

## A Father Faces Drug Abuse

One year ago, my wife and I faced the most desperate situation in our lives. In my own life, from a very early age, I was accustomed to success. I was pretty much my father's favourite son; college was very easy for me; and I progressed without difficulty through a doctor's degree in engineering to a position of considerable responsibility. So to me, success was something that came naturally, and I suppose I figured that success was automatic in my children.

Yet one year ago I found myself struggling to accept the harsh reality that our two older children, aged 15 and 17, were deeply involved with drugs. To give you some examples of where we were in our family – one day my sister came over to visit us, and our 17-year-old boy was in such a drugged state that he was unable to stir for the whole day.

Another time when I was painting my daughter's room, I found some suspicious-looking items in a cardboard box. But still in our simplicity we failed to accept the fact that our children were in trouble – and that we too were in trouble.

We excused it as experimentation: you know, the kids were experimenting; all kids experimented; we didn't have any problems. We'd get a promise from them - they wouldn't use drugs anymore. And that was the end of that – until the next occurrence.

We finally realised where we were the day my wife discovered a note listing various sums of money and the names of neighbourhood children who were common visitors in our home. On this list we also recognised the names of drugs – which our son had apparently sold to these children. We discovered he was a fairly large seller of drugs – like £60 for some kid that you think gets £3 in pocket money. **The child owes your son £60 for drugs:** that's a harsh reality to grasp.

When we confronted our son with the horror of what he was doing - the terrible consequences; the way he was taking up the vernacular of the drug culture; his grades dropping in school; the implication of our family in the drug problems of so many other children – he said he took drugs because it was **fun**, and he wasn't hurting anyone by being the neighbourhood supplier. My first reaction was helplessness, which soon turned to anger. I was so distraught I actually struck my son with my fist – something I have never done in anger in my whole life.

He immediately ran out of the house and jumped in his van, and my wife practically tore the door off its hinges in her effort to stop him. He ran down the street, I chased him in my car, and we finally persuaded him to come back home and try to help us find a way out. If that didn't work, then he could leave.

What does one do in a situation like this? In our desperation, we called the Help Line in our area, which referred us to both a family counsellor and a woman who told us she belonged to an organisation of people who'd learned to cope with the same problems we were now facing. We visited the family counsellor, and she too suggested we become involved in the family self-help programme. With her

encouragement, we began attending meetings and trying to practise the principles of Families Anonymous.

The road to recovery is very difficult when the relationship in a family breaks down. And the drug scene, in my estimation, was only part of the deep psychological problems that we as a family were facing. This didn't occur in one year, it occurred over a long period of time.

It was very hard to learn the principle of "letting go," yet I think it was the one principle in this programme that helped us the most. To learn how to let our teenagers have the dignity of making mistakes of their own, when they went out of our house, not to be so obsessed with what they were doing – as long as they came back at the time they specified – this was something we had to learn. But it was very difficult.

I remember one situation where our 15 year-old daughter (who'd previously talked of suicide) didn't come home at the appointed time, and of course the old anxiety really grows in you, so you feel you have to **do something**. I remember I got in the car and was driving down the street when I said "Stop! What am I doing? I'm satisfying my own need, but I'm not really helping the situation. The chances of finding her are really very remote." So, I turned the car around and went back home. I know other situations where I've had that same feeling, that same terror that by not doing something you are leading to their destruction, that old feeling that we are fully responsible for whatever our children do – again, the difficulty of letting go!

For the last year I have been motivated to do a considerable amount of reading. I've read a lot of books, and I've done a lot of thinking. I'd like to try to summarise what I've learned through this reading – and through applying the principles of Families Anonymous.

## **"Start to learn now, to understand and to plan for recovery"**

First of all, I found I needed to **replace my fear of drugs with facts**. The fear of what drugs will do to your children will cause all kinds of difficulties – unless and until you overcome your fear that they can never recover – as well as the idea that drugs are their only problem.

The first book I read was a piece of AA literature – the so-called "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous. This to me was a fantastic revelation – the realisation that the psychological factors that drive people to self-destruction through drugs or alcohol are really the same factors or very similar. I remember this book – which I got out of the library – as one of the really great books. It made a lot of things clearer to me, and it gave me hope.

The FRANK website, which offers information on drugs, I found most informative and helpful. And, I read quite a few interesting books on the subject of the psychology of youth and drugs. However, many of these books are at times contrary to the

principles of our programme. They might be great when you're dealing with an eight-year-old. But if you're already deep in the drug problem, beware. It will be disquieting information because it will say, "you've got to go out there and do something for this person." There are a lot of books on "You've Got to Make This Person Do Something".

### **"I will change my hostility to understanding"**

I found it terribly important to try to **rebuild my relationship with my children**. When our children became involved with drugs they were alienated, not only from our culture, but also from us as parents and all the things we stood for. The challenge of relating to them in this circumstance was one of the most enormous challenges my wife and I ever faced.

In trying to work our programme, one concept I found particularly helpful is "The Three A's". I found it in a book that looks like one of the books they try to peddle off to make you a millionaire through using psychology, but it has great ideas for dealing with people, and when you're deep in a psychological problem with your children, I think you're going to need some help.

The first "A" is **Acceptance**. That is a very difficult thing to do – to accept your child when this child is alienated from you, when this child is using drugs and is out with a friend that you find difficult to accept. How can you accept this child? And yet, if the child is going to rebuild their self-esteem, there has to be some way – some bridge over which you can accept at least some part of their behaviour.

I believe it's important that you find the things that you really can accept – and that you honestly tell them what is acceptable behaviour in your home – and what is not acceptable. Honesty in this area is important in being able to develop the feeling in this child that you respect them as an individual.

We spend a lot of time in this programme talking in different ways about acceptance, for example, we accept the person as they are but we don't accept their behaviour. This distinction is very important, because the child has a fantastic sensor that is tuned to whether or not they are acceptable. And if their friends walk in the house, those kids can tell instantly if you don't accept them.

There's no magical way that you can learn to accept your children – though our meetings help – but I think it's one of the first steps toward really developing a relationship with them.

The challenge increases, of course, if their outward appearance bothers you, and they're dirty. When they were children they would accept your values, they would pay lip service to your attitudes, they would go to church when you asked them – maybe reluctantly - they would do things to please you. But suddenly they're no longer pleasing you, and you have this great difficulty of developing areas where you can accept them – even though they don't accept your values.

Of course, neither do they accept your concern for them. They don't want your concern – or over concern - about them and where they're going in their life. They

may be dropping down in school and particularly for me, this has always been a difficult thing to accept in my children. But acceptance is one of the first “A’s” in rebuilding that relationship.

### **“I will change my negatives to positives”**

The second “A” is **Approval**. If you can find areas where you can approve of what your child is or does, this will help to build a better relationship with you and their teachers and in many other areas. Of course, here I think it’s really important not to be fake or insincere— that is, to **say** you approve of things they do when you really don’t – because then they will discredit any approval you show and you’ll have a real problem, again, of credibility.

No matter how extreme the behaviour of a child, I think it’s necessary to find areas where you can approve of them. It might be things such as honesty. It might be something like their concern for fellow drug users. They may go out of their way to help other people who are in trouble.. If you can show that this kind of behaviour- of a human being helping others – is consistent with values you have yourself and that you’re proud of them for doing that, this may be an area where you can approve of their behaviour. I don’t say it’s easy.

### **“I will change my dominance to encouragement”**

The third “A” is **Appreciation**. Showing appreciation when they do something that is right, such as coming home on time or calling if they can’t come home, and honestly recognising when they go out of their way to do something – and to **express** that appreciation – is, I think, a tremendous help in rebuilding a relationship.

### **“Through understanding and awareness, to change my reactions”**

Communication is probably the area which was most suffering during the time our children were alienated and using drugs. I believe that communication has to be based on the three A’s of **Acceptance, Approval** and **Appreciation**. If as a parent you can get beyond that point, the day may come – at a time when their mind is clear – when you can sit down with your child and talk to them, not in a sense of judgement, but in the sense of accepting them. They may tell you the things that really hurt them, and if you can listen to those and show an interest – but not judge— then they may find other areas where they will want to communicate with you.

We find it very gratifying when our children sit down occasionally and just talk; they’ll talk for half an hour or 45 minutes about their problems. In my view, the key to communication is being able to withhold judgement on the things a person is saying. By withholding our judgement they won’t feel threatened. And when they don’t feel threatened, I have found they do begin to open up and communicate.

I don't want to give you the impression that we have achieved perfection here. We have achieved progress, not perfection. But then – **we don't have to be perfect parents.**

Just last evening on the way to the meeting, I stopped to eat at a coffee shop, and across from me, a boy wearing sunglasses was sitting somberly with his parents, and they were hardly saying a thing. Then there was another family. In that family, the father was sitting on one side next to his daughter, and the mother was sitting on the other side with another daughter, and they were very close together as a family and talking together very amiably, and I thought, "My God, if I only could achieve that kind of communication with my kids, it would be really fantastic."

Yet for me, I can take gratification in the small progress that we have made in the last year. Perhaps to begin with, we were with the parents sitting across from the boy who wore sunglasses to shade his expression from his family. But maybe in the future we can build toward the family which has a close relationship with their children.

### **"Made a searching and fearless moral inventory"**

Another thing that seems extremely important to me is the **need for personal honesty.** Personal honesty shows the way for our children, and to me it has a number of dimensions. I remember I used to be very interested in the stock market. In fact, I became so enamoured with and so dedicated to the stock market and to the concept of becoming very wealthy that my values were actually being twisted. Rather than really being concerned for my fellow man - as I should have been – I was more concerned with wealth and what wealth would bring. This is the kind of phase that I, at least, went through that contributed to the difficulties in our family.

Attitudes of honesty are extremely important, particularly to idealistic youngsters. Youngsters today are extraordinarily idealistic. They're not absorbed with making a living, like I was when I grew up. They're concerned with equality and with justice and with people finding better ways of living more amicably together in the world, and if we flaunt those values, we cause difficulties with our children in the areas of communication.

Living an untarnished life is important – that is, when we go out on trips we make sure our life is rigid – that we don't adulterate ourselves. By doing this, we establish an attitude toward life and towards our children which - even though we may not express it to them - they can pick up. Otherwise, they don't have the confidence and faith in us as human beings and as examples for them to follow in their own life.

I know that many times rather than telling my kids honestly that they can't have something or that something isn't going to work out, I take the easy way out and say something just to make them feel good, and I think **this** creates problems in honesty.

And honesty with yourself – not sacrificing your life for your children – I believe is an extremely important point. I know that for many years our children were the centre of

our life. We were on the outside, and everything rotated around the children. But now we're to live our own lives independently of our teenagers and let them live their own. If they have difficulties – if they want to do something – we're not going to sacrifice our life for them. I think that's part of honesty. We try to do what interests us, not what we think we should do for them all the time. Being honest with ourselves, enjoying ourselves, enjoying the fruits of our labours and letting them suffer occasionally – that too I think is a good idea.

### **“Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves...”**

And last of all, for me, I found it important to rebuild my faith in God. During this time our faith also fell into disrepair. And it was part of our own personal attitudes – not continuing with our faith, not maintaining an unwavering position with regard to that faith – which contributed to a loss of rapport, a loss of direction in our own lives.

I know many times at cocktail parties people would talk against religion as atheists, and I wouldn't stand up for my position, even though my position was towards a faith in God. But it wasn't really an integrated faith, it was kind of fuzzy and unfocused. I still need to do a great deal more thinking and reading to sharpen that faith so when I talk to other people, I can articulate it. If I can't, then it's fuzzy. And our kids find it hard to accept our faith if it's in a fuzzy state like this.

So knowing what we believe and our reasons for believing, being able to communicate, to relate to our God – whatever God, whatever Higher Power that happens to be – is an important part of rebuilding our personal honesty, integrity, and the kind of life that can be independent of our children.

It's very easy to depend on children when they're young and to use them as a crutch for all kinds of things, all kinds of excuses. But when they mature, things are different. Now I find it necessary to rebuild my faith, and it will take some time and a great deal of thought and reading because I was lazy in these last years.

Through our faith we can demonstrate to our children that there's a better way of life – that “Better Living Through Chemistry” can be replaced with “Better Living Through Awareness of God's World and God's Love.”

### **“I CAN CHANGE MYSELF. Others I can only love”**

As that song says, “What the World Needs Now Is Love, Sweet Love.” And **Loving is really the basis of learning to live in the world**. We don't need to live in a world of hate, we can develop attitudes of love, and I think this applies to one's entire life. I know that I wasn't taught the art of loving in **my** home, and I'm trying now to develop this – but it's hard.

As to where we are today, we didn't institutionalise either of our children. Fortunately, we had started going to meetings, and the conclusion we came to was that our **first** step should be to **let go and work on ourselves**.

Yet we have really seen a miracle occur with these two youngsters that we were so desperately worried about. Once we began turning the responsibility for their lives over to them – and to God – they accepted the challenge of that responsibility far beyond my wildest dreams at the time we faced our darkest hour. Our daughter is absorbed in a part-time job and her role as a hospital volunteer. And our son is now working towards top grades in college, with a personal goal of medical school.

We're learning to live with our children. They're delightful people, and in the last year we've discovered how wonderful they really are. They are tremendously honest. They don't always think the way we do, but they are fantastic people.

And quite apart from how things are with our children, in the last year I've developed some changed ideas of what life's really all about.

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