moment of complete desperation we had to remove our son from our home after he had destroyed it in a psychotic meltdown. We searched the internet and came across PAL as a resource. It has now been over three years since we found ourselves in that downward out of control spiral.

The Light

We started to see the light when we finally accepted while we could not "fix" our sons. What we could do was work on ourselves and hope to bring healing and hope to our family. Our history of enabling and rescuing had not only delayed their growth but had kept all of us stuck. We learned we were not helping, we were actually be hindering their potential for change.

In the beginning, the suggestions from PAL seemed preposterous. But, we have seen how important these changes were to our sons' recovery as well as our own. We learned to focus on our marriage and at all costs stay on the same team in order to have a united position. Without it addiction will divide any family.

We did what was suggested by regularly attending meetings and seeking the help of a counselor with expertise in family and addiction issues. We implemented boundaries and consequences; and cut the strings that were preventing all of us from growing up. Whatever our son's did, we knew who to call and we were not alone.

The past few years have had many twists and turns. Both sons have relapsed, been to detox, ER's, recovery centers, halfway houses, and jail. They have lived in parks, cars and on friend's couches. Both of them had to lose everything they owned.

Today, John has close to a year of sobriety. This is the longest time he has had since the journey began 11 years ago. He now works at a recovery center. Michael just celebrated 90 days of sobriety and is back in school. He seems to have embraced the changes in his life and appears to be humbled by the experience.

We've learned we should not gauge our lives based on our son's behaviors. As the preamble from PAL states: "...it is our desire that by attending our meetings you will learn proven ways to help your loved one and ultimately learn to find joy in your own lives regardless of the choices of your loved ones."

Glimmers of Hope

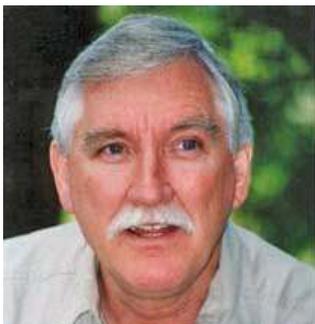
Today we facilitate a PAL meeting and love working with other parents. We would have never chosen what happened or wished it upon anyone, but we are grateful. There is no judgment, no condemnation, just acceptance, surrender, empathy and compassion. Our journey to health has led to our son's heading down the path of sobriety. One of the promises of PAL is — if we get better, it gives hope to our loved ones and that may in turn help them.

At weekly meetings many parents show up for the first time looking like the "deer in the headlights." Lost, desperate and hopeless. Like us, they carry massive guilt, shame, certain they are not only the cause of their loved ones addiction — they are the worst parents on the planet. Sadly, their children's addiction has taken its toll on them, from heart attacks, depression, and a myriad of other health issues. Parents are so devastated some have said they don't want to go on in life. They feel they cannot handle the pressures and their desire to "help," their addicted loved one has continually backfired to the point they give up hope. It is not uncommon for a parent to say they would give up their own life for their loved one if they knew it would save them. They are willing to die for their children, at which point the question is asked, "Are you willing to live for them?"

PAL brought back hope, sanity and purpose in our lives. We have learned to live again. We are thankful for what we have learned and for all of the parents who have stood with us. Today, we're feel blessed to stand with others as they venture down this road that no one would ask for. — Jan and Reed, Phoenix AZ

About Parents of Addicted Loved Ones

The PAL Group was founded by Mike Speakman, a licensed substance abuse counselor working in rehab centers since 1988. Mike started PAL because he saw the need for continuing education and support, through time, for parents trying to save a son or daughter from addiction.



Since the first meeting in July of 2006, PAL has grown to 16 meetings in Arizona and there are PAL meetings now in Indiana and Kentucky. PAL offers realistic hope to parents and spouses struggling with the complex challenges of trying to help a hurting loved one. PAL is blessed with more than 40 volunteer facilitator parents. PAL is looking to expand and formalize as the needs are everywhere and we are constantly receiving requests on how to start a new PAL support group (www.palgroup.org).

In his private practice, Mike provides focused family coaching sessions. Recently, Mike captured his thoughts on how to help your adult child give up destructive addictions in his book, *The Four Seasons of Recovery for Parents of Alcoholics and Addicts*. For more information, 800-239-9127, email: mike@mikespeakman.com, or visit: www.mikespeakman.com.