

To Drown My Feelings: The Story of Addiction

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Most of us equate substance abuse, or addiction, with some who drinks so much he or she throws a chair or falls asleep on the floor. In our imagination, addicts (*explain word use*) are obvious –they aren't clean, they yell, they might be underweight, they might be homeless, they are definitely angry. There are some addicts who fit this description, but the majority do not. It's a stereotype and a defense mechanism to keep addiction away from the reality of our family, friends, and lives.

The addicts I have known are more like this; the man who was in a car accident and hurt his knee and kept taking those prescription pain killers long after the pain was gone, the mother who repeatedly takes pills for "anxiety," the college student who always drinks and is the life of the party, the executive who still loves a good three martini lunch, the grandmother who started to drink too much in the evening after her husband died (my grandmother).

Addiction isn't out there; it is in here, in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, our congregations. It's in us. Most addiction isn't obvious. Plenty of people get up, go to work or school (maybe even drink or take hits while there) and go about their day. Moms and Dads watch kids while hitting the bottle or secretly taken pills. The common denominators are secrecy, denial, shame, and underlying issues that need help.

As an adult it is fine to have a drink or two with dinner every once in a while. It's completely normal to have a hard day at work, walk in the house and say "I need a beer." In a perfect world no one would drink until reaching the legal age. The reality is that kids sneak drinks and pills and other drugs. Sometimes its experimentation and it passes, sometimes it's not. It's one thing to drink a beer behind your parent's house. It's another thing to need to do it three times, four times, every night of the week. It's another thing to take stronger and stronger drugs and to regularly buy them. It's another thing to regularly take a substance to deal with emotional pain. This is addiction.

According to the comprehensive HBO documentary, *Addiction*, which aired last spring, addictive substances trigger the release of a neurotransmitter in the brain, dopamine that creates pleasurable feelings and the craving to repeat the feeling over again. This is true whether one is taking cocaine, a so-called "upper," or drinking alcohol, a so-called "downer." (Some drugs, like cocaine are more addictive than others). Some people are more resistant to the cravings than others. The latest research indicates that the brains of addicts are more susceptible to the affects of addictive substances; that some brains react differently, more positively to addictive substances.

Given these findings, scientists and treatment providers are now seeing addiction as a brain disease, similar to cancer. This is a radical rethinking of addiction. Addicts have traditionally been seen as weak people with moral failings, which has allowed us to incorrectly and unfairly associate addiction with the poor, with minorities, with

uneducated people. Another stereotype. The reality is that addiction is an equal opportunity disease affecting doctors, lawyers, athletes, police officers, clergy, mothers, children, professors, anyone, anyone.

As a Unitarian Universalist the topic of addiction called to me because of our interest in justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, how we figure out how to live together. I can't tell you the number of people who have come to my office in the last ten years trying to figure out how to accept, manage, avoid, cut off, control, restrain, or confront the addict in their life. Many of you have come to talk about your own addiction. And then there are the children of addicts, now adults finally putting together the secret trail of addiction in their families. They might never have become addicted themselves, but only now are they having "aha!" moments (that is why my first husband/wife was an addict, that is why I never believed in myself, etc.).

Addiction is much more than the disease of an individual; it changes an entire family system and friendship network, affecting every member, children, parents, partners, colleagues, neighbors, and friends. One of you wrote to me expressing great confusion and pain about three family members struggling with addiction. This person paused in the midst of the email and wrote "Questions, questions." How do you figure out what happened, what to do, how to help or find out the truth? Questions, questions.

Like cancer, addiction is a chronic disease, where addicts are prone to relapse throughout their lives. One treatment, one support group, one intervention, one rehab facility is not likely to change the cravings and behavior of an addict. Rather, to overcome addiction, one must do as our reading said, change behaviors and make conscious decisions not to take one drink, one pill, one hit. No one recovers from addiction, ever. It is managed. You are either in recovery, or you are using. It is as simple and as hard as that.

There are still scientists and treatment providers who do not see addiction as a brain disease, but I think the evidence is compelling. If you are interested in addiction, are yourself an addict, or have a friend or loved one who is an addict, please take a look at the HBO series *Addiction*. It answered many questions that I had and gave me a deeper understanding of the complexity of the problems. It also called me to preach this sermon and to invite our high school students in for the service. They will have an opportunity to discuss this sermon and topic, hopefully with their parents, but also with Briana, their advisor, because one of the surprising findings is that in general, addiction begins in childhood.

Here are some quotes from a variety of experts on the series:

"The reasons for addiction are brain process, genetic predisposition, and abuse and trauma. The victims of early childhood trauma (such as physical or sexual abuse) experience changes in their response to stressors – disrupted stress responses – that make them more vulnerable to substance abuse."

And

"The reasons are genetic and environmental – no parents present, stress, abuse, or drugs available."

And

“Most addiction begins between 18 and 25 years or age. The disease begins in childhood. Little addiction starts after 30.”

And

“90% - 95% of people with life time dependence started in adolescence. Most people just don’t show up for treatment for twenty years.”

The HBO series *Addiction* focused heavily on teen addicts in a segment entitled “The Adolescent Addict: A Multi-Systematic Therapy Approach.” According to the series there are two million teen addicts and only 17% of them are in treatment. That indicates a lot of hidden or ignored substance abuse. In addition, of the children in treatment, 80% of them have co-current mental health issues. One teenager on the show said “As long as you’re alive you’re still in pain, so if you escape and die no big deal.” Wow. I wondered what his pain was – that is a mental health issue. Why does he hurt so much inside that dying seems like no big deal. It makes me want to cry. This boy is in a lot of pain.

Let’s take the stigma out and be honest. Our children struggle with stress, depression, anxiety, and developing major mental illnesses. In essence children are self-medicating for painful feelings. The story of addiction for children and adults is the story of mental health, and addiction cannot be successfully addressed without addressing mental health issues.

Unfortunately, brain research indicates that adolescents have less impulse control than adults. The frontal lobe of the brain, responsible for executive control and caution, is still developing, so teenagers are more susceptible to addiction, and their mental health issues often go undetected. It’s a dangerous combination. One treatment provider explained that kids scare their parents with rage, weapons, impulsivity, and in girls especially, there is an increase in cutting. Parents get scared, they get angry when their children lie to them (“I’m not drinking . . . I didn’t sneak out of the house.”).

The HBO series noted that there aren’t a lot of good treatment facilities or options for teenagers or adults (it’s worse for teenagers – although addiction begins in childhood). “43% of people seeking treatment cite insurance costs as an impediment.” One doctor stated “Managed care has taught despair to families.” She went on to ask “Is it involuntary manslaughter to refuse treatment as an insurance company?” This is a relevant question.

There is a boy saying dying is no big deal. That’s a cry for help. He needs treatment today, not tomorrow. He needs affordable treatment now. There is currently legislation on Capital Hill that proposes giving reimbursement parity for mental health and substance abuse, so that these conditions are reimbursed at rates similar to what we would expect for mammography or heart disease, and I believe this needs to be standard. Our society, families, workplaces, and children are suffering because it is not.

The best treatment programs for teenagers require individual and family therapy. When children are in serious trouble they need residential treatment (that means leaving their home and moving into a facility for treatment), and it might be out of state because there are not a lot of facilities. The longer the treatment; the greater the chances for success. That’s a lot of money but statistics overwhelmingly support that longer treatment is better. Time is needed to change behavior and to open up.

After a lot of therapy one boy was able to say “If I can control the anger raging in me, I can control the addiction.” That’s it. I am sure it took months, if not years for him to get it. I was surprised to learn that most children need treatment three to four times (that’s the chronic part). That’s a lot of fear, money, and heartache for families. They all need our compassion.

Addiction clearly stated that there are medications available for addicts in recovery, but **none** help without a therapeutic approach. Of the emails I received from you, almost every one mentioned the necessity of group therapy. One of you wrote “My dad was an alcoholic for years and what really helped him was joining AA. He would go to a meeting every night and often at lunch.” At First Church we host a weekly SMART meeting led by Dick Bozian, which focuses on cognitive and behavioral changes for people struggling with addiction.

There is no group of people I respect more than addicts in long term recovery. As a group, they have the habit of wintry fresh truth telling which I find refreshing and trustworthy. It’s the only way they have managed to stay clean. Addiction relies on denial and lies (“Oh, it was just one drink,” “Oh, I can do one,” “Oh, those pills, they help my migraines.”), so recovery relies on truth. Addicts in long term recovery have often had to pull out and examine all the significant pains and failings in their lives, and they often did this in front of others, in group therapy (like AA). That takes courage, so does sobriety. (Example, why one person in an accident becomes addicted to prescription meds and another does not).

One member in recovery wrote to me

None of us expected to become addicted when we started out or any time along the way . . . We have different experiences than “normal” people who can use the substance without turning to it so often that the substance high jacks our brains. Despite the notion that we did not “cause” the addiction, I think that once it has been brought to our attention that the substance is harming us, it is up to us to do something about it. This is a difficult task because we have used the substance to deal with all of our life situations (it is raining, the sun is shining, the Reds won, the Reds lost, I am happy, I am sad) and now we have to find new ways to cope.

Recovery is grueling work that requires support networks. Unfortunately people struggling with addiction have spent most of their lives pushing people away because feeding the addiction becomes more important than telling the truth, showing up for work, paying bills, watching the kids, helping, or behaving in social situations. Addicts are really hard to live with, hard to trust and hard to forgive and sometimes the addiction leads to dangerous and inappropriate behavior. There are addicts in my family, and the ones who have never told themselves the truth of their situation are exceptionally hard for me to accept. The lies and behavior are crushing. Family and friends become the burned over territory, used and abused in the cycle addiction.

To turn around and name that is amazing. What is that moment, that bottom, that turning for people struggling with addiction? It’s different for everyone. In AA they talk about high bottoms and low bottoms. My former husband is an addictions counselor, and he explains a high bottom as his client “who crashed his car, walked away, and got sober.” Low bottom was the client who “lost an arm to gangrene from unclean injection use and then got clean.” It’s different for everyone, and some people never get it.

Getting it means taking responsibility and changing behavior. Getting clean means facing loss and mistakes; “I was sexually abused as a child” or “I was a terrible father to my children when I used.” Recovery comes with withdrawal symptoms. Recovery means living with neurotransmitters formerly dosed with dopamine via substances, now not receiving dopamine and then not experiencing much pleasure, happiness, or meaning. This is not easy stuff. And in early recovery it is particularly hard to separate oneself from the people and places that undermine sobriety which is why AA says 90 meetings in the first 90 days. You’re going to need them.

A friend of mine told me this story about the complexity of getting sober. She had stopped using and was in treatment and therapy. She had been clean for sixty days when her mother-in-law came to visit. Her mother-in-law believes that addiction is a moral failing and that if my friend were stronger she wouldn’t have this problem. When she came to my friend’s house she left her purse open, and at the top of her purse was a bottle of percocet. My friend told me that she walked by that bottle and thought and thought and thought and did not take it. Then she spent the next three weeks thinking, obsessing about that bottle and those pills. She went to a meeting every day.

When I heard this story my first question was “Why does your mother-in-law have a bottle of percocet in her purse?” My friend told me that that her mother-in-law had surgery six months ago and it was prescribed to her then. I asked “So why does she have it now?” I am suspicious that either the mother-in-law was sabotaging my friend’s recovery and/or that the mother-in-law is an addict in denial (because there is just no reason after successful surgery to still have a full bottle of percocet in your possession). This is the challenge of recovery. When you are not expecting it that lure is there, and only with honesty and a constant, supportive social and medical network can people in recovery manage sobriety.

Substance abuse has existed for as long as anyone can remember. We accept it as normal, the way things are, but our world does not have to be this way. We can begin by honestly addressing mental health issues for children and adults. The title for this sermon was taken from someone on the HBO series who said “I reach for beer to drown my feelings.” Let’s begin with a fresh understanding that before we attempt to drown any feelings, they should be openly discussed in safe, affordable, supportive environments.

The societal consequences of addiction are staggering. Long term substance abusers experience changes in emotions, memory, and reflexes, become more deeply addicted over time, and develop health problems. There are financial costs as well. The HBO series quoted a doctor from a Dallas Hospital who estimated that his center saw 30,000 patients in 2006 and half of the injuries they treated that year were drug or alcohol related.

Friends and family can make a positive difference by helping addicts to recognize their problems. However, the reality is that interventions don’t always work and in the end, only the individual can make the decision to change and take actions that create change. If you want to help someone in recovery be willing to attend family therapy, take them to a meeting (went with friend in college), do something new and different with them like go to a movie (not the movie theater where they used to buy), or go for a walk, something new and healthy. Help them develop positive, new habits and behaviors. Do not show up with pills, or suggest a visit to Oktoberfest. And if a loved one relapses, as they will be prone to do, look them in the eye and say you have to stop

now and get help. There are consequences to using addictive substances. Family and friends have the right to say “I will not see you if you keep using,” “you can’t live here if you keep using.”

If we take our children, our friends, our family, and their mental health needs and drug abuse seriously now, there will be less addiction in the future. If we talk about substance abuse, its complexity and repercussions, there will be less addiction in the future. If we fund mental health and substance abuse treatment programs, there will be less addiction in the future. We can push family and friends into treatment and support recovery and honesty, but we can’t get sober for our loved ones. There is great pain in loss in this truth, and there is also hope.

I hope everyone here will be honest about personal substance use, and if you need help, please ask for it. Are you visiting different doctors and requesting narcotics? Are you having a couple of drinks every night to calm your nerves? It’s never too late to make a positive difference, to take responsibility for a difficult disease and change behaviors and actions. The journey will be long and hard, and it will be more than worth it for you and everyone who loves you and who you love. You are more than the sum or your addiction. You are worthy, and life has beauty just for you if you will take responsibility now. May it always be so.

