

Finding Hope in the Darkest of Times

by John and Deb Casey

John: I don't think it ever crossed our minds that we would have a child hooked on drugs, certainly not our quiet, middle kid. But considering my family of origin, I now realize that I probably should have expected one or more of my children to struggle with some kind of substance abuse. We wish we didn't have these experiences in our life. However, we do, so we want to harvest good from them by sharing our story and telling how we found hope in the journey with our son and his drug use. Let me start by introducing my family.

I grew up as the second of six children, in a family where both parents succumbed to alcoholism. From my junior high years to two years beyond college, my parents were drunk most days. Sadly, my mother died of her drinking at the young age of 49. Like me, my two brothers are quite the workaholics. Perhaps all three of my sisters are married to men who have struggled with alcohol.

Deb: I come from a strong Swedish family that valued church, gutting things out, being tough and not dwelling on feelings. My older brother is a recovering alcoholic.

God has blessed us with three children, but we have experienced some heartbreak along the way. I miscarried our first child. After Kristin's birth I lost two more children before Ryan was born. Although John wanted to have more children, I was afraid of more miscarriages. But, low and behold, three years after Ryan's birth, Shane was born. Because my children were so longed for and long awaited, I focused a great deal of my attention on them. I think that I was born co-dependent and very intuitive to other people's needs and feelings. With John under-functioning at home, I focused much energy on our kids when they were young. After our youngest entered fourth grade, I began teaching fifth grade.

Ryan was a typical middle child, a bit quiet, often drowned out by the strength and demands of his older sister and younger brother. He had a hard time pushing himself to overcome his hesitancy about new activities. I remember his having such a hard time choosing which athletic shoes to buy in fifth grade. Thinking it would help, I bought both, but that seemed to compound the problem. He simply could not decide. I remember Ryan's struggle with season shifts. As a toddler, when the seasons changed, he hated to go from long sleeves to short sleeves. The first day of short sleeves, he kept trying to pull his sleeves down. Change was challenging for Ryan.

Facing the Darkness

John: Although Ryan had always been a decent student, in eighth grade he began to struggle in school and his grades slid drastically. Though he was good athlete, joining a team was too difficult for him. He did play soccer for a while but he eventually quit. I think because he felt too much pressure to perform. Knowing Ryan's stress about change, we thought that his transition into high school might pose problems for him. In fact, all through freshman year, we tussled over his grades. He was capable enough but for reasons we didn't understand, he put out little effort. For me with my alcoholic parents, school was a refuge, a place where I could put things in order. I never considered that I'd have a kid who wouldn't enjoy high school. Expectations are a funny thing, unknown, and then suddenly very disappointing.

Facing any academic challenge, Ryan seemed unable to push himself. We struggled to know whether he was unable because of some blockage like ADD or simply disinterest. Through testing, we learned that he did not have ADD but perhaps was a bit depressed. Later, we would realize that the issues were compounded because he was dabbling in drugs, starting with a

friend's Ritalin, about which we knew nothing. We were treating the problem behaviorally in regards to schoolwork, but the issues were much deeper.

Deb: In April, as we returned home from a trip to Russia, my folks, who had stayed with our kids, reported that Ryan and his friends had smoked marijuana in his room one night. Ryan denied it, and we wondered what it meant, a bit of experimentation or something more dangerous. Denial was hovering over us, tempting us to make light of Ryan's drug use. During the summer, there was some drinking and more grade battles as Ryan took Algebra to make up for a failing grade during the year. He was dark and brooding, but we saw no hints of ongoing drug abuse, as if we knew what we were looking for at that point.

As soon as school started, Ryan seemed to be in trouble, aloof, out late, hanging with guys we didn't know. I began searching his room, finding small signs of more marijuana use.

John: I remember cringing about Debbie searching his room, almost wanting Deb to stop doing that, not wanting to find any more evidence of further problems. Denial, wishful thinking, dangerous thinking. But, with all the hints, we decided it was time to have Ryan tested for drugs. When the test indicated significant use, we entered him in an after school program for teenagers involved with drugs.

Facing what we saw, looking for other signs of trouble, these steps uncovered more darkness and danger but these were also first steps of hope. Looking and admitting what we were seeing was a tremendous step of hope, because we couldn't take any positive step for healing until we admitted that our family was up against a huge problem. I think of the apostle John's comments in his first letter: "If we deny the reality of sin, fellowship breaks down, but if we admit the trouble, we open up the hope of God doing His healing, cleansing work." Denial never gives hope a chance to grow.

Dealing with What We Know

Deb: Shockingly, after only a week in this treatment program, the director dropped Ryan, saying that he wasn't motivated. Duh! What teenager is motivated? Though we were angry and scared, we actually considered not seeking out another program—denial again. "Maybe it's not so bad. Maybe a week is enough to scare him." Through a lot of phone calls and networking, John found another after school treatment program, quite similar to the first one. We entered Ryan in that program, and quickly got the feeling that we were working harder at this than he was.

John: During those fall months, we also reached out to get help from other sources, like the police. When Ryan would "blow off a grounding," I would call the police, and they would go find him. I cringe at the memory of dialing 911 on my own son. But with their support though, we re-established our ability to enforce household standards. Though hard, those 911 calls were developing courage that we would need later, when even more drastic steps would be needed.

Deb: Only a week or two into his second program, we grounded him for more grade problems. I think John believed that we should relax our concern about grades and zero in on the drug issue, but I felt that we needed to maintain basic household standards, which we both held. Ryan was capable of getting C's, and we felt that was a firm line. So, with D's and F's, Ryan lost freedom on the weekends.

John: In that week following his grounding, at his program, Ryan tested positive for barbiturates. Suddenly, I realized the problem was bigger. This was more than experimentation or rebellion. Grounded, stuck at home, to get through, he had found some things in the medicine cabinet. To get by, to survive, this kid was reaching for any substance he could find. For years, our basic plan had been to deal with what we knew. Now knowing that the problem was bigger, we moved Ryan into the all day program for more intensive help. Hope comes by facing reality, admitting what is true and then taking the appropriate next step. For Ryan, that meant more intensive treatment. A simple thing, grounding him for bad grades, a basic household standard,

helped us to see that his need for drugs was quite strong, dangerously so. Taking firm, consistent stands was a simple structure that gave us hope.

Deb: A week before Thanksgiving, we again grounded Ryan with more grade problems. John tried to get him to do something with us that Friday night, but depressed and struggling, he chose to isolate himself in his room with the door closed, refusing overtures to watch a movie or do something else with us. Ryan already knew what we hadn't quite yet seen: he was in an all day treatment program but getting no better. Instead, he was finding more drugs to use.

John: Later that night, I was in our bedroom, talking on the phone with my good friend Ray. Turning, I happened to see a note carefully placed on our bed. With Ray on the line, I opened up the note and realized it was a desperate letter that Ryan had written that night, saying that if we didn't do something, he would hurt himself. Instantly, I felt a jumbled mixture of fear and relief. I was sad and afraid for his level of despair but so glad that we knew, that he wrote and told us. Again, I could see that Deb's firmness about household standards, passing grades, brought the grounding that put Ryan at home that night and brought out the depth of his need. So, again facing reality with all its pain, never considering what others might think, that night I took Ryan to the treatment center, where they entered him into the inpatient program. He remained there for a week, a rather depressed young man. He was starting to believe that there was no hope for him to ever get free from drugs.

In those weeks, we found hope in some of the most ordinary places, like following through on stated consequences for poor grades. Debbie is firmer; I'm more compassionate, wanting to ease up. By trusting each other, we became a good team and found some hope. Deb held to the rules, and fortunately I didn't get in the way. On the phone and in person, I could convey our hurt and compassion and concern to Ryan. I remember a Friday night, when Ryan was again grounded but was threatening to leave. I warned him that if he left, I'd send the police after him. He left, but then called from a pay phone 15 minutes later. On the phone, I was deeply compassionate with him but also firm, saying I'd call the police unless he came home or let me come pick him up. Toughness and tenderness—the combination gave us parents hope and actually provided some hope for Ryan, too.

We also found hope by learning and thinking about drug use and re-confirming our belief that any kind of drug use was not good, something we would not passively accept because everyone was doing it. If Ryan chose to use drugs, then we were going to act rather than ignore. We found hope in thinking through our beliefs and acting on them for our son.

We found hope by talking to others, I talked regularly with my friend in Canada; he wept with me. His counsel was too soft, too much rescuing. At some level I knew that, but it didn't matter. His love and support gave me hope. Early that fall, I also told our elders; I wanted them to know what we were facing. As I suspected they would, they stayed calm and used their energy to support us with interest and prayer. I'm sad to hear that elders in other churches aren't able to support their pastors in trouble.

Deb: We also found hope in laughter. To this day, we chuckle and hold onto an hour we had with an unusual psychologist at the treatment center. In the hour appointment, he talked mostly about himself, his airplane and his commute from Michigan. But he did say one thing that we found quite hopeful and wise: "What we need to do is buy Ryan enough time to mature, for him to discover that there are things to look forward to in life, things worth setting goals for." His remark gave us perspective and hope, that we needed to create enough structure around this struggling 16-year-old that he could mature and see himself differently and make better choices.

Daring to Take Drastic Steps

John: As we crossed into cold December, God prepared us. Deb and I could both see that Ryan was not getting better, although he had been in treatment all day for several weeks. Before the staff even verbalized it, we realized that the next step was residential treatment some place. The cost, the time, the separation—it all scared us.

Deb: A week before Christmas, Ryan had been released from his treatment and had flown to Minnesota to see my parents, assuring us that he would not use drugs at this grandparents' lake home, a place Ryan loved. But through phone conversations with my folks, we learned that Ryan was spending unusual amounts of time in the bathroom. In this place he counted special, he was busy snorting various over the counter medications that he found. He couldn't stop himself. He was still in big trouble.

John: With Ryan in Minnesota, I remember a very dark Friday in mid-December. After stretching to finish the sermon, I spent the morning calling the three residential treatment centers recommended by his program. I was terribly upset to learn none of the three was a good fit for Ryan. One of them wasn't even a residential program. We knew this 16-year-old kid needed more help. He knew it. He had no hope. He believed that drugs would be his life. But the hospital that had been treating him didn't even know what was out there for the next step. I felt panic! I loved this kid. He desperately needed more help but who could help him? Late that Friday, I remember going from panic to peace. Inside, something snapped. Suddenly, we got in touch with the truth that God loved Ryan deeply and would provide some good place for him and us.

And God did. Through an amazing series of overlapping recommendations, it became clear that we should take Ryan to a Christian, 12-step adolescent program in Tennessee. The shock was that he'd be so far from home for as long as it would take him to finish the program, probably 10-12 months. That first Friday in January, we dropped Ryan at Second Chance, frightened about what we had done, and then headed home. On Sunday, in each of our three worship services, I told our congregation what we had done, one of the hardest steps we had ever taken in our lives, putting your son in drug treatment 600 miles from home.

Deb: The program turned out to be a wonderful place for Ryan to learn about himself and find solutions to his problem. We found hope by realizing we were part of the problem and had things to work on, as well. John and I both joined 12 step groups and worked our own growth while Ryan worked on his issues. We found tremendous hope in trusting God to lead, in taking very hard steps that inflicted pain, and in dealing with what we knew, by taking firm stands.

Dampening Anxiety

John: After 10 months, Ryan came home. He had gained much of that maturity that the psychologist said he would find, if given the time to do so. Ryan jumped into his youth group and tackled school with much responsibility. One of the youth sponsors spent hours with him. But looking back, I can taste and feel and see my anxiety, so much like the fear I had had whenever my parents sobered up, so afraid that they would return to their alcohol, which they did again and again. I was anxious about Ryan's well being. I continued to attend my AI-Anon group, sharing and leading and learning. As he did well, I relaxed a bit. After being home ten months, Ryan asked if he could return to his former public high school for his senior year. Because he had done so well, we agreed, even though I was anxious. In the early weeks, he faced terrible temptation but was open with us. I continued to be anxious. In March, when a friend tried to commit suicide, Ryan began to relapse mentally, thinking that life made no sense. My anxiety rose. Of course, all my worry and attempts to talk with him couldn't control his behavior. Just before his high school graduation, he relapsed dangerously, nearly killing himself.

Just after Ryan's relapse and high school graduation, I was drenched in anxiety but trying to get my bearings. Talking with a counselor friend, he mentioned some things he thought Ryan might do. I responded that I didn't think Ryan would take those steps. Instantly, Mark replied, "John, the main thing isn't what Ryan will do but what are you going to do?" I got it. That's where my hope is: "What will I do?"

Something inside me said that Deb and I should go ahead and make the trip to Maine that we had planned and leave Ryan at home as planned, to begin his summer job. The old behavioral

ruts suggested we should stay around and hover over this kid who nearly did himself in with drugs. We went.

Deb: At first, I didn't think we should make the trip, but slowly it made sense to me, too. The five days on this island off the Maine coast were wonderfully restoring, calming our anxiety and knitting us together. We enjoyed delicious sea chowder, walked the island, drove the coast, enjoyed the shops, rode the ferry, visited LL Bean, read, sat overlooking the ocean, and ate more sea chowder. There is much hope in resting and working on our relationship. Meanwhile back home, Ryan was able to come to terms with his relapse and make some very good personal choices for his future.

Gaining Hope by Growing

John: For a variety of reasons, a month after graduating, Ryan moved to Colorado to live and work with my brother. He had a relatively good year, followed by a rough summer, more drug use, and now a return to my brother's place.

He talked about entering a 30-day treatment program. I wanted that, but he changed his mind. I'd like to see him attend Nar-Anon meetings regularly and find a sponsor, but he's 20 years old now. Clearly, he must manage his own program and sobriety.

And my job, my hope, is to manage myself, especially my anxiety. There is no hope in my remaining anxious, no peace for me, and only a strained relationship with my son. For me, the curriculum is clear. I need to work on entrusting him to God and simply loving him. That is enough. I need to believe that. God knows him and loves him and that is enough. I need to believe this. I need to let Ryan take care of his addiction and communicate that I trust him to do so, willing to help if he asks. And I need to work on my life. I need to start dreaming for my future, what God wants me to be and do in these years, apart from what my son chooses to do. God has given me life with abilities and opportunities, even for a son I love, God doesn't want me to give up using my life to exercise dominion in our world as He made me to do. There is hope in being productive for my God.

For me, there is hope in truly believing that God and I can make something of my life. And that God and Ryan can make something of his life.

Deb: When Ryan entered Second Chance, the clear message to us as parents was to begin working on ourselves. For me, this was very difficult to begin to do. As I have already said, I was an over-responsible parent, very willing to jump instinctively in and fill voids. So, with one eye on the family, I began working on myself. I joined a Christian 12 step group and we worked our way through the workbook, [The Twelve Steps, a Spiritual Journey](#). It is excellent. I needed Ryan to do well for my sake, so when he relapsed the week of his high school graduation, it was as if the worst had happened and the earth was still standing. I was grateful for the summer so I could spend large amounts of time with God, giving Ryan and our other children over to Him. That is a process I am still working on. God has given me some verses in Isaiah 30:15... "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." That is quite a tall order for a person who has felt pulled to do and compensate. In fact, the verses after these made me think and pray for this weekend. We so long for wisdom and guidance. What should it look like and feel like dealing with our addicted loved ones? These verses give such hope that when we turn and fully trust God's hand, He will allow us to see things clearly and give us teachers.

I am realizing that God wants me to have a hopeful future for Ryan and put him in His very loving care. Picturing Ryan's strengths of being hardworking, very easy-going, a good sense of humor, and very helpful, and then visualizing these strengths fully turned over to God helps me know how to relate to Ryan in a very positive way. Larry Crabb's book [Connecting](#) has given me some of these insights. It has taken me several years, not only to find Scriptures that help me know what my attitudes should be, but also several years to begin to learn how to use those 30 seconds of time that I have to choose my attitude. I currently am in a women's Bible study that is fabulous. It is this book, Beth Moore's study called [Breaking Free](#). Now that all of my children are out of our home, I really feel that I can focus on myself. I am 50, and this is my year of Jubilee, a year to evaluate where the idols are in my life, a year to reclaim the territory that has been in bondage, and a year to learn how to rest in Jesus. I am grateful for my ability to slow

down at Jesus' feet and allow Him to help me work on me. As the next 50 years of my life begin, I want to learn how to be compassionate without being over-responsible; I want to learn how to relate to my children as adults in meaningful ways, even though I don't always approve or agree with their choices. Above all I want to learn how to deeply trust and see God's good loving hand, instead of fretting over imperfections and obstacles.

So where's the hope?

John: So, where is the hope? We have found it in these places...

1. There's hope, not in denial, but in honesty about the problems we face and our part in them. There is hope in accepting our common, human trials, in welcoming trials as friends, instead of fighting them off.
2. There's hope in working together as father and mother, not in blaming but trusting each other's strengths. I am grateful for Deb's firmness with Ryan. I'm glad for my compassion with him. There is hope in accepting what we each bring to the family, instead of blaming and attacking.
3. There's hope in taking firm stands, doing what we can, even taking drastic steps. Looking back this summer, we realized how much our 17-year-old college freshman had turned to drugs. I took clear, firm stands with him—no money for his apartment until he had a clean drug screen and he loses money with a dirty screen. For parents and kids, there is hope in clear structure.
4. There's great hope in working on our own personal growth and the growth of all relationships. Years ago, at my first 12 step meeting of adult children of alcoholics, I remember one participant sighing and saying, "Oh well, I have the rest of my life to get better." I could have screamed. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life dealing with my alcoholic parents. But now I realize this is what my life is all about, simply copying Christ a step and a day at a time. Having a drug-addicted son I love is an opportunity to grow. It's hard, but I find hope in learning to live my life the way Jesus would.
5. There is hope in talking with others, reaching out for help that others can provide, some only with tears, others with very sage advice about how to be part of the solution, not the problem.
6. And there is great hope in letting go of anxiety, coming to believe God's presence and power, meaning peace for us and for our addict, freedom from our well meaning but suffocating worry. This right now is my number one challenge, to truly let my worries about my son go and entrust him to God, to take him daily to Jesus' feet as Jairus did with his daughter.
- 7.

Deb: We leave you with Paul's very hopeful invitation from Romans 12: ***"Be patient in affliction, joyful in hope, faithful in prayer."***