

Playing the Fool

Nobody enjoys feeling like a fool. Sure, there's practical jokes, which can be innocent enough, or some good-natured ribbing – but truly feeling like you've been played out can be exasperating. Unfortunately, for family members, spouses, and even close friends of those struggling with active addiction, this is a feeling that's all too familiar. In active addiction, the desperate pursuit of drugs and alcohol to satiate the intense cravings will almost always drive the sufferer to manipulate others, especially the ones who love them the most. These types of behaviors manifest themselves in myriad ways; invariably they involve some scenario in which the intended family member or target is made to feel guilty or sorry for the addict through emotional manipulation. Addicts in active addiction will always have a thousand excuses as to why they need something from you, and can be astonishingly adept at creating intricately wound lies designed to extract your money, time, emotional support, or resources in general. Though it hurts to admit, there were times in my own addiction wherein I engaged with my parents in multiple deceitful ways with the sole goal of financial support. I was depressed, or I was a victim of my circumstances, of misfortunate, of others people's bad choices. But I was never willing to admit that I was the maker of my insanely unmanageable lifestyle. And there were times when they reluctantly bought whatever garbage it was that I was selling. Often times, my story was something along the lines of " If you could just help me with A, then I could effectively get (or be) B, so to speak. This is a somewhat simple example, but nonetheless something I distinctly remember repeating some variation of to my parents endlessly.

Being on the other side of addiction, in recovery, I've had the pleasure of working in the field of behavioral health. I have witnessed these behaviors, almost literally, on a daily basis. And I can say today, honestly, that I truly understand the pain of being played for a fool by someone you care for and love. It's so easy to develop a cynical, or untrusting attitude towards addicts, and even with all my knowledge and experience, I was still unable to resist being manipulated by someone I cared about on multiple occasions. I remember the frustration, the helplessness, and the guilt of feeling that if I didn't step in and accommodate this person in the way they were requesting, then death could be a very real possibility for them, and I, somehow, in my inaction or refusal, would inadvertently have played a role in their demise. What a fool I was! What an insane line of thinking this is! WE are not responsible for the inaction of others. WE are not responsible for a legal adult's financial or emotional wellbeing. WE are not responsible for their seeming inability to own their behavior. And most importantly, we cannot hold ourselves responsible for an addict's self-destruction.

By playing into someone's guilt trip, to buy the lie they are selling, and to support them in it helps them stay sick. It helps reinforce the idea that you are someone who can, and will be manipulated and can delay the empowering path to recovery. There are so many tools, so many resources, so much support in the PAL and 12-step communities that

can help us learn how to honestly set boundaries, how to stick with them, stand our ground, and help others in a loving and healthy way. I know how so very disheartening it can be to watch the disintegration of the lives of the people you love, how desperately you might think that giving in and rescuing can be the answer... but I can promise you these efforts will be in vain. They will leave you frustrated, unfulfilled, helpless and emotionally vacant.

Don't let yourself be taken for a fool this year. Own your own behavior; take a stand, get involved with people who are actively implementing boundaries with people in their own lives and learn from their example. Take to heart what you hear in meetings. These are lifelong tools and coping mechanisms that quite honestly hold within them the unabated power to save lives. I've seen it happen firsthand, and can say, truly, that my own families effort to stick to their boundaries with me, to not give in or be played by my schemes, was a keystone in what eventually became the foundation of my path to recovery, as well as their own. By taking simple steps in the right direction, with correct action, you'll never go wrong. Take a step with me today. Refuse to be coerced into supporting something you know will hurt the person in question, regardless of how much they say it might help. Actively love and support others in a healthy way. They'll thank you someday for your efforts. I guarantee it.

“Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.”

-Fred Rogers

In Recovery,
Sean