

Addiction Recovery Month 2010

# On Addiction Recovery

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These articles originally appeared in [Dr Tian Dayton's Blog at The Huffington Post](#)

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## **Recovery Movement Grassfires Ignited - September 13, 2010**

My high school motto was "Great in '68". My colleague on the board of The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA), Peter Palanca's, was "Fine in '69". As kids living in homes where addiction was a living, breathing green eyed monster, we weren't so great and we weren't so fine. We were part of the silent mass, the one in four -- the 50s and 60s, kids with nowhere to go to talk about what was going on in our homes. Most of us carried a lot of confusion and pain around that we didn't know what to do with. We were often embarrassed to bring friends home lest our alcoholic parents subject them to the rages that were part of our weekly fare or worse, reveal that no one even knew we'd walked through the door. We were often falling through the cracks at home where one parent was drinking and the other was so preoccupied and upset that they had little to give us. That was on the inside. On the outside, many of us were marching double time to restore the dignity and feeling of normalcy that was daily draining out the bottom of our families. We were class presidents, student council members, cheerleaders and football stars. It's no coincidence that four out of four of our most recent Presidents of the United States are ACOAs..... or addicts themselves. We are a hardy, hurting but often competent lot. Those of us who thrived learned how to take innovative and independent action to get our lives (and everyone else's lives) together.

We are also the generation who made recovery a household word. We're the ones who created the word "codependency" and turned the adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) movement into a grassfire that changed the face of the mental health field. We're the generation that passed the legislation,

H.R. 6983: Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008,

that made insurance companies recognize mental illness as an actual disease that deserves treatment that is reimbursed by insurance.

## **Recovery: A Sane and Healthy Movement**

The problem of addiction hasn't gotten better, in fact it's gotten worse. However, recovery has changed EVERYTHING. It has given anyone suffering at the other end of a bottle, pipe, needle, sex or food addiction a place to go, not only to feel better but to get better. Recovery makes hope and health more important than despair and sickness. It gives people a way to become different on the inside and on the outside. In treatment centers and twelve step rooms all across the world, communities of like minded people share their "experience, strength and hope", throw a dollar in a basket and change their lives and the world for the better. They light one candle and that candle is themselves and that candle lights the candle of the person next to them and eventually the whole room is warmed by the glow of hope and healing.

## **Spring the Lock**

NACOA's mission is to help children who are trapped in families struggling with addiction to find help, whether that help be from a relative, neighbor or government program.

Peter's mission as Executive Vice President of TASC, Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities, is to help prisoners who are trapped behind bars, find their way to recovery in one of Illinois's model recovery prisons.

My mission is to help the hurting child trapped within the adult, ACOA, to find emotional balance and freedom.

## **Another Grassfire is Being Lit**

This September is "Recovery Month". All across the nation tens of thousands of people in recovery will be banding together to march down streets and across bridges to honor and celebrate the concept of RECOVERY and their own RECOVERIES. Now there is somewhere to go, a path to follow lit by others who are breaking their silence and choosing life. Believe it or not, it hasn't always been this way. Because I am from a generation of children who didn't dare to talk about their parent's drinking, the chaos at home or the pain we were carrying to school every day, there isn't a day that goes by that I don't say "thank you" inside of me to what recovery has meant to my life. I have never abused substances but I grew up in a home in which addiction took us over. I am an ACOA and my recovery has been basically from the post traumatic stress symptoms (PTSD) that so many ACOAs carry. Recovery couldn't give me my Dad back. But it gave me, me back. And I have had a great life by any standards. No one would be happier about it than my Dad. He couldn't manage to get well. Call it shame, pride, lack of resources or "his generation", sobriety eluded him until his death. But that need not be true any more. Through making the message of RECOVERY public, we can share our hope and healing with the world so that no one will feel that they have to remain hidden and silent, trapped in this disease either as addicts, ACOAs or spouses. Today, there is somewhere to go and someone to tell who will understand.

To honor "Recovery Month" and to honor my Dad, I will begin a series of articles on various aspects of addiction and recovery....some of the topics I'll be covering are.....

- What is an ACOA?
- What is Codependency?
- Recovery for the Whole Family
- Trauma and Addiction
- ACOAs and PTSD

and more..... for more information on where you can go or what you can do log onto [www.nacoa.org](http://www.nacoa.org).



## **The Hidden Pain of the Addicted Family - September 21, 2010**

In the 1960s, when my Dad got treatment, we all thought that once the alcoholic got sober, the rest of us in the family would sort of get better automatically. Normalcy would be restored and we could all go on with our lives as if addiction had never really been there. We weren't total idiots, that's what everyone thought. That's what a lot of people still think, in fact.

If you happen to think this, I will save you a lot of time and heartache. It's not true. It's not true because addiction is not only about addiction, it's about emotional and psychological trauma. People who use drugs and alcohol are often times attempting to numb disturbing emotional and psychological pain that they don't want to feel.

### **How Addiction Leads to Trauma**

Living with addiction often results in cumulative trauma that deeply affects family members. When addicts are using they are, for all intents and purposes, out of their minds. Their behavior mimics that of a variety of psychiatric disorders ranging from manic depression, to full blown psychosis in which the addict is totally out of touch with reality. To see the father you love turn into a raging, abusive monster, the mother who cooked you your favorite dinner become a raving lunatic, or simply disappear behind a closed door by 9:00 pm or the child you have raised and adored turn into someone you cannot recognize, is nothing short of terrifying. They look at you as if they never loved you, never knew you...as if you are simply in the way of what is really important to them, namely their drug of choice. The out of control and unpredictable nature of these behaviors can make family members feel helpless, enraged, and as if their sense of reality is being turned inside out and upside down. In short, it's traumatizing.

## How Trauma Leads to Addiction

Living with the kind of unpredictable and damaging behaviors that surround addiction, often challenges our sense of a normal and predictable world. It undermines our trust and faith in relationships and their ability to nurture and sustain us. It interferes with our ability to communicate our needs and have them heard or to listen to another person communicate theirs. It is, in other words, traumatizing. Over time this "cumulative" trauma (it's never just one time in the addicted home, right?) can engender trauma related symptoms such as depression, anxiety, hypervigilance, low self worth and somatic disturbances (head and body aches, chronic tension and so forth). These symptoms, if they go untreated in family members, can become full blown PTSD. They can lead to all sorts of life, learning, health, psychological and relationship complications and yes, you guessed it, a desire to self medicate. This is how the insidious baton of addiction gets handed down through the generations. Addiction engenders trauma symptoms and trauma symptoms engender addiction. Even if family members do not become alcoholics or drug addicts themselves, they are at increased risk for other forms of self medicating (food, sex or money, or hybrid combinations of two or three). They are also at increased risk for other types of trauma related symptoms. Who needs to locate an "alcoholic gene"? Understanding the trauma set up makes intergenerational dysfunction or "passing down the pain" clear enough as to make a gene only proof of what we already know.

## When the Addict Gets Sober Why Isn't the Whole Family Better?

The addict sobering up is only the first step in healing. Whether that's because the addict was numbing emotional pain from living in a painfilled family or because the family has now become traumatized by living with addiction is more or less a moot point. It's the old chicken and egg story, which came first doesn't matter any more. Everyone in an addicted family system needs to get help and the sooner they get it, the sooner the family can start to heal. If this kind of healing doesn't take place a few things might happen:

The addict may relapse.

The family may break up or polarize.

The sober addict may have to leave the family in order to get and stay sober.

The family may find a new "problem person" or "symptom bearer" to take the focus off the family illness.

Because the addicted family becomes slowly sicker, they may experience one of their members going into recovery up as an assault to their now (or maybe always) dysfunctional equilibrium. They may silently collude in "not changing", in maintaining their sick status quo. Having an "addict" in the family is a great way for the rest of the family to ignore their own state of emotional health. There is always someone to blame the family pain on. Namely, the addict. But when the addict gets sober, the family is left with their pain which they need to take

responsibility for and work through whether it preceded addiction or was a direct result of living with addiction or, more likely, a very uncomfortable combination of both. After all, happy, well adjusted and well related people don't tend to want to drown their pain with drugs and alcohol, something was likely engendering that pain to begin with.

### **What if the Addict is Divorced, Leaves or Dies; Then Isn't the Problem Over?**

Out of sight is unfortunately not out of mind. The unconscious of the family system is shared by all. Family dysfunction is sort of like a rash, it moves around the body of the family and reappears, in another location hot, red.....demanding to be scratched or soothed. But it is still the same virus whether it appears as a bump, series of lines or a fiery patch. The tentacles of trauma reach deep into both the body and the mind, they become part of us. If they remain unconscious they can shape and impact further ways of relating and life choices. They are just as likely to get worse not better on their own.

### **Recovery Can Grip A Family Too**

Getting better is just as easy as getting worse. Healing is also cumulative. The pay offs of recovery are as easily quantified as symptoms of decline. Some "symptoms" of recovery are: enhanced self esteem, renewed energy for life, increased emotional literacy and emotional intelligence, increased emotional sobriety and balance and an ability to make healthier life choices. Awareness is a powerful tool and safeguard. Life will still be challenging, it always is, but with help and awareness, family member's energy will be freed up to meet their own challenges rather than unconsciously throbbing from festering or turgid wounds from the past that are constantly bleeding into the present and future. Though admitting our need for recovery can feel like walking through a wall, once we walk through it we discover that the wall was a wall of fear, a mental construct, a dark imagining of our own making. On the other side of that wall is a new kind of freedom and self possession, a new lease on life.

For Further info on recovery and addiction log onto [nacoa.org](http://nacoa.org) National Association for Children of Alcoholics.



## [Diane Schuler: Further Discussion - August 9, 2010](#)

The Chinese have a saying .....

*"First the man takes the drink, then the drink takes the drink, then the drink takes the man."*

These eighteen words tell the story of addiction.

It is not about blame, blame doesn't help. It is not about moral weakness even, the best of people succumb to addiction once the body and mind have become compulsively dependent. Pointing fingers at those surrounding the addict is missing a crucial point as well, addiction becomes a family illness, everyone around the addict becomes invested in hiding the problem right along with the addict themselves. Putting Diane Schuler's case aside for a moment and simply looking at the 32 comments that followed this article and all of the points of view represented there...well...what's going on here? Why is the word "addiction" still such a hot button?

- *Stigma*: Addiction still carries the stigma of moral decrepitude to some extent, people don't want to be seen as addicts, it's too mortifying and injurious to their sense of who they are and who they think they should be.
- *Blame*: Addicts often point the finger at those close to them making spouses and children feel like it is their fault, that if they weren't so "terrible, bad, annoying" the addict wouldn't need to use. For this reason those surrounding the addict feel confused as to what the real problem might be or how much alcohol and drugs have affected their lives and relationships.
- *Incipient Nature of the Disease*: Addiction takes hold incrementally, family members slip seamlessly into denial right along with the addict, making excuses for why someone is "out of sorts", "can't show up", "is just not themselves" and so on. Addicts seem to get the "flu" alot, have more "back aches" than other people and always seem to have an "upset stomach". Over time this denial becomes a twisted kind of thinking and spins a web of subterfuge and secrecy around the addict, all designed to hide his or her use and abuse and the emotional and psychological pain that family members are in.

If Diane Schuler didn't have some sort of problem with alcohol or pot why was her blood-alcohol level more than twice the legal limit and why did she have marijuana in her system having smoked it within an hour of driving five children home from the camp site? Blaming after the fact doesn't help and that is not what we need to be doing. Being willing to identify the incipient signs of alcohol and drug abuse and doing something about them actually does

work, there is so much help available for this disease today if we're willing to be open and listen. But unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way.

#### **Reader's Comments from our last blog:**

**andrewsmarilyn** illustrates just how invested the family becomes in denying the impact of addiction: *"It's that all too often it's the person who says there is a problem who gets in trouble, not the person who is the problem."*

*"This quote from your article is very touching -- and unfortunately very true. My personal experience exactly reflects this quote. My father is an alcoholic and when I was 16, left his house. I was not able to state openly that I believed him to have a drinking problem until I was 19. As a result of those actions, the majority of my immediate and extended family (from his side) have ostracized me and I am estranged from them. It is extremely hurtful, particularly as many of them now acknowledge what I stated many years ago is true (stated 15 years ago), however, likely due to their shame, they have yet to welcome me back into the family. I have learned that the only person you can control is yourself, however, so I try to remember that I did what was best for my health when I left, even though it meant suffering the loss of my other family members."*

Sis Wenger's (nacoa.org) comments from my last blog were, as many of you realized, referring to educating those who touch the lives of children to learn to identify signs of addiction in the family so that 1) the child can get some help for themselves and 2) the family disease of addiction can be addressed. Kids like "andrewsmarilyn" suffer in silence, afraid that they will lose those they love if they tell the truth about what's really going on in their homes.

Scapegoating and passing the buck are some of the heartbreaking realities of drug and alcohol abuse. Pain loves a culprit and finger pointing and passing the buck are a constant feature of addicted family systems. All groups want to achieve "homeostasis" or a sort of functional, social balance. When an addict threatens the homeostasis of a family, the family group does what it has to do to "get rid" of the problem. Unfortunately because they are steeped in denial about the extent to which addiction is affecting the family, they often times identify something or someone other than addiction as the problem and set about "dealing" with or getting rid of *them*, it's called scapegoating. It provides the family with temporary relief but the deeper problem of addiction is denied, grows and gets worse.

In interviews with family and friends a neighbor, Bob McClellan, a 59-year-old substance- and alcohol-abuse counselor, shared that they were all having difficulty understanding how the pleasant and normal seeming woman they knew could have been that woman in the car. "In my business, the secret lives of drinkers will sometimes astound you," he said. "Sometimes even the family doesn't know."

Addiction is secretive; those who are dependent on alcohol and drugs want to hide it. They are ashamed of their own, desperate need to use substances to manage their emotional pain whether those substances are food, sex, internet porn, spending, alcohol or drugs. Addicts

become masters at "looking normal" and their families unconsciously or consciously collude with them in presenting a "normal" face to the world because it is so frightening and disturbing to their sense of themselves to let the sad truth come out.

yorkriver1 addresses this in his comment: *"One identifying feature of alcoholism is the inability for the alcoholic to see that they have a problem. The posts are correct that talk about taking away the addicted person's options in order to keep them from causing harm. It could be years away or never that the addicted person every really gets the desire to quit for good. We need much more education to counteract the denial in families. Shame and fear of dishonor to the family can keep the unhealthy addictive behavior in place until tragedy occurs. Then the family may deny any addiction was the cause. This is a problem in families of all economic levels, wealthy and poor alike. Recent examples of which I am aware are in both kinds of families. Why do we avoid working to get help for alcoholics? When someone is ill, we get help. We even threaten legal action if parents try to deny chemotherapy to kids with cancer. Addiction is a sickness, not a cause for shame. The shame should come from not seeking help."*

Everyone in an addicted family system loses their "emotional sobriety", their ability to think and feel clearly, to some extent of another, getting it back is slow and painstaking work and requires that each person in the system take a hard and honest look at themselves. Many people simply are not willing to do this. Maybe this is the place to say that recovery works. I grew up with serious addiction, my father was an alcoholic and by today's definition probably a sex addict as well. All of us in our family were steeped in denial, busy putting on a brave face to the world and making excuses for his erratic behavior and denying the creeping mistrust and distance that was growing among us. When we finally got Dad into treatment his disease was so progressed that he never really could sustain sobriety. The rest of us were scattered by then having gone off to college, marriage and whatever and came to our own treatment each at different times and to differing degrees. We couldn't even discuss the problem without huge blow ups, finger pointing, pain and blame. Over time we have made progress and that progress has been directly tied to the amount of help each of us has been willing to get. Many years ago I found Alanon and it changed my life. For months, maybe even years, it was enough for me just to go to meetings, raise my hand and share for three minutes about the pain and confusion I carried from growing up in an addicted family system without clearing the room or bringing the roof down on my head. No one shouted at me, no one called me a big mouth, overly dramatic or said I had a poison tongue. No one left the room, slammed the door or stopped talking to me. They quietly nodded their heads, identified with me and shared their version of their story which sounded flabbergastingly like mine. I began to heal. Alanon and twelve step programs are one place that when you talk about these issues people "understand because they've been there".