

Group for spouses, parents of addicts offers education, support

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Years of working as a substance abuse counselor taught Mike Speakman that overcoming addiction isn't just about treatment for the individual, but that it takes support from the family as well.

"A good example is diabetes," Speakman said. "You didn't cause it but if your son had it you might want to learn a little about it so you could help better."

Speakman offered counseling for families during weekend visits for years, but eventually realized the change that needs to occur with drug and alcohol addiction is a long-term change for the entire family. They may learn a lot over the weekend but repetition and consistency is what will cause the change. That's why he began the PAL-Group (Parents of Addicted Loved-ones.)

The first meeting began in July of 2007 at the Calvary Addiction Recovery Center and has since spread to 13 meetings happening once a week across the Valley and one in Tucson.

Each meeting, which is designed for parents or spouses of loved ones going through an addiction, begins with a prayer, followed by introductions. The group is then introduced to one of eight lessons which include delayed emotional growth; three promises to a loved-one; healthy helping, enabling checklist; the four stages of growth in recovery; 13 family lessons about recovery; alcoholic/addict roles and family roles; and re-entry, transitional living and aftercare. After some discussion of the lesson the members of the group give an update about what's going on in their lives and the meeting ends with prayer.

Speakman said while some people may feel a need to attend multiple meetings a week, many will come once and not come again for a few weeks to give themselves time to understand the lesson they were given. The challenge is that the teaching goes against natural parenting instincts.

Jerry Law, an Ahwatukee Foothills resident who has been to PAL meetings while his son was going through an addiction and has also facilitated some meetings, said it's helpful for parents to be able to learn some healthy boundaries.

"Your kid is making his own choices," Law said. "You're not responsible for that. If you don't set healthy boundaries to tell your kid 'I'm not going to rescue you from the choices you are making,' that kid is never going to get well... A healthy boundary lets your child know 'I love you, but you're responsible for your decisions. I'm not.'"

Law, who is now a certified interventionist, said it's important for parents or spouses to find a support group like PAL so that they don't have to feel so alone.

“It’s critical,” he said. “It’s the only way to survive. You feel like, ‘What did I do wrong?’ You didn’t do anything wrong. This is reality. This is life. This is the hand you’ve been dealt. If you’re going to live beating yourself up you’re never going to be healthy. You have to be around other people who get it or you’re going to die in the disease along with your kid.”

PAL-Group does not endorse any particular action. Speakman said the group is just one way parents and spouses can educate themselves and prepare to make their own decisions.

The group doesn’t currently have a meeting in Ahwatukee Foothills but they do have facilitators ready to begin one as soon as they can find a location. Speakman says churches are the most convenient meeting spaces and all the group requires is a room for about two hours once a week.

For more information on the group or to find a meeting location, visit: www.pal-group.org or call (800) 239-9127.

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