

Honoring Addiction

Category: Addicted

written by Alison Hartman | July 8, 2018

My son struggled with addiction for over eight years. He died last March of a heroin overdose at the age of 25. To lose a child is completely devastating. I've been working through the many layers of grief and am slowly healing.

Over the years I educated myself about addiction and sought a wide range of support. I had little exposure to drug abuse as it did not exist in my family history. Like many, I saw it as a poor behavioral choice.

My son started using recreational drugs in high school, but by 17 he became addicted to opiates. I initially thought his use of drugs was a misguided phase of adolescence, a product of hanging with the wrong crowd. However it became clear it was much deeper than that. For him it was a total identity, and as he later described to me, it was like the round peg that fit perfectly into the round hole. I discovered this was similar to how it's been described in scientific terms.

Addiction is now widely considered a brain disease, caused by a defect in the midbrain or survival part of the brain, resulting in a neurological dysfunction of the neurotransmitter, dopamine. This sets off a misfiring in the pleasure response, easily quelled by the active ingredients in drugs. No wonder my son would say, "Mom, I feel normal when I use opiates." The drug was completing an internal process that was organically insufficient. In a sense, how is this really that different from a diabetic who cannot produce enough insulin to regulate their pancreas?

A major difference in addiction versus diabetes, is that it often involves behavioral dysfunction and criminal activities. My son was frequently arrested and several times put in jail. Illicit drugs are illegal and addicts often steal to get more drugs so they don't get sick. As a result, addicts are disenfranchised from society, which perpetuates the cycle of abuse and shame.

I have often thought if my son had died of cancer, for example, people would have been more comfortable approaching me over my loss and been able to extend greater sympathy. It's somehow noble to die from cancer, but not from addiction. Even though the current opioid epidemic is bringing the problem out of the closet, there is still a profound stigma. Once we begin to approach addiction with correct understanding and compassion, we will have made huge strides in the humanity of medicine, and therefore the treatment and possible cure.

Underneath the disease of addiction, my son was a beautiful person, empathic and kind, like so many others who suffer from this disease. It wasn't for lack of trying to get help that he died; there were many rehabs and an assortment of medical interventions along the way. Though tragic, I will

always view his disease and death with humility and honor.

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