

For the Concerned

"A Fine Line between Helping and Enabling"

By G. Raymond McCullough



I consider this to be the most important article I have written for The Juanita Center. The original rendering of this article sat on my computer for months after my editors rejected the initial version as incoherent and lacking focus. I resisted returning to it because I felt stymied in communicating a concise and helpful message. My difficulty stemmed from the awareness of its importance and the powerful emotions that are stirred for the families and friends who are dealing with a loved one's addiction. Furthermore, I acutely feel their fear, desperation, frustration, helplessness, guilt, anger, and shame. My only hope is that this article will bring the reader some comfort and inspire a sense of hope. I write this for the family members and loved ones of the people who are struggling with an alcohol or other drug problem.

The impact of substance abuse and addiction on families can be destabilizing to the family unit, emotionally upsetting, and sometimes tragic. Substance abuse and addiction affects not only the person using. Addiction in its many forms (alcohol, other drugs, gambling, etc.) has a profound and lasting impact on the family and friends of those that are addicted. Addiction simply defined is a condition that results when a person ingests a substance (alcohol or other drugs) or engages in an activity (gambling) that can be pleasurable but the continued use becomes compulsive and interferes with life's

ordinary responsibilities such as work, school, relationships, and even health. Users may not be aware that their behavior is out of control and causing problems for themselves and others.

I acutely understand the importance of involving family, close friends, and other influential people in the process of exploring and finding solutions that can intervene and promote treatment for their loved ones and for themselves.

In the name of full disclosure, I grew up in a home where substance abuse was a problem. My father exhibited all the classic symptoms and characteristics of someone that would be called an alcoholic. My father lost his family, his job, his health, at times his mind, as well as his freedom. He had repeated encounters with law enforcement for drinking and driving. Twice he ran into parked police cars while intoxicated. He totaled 3 brand new cars in less than a year. As a young child I remember trying to intervene on my father's drinking by hiding his pints of Old Crow or Seagram's 7 whiskey bottles. I even attempted a primitive form of aversion therapy by mixing salt water in the whiskey bottles. All of my efforts were futile and only brought on my father's rage. During this time I experienced a great deal

of anger, anguish, embarrassment, shame, but mostly fear. My feelings turned into abject resentment towards my father, as I grew older. His own attempts and those of others to help him gain sobriety (Alcoholics Anonymous, psychiatrists, and several Veterans' Administration inpatient treatment s) all ended in failure. My father did eventually get sober 13 years before his death. Many people will lead you to believe that the numerous interventions over the years helped to plant a seed for his eventual decision many years later. I suspect my father would say, "I did not and could not see what others thought was a problem. I did not want to be labeled an alcoholic. There were enough labels for black men at that time and none of them were positive. Drinking became my life—one in which I found respite from problems and responsibilities that felt too overwhelming for me to deal with." As challenging as this thought process may seem I understand what he meant. I had the opportunity to ask my father several years before his death: "Dad what happened that finally led to you getting sober?" He responded, "I woke up one day and said I was done." A key truth in this story is that the motivation for my father to stop drinking came from within. Unfortunately and tragically that decision for many only comes with their death.

During my career as an addictions counselor it has become very clear to me. The obvious problem is exactly what it appears to be most of the time. Years ago I was working with a family. The husband was struggling with alcoholism. His wife literally dragged him into my office with their 6 year

old daughter in tow. The wife had repeatedly tried to convince and cajole her husband to quit drinking. He resisted at every turn. At some point, during the otherwise calm meeting, the restless 6 year old without solicitation said, "My daddy and mommy fight a lot." I asked her, "Why do your daddy and mommy fight so much?" Her innocent response was, "Because my daddy drinks too much." The room became silent. The child's father became teary eyed and tears flowed down his cheeks.



The little girl went over to her daddy and said, "It's okay daddy. I love you."

In the 1980s I was the program manager of an inpatient treatment program. The program was unique for its time because the person that was being treated for an addiction problem was afforded the opportunity to have their spouse participate in the last 3 weeks of their 6 week treatment. This meant the spouse was admitted to the program, which included a full physical exam and psychological and social assessment just as their spouse had undergone 3 weeks earlier. The spouse was assigned an individual counselor and was assigned to group counseling just as their spouse had been 3 weeks earlier. This meant total immersion into every element of the treatment

program which included: individual sessions at least once a week, group counseling twice a day 5 days a week, attendance at all psychosocial educational groups, participation in daily physical training that may include a 5 mile run, and participation in support group meetings (e.g. ALANON). These family members usually comprised 2-3 in each of the 12 person group counseling sessions. If you are curious the spouses were never assigned to the same group counseling sessions or individual counselor. Additionally, the husband and wife participated in couples counseling at least once a week with the family counselor. It was a comprehensive program. I consider it to be a program that was ahead of its time in addressing alcohol, other drugs, and eating disorders as a “family systems problem.” I am sharing this background story with you because it profoundly impacted the way I believe addiction must be treated. If at all possible the important relationships of the person that is struggling with addiction must be engaged in the intervention and treatment process for a better outcome. A side thought: The spouse of the person that was struggling with an addiction often presented with more emotional despair and trauma than the person being treated for addiction. This makes sense because the spouse is constantly experiencing the fear, desperation, guilt, shame, anger, resentment and frustration that come with living with a person that driven by their addiction. Unlike their addicted partner, the spouse was not escaping by using a substance.

I want to interject at this stage that working with adolescents can be particularly challenging. Because often time the young person that is using alcohol or other drugs is symptomatic of a much deeper and proliferate problem within the family (the teen becomes the identified problem). There have been occasions that I have experienced success in a session with a teen only to have our gains under-minded within hours of them returning to their family system and/or peer group. A teen unlike an adult can't change their family and can't move away to find a new peer group. Working with the family and other supportive influences of the adolescent is an unequivocal necessity.

Here is an analogy of why it is important to provide counseling and support for close friends and family of the person that is in treatment.

Analogy --For the mechanically inclined—I have a faulty gear box. I have concluded one gear needs to be machined for it to function properly. However, in my haste to solve the problem I overlook the fact that the one faulty gear has caused excessive wear on the others. Hence, for a more effective fix I must machine all the gears. There is a very fine often times an indistinguishable line between helping and enabling. I define helping as all the things that we do or do not do to empower someone to overcome the challenges and difficulties in their lives. On the other hand enabling is what we do or do not do that has a disempowering effect and makes them more dependent on us. There is a

tricky balance and sometimes it is difficult to discern whether we are helping or enabling. As a counselor I am constantly assessing whether I am helping or enabling. Ask yourself the question in your quest to assist love ones: "Are the actions I just took (or am thinking about taking) going to help or enable?" If the scale tips more in favor of enabling rethink your approach and bounce your thoughts off of a confidant or professional.

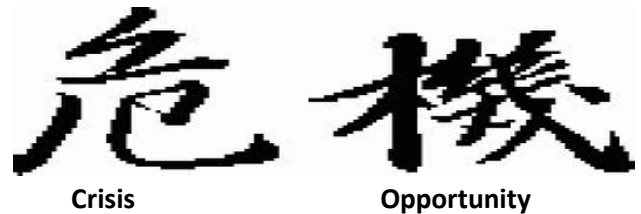
Finally, what can you do if you believe someone is jeopardizing their mental health, physical well-being, career, relationships, or self respect because alcohol or other drug use?

1. Caringly point them in a direction for help.
2. Increase your awareness about our attitudes as they relate to addiction. Yes, this includes marijuana.
3. Educate yourself about the health related problems and social consequences of addiction.
4. Make a clear choice about what role alcohol and other drugs will play in your life and those that look to you for guidance.
5. Set an example. Be a role model. Discard the cliché "do as I say not as I do."
6. Show compassion and reserve judgment.

7. Learn about healthy boundaries and work toward establishing them with people in your life.
8. Discern if your actions are helping or enabling. Take corrective action.
9. Reach out for support.
10. Seek professional help.

The Juanita Center offers supportive counseling and a consultative relationship to family and friends that are struggling with the substance abuse and/or addiction/alcoholism of a friend or family member.

The service is offered in individual sessions or in small groups. The key function is support, assistance in establishing healthy and effective boundaries, and emotional freedom.



There are opportunities in any crisis if handled with astuteness.