

Dealing With The Fear/Pain Caused By An Addict Child

by John Vawter

In the mid seventies I was the Pacific Northwest Area Director for Campus Crusade for Christ. I was on a ministry trip to Spokane, WA and was at the Spokane Athletic Club with two friends—both of whom happened to be counselors. We were in the gym shooting baskets. At the other end of the court a little five year old boy was throwing the basketball up at the basket. The ball hit the rim and came down and hit him squarely in the face. He was hurt and began to cry quite loudly. I picked him up, patted him on the back and comforted him with these All-American words, “It will be alright. Big boys don’t cry.”

Later, in the locker room, one of my friends leveled me with these words: “Where did you get the philosophy that ‘big boys don’t cry’? The little boy was hurt. Why did you not acknowledge that?” I think this experience was the first time I realized that much of what I had been taught as an American was actually anti-thetical to what Christ taught and how He lived. Specifically, it is not wrong to acknowledge and experience pain.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus was very much in pain and agony. We know this because He allowed three of His disciples to be close enough to hear what He said as He prayed: “Father, let this cup pass from Me.” There is no way one can interpret those words as anything other than the fact that Jesus did not want to go to the cross. We also know He was in deep agony. He was “grieved and distressed.” These words have the connotation and meaning of deep sadness and stress. The stress was deep enough that He sweat drops of blood.

For those of us who have suffered or are suffering the pain of having one of our kids abuse drugs and alcohol we should reject the philosophy I espoused to the little boy at the athletic club in Spokane and rather follow the leadership of Jesus Christ. It is not wrong to experience pain or fear. It is wrong to allow pain and fear to control us without learning to share those burdens with God. He wants to be a very real help in the time of our trouble.

PAIN IS PHYSICAL, MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL

It has been my experience the past five-plus years since we got the news that our daughter Stephanie was addicted to heroin and then since starting the ministry of You’re Not Alone that men are much more reluctant to admit and acknowledge the pain and fear that drug/alcohol abuse can cause. Indeed, most calls or emails we have gotten for help have come from mothers not from fathers. I noticed when Susan and I attended Nar-Anon—the support group for family members of narcotics addicts—that most attendees were women. In one case, the stepmother of the addict attended the meetings because the father would not acknowledge the problem.

The fact is this: If we love our kids we are going to be in pain over their abuse of drugs/alcohol. We did not create them or adopt them to see them ruining their lives. We have only ever wanted the best for them. We have only ever wanted them to maximize their God-given talents. We have only ever wanted them to love God with the entirety of their hearts.

But, for whatever reason they made decisions on drugs/alcohol that we would not have made for them. Indeed, in most cases, we have counseled them and reared them not to make those choices. We have prayed hard that they would not use drugs/alcohol. So, the pain we feel is not only for the incredible loss we are watching as we observe our kids on a path that may destroy them but it is also an incredible sadness as we try to make some sense out of the jumble of emotions that we feel as parents.

The physical pain is just that—physical. It is related to our emotions but we can take on such guilt and shame over our kids that we actually have genuine physical symptoms. The mental pain is a pain of trying to figure out some solution to our kid’s abuse when it might not be our problem to solve. But, because we spend so much mental time trying to solve the problem we actually can have mental pain such as poor thinking patterns, poor decisions, etc. The emotional pain is real because it hurts so badly. We hurt for our

kids. We agonize over what we might have done wrong. We wonder if they will ever come back to God. The spiritual pain can be just as real because somehow we do not feel as close to God as we once did. Some even feel as though He has failed us and then we feel guilty about thinking that way. Some blame God...even though they know that is not right.

TIME DOES HEAL WOUNDS, BUT...

On the other hand we have to be careful about with whom we share because there are always well-meaning but incredibly insensitive, judgmental or hypercritical people who seem to be very well skilled in saying the very thing that we do not want or need to hear. We need encouragement and we leave such people worse than when we first started the conversation with them. A woman emailed me recently to ask for advice. She said that her church had been supportive but one woman's only comment to her relative to drug abuse was, "My children would never be so stupid as to use drugs." So, the reality is that while we are reeling from the pain and fear caused by our own child's abuse we must be on guard for the unfortunate, unkind and may I be blunt—the stupid—things people say to us.

It is also true that each of us experiences pain and fear in different ways. We must be careful not to project ourselves on our spouse or other family members. Susan and I have grappled with this and addressed it in talks at earlier conferences. Those talks can be found on the website or in the book that FamilyLife is publishing. But, what I am talking about is not differences in temperament but rather being willing to be honest with the pain and fear we experience because of our kids' abuse. I am afraid that we sometimes try to put our best foot forward in the church. One pastor at an earlier conference told me that he told his bishop that his daughter—that is the pastor's daughter--was addicted to drugs---and the bishop never again spoke to him about the subject. So, sometimes the very subculture that should be giving us the most help is the one that gives us the least. The result is that we then tend to hold the pain and fear inside without admitting them or dealing with them.

AN HONEST APPRAISAL AND ADMISSION IS NEEDED

The pain can manifest itself in many ways. Here are some of the manifestations I have either experienced or have seen in others:

A deep, deep sadness that is so deep that it has no name

A low-grade infection that saps our energy and renders us unmotivated

A low-grade infection that never goes away

A figurative kick in the stomach that keeps us doubled over in pain

An open wound that we are convinced everyone sees

A pain that simply tears at the very fiber of our souls because it is so pronounced

A pain—that seems selfish but is not—when we see others' kids doing so well or observe our kids' contemporaries doing well in their careers. (*We get angry at God, we doubt God, we think He is unjust—we are innocent victims and we end up having to do lots of hard work.*)

BRING THE LORD INTO THE PERSPECTIVE AND THE PROBLEM

The fear we experience also manifests itself in many different ways. Here are some of the manifestations I have either experienced or have seen in others:

It tears at the fabric of our faith because we doubt our relationship with God and the effectiveness of our prayers.

It gnaws at us because the fear never goes away. The fear can become a totally irrational thing that controls us. Unfortunately, our emotions are not able to discern between real and unreal. If I think there is a bear in the closet behind me, I am going to run out the front door. My emotions are not able to discern that it makes no sense that a bear could be in the closet behind me in this building.

The fear takes on all kinds of shapes and forms: will my child end up on the street, will my child end up in jail, will my child end up dead—at the hands of a police officer or robbery for his/her drugs, will my child commit suicide, will my child ever get clean, will my child wander off and I will never see him/her again. These fears are not always irrational; they can be real and valid fears.

Will my child ever finish school or use his/her schooling.

Will my spouse and I end up raising our grandchildren because of our child being controlled by drugs/alcohol.

Fear becomes our constant and most unwelcome companion.

I have a friend who continuously fights the Type A tendencies that often make his walk a struggle. He has succeeded in a business that is based largely upon power. But when his youngest son became an addict, he realized (perhaps for the first time) how truly powerless we all are. He tried to control the situation and failed. Finally, he gave his son up... but did not give up on his son. Eventually his son took responsibility for his own recovery. His son is back in school and a good father. This formerly powerful man carries a mobile phone with him 24/7. If he is in a meeting (or church) he puts the phone on vibrate. If he gets a call and does not recognize the number, he lets the caller go into his voice mail. But if the call is from his son – no matter how important the meeting – he takes the call. He does this partly as an act of appreciation for how far his son has come and his desire to continue to restore their relationship – but he also admits it is out of fear. Every time the call is from his son, he fears that he may have slipped back or is in trouble again. Thankful as he is, he simply cannot make that fear go away.

All of this pain and fear are compounded by the fact that the journey to wholeness and sobriety often is not a simple, easy to follow path. I think we all want to swallow the “Jesus pill” and have this pain and this fear gone from our lives. But, that is not how it happens most of the time. Frequently—maybe usually—there are no easy answers. Life is not joyful; it is awful. God does not seem close; He seems far away. Then we add to this equation the fact that we have other demanding duties—our spouse, other children, our jobs, possibly aging parents, etc. and we feel as though we will never escape from this maelstrom. And, if we have those with the “gift of discouragement” around then we have to be on the look out for them...and that takes more time and energy.

LIVING ONE DAY AT A TIME

Susan and I felt extremely fortunate. We discovered on a Sunday afternoon about 5:00pm that Stephanie was using heroin. We were able to find her about midnight the following night and by 2:30 am she was in detox. So, our pain was about 30 hours long. We often commented driving home from Nar-Anon how fortunate we felt not to have had to endure the long-term pain that some in our support group were experiencing. Then, almost exactly one year later, our son Michael told us he had smoked marijuana every day since he had graduated from college. He did not look good, he was barely working and his marriage was in a shambles. At that moment we began to experience the pain and fear we had observed in others. And, much of what I described earlier about pain and fear were now my pain and fear. They were my constant and most unwelcome companions. Then, living one day at a time became very important to me. Along the way I have learned a number of lessons to combat those pains and fears. I want to emphasize strongly that just because both of our kids are clean and sober and living productive lives does not mean the fear is gone. Relapse is a real possibility. I asked one man who had three of his four children go through treatment when the fear for their future leaves. I asked this question 15 years after the last one had gotten out of treatment. His answer was very succinct: “Sometime after 15 years of their being clean and sober.”

I also want to emphasize ever so strongly that these are lessons that I am still learning. I have not arrived. I am still learning to try to be dependent on God.

I have already addressed the issue but it is important not to deny or neglect the pain and fear we feel. These emotions of pain and fear are like termites in the foundation of our home. We do not see them but they are doing their work; we may know they are there but pretend they are not there. They will still be doing their work. Then one day, the damage is done. So, it is with these emotions if we do not deal with them. Their poison will keep eating away at our emotional and spiritual strength and somewhere in the future there will be a crash or crisis. I remember one man saying one day at a Nar-Anon meeting: "The reason we are here and the reason we feel so badly is because we love our kids and want the best for them." As God's children we can grieve and limit the Holy Spirit. Why do we deny then that our kids can do the same to us? To deny such a reality is to deny our humanness.

I have been learning to share with trusted friends. They must be people who understand the reality of Romans 12:15 where Paul tells us to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." When we are in pain and controlled by the fear for our child's future we do not need advice as much as we need comfort.

I am learning to say, "This really hurts." Susan and I never had this with Stephanie but we did have it with Michael. As we would speak different places around the country and meet new people they would ask, "What does your son do?" It was always difficult to say, "He does not do anything." Sometimes I just lied or made up stories. It was not right but it was easier that way. At home or in the privacy I would tell Susan, "It really hurts to be deceiving people and to know that our brilliant son is not working or maximizing his God-given talents." She would respond, "I know, it really hurts." Just knowing I was not alone in my feelings meant so much to me. This is consistent with 1 Corinthians 10:13 that says there is no temptation that is unique to us. Parenthetically, this is a strong argument for not keeping this pain inside and to ourselves. Usually when we share with the parent of another addict or abuser we discover that whatever we are thinking and feeling is not unique to us—but is quite common. A case in point is that when I shared at Nar-Anon that I wanted to kill the dealer who sold Stephanie drugs, other fathers confessed the same motivation. We learned together that the motivation to do damage to the dealer is very much of a "father thing." If I had not shared I would not have been comforted by the sharing of other fathers...and I might not have been motivated to confess my hatred for the dealer and my desire to kill him as sin. On my desk I had a picture of Michael and me taken at his college graduation. He looked so handsome. He had gotten such good grades. He had done so well. I finally had to remove the picture because looking at it every day as I did my work created such pain. I remember telling Margaret Hansell, with whom I had gone to college and who has spoken at our conferences along with her husband, "I just want my son back." She responded, "John, you have to be willing to take back what God gives you." That was painful to accept but it helped me deal with the frustration and pain that there was nothing more I could do for my son but pray and leave him in God's hands." That was not an easy acceptance. So, you can imagine my joy and thankfulness now that Michael is working as a counselor at a home for delinquent boys, coaching his daughter's soccer team and living successfully as a father and husband.

GOD'S POWER, FREEWILL AND THE HOUND OF HEAVEN

I have taken great comfort from the fact that God has proven so very faithful in the lives of other addicts. And, I take great joy in seeing where they are now. That encouraged me—and it encourages me—that God can work and will work in my own kids' lives. I find great comfort in one of our speakers Todd Smoke's being sober, productive and helping others after 20 years of living on the streets. I do not mean this in any way other than with great praise to God but if He did not quit on Todd and kept pursuing him until Todd turned back to God then He will keep pursuing every other child on drugs/alcohol as well. I had to give up my desire to somehow "fix" my son or rationally convince him that the life of marijuana was not the best way to live. I had done the "rational talk" thing with him and it had not worked so I had to turn him over to the love and care of God. If this meant he needed to genuinely hit bottom and lose everything he had in order to come to his senses then that is what had to happen. Parenthetically, it was the

birth of his son that brought him to his senses and he tells us he has not smoked marijuana since his son was born over three years ago.

NEVER GIVE UP HOPE

I had to realize that only God could get us out of this jam. 1 Peter 5:7 says, "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." I realized that this pain had to be given to God and so I gave it to Him---over and over and over. For me, it was not a once and for all deal. It was a many times a week deal.

I also had to remember that Paul says "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6) Jesus loves Michael more than I do. I had to give Him my son's future. I had done all I could.

All of this to say that our kids' either abusing or addicted is incredibly painful. It hurts; it rips; it tears at us. It is not healthy to deny we are in pain. Jesus admitted pain in His life. He should be our model. We may need to ask for His power through the presence of the Holy Spirit to be able to follow what He modeled. But, admitting pain and fear is the right thing to do.

I would be remiss if I did not say this pain and fear have ended up being good instruments of God's grace in my life. I have learned more dependence on Him; I have learned more about how He does come close to us in our times of trouble and pain. I have grown closer to Susan. I have learned more about thankfulness now that our kids are clean and sober and living productive lives. But, if I had denied the pain these wonderful things would not have happened.

I have an acquaintance in Phoenix whose 16-year-old son drowned. As he told me about it he wept. He talked about how much he misses his son. Then he said something to this effect: "Do not misunderstand me. I wish my son were alive. But God has done things in my life through his death that He never could have done otherwise. This is how I feel about having drugs in my family. I would not wish it on anyone; I would not want to go through it again, but I would not have missed the lessons God taught me and is teaching me for anything.