

## **How Drugs and Alcohol Impact your Marriage**

by John and Susan Vawter

**JOHN:** Discovering that your child is abusing drugs or alcohol is very similar to a hand grenade going off in your living room. At first there is a huge explosion and shock that knock you off balance. As you begin to regain your equilibrium you realize that pieces of the grenade have brought ruin and destruction to many parts of the house. Each of those points of destruction has to be acknowledged and then repaired one at a time...and often by a different specialist because different kinds of damage are done at different locations of the house.

This word picture is not dissimilar to the shock of finding out about your child's abuse of drugs or alcohol. The shock comes in waves when you least expect them; it hurts; it brings disillusionment and confusion in so many different areas of your life. In some cases the damage is anger—in some you doubt God—in some you are frightened for your child's future. The list is endless. Then you add to the predicament the fact that your spouse is experiencing their own shock and disillusionment and it is possible that the marriage begins to suffer.

Susan and I have been walking this road for three years. It was July 7, 1997 that we received a phone call from our son Michael telling us that Stephanie was a heroin addict. We thank God that 40 hours later she was in treatment. She has been clean since then and recently celebrated her third year of sobriety. However, it was one year later, July of 1998, that Michael told us he was smoking marijuana on a daily basis. (Parenthetically, that is the craziness of "addict logic"—Michael was concerned about Stephanie's use of heroin but did not think he had a problem with marijuana.) We praise God that he told us recently that he has not smoked pot for one year. So, Susan and I have a lot less pain in our lives than we did one year ago. But, nevertheless, the lessons remain.

When a husband and wife have that drug or alcohol abuse grenade go off in their lives, they must figure out how to respond to it in a way that does not violate their individuality but at the same time brings them closer to one another and to God. That is often easier said than done. As Susan will tell you in a few minutes, she and I are entirely different personalities. She is more amiable and I am more confrontive. She sees the glass half full while I see it half empty. She responds in faith while I respond in activity. So, there was potential for lots of conflict in our marriage because of how we responded differently to discovering that drugs had invaded our family.

For many years we have tried to honor each other's individuality. We were motivated to think this way by a friend in Minnesota, Reuel Nygaard, who wrote a book called "From Triumph to Tragedy" about his son's suicide. Reuel asked me to edit the book and I commented that his wife Mary was not mentioned in the book. Reuel responded, "No, this is my story. Mary does not mind my writing the book or speaking about Kelly's suicide but she does not care to be part of a public discussion. She limits her words to speaking at our support group for survivors of suicide." Reuel's comments helped me realize that husbands and wives can love each other very much and have different responses to tragedy and pain in their lives.

For Susan and me it was a matter of acknowledging that we both were hurt, in pain, disillusioned and having to fight through that pain. On the other hand we made a commitment to each other that our marriage was more important to us than our relationship with our kids and if we had to choose one or the other we would choose our marriage. We made a commitment that our kids' drug use would not kill or destroy our marriage.

With this major commitment we each then committed to acknowledging the pain and struggles that we were having as individuals. For me, it was a very short term anger at God for letting this happen, an initial embarrassment that after modeling abstinence and endeavoring to educate our kids to commit to abstinence they had chosen to drink and use drugs, a fear that Stephanie might relapse and a huge fear that Michael would never come to his senses and get clean. In Stephanie's case with her being in treatment 40 hours after we discovered she was using brought a great sense of relief although I still live with the fear that she may relapse since only 3% of heroin addicts ultimately stay clean for the balance of their lives.

As a problem solver and fixer I wanted to fix everything. Initially, I was tempted to try to know where Stephanie was at every moment after she left treatment. On the other hand, Susan was grateful for her having finished treatment, her attendance at AA meetings and her resolve not to use again. It was hard for me to accept the fact that her sobriety is her responsibility. I can encourage her but she must make the daily decision to stay clean. It was also hard for me to trust her counselor or her friends at AA who were--and remain--great sources of encouragement and inspiration to Stephanie. As I learned at Nar-Anon, "You love the addict but you leave them in God's hands." That was hard to do but it had to be done. In Michael's case my response was vastly different from Susan's response and those two responses had the potential of bringing conflict into our marriage. I wanted to keep talking to Michael. I was scheming to take different pastor friends who had used drugs to Oregon to "talk sense" into Michael. You name the scheme and I probably thought about it. I was having a hard time practicing what I learned at Nar-Anon—"to love the addict and leave him in God's hands."

Susan on the other hand was quite willing to pray, have faith and give our kids to God every day. These different responses created conflict between us and we had to work hard to overcome them...but in the midst of all this work we never thought of quitting on one another because we honored the commitment that our marriage relationship was more important than our relationship to either one of our kids.

**SUSAN:** As John said we have different personalities. Personality inventories peg John as a dominant driver and me as an amiable or phlegmatic. John is usually the leader and I am usually the follower. John is an activist who fixes things and I tend to be more passive. I just assume things will work out. When faced with conflict I tend to back away—especially if there is a lot of anger. I want to retreat whereas John is never afraid to confront a situation.

These are the kinds of differences that really started impacting our marriage when we found out about Michael's use of marijuana in July of 1998. It really tested us. It really stretched our marriage and our commitment that our relationship with one another was more important than our relationship with our kids. We both were very hurt and very fragile. It was hard to see the other person's needs and perspective. It was easy to be inward looking—looking out only for our own self. We thought we had been doing quite well in terms of accepting those differences, learning to adapt to them and giving each other leeway in those areas where we differ, but there was more to learn.

Two examples of pain and stress underline our different personalities, our different responses to pain and how we had to work to maintain the commitment to our marriage as the priority. One night after we discovered that Michael was using marijuana John said, "Let's take a walk after dinner so we can talk." On this particular day, I had had a wonderful time of private prayer in the morning and had given God my pain and concern over Michael. This was a day where I had felt like I had been able to leave the sadness in God's hands. John often uses an illustration of giving our burdens and fears to God with our hands outstretched with the palms down as a picture of not being able to take them back once we release them to God's control. In my mind that day I had been thinking of that image of prayer. I had been feeling such helplessness because of Michael's situation. I had thought back to a phone conversation with a very wise friend and counselor in Minnesota. I had described to Terry Zuehlkehow hopeless I felt, that things were sad and looked so black. He said, "Susan, that sense of hopelessness you feel means that you are looking at the

circumstances. You are looking at what maybe you can fix, what you should have done and what you can do in the future. If you are looking to God and what He can do and how He can work in the situation then there still is hope." All of those things I had been mulling over in my mind that day. It had been a very peaceful day. Not that the sadness was not deep but I still had a sense of peace with God. As John and I began the walk that night John was obviously upset. He had lots of anger and lots of frustration with lots of "what ifs." He was taking those "what ifs" down the road to the point where Michael might be dead in the street. His intensity level was very high. I thought, "Oh, no. I have had such a great day. Anything I say is going to come out as being Pollyanna or super spiritual." As a result I said nothing. I did not know what to say. After some time John expressed to me that he was really hurt because I had not responded to what he said. This was a point of alienation. As we worked through this I realized that I could not give in to my amiable personality. I needed to figure out how to respond to John. I have learned to say, "Darling, I do not know what to say," or "I have not been feeling the same way as you have but I hear you and understand what you are saying." By acknowledging our differences and our different responses we learned how to love each other more, show that love and build a better marriage relationship. This principle has helped both John and me in relating to one another and in trusting God for our kids' future.

John and I must continue to learn not to control. We must continue to learn to pray and let God work as He wills. In this we have also seen that our love and acceptance are doing wonders. For example, Mindy gave me a wonderful and poignant birthday card telling of her love for me and her gratefulness for my love for the girls.

**JOHN:** When Stephanie was in adolescence it was not the easiest of times for us. There were days on end when she brought great pain into our lives. In our pain Susan and I would hurl at one another unknowingly. We learned that often we did not even know we were doing it. So, we developed a "safe" but direct way of telling one another "You just hurt me." We began to say, "I am not the enemy, darling" to one another. This safe but direct phrase was our way of saying, "Remember, we are in this together. We are a team. We must work together." When the pain of drugs hit us we reinstated the use of this little phrase. It kept bringing us back to the realization that we did not want to hurl at each other in our pain...and that we valued our relationship together.

All of this brings us to the point of reiterating some principles we are endeavoring to learn and practice. By no stretch of the imagination have we mastered these principles. We continue to struggle with them, learn them, violate them, relearn them and try to make them more of our daily-married life. Let me repeat them:

\* We are trying to be honest with the pain that our children's abuse of drugs or alcohol causes us. As with the hand grenade illustration all the wounds and pain are not seen immediately but they cannot be ignored. If we keep them in the darkness of denial we do not get well. As Zach Whaley says, "It is what we keep in the darkness that keeps us ill." Furthermore, we have just commissioned a survey by the *Barna*Research Group. Data from that survey show us that 17% of the pastors surveyed have kids who are abusing or have abused drugs or alcohol. An even more alarming statistic is that 75% of the pastors whose kids are abusing do not go for any professional help. There are many conclusions we could draw from this but I think it underlines the fact that we as ministers and "answer givers" have a hard time admitting anything is wrong, have a hard time going for help and have a hard time being healed of the pain we suffer.

\* We are learning to acknowledge and affirm one another's differences in personality, response, faith response and pain level. God made each of us differently. Each of us comes to Him in a different way and on a different time frame. We cannot project ourselves on our mate.

\* The fact that our kids are abusing is an embarrassment. We should not deny it. But, only those that do not love us or are ignorant will be anything less than supportive and helpful.

\* We continue to commit ourselves to one another and state that our marriage relationship is more important than the relationship with our kids. We can hurt for them, pray for them and try to encourage them but they are the ones who decide if they are going to stay sober. As Stephanie told us one night after an AA meeting, "In my group tonight there were people from the streets, middle class people such as myself, rich people and formerly rich people who have wasted all their money on drugs or alcohol. We agreed that the common denominator among us was that until we quit blaming someone else for our using and took responsibility for it, we did not go to get help."

\* We must hold one another accountable but not be pejorative when we do it. Jesus says we are to take the log out of our own eye first. Paul says we are to restore one another in a spirit of gentleness. When we are hurting we do not need the love of our life preaching to or being harsh in correcting us. We need understanding, gentleness and accountability.

\* On the other hand we cannot let our child's abuse debilitate us to the point that we are not productive. We still have spiritual gifts; we still have work to accomplish; we still have people to serve. Thus, we must trust God that He can be real to us in an entirely new way.

\* We are also learning that our healing does not happen over night. It is a process. Sometimes it seems unfair because we as parents are innocent victims. We did not cause the abuse nor can we control or cure it. But, the abuse on the part of our kids exposes areas in our lives where we need deeper dependence on God. This dependence on God forces us to accept the fact that we cannot enable our kids or be co-dependent with them. They must decide whether or not they will live lives of sobriety. It often takes time for us as parents to learn this lesson.

\* Also, what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1 is true: "God comforts us in our afflictions so we may comfort others in theirs." In retrospect, Susan and I see how God's comfort through other people in our lives during the tough days of Stephanie's adolescence has not only helped prepare us for this pain but how God has used it in the lives of others as we have helped them.

\* We are also learning to be thankful for the positives. Stephanie learned a phrase at AA that says, "I will not regret the past nor seek to change it." I asked her with some incredulity how she could say that since she had blown a lot of money on drugs and could have died of a heroin overdose since seven people in Denver died of overdoses near the time we went there to confront her addiction. She responded by saying, "Dad, if I look back, I will not focus on God's forgiveness or what I can accomplish in the future." I am learning from this to be thankful for how far God has brought all of us.

\* Finally, we must recognize the value of living one day at a time. There is power and release in saying, "God, get me through the day." As we see Him faithful and powerful on a daily basis we begin to trust Him more. Two years ago when Michael told us he was smoking pot every day I was absolutely crushed. I was devastated. I told Susan that if I felt that badly a year later I was going to leave the pastorate. Some days were awful; some days the pain never left me. But, God proved faithful and a year later we were sponsoring the first "You're Not Alone" conference.

Father, thank You for what You are teaching Susan and me through our kids' abuse of drugs. Thank You for how You have worked and are working in their lives. I pray that You will keep working in them—and in Susan and me. I pray for my brothers and sisters here tonight that You will continue to minister to them, to encourage them and to bring comfort where comfort is needed. Thank You that You are the God of all comfort, that You do not leave us alone and that You care for us—more than we will ever know or understand. Amen