

## **Recovery Parenting**

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I find that parents in recovery have concerns in four core areas. Each area contributes to the whole picture. On any given day one area may be more important than another. For example, when you wonder how you will pay for treatment, it's a tangible, physical problem. On another day, the stress of wondering if your child will ever get to treatment is an emotional problem you face.

So often, we use all our energy on our problems without replenishing that energy. We martyr ourselves for the worthy cause of our child who is in such pain and trouble when martyrdom is not necessary. It's not even helpful. A big part of our job as a parent is to stay healthy. But it's hard to stay healthy when our child is dying on drugs. We are worried sick and most of our resources are directed towards this child.

It is vital to look at our problems and our energy in light of our renewable resources. Are we using up our resources without renewing them? Are we forgetting to eat, exercise, laugh with family and friends? More importantly, are we relating to God? If we are not, then we are sacrificing our life. This won't bring about recovery to our child.

The main objective of this chapter is to help us find power to begin or continue recovery for yourselves. If we muster the courage and faith to work on our own recovery, we will be more whole and available to our child if or when he or she begins his/her own recovery. But this is not the main reason for us to recover. Not to recover is to choose illness for ourselves, rather than allowing God to work in our lives and in the situation. Illness will not bring recovery for our child but will sacrifice another valuable person to addiction – us.

Doing something together usually makes a parent feel good about themselves and proud to be able to share with their child. It's great when there is a nice product at the end, like a science project. When something goes wrong, parents are disappointed, even guilty, that they couldn't make it turn out better. Some parents feel sad, others get angry, and others try to talk the child into better behavior with humor or treats.

In the first case, the vibes were good, our plan worked out well, and it may have seemed effortless. In the second case even a lot of effort might not salvage our plan. We could be the best

parent on the planet and still have an argument with our child about that science project. At times like these, it had better be clear who the grown-up is. When the child has a tantrum, the parents must resist having one, too. Parents must RESPOND to tantrums as maturely as they respond to smiling cooperation. Parents must RESPOND to an oppositional, drug-using child from a mature center rich in resources and God, rather than REACT out of fatigue, guilt or self-doubt.

Parents must recover to become, or remain, responsive in a terrible situation like teen drug use. Failing to work our own recovery will result in raw emotional reactions to a child's drug use. Recovering parents will still have strong emotions like fear, but they will not have to respond to them every time. Recovering parents have resources in addition to emotional and spiritual fuel. They have a source of spiritual power in Jesus Christ that is full even when everything else seems empty. What is fueling our parental tank today? Are we going on emotions? Are events driving us? Before we go any further, reflect on where your strength is today. Is it coming from Christ? Can you name who or what is at your center today? Is it your child? Addiction? Emotional confusion? Finances? God?

Before or sometime during the addictive process, the addicted child usually becomes the center of our lives. All emotional strength, physical endurance, spiritual energy and social momentum are increasingly directed towards the addicted child. Going to work is a sham. Meals are tasteless, marital intimacy is non-existent, and the other children are set aside. How much of our physical, social, emotional, and spiritual life is tied up in our addicted child?

We may ask why this is important, since we believe we can't do anything about our energy expenditure towards our child right now. Or we may wish we had even more energy to devote to the cause. We must be very honest as we think about our personal energy, ability and resources, especially where they come from and where we are spending them, because we cannot make good choices if we haven't considered what they are or how they might be different.

For example, in a race we pace ourselves so we have some kick at the end. Some parents use all their energy on their drug-using child as if it was a sprint. Addicts routinely run over sprinters. Some parents use the family resources on their addict child like a credit card. Addicts routinely max out resources.

Take a moment to write down who or what is in your focus today. Don't analyze yourself. Just put down who or what is in your focus. Your energy is going out into these places and people, or being restored by them. Naming what is in your focus gives you a place to begin to focus on healing and recovery.

However, wherever one starts, ultimately we want to focus on God as our source of strength. What consumes your physical, emotional, social and spiritual energy? What restores your energy in these areas? Where is God in relation to all of this?

### **Parenting and Responsibility**

Can we ever forget the day we brought our child home for the very first time? Whether this was our first child or our fifth, the family would never be the same. We wanted this child to be all he or she could possibly be. We were responsible for making the possibilities happen, and more than a little nervous when we couldn't. As sure as we all counted fingers and toes on our newborns, we thought about the day our kids would reach adolescence. Would this innocent child someday be beautiful, talented, brilliant, or do scary things we could hardly think about, such as drugs, rebellion, become promiscuous, or run away from home?

Recently our son went overseas to study. The night before this now mature 21 year old left for Japan, I begged him to let me fold something. I yearned for a physical duty to connect me to his adventure. Parents are inextricably linked to the physical lives of their children. As children grow up, we parents have to learn how to let go appropriately, not too fast and not too slowly. We second guess ourselves, get scared, and pull back after giving a privilege. It happens to most parents, and it starts from day one. We meet the helplessness in them with varying degrees of helplessness in ourselves. Providing for our addicted children begins at the physical questions and concerns.

### **Physical concerns**

Physical concerns account for many of our problems and unanswered questions about our child's addiction. We worry that our child will keep his/her feet dry and get enough to eat at the same time, hoping he/she wouldn't be shot in a drug deal, or cause a fatal car accident. As a mother, I found these physical concerns irrationally washing over me. I couldn't separate the important (food) from the urgent (bad drug deal). Where did he end and where did I begin? Many of my concerns, rational or

otherwise, stemmed from questions concerning larger parental responsibilities. In addition, it was not always easy to bring God into the equation. Sometimes He seemed distant.

**Check the Questions You have About Your Responsibility as a Parent**

- \_\_\_ What is addiction? Did I cause it? Can I fix it? How soon?
- \_\_\_ Will the addiction last forever? Is there a cure? If so, what is it?
- \_\_\_ If there is no cure, will he/she die?
- \_\_\_ Is my child brain damaged or dangerous to him/herself/others?
- \_\_\_ Is there a skill, information, or service that I need?
- \_\_\_ How will I pay for help? Who will help me get it?
- \_\_\_ Have I turned my child over to God's care?
- \_\_\_ Am I trusting God for comfort and strength in my own life?

**Some Other Physical Concerns I Have For Myself or My Child Today**

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**Social Concerns**

Families want to be close and proud of one another. Parents expect to be proud of their children, in part because parents expect that they contributed something to their success besides good genes. After all, mom helped with the spelling homework, dad taught the curve ball, and they both cared...a lot. While I have met lots of parents with regrets, I have never met a parent who raised their children badly on purpose. The pressure to do a good job is just too strong. Women contemplating pregnancy stop smoking and begin taking folic acid. Couples talk, sing and play music to the unborn child. A perfect baby is quite an accomplishment for which new parents take pride (and some credit).

Parents who have a disabled child often blame themselves for the disability as they grieve the loss of a perfect child. These loving parents did all the same things to ensure a healthy child, but something unexpected happened anyway. Parents of children who become injured, ill or have

behavior problems feel guilty, sometimes reliving over and over decisions, which led up to the discovery of the problem. With guilt comes social stigma in having a child who is "different."

Recently, a young woman arrived unannounced at my office door. Her story helps us understand how prone we parents are to feeling guilty about issues and situations in our children's lives. She was in her early 30's, medium build, with shiny blond hair and a furrowed brow. She looked around, and because my door was ajar, she stepped inside.

"Are you..., no, how could you be...", she began. She had tears in her eyes.

I asked her to sit down and told her that I would help her if I could. She was looking for a nurse practitioner she had called at random some weeks before regarding her son. Yes, I was the one she wanted.

Thirteen years prior to this day, she was a high school senior, ready for college, and pregnant with her football star boyfriend's child. They cared about each other a great deal, but knew they couldn't provide a home for their child. They placed their beautiful baby boy in a loving adoptive home. It was a difficult decision, but one that they believed was right. The day she made the phone call (and got me), she had received information that her son was in a home for delinquent boys. The agency wanted to know more about the backgrounds of the boy's biological parents. There were obvious questions about physical lineage, but there was no problem there.

The more immediate concerns of this young woman just blew me away. She had a wonderful husband and two little preschoolers. She had not married the father of the boy, but someone she had met and fallen in love with in college. He knew all about her past, even her continued friendship with members of the old boyfriend's family. I had a sense that these were very loving people. But today she wondered about the implications for her new little family. Was it possible she passed on some impulsiveness to her boy, the impulsiveness that led to her pregnancy in the first place? And if she did, could she have also passed it on to these new babies? What did the future hold for her as the mother of delinquent children?

These are normal questions. What surprised me was the sense of responsibility this mom had for the trouble the boy was in. She both wanted to know if there was any hope for him (or her other children) and was ashamed of what had made him that way. She felt stigmatized and afraid.

Rebellious substance-abusing children have very different values and lifestyles than the lifestyle of "normal" adolescents. It is extremely confounding and distressing when an adolescent chooses drugs and a wayward path. As we saw in the physical concerns section previously, we have such a sense of responsibility for our children it is hard to separate where we end and they begin. Part of the distress parents feel is social distress or social stigma. We "own" the success or failure of our child even to the extent that our own self definition is reshaped by it. Our society cultivates parental ownership even as we pass laws which hold parents responsible for their children's misdeeds.

The implications of such a policy are beyond the scope of this work, but I believe that parents whose identity and worth are tied up in the success or failure of their children will be the most confused and devastated of all parents when their child rebels and abuses drugs/alcohol. This is not to say that parents don't influence rebellion, only that taking such total credit or blame for our child's independent actions are two sides of a counterfeit coin.

Taking credit for their success leaves our children without the dignity of their own good judgment, while taking blame for their failure relieves the burden of their acts. Our job is rather to teach and love and stand back while the adolescent learns through as many natural consequences as possible about normal successes and failures.

Our society has misinterpreted high parental involvement, for parental responsibility for every outcome. One writer makes the distinction between being increasingly "responsible to" versus "responsible for" the adolescent. Social stigma has to do with the judgment of society that a parent (or a child in the parent's care) has failed to reflect the values of that society. It's a type of banishment, and the fear of it keeps us from making hard decisions like letting a child take responsibility he/she may not seem ready to take.

Social concerns are all about social stigma, about questions from friends, family or employers regarding our responsibility as a parent to our children. Ultimately, we must parent according to God's standards and allow Him—and only Him—to be our judge.

**Check the Social Concerns You Have:**

\_\_\_\_ Are people avoiding me, my spouse and my other children?

\_\_\_\_ Am I avoiding people?

\_\_\_\_ Do I need counseling to be able to parent this child?

\_\_\_\_ Who has to know about this?

**Some of My Other Social Concerns Are:**

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As you begin your own recovery, take time to think about what brought you to where you are today. Your child is abusing drugs or alcohol or is in chemical dependency treatment. Does this say something about you? What? If you make changes in your life, will it be because you want this child to change? If your child does not change, can you still grow to be the person you want to be anyway? Can you still become the person God wants you to become?

**Part Two**

A good deal of what we think about is connected to our expectations of "how it ought to be." In part one, we looked at how we provide for our families and the cultural expectations to do so. Part Two moves into our inner lives.

One way psychologists look at how resilient people are is by finding their "Locus of Control." People who have an internal versus external locus of control often have a better handle on themselves because they understand what is their concern and what is really someone else's. As followers of Christ, we realize that He must control our lives as we continue to depend on Him.

We are always responsible to our children, but less and less responsible for them. For example, I tied the shoelaces until my daughter could do it for herself. It was a test of wills to potty train her because she wanted to have big girl pants on from day one, and had a tantrum every time she had an accident. I learned how to walk away from tantrums and she learned how to use a toilet. It was very embarrassing to have a screaming two year old with wet clothes at the mall, but as I figured out just who had the wet pants I could figure out what was the appropriate response to them in that pre-Pampers era.

I was able to see that she would train more easily if she could make the connection between her wet pants and how to use a potty without my emotional input responding too much to her emotional output. I was able to see she didn't make me lose my cool when she lost hers. This is an example of internal locus of control. My power to control my circumstances is limited, but my power to respond to my circumstances is limited only by my internal ability to separate myself from them. No one can make me lose my control without my permission. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us that the fruit of the Spirit includes self-control.

Fast forward to my snarly, teenage child sneaking out of the house at 10 o'clock on a school night to meet some "druggie" friends. I was much more invested in this outcome than I was with potty training. I was actually feeling a creeping insanity as I look into those hate filled eyes. I loved this child more than life. How could this happen? Suddenly I realized that my child could die, that he could die alone with his addiction...or he could take me with him. I'd seen it happen with other parents I knew. One had aged 10 years in six months. Her marriage was shaky, her other children were emotionally at risk and her job was on the line for all the time off she needed because of her child's addiction.

Maybe I was just a bad parent. I felt so terrible that I just wanted to isolate myself until the problem went away. I let his state define mine...an external locus of control. I let his circumstances define what mine would be. Think about your circumstances, whose problem these are, and what you may do about them.

One of the hardest things parents must do is to shift the burden of responsibility for their children's decisions to the children. Oh, sure, when the child forgets his lunch money, a good "lesson" is a lunchless lunch period. But when a child is picked up high or intoxicated by the police, will the child understand that this is his own responsibility, or will his parents pay the fine and cover for him so he won't be thrown off the hockey team?

When parents take responsibility for their children's decisions it's really natural because parents see most things related to their children in a "big picture" way. Our dreams are wrapped up in the hopes and plans we've dreamt for them from before they were born. Parents see their children's lives in such a long term way that we find it hard to employ short term lessons.



Write out your own problem list and see if you can assign the problem to the right person and decide what to do about it. You may need a spouse, friend or counselor to help you.

Having a substance-abusing adolescent is so heart-wrenching, so stressful, so emotionally draining that we sometimes turn inward, get depressed, and blame ourselves for all the things that inevitably went wrong. We have an emotional crisis and do not have the ability to deal with it. In addition, sometimes we do not know how to rely on God for answers and help.

Parents tell me they feel so guilty they can't have fun. They eat or drink too much, yell a lot, isolate themselves, and do not deal with their own recovery.

**We struggle with issues such as:**

I feel so ashamed. Am I a bad parent?

Why am I so sad, and worried about myself?

I can't admit I don't like my child right now.

I feel like I can't trust anyone anymore.

Is God punishing me for something I did?

Sometimes I feel abandoned by God and bewildered. Am I normal?

**Some of my other spiritual concerns:**

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**Addiction is a family disease.**

Every one in the family is touched or affected in some way by a member's drug or alcohol abuse. Parents of substance-abusing adolescents often feel vulnerable and defensive. Some say it's as if other *normal* parents got a more complete set of directions for parenting than they did.

But we have to ask, what is my definition of a normal family and how closely does my definition compare with God's definition?

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## **The role of insecurity**

The truth is, all parents feel insecure at times. The insecurity of parenting a substance-abusing child is tied to "not knowing." We don't know how to parent a child who comes home stoned, fails in school or steals our stuff. There is no parent manual for us for these situations. Even the "experts" are relieved and happy when their own kids don't use drugs. But when their kids do, the experts are just as confused as we "non-experts" are. They don't have all the answers either.

Insecure or not, we need to be the adults in our families. Our kids will not make us secure in our decisions. It is not their job to make us feel secure. When our kids use drugs, we have very little positive feedback about how we are doing our job as parents, so it's important that we find good ways to learn what we need, and find some models in other parents.

## **Stress and confusion**

Actually, stress and confusion add to guilt. Most of us experience guilt because we think we should have known the answers to our questions. The result of the mix of stress, confusion and guilt is to become paralyzed and not ask for help. For the same reason, people don't ask directions when they know they are lost. They think it's temporary. They think they know where north, south, east and west are. They may feel guilty that they took a shortcut. Besides, they've gotten out of worse jams than this, and they'll have to admit they might even have contributed to the problem. If people have a difficulty admitting they need help in finding directions then it follows that we will have trouble asking for help when drugs/alcohol hit our families.

What are the other sources of stress in my life that contribute to my confusion?

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What else causes confusion for me?

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What do I feel guilty about? Should I have known more or done more?

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What help do I need or what person should I see to do a better job as a parent of a substance-using kid?

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How can I rely more on God to remove the stress and confusion in my life?

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Is guilt getting in the way of asking for help?

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Have I tried to take a shortcut in my life or my parenting that I now regret?

### **On the Road to Recovery**

It's okay to ask directions on the road to recovery. We couldn't have known about this stressful confusing road. Few people talk about being here even though a lot of people have been. We want to leave it behind, not put up detours or draw maps for other frightened travelers. We certainly didn't come here on purpose. We need directions to an exit, detour or bridge to get ourselves and our family to a safe highway.

### **Where We Think We Are**

Take some time to do one of these thought provoking exercises. Do it again with another adult, your spouse, your parent, or a trusted friend who is accompanying you in recovery.

### **Serenity Prayer Exercise**

Do you already know the Serenity Prayer? Read it now, and think about it as you do this little exercise. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen"

**God grant me the serenity to accept...**

Where I am, and that it's a good place to start even if I am a confused traveler on a strange road. I'm not sure how I got here, or how to leave, but I know I didn't intend to take this turn. I'm really lost. I need Your love, wisdom, direction and strength to get out of this mess.

Some things I cannot change:

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**Courage to change...**

It's hard to change me. I'll start changing but I don't know where to start because I'm stressed and confused. I need Jesus Christ because He knows the road and where the off ramp is.

Lord, strengthen me to change the things I can.

Some things I need the courage to change:

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**Wisdom to know the difference...**

I need to know if this is a straight and narrow road to recovery, or another crazy ride over a cliff. I must admit that it is impossible for me to change my child. Write down some areas where I have trouble knowing the difference among things I can change, things I cannot and the things God can change.

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**Picture yourself talking to God in person.**

What would you say? Are you angry? Disappointed? Sad? Contented? Fearful? Faithful? Below, take a moment to write a few words to God, telling Him how you feel and how you are recovering today. Tell Him how much you need Him to be working in your life. If you are angry at Him, tell Him. He can handle it. He responds with love when we are honest with Him.

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## **Self Care**

We parents all know we have to eat and sleep to live. Yet we don't feel right about spending time on ourselves when our child is using drugs. It seems selfish to worry about ourselves when our child could die.

Let's stop here a minute, because poor self care is a side street of the guilty road that we parents often take to Martyrdom Drive.

We can get confused on Martyrdom Drive and stop taking care of ourselves. Instead, we must get back our courage. It's not courageous or faithful to be exhausted and thin. It won't make the user stop using drugs. Martyrdom is self inflicted and lonely and it prevents God from working in our lives. It takes real courage and faith to thrive. Getting well takes courage and acceptance of God's love for us and God's power in us.

We parents get confused when our kids use drugs, because nothing seems to be working predictably except the numerous paths that take us to guilt. This is why it is so important to have God working in our lives.

### **Definition of coping skill: Responses that deal with a problem.**

Some coping skills are appropriate and positive. Some are not. For example, an appropriate way to deal with someone stealing your wallet is to call 911. It's not appropriate to excuse it, even if the thief is your son.

Positive coping means to choose actively, not reactively, a good and justly motivated response. For example, when your daughter is an hour late for curfew, a positive coping skill is to respond, calmly applying the consequences previously agreed and go back to bed. A negative coping response would be to open the door, yell and scream until you have a headache, and ground her for a

month, an option which should not be in the contract. It is hard to trust God when we manifest such behavior.

**Which coping strategies do you use, and which ones are helpful?**

Make a coping strategies inventory. Some coping strategies are helpful, and some are not helpful. For example, taking a walk is a positive coping strategy. Being honest with God about your fears is a positive coping strategy. Kicking the dog, criticizing your spouse or drinking to inebriation is a negative strategy. You may be using either one regularly, but you must accept that a negative strategy cannot possibly bring the positive changes you desire.

Reflect in the second column how often you use it seldom, often, or always. Then evaluate the need to change the strategy. Be honest about where God is in all of this.

**What I do to cope with parenting a child with a drug problem**

Strategy	Used seldom..often..always	Does it need to change?	Does it include God?

(Pat’s material was not given at a conference. Rather, it is Chapter 19 of “Hit By A Ton of Bricks: You’re Not Alone When Your Child’s on Drugs.” It is here on the website with the permission of FamilyLife Publisher Publishers.)