

Dealing with an Addicted Loved One

by Zach Whaley

I got involved in helping addicted people in Fort Carson, Colorado, when I was in charge of a comprehensive drug and alcohol program in the early seventies when the Viet Nam veterans were returning addicted to heroin and other drugs. Then I received special training at the University of Miami, University of Utah, and University of Colorado. For several years I was Chairman of the Colorado Summer School of Drug and Alcohol Studies, and I spent about ten years training substance abuse counselors in Colorado to be certified by the Department of Health. But those are not the things that qualify me to be with you this afternoon.

As I was looking over the agenda, it dawned on me that this is a very personal and difficult topic and one that requires some warmth and understanding. So I want to share with you why I initially got involved at Fort Carson. Basically I'm standing up here and I don't have a kid on drugs. I spent the last twelve years of my twenty-one years at home watching my father's alcoholism progress and watching him deteriorate. I felt shame, rejection, helplessness, and loneliness. At about the time I finished college, my mom left him and he got better. He was abstinent the last twenty years of his life.

My sister's husband became an alcoholic. I don't know the whole story, but she left him and he got better. He was abstinent for the last thirty years of his life. After three years of marriage I saw my wife sinking deeper and deeper into alcoholism, and I spent the next twelve years trying to keep her sober. And again I felt shame, rejection, helplessness, loneliness and anger. My response to shame was to become arrogant. Some people respond to shame by getting depressed or defeated. Then I filed for divorce, thinking she would get better, like my father and brother-in-law had. But she did not. I learned that not everyone is the same. Each person is different, unique. So at the age of 40 I was a brand new Christian, divorced and alone. I still had to deal with shame, rejection and helplessness. For me, helplessness frequently translated into anxiety, loneliness, anger and a need to control. You see, when the addict leaves your life, for whatever reason or however, you still have all those things to deal with. They are a part of you. They have become a part of who you are. So here I was with all that baggage that went all the way back to my childhood.

Dealing with an addicted loved one leaves bruises and scars. When these are not healed, they cause us to react and overreact. If I for some reason had gotten a big bruise on my arm right here yesterday that no one could see, but if John in an act of friendliness came up to me and grabbed my arm and said, "Hey, Zach, how ya doing?" I would not think, "Let's see. Yesterday I bumped into that thing and got this bruise and that is what is causing me all that pain." No, I'd probably shout, "Hey, John, that hurts!" But he didn't see the bruise. He didn't know it was there. We can have emotional bruises on our heart that are caused when someone we love is addicted to something. They cause us to overreact, so we walk around being irritable, edgy, easily irritated, and bitter. We begin blaming. For example, I would blame John for the pain that had just been inflicted, even though in reality the pain was from what happened yesterday, not from what John had just done. But because I am feeling the pain, I have to blame somebody; and typically, addicts are easy to blame. We blame them for everything that is wrong in our lives.

Also, when these bruises are unhealed, we get into control. Because we feel so helpless about *this* person, we try to control other people and controlling becomes a way of life. We can do that through manipulation, and by that I mean by not being clear about what we want. Examples are by not telling people when we are not satisfied and by not telling them what we want. We can manipulate through transmitting guilt: by saying if you really loved me and if

you were really a good person then you wouldn't be doing this and I wouldn't be feeling this pain and frustration. We also try to control through the use of power. Power is exerted in a number of different ways. One is physical strength. Another is intellectual strength by overpowering people with our clever arguments. Another is financial strength by granting or withholding money. These become ways that we try to control things.

Also since we are walking around with these bruises, we don't want to get close to others because they might bump up against us. So we begin to withdraw, isolate ourselves, push people away and alienate them in order to protect ourselves.

In self-protection, we put our focus elsewhere. Work is a very convenient place to put that focus especially if you are working in the church. Work in the church can become your total focus. You get a lot of good feelings out of that, so you don't get your bruises rebruised. Or we can focus on hobbies or anything that gets our mind off the problem. The problem is that person's drug use. But you know what? It's that hole in the stomach. It's that emptiness that needs to be filled and that belongs to us. It doesn't only belong to the addict because it affects us as well. Moreover, we can push people away by being arrogant and by acting like we don't need them, by becoming defeated, by moping around, and by becoming withdrawn and depressed. Now I want you to know that I went through all of that.

At the age of 40 I was a brand new Christian and alone. Twenty years later as a Pastor of Counseling I had a son who was rebellious and depressed. He experimented with drugs, but was never addicted. So I know what it is like to feel like your child is ruining his life ... and then also exposing me to ruin. What I want to do is highlight *Zach's Top Ten Tips*. Well, really there are more than ten. You can choose the most important ten for you.

Zach's Top Ten Tips for Codependency and Boundaries

1. *The only behavior I can control is my own.*
2. *Replace automatic reactions with conscious decisions about your behavior.*
3. *When you allow an intrusion, you have drawn a new boundary.*
4. *You can't require other people to honor your boundaries, but you can decide what you will do if they don't.*
5. *Dead people never bleed, and emotionally dead people never cry.*
6. *It is okay to feel what others are feeling – "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." It is only unhealthy when we can't separate our feelings from theirs.*
7. *If I stab someone and he bleeds, I can't say, "You are responsible for your bleeding." Likewise, when I do something that causes an emotional bruise, I can't ignore my part in the bruise by saying, "You are responsible for your feelings." In the first case, I am responsible for my behavior that caused the bleeding; and in the second case, I am responsible for my behavior that caused the emotional bruise. In both cases, I am responsible to change my behavior as an act of love.*
8. *An addict will never quit the addiction until he/she views continuing the addiction as more painful than stopping. Therefore, anything that is done to lessen the painful consequences of practicing the addiction will reduce any motivation to stop.*

9. *If a loved one is addicted to something, perhaps the best way to help is to concentrate on your own growth so you can become strong enough to allow the addict to experience the natural consequences of the addiction.*

10. *Social and emotional growth are arrested when a person begins using addictive substances or behaviors to alter his/her feelings and his/her perceptions. Therefore, treat him/her as if they are at the age when he or she started abusing drugs or alcohol. One of the most helpful books is **Parenting Your Teen with Love and Logic**, by Dr. Foster Cline and Jim Fay.*

11. *Shame supports addictions, but acceptance defeats shame. Guilt has to do with behavior, which can produce repentance, forgiveness, and improved behavior. Shame has to do with identity – a deep sense of being valueless. Shame is so deep and so pervasive that it influences every thought about ourselves and others. It influences our actions, our feelings, and our interactions with others and with God. It can make us depressed or angry, defeated or arrogant. Some people only know how to deal with shame superficially by a quick fix, a drug or a behavior that causes our body to produce its own drug. The result is the same: instant relief. But that produces more shame, and another quick fix is the answer. This is part of the addictive process.*

12. *We can inflict shame by criticizing excessively, communicating contempt, or implying that a person's worth is determined by performance or appearance. Instead, we need to communicate that we accept the addicted person as a wonderful, lovable creation of God whose behavior is unacceptable.*

13. *Addicts are master manipulators. Parents can resist manipulation only when they are united. Parental unity needs to occur after both have shared their thoughts and feelings and negotiated a unified position.*

14. *There but for the grace of God go I.*

Due to this pattern of automatically reacting because of the emotional, intellectual and spiritual bruises you are carrying; you must concentrate on your own growth. The patterns become habitual. You need to consciously work on it so that you do not automatically react in those ways. We need to recognize that the Lord heals these bruises.

I Peter 5:10 says, "After you have suffered a little while, God will restore you and make you strong and steadfast." We need to be restored from these patterns that we have developed. It is very interesting that it says, "after a little while." We want to scream out, "How long is a little while?" The Bible teaches us that for God a minute is as a thousand years. We need to develop some patience.

The recovery for us as well as the addict requires a process. Part of that process involves confessing to one another and praying for one another. The promise is that we will be healed. How do we do that? In 1986 I sat down and tried to figure out how many AA and Ala-Anon meetings I had attended. It was about a thousand, and at that time I quit counting. We need to get involved with people who can accept us, with whom we can share. As Stephanie Vawter says, whenever she has a difficulty, she goes to a meeting. She meets with people who understand, people who care, people who struggle with the same kinds of things. Groups can be very helpful for that.

You as a couple can help each other to heal in these areas. You can work together as a family to bring about healing for each other. We need to heal because if we approach an addict with irritability, blame or control, he probably won't listen.

James 1 says, "Count it all joy when you encounter various trials." I don't think that verse means just to put on a happy face, dance around and have fun. It means that God wants us to see this situation as an opportunity to become totally dependent on Him. For the loved one it is necessary to become totally dependent on God. Quit trying to control things yourselves. There is a difference between giving up and letting go. I don't advise that you give up, but you do need to let go.

I think "count it all joy" also means drawing closer to your lifemate, becoming more understanding, softer and more gracious in the way we minister to others. I think it also means "hope." Don't give up hope. When we do all of those things I think we will encounter joy. Joy doesn't mean that I am glad that it is happening. No, it doesn't mean that.

My basic theory about addiction recovery is stated in principle #8: An addict will never quit the addiction until he/she views continuing the addiction as more painful than stopping. Therefore, anything that is done to lessen the painful consequences of practicing the addiction will reduce any motivation to stop.

If that is true, and I believe it is, I've never met an addict who just woke up one day and said, "Oh, this is a good day to stop using drugs." No. Instead, he/she says, "If I don't quit, I think I'm going to die." The struggle at one point is, "I'm going to die if I don't use." Then when it comes time for recovery, it is "I'm going to die if I keep on using." That fear is the motivator. Anything that is done to lessen the hassle or the painful consequences of practicing the addiction will reduce motivation to change. This fact is hard to keep in our minds. We have to allow the addict to experience the natural consequences of his/her behavior.

When we take responsibility for the addicts' behavior, then the addict doesn't have to. So if you take responsibility for seeing to it that there are no drugs available for the addict or that there is no alcohol available for the alcoholic, then the addict or alcoholic doesn't have to worry about it because you're worrying about it. He or she can just go ahead and have fun.

Now, we are ready for "Zach's Top Ten Tips for Recovery." Again, there are more than ten. You can choose the most important ten for you.

Zach's Top Ten Tips for Recovery

1. *Most recovery failures come from not dealing with the underlying codependency, not dealing with all addictions, or not being totally honest*
2. *Let go and let God! Get out of God's way so He can make things better.*
3. *Easy does it, but do it! Move cautiously, but move!*
4. *This too shall pass! Nothing stays the same. Give it time, and it will change. Relax and don't try to force it.*
5. *A "dry drunk" is no better excuse for bad behavior than a wet drunk is!*
6. *Just don't take the first (drink, hit, snort, look, bite, etc).*
7. *What works for someone else might work for me!*
8. *Addictive behavior must be stopped in order to make progress in recovery. (For example, the addict goes to detox to get the drug out of her body. Then she goes into treatment. The first step is to stop the addictive behavior and get the addictive substances out of the system. Until that is done, you are dealing with a person whose brain is not functioning well.)*

9. *Addictive behavior begins with focusing on the desire. Focus on God instead!*
10. *Addicts deceive themselves when they say, "I'm only hurting myself." That's why recovery includes Steps 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. Five out of the twelve steps focus on relationships that have been damaged by the addictive behavior.*
11. *This too shall pass. Two things make an addictive urge go away: practicing the addiction and the passage of time.*
12. *First things first! The first thing for an addict is RECOVERY!*
13. *Temptations go away when we don't give in to them. They come back when we do give in to them.*
14. *What causes problems is one.*
15. *Our secrets keep us sick.*
16. *When someone else takes responsibility for an addict's behavior, the addict doesn't have to.*
17. *When you take responsibility for someone's drinking, he doesn't have a drinking problem. He has a drinking solution. You have the drinking problem (because you have taken responsibility for this problem. Now the addict is free to use all he wants).*
18. *Don't argue about the details of the past. All parties' memories are selective and at least partially inaccurate, and their perceptions at the time were probably distorted. That means you are arguing over inaccurate memories of distorted perceptions. Just accept that you remember it differently and will never be able to prove it. Let go!*
19. *One day at a time! Jesus said, don't borrow trouble from tomorrow. Paul said, forget the past.*

Let's look at *Recovery Tip #17: When you take responsibility for someone's drinking or drugging, he doesn't have a drinking problem. He has a drinking solution.* You have the drinking problem because you have taken responsibility for this problem. Now the addict is free to use all he wants.

Recovery Tip #8 states: *Addictive behavior must be stopped in order to make progress in recovery.* For example, Stephanie went to detox; she got the drug out of her body, and then she went into treatment. But the first step was to stop the addictive behavior and get the addictive substances out of the system. Until that is done, you are dealing with a person whose brain is not functioning well.

Social and emotional growth is arrested when a person begins to use addictive substances to alter his feelings and perceptions. Therefore, treat him at the age he was when he started abusing. Most start when they are teens. So if he is 35 years old and he has been using drugs all that time you have got to treat him as if he were a teenager. His emotional and relational development was arrested when he started using. After he has begun using, it becomes impossible to have healthy relationships with other people. The drug experience is a very personal and self-centered experience. Addiction is very self-centered because the addict will do whatever he has to do to get the drugs.

Have any of you been to a pot party? I was at one once, not knowing what was going to go on. Some of the counselors in the program at Fort Carson had invited me and they were all smoking pot. They offered me some and, unlike some people we know, I didn't even puff, let alone inhale. I was flabbergasted. I ended up firing them all the next day. What I noticed was that the party was very quiet. No interaction at all. Every once in a while someone would say, "Wow!" "Cool!" "Look at that!" They reported the next day that they had had a ball, but I was there. I could see what was happening because I wasn't stoned. It was all very internal. The drug experience is a very internal experience. That is why their social life is arrested. Once they start using drugs they don't have much of a social life or interactions with other people; other than scoring a drug or sharing a needle or whatever it is; so you have to treat them as teenagers. One of the best books I've seen is ***Parenting Your Teen with Love and Logic***. It takes it out of the emotional realm. You don't have to get upset anymore.

Remember my son who was rebellious? Applying what we learned from this book, my wife and I said to him, "You can choose to live here and follow this rule or you can choose to live somewhere else and keep doing what you're doing."

He said, "Oh, I'm going to live here. I'm not going to do it anymore." That very night he did it again.

So the next day we said, "We see that you have chosen to live elsewhere. We will give you until August 1 to find a place. If you need any help with that, ask us. Maybe we could help you with it." He moved out. He had dropped out of school at that point. Now, six years later, he has gotten his GED and he has been employed the entire time. He has been through a couple of unsatisfactory relationships. But in talking to him the other day, he said he realizes the mistakes that he made and he is getting on with his life. I wonder if he would have made all of those changes while still living with us. I'll never know. Don't try to figure out "What if" because you can't figure out "What if."

You can't use rational arguments with someone who is irrational. Stephanie Vawter said, "I take responsibility for my actions today" in response to a question asked of her. What this book does is to help people know how to help kids take responsibility for their actions today. You can begin this action before the person even starts recovery. You must give him a choice. Tell him, "You can choose to live here with us and not use drugs or you can choose to live elsewhere and use drugs." Remember what I said about my father and my brother-in-law and then when I did it, it didn't work. So don't leave here thinking, "Well, Zach gave him this choice and now everything is going well," because it may not work that way with your child. Remember, I said that I went to a thousand meetings? Well, in the vast majority of those meetings I was looking for the answer. I was looking for a way to get my wife sober. I saw lots of ways that people got sober and I would run home and try them. None of them worked. Each person is unique. Each person is different. So just don't hear what someone else did and run home and try to repeat it. First of all, you need to bring about some healing of these things that I mentioned of having a loved one addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Let's reconsider *Recovery Tip #14: What causes problems is one*. Stephanie Vawter said that she had no food in the house and hadn't paid bills in a couple months and she was using? An alcoholic or an addict will say, "I don't have this or that. I've got all these problems," but never make the connection that it is the "using" that is causing all the problems. A phrase that we use is "What causes problems is the problem." This statement can help people to take the first step of the Twelve Step Program. Incidentally, if you don't know what the steps are, I recommend that you get a copy or go to a Twelve-Step meeting because they are very useful. The first step is admitting powerlessness over our alcohol, compulsive behavior, addiction, gambling, whatever and that our lives have become unmanageable. The addict has to make a connection between the powerlessness they have over the addiction and the unmanageability of their lives.

Let's take a look at the *Co-dependency Tips #11 and #12*: Shame supports addictions. But acceptance defeats shame. Shame has to do with who we are. Guilt has to do with our behavior. With our behavior, we can confess it, correct it, and change it. But if there is something about me that doesn't measure up and I don't know what that is, I cannot fix it. That's shame. Shame has to do with our identity. Now some people only know what to do with shame superficially, with a quick fix. Once they start using, then the use creates more shame. So the quick fix takes away that shame real quick, but then because you "used" you get more shame again. Then you need another quick fix ... and that is the addictive process. The behavior, whatever it is, whether it is an eating disorder, gambling, or taking drugs when you use that to make you feel better, then that eventually makes you feel bad. And you have to use again. We need to recognize that we can inflict shame on people when we criticize them excessively; when we communicate to them that we have contempt for them and when we imply that their worth is determined by their performance or their appearance. Instead of that, we need to communicate to them that we accept them – that they are a child of God. Their behavior is unacceptable, but they are acceptable and lovable. Unfortunately, addicts draw shame.

There is one perfect parent in this universe. And He is sitting here in this room. It is God the Father. Look at His kids. Just look around our planet and see what His kids are doing. He loves us unconditionally. And look what we are doing to each other. So, if you could be a perfect parent, your kid might still be on drugs. Therefore, don't take that responsibility on yourselves. Don't take the responsibility on yourself for your kid's drug use because even if you were perfect your kid might be using.

You're not alone. Do you really believe you are not alone? When you get back home are you going to be alone? I don't believe you can deal with this alone. God did not put six billion of us on this planet for each one of us to deal with our problems alone. So don't stay alone. Get help by developing a support system. Go to Ala-Anon, or Nar-Anon. Go to support groups at your the church. Go some place where you can talk to people and share with them. You need to do that because you can't do it alone.

For more information about Zach Whaley, go to www.zachwhaley.com .