

The Demons of Denial

by Alfred Ells

I would like to introduce myself. My background is primarily as a marriage and family therapist. I have also been the Clinical Director of Christian Alcohol and Drug Abuse Treatment Facility and a research biochemist. One of the pains of having a child who is drug-addicted or lost or in any kind of difficulty is directly related to how much of yourself you put into that child. How much of your hopes, dreams and expectations are with that child? When I listen to others' stories about their children, I realize each child is a gift from God. There is a lot of investment in our children and, therefore, an awful lot of pain.

For me to have a son was one of the greatest things that God could ever do for me. I come from a family of six boys and two girls. Much of what I did in my early life involved sports. My son was always athletic. He received a scholarship to run cross-country in college and we all had high hopes. He wasn't in college very long before he quit cross-country because he said the coach was biased against the guys' team and liked the girls' team better. So he decided to take a couple of courses and get a job, but it took him a long time to get a job. He would work a little then he'd lose the job. Then it would take him a while to get another job. We became more aware of how irresponsible he was acting and how he frequently procrastinated on doing routine, simple things. I kept thinking he was just a little lost right now. It was a difficult transition for him. My wife was very good about tracking details. She noticed he was staying up all night, sleeping all day and missing work. She kept saying that he was not doing what he ought to do and that it greatly bothered her. I made excuses for him. So, there was this growing tension in the family. One of the big values in my family is "work." If you don't work, then that's a problem. Maybe it goes back to roots and ancestors who did difficult and dangerous work in the Arizona mines. All families have rules, whether spoken or unspoken. In my family, if you didn't work you weren't worth having. So I expected my kids to work. My son had a hard time holding onto jobs. During one period of time, he wouldn't come home at night or he would stay up all night. He didn't seem to be holding a job down. Finally, I told him, "If you don't get a job, you will have to leave the house." Now, even to say that caused me pain. This was the son that I had comforted as a baby, gone hunting with and so enjoyed. But I finally came to the point of knowing that I needed to set boundaries and expectations and stick to them.

So, he began getting up, leaving early in the morning and then coming home in the evening. But something was wrong. One morning as I was praying, I got this sense that something was horribly wrong. I didn't understand it. I finished praying, got my briefcase and left the house. As I was driving down the road, I had an inner sense that he hadn't gone to work that day and that he hadn't been going to work and that he didn't really have a job, but rather was getting up in the morning, leaving, then hiding. So, I drove around the block and went over to the backside of a house where one of his friends lived. There was his Jeep parked right by the back fence. He had gotten up, put on his work clothes, grabbed his toolbox, hopped into his Jeep, drove around the corner, gone into his friend's house and had fallen asleep. He didn't have a job.

I knocked on the door, went into the house, woke him up, and said, "Son, that's it. You must leave our house." I had come to the end of my rope. I knew I had to tell him to leave. I told him that as long as he was going to be irresponsible, he couldn't live with us. I told him he could come home on Sundays for dinner and to let us know how he was doing. I still didn't realize that he was doing drugs. I couldn't see my own denial.

He left. We didn't see him again for a long time. We kept getting reports that people had seen him with cut-offs, barefoot, with pockmarks on his face; that he was running with a crowd that was

heavy into drugs. For nine months, he really turned himself over to his drug abuse, doing crystal meth and marijuana. We later learned that he had been doing marijuana for years and crystal meth for many months before getting kicked out of our house.

What astounds me about all of this is that I am still catching little remembrances and pieces of thought and wondering why didn't I catch on back then to what was going on. To me, the biggest thing that I kicked him out of the house for was being irresponsible, not working and lying. It somehow never came into my mind that I had a son who was doing drugs, and he was doing them so substantially that he had been addicted for a long time.

Another thing that astounds me is that I had worked as a clinical director of a drug and rehab program for 3½ years. I used to lecture on alcohol and drug abuse. I used to lecture on denial and how addiction worked. And, yet, in my home, I failed to really understand what was going on. It's interesting. When I kicked my son out of the house, it broke my heart. Susan says it brought her great relief, because some of the insanity stopped. I wonder if that is not the bind we are caught in. Something needs to stop the craziness, but at the same time your heart is breaking while it is all happening. There is no good answer either way. Even though there was relief, now there was great worry and pain. "Where is he? What is he doing? Is he running the streets?" No one knew where he lived. We didn't hear from him for months and months. On Thanksgiving he wasn't home. And it was one of the loneliest Christmases we had ever spent. We have three other children. All of us were getting together and saying, "Where is Matthew? Where is our son, our brother?" It still hurts. Those were hard days.

Characteristics of denial

Let me read you a description of denial:

"Something isn't right, but you can't figure it out. You may have a vague idea what the problem is or see the symptoms clearly. Others may even be pointing it out to you in very specific terms. You care deeply about the person who seems hopelessly entangled in refusing what you know is reality. You usually interpret his or her rejection of truth as stubbornness, stupidity, rebellion or insanity. (Oftentimes we thought he was acting up just against us. He was punishing us. It felt that way.) You're upset, angry and confused. You think 'what's the matter with him/her? You take his/her refusal to change personally as a rejection of your clear vision and willingness to help. (No matter what you do you can't fix the problem. Nothing you say seems to fit and he doesn't seem to hear or change.) You just want the problem to go away - - - the person to straighten up." When you are thinking those thoughts that is really what denial is. Denial by Webster's definition is a *disowning or disavowal of reality*. Denial is *Not letting yourself know what reality is, lying to yourself*.

There was something in me that didn't want to know that my son had a drug problem. This was the one that I had loved and sacrificed for. I didn't want to hear that he had a drug problem. Susan was less in denial than I; she somehow saw it more clearly than I. That is one of the things that I have noticed about denial: some people in some situations seem more susceptible to denial than others. Some of these differences are based on personalities and some of it is based on family dynamics. But understanding why some deny more than others is another lecture for the future. Denial is a short-circuiting of our awareness of things too disturbing to know. One of the questions you may ask is:

Why do we deny?

Back in 1969, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying* was the first author who on a large scale had published information about the death process; the stages people go through when they suffer loss. She talked about denial being the first stage of anticipated loss. Her original definition has been refined as follows: *Denial is the normal, natural instinctive response to trauma, loss or shock, a conscious or unconscious defense that all of us use to avoid, reduce or prevent anxiety when we are threatened*.

To even think that my son was on drugs was a threatening, painful thing, a thing that diminished the dreams, hopes and expectations I had for him. Denial is a built-in mechanism that operates to screen out devastating information and to prevent us from becoming overloaded. Denial helps keep us from becoming emotionally overloaded. It has a dampening effect. It naturally helps us absorb something special and to do it slowly.

My wife's mom passed away last week at 79. Now you would think that at age 79 we should have expected her passing. The truth of the matter is, not at all. My wife's grandmother lived to be 100 years old and it seemed like Sue's mom and all of her sisters were all going to live to be over 100 years old. So, to have Grandma die, even though she died graciously in her sleep, was so unexpected that for the first three or four days last week I kept saying, "I can't believe it." Have you ever had something happen like that where you just couldn't believe it? That's denial. That's that mechanism in us that wants to dampen the dreaded experience, not fully accept it, not fully embrace it and say yes, "It's true." We all have some of that "I can't believe it" in us.

What do we deny?

- We normally tend to deny how bad it is and what is really going on.

We don't want to know all the details because they are just too painful. I'm not just talking about the first moment. I'm talking about throughout the whole experience of knowing that someone you love is living a life of pain, addiction, loss or grief. All along the way we don't want to know. There's something within us that doesn't want to have to see fully or embrace those facts and that pain. I didn't want the pain. I had many pressures going on in my life at that time and facing my son's drug use was just one more very painful pressure that I didn't need.

- We have feelings of pain, guilt, anger and fear.

How many times have you told yourself, "I don't want to go there. It's too painful. I don't want to think about it." Or, "I don't want to feel guilty." Anytime someone that we love or invest in goes wrong, one of the first questions we ask somewhere in the process is, "What did I do wrong?" Sometimes we don't want to ask the question period. We even deny that we do feel that way, so we don't have to deal with it. We deny feelings of anger and fear. I was so scared for him when he was on the streets. People do all kinds of insane things, especially with crystal meth. They freak out when they get wired and do weird things like shooting people. They live in a sub-culture with other people who are just as insane. It is a painful place to be as a parent. So you worry and fear a lot and don't often admit the truth to yourself or others.

- Our child made this decision. We didn't. He/She is responsible for it.

There is something inside of you that wants to deny that your child really made the decision willfully to abuse drugs or alcohol. He/She made the first decision, the first time, to use or abuse. He/She also made that same decision many other times before it became so powerful that it controlled his/her life. I didn't make the decision to abuse drugs, my son did. Yet, something deep inside of me as a parent wanted to protect my son too much from his decision and therefore to take the responsibility for his drug abuse.

- Only they can truly fix their problem.

That is a reality that we want to deny. You know why? Because most of us are "fixers." People don't go into ministry unless they want to help other people. If you can't help your own kid, then how hard is that? How difficult is that? If you can't fix him/her, then it is like something is not working inside you. You especially want to fix the problem when you care about him/her more than he/she cares about himself. And you also want to fix it when you look at your own imperfections and failures as a parent. But since I didn't cause it, I can't fix it!

- Parents sometimes contribute to the problem.

Contribution is different from causation. We didn't cause our sons and daughters to use or abuse drugs. That was their choice. However, since there is no such thing as a perfect parent, we have contributed. Sometimes our contribution is very small and mainly present in how we react to their

addiction by giving too much blame and shame and not enough honest loving help. Other times, it is our own weaknesses that cause pain in them that they then choose to medicate with drugs and/or alcohol. It is always good to take the beam out of our own eye before we take the speck out of someone else's eye. Doing so helps us help them the right way. But remember, contribution is different from causation.

- Others (especially siblings) know the issues.

Our other children knew what was going on long before we did. At the time, however, Sue and I were going through some deep battles in our ministry. The time and attention we had to give the ministry detracted from time given our children. The result was that we were not as connected to them as we needed to be. The kids didn't want to burden us anymore. The connection was not there for the honesty needed. Others also saw the signs we were missing.

Three reasons why we (clergy) are likely to deny problems in our children's lives.

- It's normal . . . parents have their own worth and ego invested in their children.

"Look how cute my child/grandchild is!" We are all invested in our children as a reflection of us. We all want those we love to do well. I have prayed and prayed and prayed for the lives and futures of all my children. Part of me doesn't want to focus on their weaknesses. I would rather tell others how great they are or how well they are doing. Children can, and usually are, a source of pride. As clergy we especially don't want others to know how bad off our children might be since it could or would reflect on us.

- We are ministers of the Good News. Therefore expectations of self and others are higher.

Barna Research Group said, "73% of surveyed Americans expect clergy to live up to higher standards of moral and ethical conduct than they expect of self or others." We all know this. The Scripture makes references to how we are to be examples to the flock. Paul Robbins, CEO of **Christianity Today** states, "Pastors remain the spiritual vanguard for the Kingdom of God. There is no higher calling." This makes the expectations very high for us and our children to perform.

The greater the expectations, the greater the resistance to acknowledge failure. One of the reasons is that there is more shame. We think we should know better or be better! When you are expected to be so perfect, there is more shame in being imperfect. I didn't think my children could do drugs without my knowing about it and seeing the results.

- Because we have so many ministry battles to fight, we end up neglecting our spouses and children and don't want to face one more pressure, stress or failure.

We are too busy "being about our Father's business." Some believe old myths, such as, "If I take care of God's business, He will take care of my wife and children."

Fuller Institute of Church Growth 1991 Survey of Pastors:

- 75% reported a significant stress-related crisis at least once a month in their ministry.
- 40% reported a serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 37% confessed having been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church.
- 33% said that being in ministry was an outright hazard to their family.
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Focus on the Family 1998 Survey:

- 80% of pastors are discouraged or are dealing with depression.
- 40% of pastors are suffering from burnout, frantic schedules and unrealistic expectations.
- 47% of spouses are suffering from burnout, frantic schedules and unrealistic expectations.

- 1500 pastors leave their assignments each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout or contention within their congregation.
- 84% of clergy spouses are discouraged or dealing with depression.

When you are fighting that many battles and you are trying just to survive, somebody pays the price. When my son went through his battle with drugs, it came at a time when I was fighting a real battle, a battle that even ended up on the front page of the newspapers. That battle took so much concentration and energy that I missed things. I didn't have that extra energy to invest so that I could have either heard better, seen better or known better. My days of difficulty caused me to neglect my family and therefore be in denial about what was truly going on in my son's life.

What to do with denial: Three principles

- Talk a lot about what is happening.

The more you share with trusted or safe people, the more you hear yourself, the more it congeals, the more things click. "Silence is not golden. It's destructive." Find a safe friend or counselor and share both thoughts and feelings. The Fuller Institute study reported that 70% of pastors do not have someone they consider a close friend. Clergy are one of the most isolated groups of people there is. Therefore, talk even and especially when it's painful or conflictory.

- Admit to and face your shame.

It's embarrassing. I felt embarrassed to have a son in that position when I am supposed to represent God to people. Shame is the enemy and you are only as sick as your secrets and shame.

- Guilt says I did something wrong
- Shame says I am what's wrong (defective)

Shame makes you hide, not face reality, and lie to yourself and others. Remember Adam and Even in the garden? Remember: courage and confession are answers to shame.

- Mourn, but not as others who have no hope!

To truly mourn means to bare the anguish of your soul in words to God over: what is wrong, what you've lost, and what your child is doing. Sometimes this mourning includes tears. I cried a lot. When my son left the house, every single day in my prayer time I mourned and grieved for my son. I prayed and prayed and prayed. I prayed my heart's anguish. I prayed every thought I had. I shared all of my pain. I reminded God of all the promises that had been stored up for his life. I asked God to help me find him, to drag him home, to do anything.

My son had a black Jeep. Every time I saw a black Jeep, I would feel the pain. Then I would pray and mourn. One day when I was praying for him, I prayed until all of a sudden the burden lifted. One month later he showed up on a Sunday night, with tears in his eyes, saying he had quit using drugs a month ago and wanted to come home. I attribute that to the goodness of God. Not all drug abusers come home. I am very grateful my son did.

Matthew 5:4 says, "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." I believe that one of the biggest things we can do is to cry and cry out to God. There is a difference between crying to ourselves or crying to Him. When you cry, cry out to the Lord. Do not mourn your pain by yourself. I believe that He hears and He answers. He brought my son home. He will comfort you (2 Corinthians 1:4), He will guide you (Psalm 32:8), and He will hear you.

My son is working now. He is still not where we want him to be, but I tell you, he is a lot better off than where he was. And I am less in denial about who he is and what he and I both need.

"Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting!" (Psalm 126:5)