

How To Help Your Addicted Child

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Love, Hope, and Dreams

Except for maybe our wedding day, no event is as awe-inspiring, joyous and humbling as when our children are born. This little life is part of us, from our own body, our chance at immortality as part of us physically lives beyond our own life. God using and allowing us to miraculously create life.

During those moments when our child enters the world, we are filled with visions, dreams and expectations as we wonder about who they might become, what impact they will have, whom they will marry, the grandkids they will give us, the awesome experiences we will share with them and the journey they will make on their own. For the first time, we understand what unconditional love really is, as we would lay down our life for this little, precious and oh-so-vulnerable extension of us.

But embedded in the deepest area of our hearts is the hope and desire to give our children a better life than the one we had. Give them more love, attention, direction, coaching, options, toys, material amenities, friendships, education, opportunity and fulfillment. Ideally, we're helping them develop a foundation for their life far surpassing the one we ever developed so they can build a life that would reach heights ours never will, in all three spheres of life—spiritual, psychological and physical.

If we had one wish in that special moment when we first looked into our child's face, this abundant, peaceful, pain-free and joy-filled life of maximum fulfillment summarizes the fantasies and dreams swirling through our mind in that instant.

The Shocking News, Denial, and Confusion

We bring that little bundle home and life starts to happen. Our child grows so fast and time speeds on by like a blur. They grow, learn, laugh, and cry. Parenting is harder than we thought and certainly takes more time and energy. We are amazed at how often we are not on the same page with a little one as they grow. But all in all, that childish smile, innocence, and vulnerability are what we see as they interact with life.

But life has a way of chipping away at our little ones as they grow into teenagers. Then, somewhere along the line, even though we see many warnings signs in our society, we are shocked when our children struggle with substance use or an addiction. Take these warnings and statistics as an example:

- Addictions are the **No. 1 killer** in our society. The effects of alcohol, tobacco, food, drugs and prescription medications are more deadly than heart disease or cancer.
- 47 percent of Americans will have an addiction **this year** to tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs, eating, gambling, the Internet, love, sex, exercise, work or shopping; these numbers don't include pornography (the most common behavioral addiction) or caffeine (the most common substance addiction).
- The lifetime risk of addiction—not just substance abuse, but actually full addiction - which is defined later - is:
 - 13 percent for alcohol
 - 8 percent for illegal drugs
 - 7.5 percent for marijuana (of non-dropout high school seniors, 36 percent used marijuana in the past year, 23 percent in the past month and 6.5 percent daily);
 - 6 percent for prescription medications
 - 21 percent for nicotine
 - 32 percent for caffeine
 - 6 percent for shopping
 - 1.5 percent for gambling
 - 100 percent to comfort (yes we are all addicted to comfort and have our own pet coping skills to comfort ourselves when stressed)
- 78 percent of society will have a parent, child, sibling or spouse experience an addiction problem in their lifetime.
- 26 states have legalized medical marijuana and five states (plus Washington, D.C.) have legalized recreational marijuana.
- Heroin availability and prescription medication overdoses have greatly increased leading EMT's to carry Narcan to reverse overdoses in the field.

When we receive the startling news that our precious child is using drugs, most often it is after consequences have already arisen or when our child's functioning has been compromised so that others are now involved or affected. Rarely, the parent finds some evidence of substance use, but usually this shocking revelation comes from a teacher, police, one of their siblings, another relative, their friend, a friend's parent, and rarely, from the addicted child himself.

Often, our first reaction is disbelief, maybe even shock. Can't be my child. There must be some mistake. We might even go on the attack, defending our much-loved child, saying, "How dare you say that about my child!" You see, in most, if not all, areas of life, we rarely see our child for the age they really are, but instead, we see them as a much younger version from earlier memories of fun and innocent (and obviously drug-free) experiences with them. We see them as that little, innocent, carefree, honest, fun-loving, naïve child we held in our arms and tucked into bed - the one who needed help in so many areas, and was entertained with pure and healthy aspects of life. We can't believe someone is talking about the same child but using words associated with drug addiction.

We have so many questions, as we try to look back and see why and how this could happen. We are confused and overwhelmed, as many emotions, thoughts and worries flood our mind. We experience urges to cry, run, lash out, scream, hit, curl up in a ball, pull the covers over our head, stick our head in the sand, beat ourselves up, point fingers at others, and many more.

The initial shock, denial, reflex to evade the truth, and confusion can last for a couple hours to several years. Each parent-child situation is unique, and how long the truth takes to sink in depends on many factors. Nevertheless, we start to accept the possibility and probable reality that others already know - our child is caught up in substance abuse and possibly addiction. The first matter to keep in mind is that the problem is usually worse than the facts show and worse than your child is letting on, as 100 percent of those using substances underreport their usage. And even if they wanted to be honest, 100 percent do not know the serious and full extent of their illness or its ramifications, so it is impossible for them to accurately report the whole issue - even if they wanted to be totally open.

Now that you have heard the shocking news and have dealt with some of the normal denial and confusion any loving parent would experience, we must ask ourselves:

1. What is happening to my child?
2. Why is this happening?
3. What do I do now?
4. What could get in the way of my child's health and well-being?

What is happening to my child? Understanding addiction

Although in rare instances some people claim to be addicted to a substance upon their first exposure, addictions develop over time and usually progress through these five stages. Stages can overlap, are occasionally very brief so seem skipped, or can last a long period of time. But this is how the progression plays out.

1. Experimental: Experimenting with a substance for the first several times, not knowing what will happen.
2. Recreational: Recreational use while with friends with no real purpose other than it being a tangential aspect of the recreational activity; there is no powerful intention to use as use will occur if the substance is available and if others are using.
3. Circumstantial: Use for a specific purpose (sleep, concentration, to stay awake, escape, get high, relieve anxiety, improve mood, hallucinate, relieve boredom, fit in to peer group, avoid stress, lower inhibitions to talk to opposite sex or have sex, etc). This is when the danger really escalates as the addiction object (either a substance or a behavior like gambling, pornography or work) becomes the coping skill to deal with stressors. Users feel they get some benefit from the object so they are more inclined to gravitate toward that object hoping to get some relief, even though they recognize some consequences or downsides are probable.
4. Intensified: Even though consequences and adverse impact are evident, the use increases in quantity, frequency and intensity and starts to push out or interfere with other healthier life activities.
5. Compulsive: The individual feels compelled to use and feels no power to stop on their own even though they might want to.

Very rarely is someone “caught” in stage 1 or 2. So by the time your child’s drug or alcohol use is revealed and the substance abuse has brought about some consequences or negative impact, he or she is usually at stage 3, 4 or 5. Remember that some people are very manipulative, secretive and good at deception and try to trick you into believing they are in stage 1 or 2.

Unfortunately, we don’t have a blood test or X-ray that will show addiction in our children. But here are two definitions from two different medical groups to help you look for more concrete signs and zero in on a diagnosis:

1. The medical and psychiatric definition of addiction from the Behavioral Medicine Diagnosis Manual (DSM -5):

A problematic pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress as manifested by at least two of the following 11 criteria within a 12-month period:

1. Using larger amounts or over a longer time than was intended
2. Persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control the use
3. Significant time is spent thinking about, obtaining, using or recovering from the substance

4. Craving or a strong desire to use
 5. Recurrent use resulting in failure to fulfill major obligations at work, school or home
 6. Continued use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems as a result of the use
 7. Important social, occupational, recreational or spiritual activities are reduced because of use
 8. Recurrent use even when physically hazardous for accidents or health concerns
 9. Use continues despite knowing a persistent or recurring physical or psychological problem is caused by or worsened by the use
 10. Tolerance, over time, needing more to get the same high
 11. Withdrawal, having uncomfortable physical or psychological effects when the use is stopped or decreased
- (Add one point for each of these criteria: 0-1=no substance issue; 2-3=mild issue; 4-5=moderate issue; 6+=severe issue)*

2. The American Society of Addiction Medicine's (ASAM) definition of addiction:

- Addiction is a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors.
- Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.
- To simplify, due to some faulty brain wiring, a person has some difficulties in some areas of their life, then they use substances or behaviors to relieve those difficulties in some way. The addiction then causes many problems, the person cannot stop and is progressive unless a very intentional effort on the addict's part to stop or find treatment.

The definition from the Diagnosis Manual (DSM – 5) is based on the impact of the substance use or addiction on the person. ASAM gets more to the core, stating that something inside is not right, so we reach for a substance to help us fix or self-medicate the problem. The problem can easily get out of hand and we need targeted or professional help to stop it and avoid returning to it.

What is an addiction?

So, having been on both sides, meaning I am in recovery for alcohol addiction and other substance abuse (not to mention many other sad and shameful behaviors), as well as being a practicing psychiatrist who has treated numerous patients struggling with addictions, and I also consult to rehabs helping them develop a more holistic faith based approach to addiction understanding and treatment, let me tell you my definition of addiction.

My addiction definition is based blending of my education, expertise, and experience as a scientist and in treating thousands of people, the powerful teachings in the Holy Bible, and my personal experience as an addict and human being trying to understand life: “An addiction is when we go to something, other than God, in a patterned, repetitive or habitual way, to get our needs met.”

Basically, an often used coping skill which leaves out God, while it provides a little benefit or relief initially or superficially, it also produces more consequences and damage. Unfortunately, the relief tricks us into using that coping mechanism even though it becomes disruptive to various aspects of our lives.

SO let me explain it a little more specifically without getting too technical. No one develops a substance abuse problem or addiction out of the blue or because they want an addiction. An addiction occurs because of some “internal discomfort” that a person is unable to handle or soothe using their usual coping mechanisms, but finds the substance or addicting behavior helps them soothe, escape, anesthetize, self-medicate or avoid that discomfort.

Addictions are a problem in all three spheres of our being:

1. Addiction is a spiritual sphere or sin issue, as the addict worships something other than God and uses that object to comfort and provide for their needs. It is becoming the authority and center of their life. They start to put their faith in the addiction, and not God, while also starting to believe the world’s lies about life instead of living in the truth.
2. Addiction is a psychological sphere or mind issue as we are using faulty coping skills and making poor decisions. Immaturity in both understanding what is going on both in and around us blended with immature methods to respond to these happenings. “Internal discomfort” is usually a combination of psychological and spiritual defects in our thinking, beliefs, and decisions.
3. Addiction is a biological (body sphere) issue as our brain circuitry is faulty first in leading to the internal discomfort and then in the wrong decision-making. The substance the addict takes in is also a toxin to the brain and worsens the brain circuitry, thus accelerating this downward spiral. We easily see this on special X-rays of the brain called SPECT Scans. Compounding this is the knowledge we now have that making a wrong decision (like using a substance) also harms our brain chemistry or circuitry effectiveness.

So what is that “internal discomfort?” This is what ASAM means when it refers to the brain circuitry malfunction that leads to physical, psychological, social or spiritual struggles. These struggles come in a variety of presentations, including anxiety, depression, peer pressure, overvaluing the opinions of others, loneliness or feeling disconnected, expecting too much from themselves and life, or low self-esteem. Others can be insecurity about school performance, grades, fear of failure, work stressors, financial pressures, or relationship conflict with peers, loved ones or authorities. Ongoing physical pain or physical disability, loss, grief or past trauma also have many hurtful ripples. Deeper spiritual concerns are lack of purpose, identity, skill,

meaning, confusion about growing up, future vocation, or uncertainty about God or eternal security and destiny.

These are just the tip of the iceberg when we imagine the thousands of reasons why a person feels something just isn't right or is having a problem navigating life smoothly. Unfortunately, adolescence is a time of many changes, and teens must constantly navigate new situations, relationships, and their own many changes physically, psychologically, emotionally, relationally and academically. Blend this ongoing uneasiness with increased spending money, less supervision, the ability to stay out later, a feeling of invincibility, the easy availability of substances, the drive to be happy or high, and a desire to try things out on their own and form their own opinions makes for the perfect recipe for substance sampling and fertile ground for a budding addiction.

What is a Process Addiction?

Substance abuse, substance addiction, chemical addiction, or addictive behaviors are all terms in the addiction discussion. Substance addictions are easy to understand and are defined as taking a chemical into the body for some form of comfort or reward, even though use is harmful, and the person feels unable to easily stop using the chemical or has cravings to use. Obvious substance or chemical examples are alcohol, marijuana, heroin, cocaine, caffeine, tobacco, hallucinogens, party drugs, and certain prescriptions pain medications, tranquilizers and stimulants.

A process addiction has many of the same elements as a substance addiction, but the chemical is replaced with a certain behavior. More harmful examples would be gambling, shopping/spending, pornography, hoarding or dieting/eating disorders. Less acutely dangerous but still life interfering behaviors can also be recreational, such as TV, video games, social media, cell phones or adrenaline inducing activities. Some behaviors could come with functional rewards, as in work-a-holism or for those who are addicted to productivity or control. Process addictions are often overlooked, or seen as just the person's personality, quirkiness or a bad habit but - just the same as a chemical addiction - can be very damaging to both the individual and those around them, especially loved ones.

For teens and young adults, the most damaging process addictions are pornography, gambling, and video gaming in boys, and social media, dieting/eating disorders, and shopping in girls. Not only will these process addictions lead to school, work or relational consequences, but people often start to have psychological struggles then possible self-medicating with substances to escape the frustration, emotional pain, and consequences they are absorbing.

Why is this Happening? Why my child?

Many reasons exist as to why some people turn to addictions to cope. But we can narrow it down to a 2 common factors and then one important question.

1. Something is stressed inside my child.

As we discussed earlier when we defined an addiction, your child has struggles going on inside his head. Everybody has them, and your child is no different. No matter how much they deny it, and they truly might mean it, they have something going on inside and they are struggling to deal with it. Occasionally, it is something major, like a past trauma or abuse they don't remember or didn't tell you about. But most often, it is something most people experience and are able deal with to varying levels of success, and when we look back as a middle-aged adult, we realize how misguided we are to be so upset about that particular stressor in our younger years. But a teen or young adult doesn't have the benefit of experience or maturity to see it accurately because they only wear all-or-nothing lenses. Everything is grandiose and Super Bowl-ish in intensity and importance from their perspective and for their needs. So these stressors produce a discomfort which is hard for them to tolerate, and they don't know what to do to get rid of it, but are getting tired of this discomfort.

2. My child is picking the wrong coping skills.

When teens experience a perceived problem - some stress or discomfort - they want to cope with it, deal with it, make the discomfort go away NOW so they can feel good. Some find the healthy coping skills, which adequately relieve the pressure or stress. Sports, academics, friends, siblings, hobbies, spirituality, art, music, poetry, journaling. God has given us many outlets to express ourselves and help us manage life. Some realize the pressure and stress won't kill them and that it is part of life, and that awareness and realization alone is enough to calm and soothe them. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, some don't understand the stress inside or don't find the healthy coping mechanisms, or both. They then reach out to substances that seem to provide quick relief or escape, but their immaturity interferes with their ability to appreciate the many immediate and long-term consequences always present with the substances or addiction .

3. Whom do I blame?

This is what we are all worried about—the sticking point. From issues with breastfeeding or dropping babies on their heads to picking them up too quickly when they cried or letting them cry too long, we all make mistakes as parents. Some make big ones; everybody makes many small ones. Our kids make many mistakes with their decisions, which is why we call them immature and why they need parents. The bottom line is that there's plenty of blame to go around. As parents, we have three options:

- A. Accept that we are partly to blame and move on in finding the problems and solutions.
- B. Hold the line that we were perfect and it's someone else's fault.
- C. Feel so much guilt and shame for our dysfunctional parenting then continually beat ourselves, while allowing the guilt to push us into a passive or permissive mode and let our children off the hook.

Option A is the only realistic and healthy option. The others are self-serving and full of distortion. Most importantly, option A pushes us to pursue healing and help, while the other options keep us locked in dysfunction and darkness. Blame for the sake of blame is irrelevant and dividing. You will always find enough targets to blame, but you can't afford to waste the time and effort. Accepting the blame and committing to moving on are valuable as you see your way through this time of adversity.

Focus your time and effort on accepting your share of the blame, then more importantly, modeling a process of identifying the problems and finding healthy solutions. Choosing - yes, it is a choice - to move in this direction of healing will build a team around you so you don't have to do it all on your own.

What do I do now? The next steps...

Now that you know what you are dealing with:

- 1 that your child has a substance abuse problem or a full-blown addiction,
- 2 why they might have it, and
- 3 who is to blame

it's time to come up with a plan to deal with it in the best way for all those involved.

Here is a list of vital steps. Unfortunately, it isn't a "do it, check it off, then move to the next one" kind of list. These are items you need to keep at, but the more you practice, the better you will get at them.

1. Take care of yourself

Just like when the flight attendant instructs us to put on our own oxygen mask first, THEN put on our child's mask, we need to really hear this important principle. You will be your child's strongest advocate, supporter and coach and will stay in their life longer than anyone else (except maybe their spouse). So it is very important for you to take care of yourself so you can be as healthy, strong and clear-thinking as possible, allowing you to best help your child. If you are run down and out of commission, that obviously isn't in your best interest, nor is it good for your addicted child. So taking care of yourself happens in several areas:

- Spiritually: Connect with God regularly and intentionally. You need His peace, power, wisdom and guidance during this time of testing and refinement. Take time to pray AND listen. Know that God is in charge, loves your child and will provide opportunities for him or her to overcome this addiction.
- Physically: In order for your brain to be as sharp as possible, it needs rest and nutrients.
 - Make sure you are getting eight hours of sleep so your brain and body can rest and refresh.
 - Eat a good diet of nutritious foods to build brain circuits. Avoid stress or late-night eating.
 - Exercise, even if it's just a daily brisk walk, keeps weight off so you aren't literally and figuratively weighed down, relieves stress, and improves circulation so oxygen and nutrients can get to your brain.
 - Avoid alcohol, drugs, caffeine, and tobacco.
- Psychologically: It is so important for you to think clearly and control your emotions.
 - Find those trusted support people you have in your life and confide in them.
 - Don't cut out your hobbies; you need some enjoyment, escape and stress relievers, too.
 - Simplify life wherever possible. Addiction adds a lot to your plate, so it is important to clear some things off plate so you aren't overwhelmed.
 - Keep a journal and make brief daily entries to keep your mind in the here and now of what is going on and what to do. If not, so much will swirl through your head and overwhelm you.

- Relationally: You can't handle this alone. God built us for relationship and gives us opportunity for a community of support, encouragement, guidance, a shoulder to cry on and camaraderie. Rely on:
 - Your spouse - Your biggest support because you have a common goal of your child's safety and health.
 - Family - Connect with those close to you or who might have gone through something similar
 - Friends - You have people over the years who have experienced life with you. They want to help, encourage, and support you. Let them.
 - A church or faith community - Sometimes these acquaintances help shed the best wisdom and overall perspective
 - Community support groups - Unfortunately, having a child with addiction problems is common, so many support groups have formed around the country and are very valuable for practical guidance, prayer and support
 - Al-Anon - Like Alcoholics Anonymous but for family members of the addict (www.al-anon.org)
 - Celebrate Recovery - A Christian version of AA for spiritual growth in adversity (www.celebraterecovery.com)
 - Tough Love or Because I Love You (BILY) groups - Parents of addicts supporting each other (www.bily.org)
- Professionally: The help of a psychiatrist, therapist or coach is a great resource to help you and/or your family navigate something few have the expertise to navigate on their own. Professional help is especially useful if
 - you are having trouble functioning, managing your emotions or thinking clearly;
 - need guidance as a family to get on the same page and communicate in a healthy way;
 - can financially afford getting more input, support and help in a complex situation from professionals who are trained and counsel others regularly.

2. Manage your emotions, don't let them manage you

Another major area that can easily cause us more harm than good if we don't understand and manage it well is our emotional state. Negative emotions are a great gift from God and are our warning system. Just like a smoke detector, they let us know when something different or potentially dangerous is happening or when something is wrong. Just like if you are walking in the woods and you see a tiger, you should feel afraid, worried and sad. That is your warning system letting you know something is wrong and danger is lurking.

Our emotions can get us into trouble when:

- We let them become the decision-maker. Ideally, we use facts and information to make decisions. Emotions are terrible decision-makers. We don't allow doctors to operate on their own kids because of the emotional aspect. In court, we don't allow relatives of a defendant or victim to serve as the judge or sit on the jury because of emotional bias.
- Emotions distort our ability to see the situation clearly. We even use figures of speech to illustrate this: "see red with anger," "see green with envy" or "love is blind." Seeing

clearly is essential in good decision-making, but emotional bias distorts our lenses and causes many problems, so we must be on guard.

- We are raised to fear our negative emotions. We often believe we can't handle them or feel that experiencing negative emotions equals failure. "There must be something I am doing wrong if I feel this way." The fact is, negative emotions can be positive because they let us know something is wrong as either 1. a real danger or concern exists and you are looking at it accurately or 2. you may be misinterpreting a situation. Regardless, negative emotions provide an incredibly valuable service. Long ago, messengers would run to the king to report, "The enemy is coming!" The problem is the enemy, not the messenger, but the king sometimes cut the messenger's head off anyway. Don't fear your negative feelings, but instead be thankful you have a warning system.

This next concept is very helpful to me and those I work with. Think of your mind as having two volume buttons - ranging from 1 to 10 - one that controls your *thinking* abilities (high volume means maximum thinking and problem solving) and one that controls your *emotional* intensity (maximum volume means your emotions are maximum intensity and, for most of us, out of control).

A few points to remember about these volume buttons:

- Only Jesus could have them both cranked at the same time. For you and me, if one is cranked up, then the other is low. When we are younger, the emotional volume usually influences the thinking volume, and as we mature, our thinking volume gets better at holding down our emotional volume. Real maturity is being Christ-like; we can have good thinking (a high thinking volume) even when our emotional volume/intensity is high.
- For most of our present situations, when our emotional volume is high then our thinking volume is low. We have all experienced the phenomena of being so emotional, we can't think or we freeze up. Athletes or performers choke in pressure situations because their emotional volume is too high, so they can't think clearly to respond successfully in the tense situation. We see this in our kids. When they steal a cookie and follow that with a temper tantrum, we try to turn it into a teachable moment. The next day, when we ask them about the situation, they don't remember anything we told them. Or when someone's emotional volume shoots to a 10 because they hear the doctor say "cancer," they don't comprehend or remember anything they heard after the word "cancer."
- The opposite is also true, when our emotional volume is low, we can easily increase our thinking volume. Consider being a student in school, a parishioner in a church service or having someone explain directions to you. Emotion is low, but cognition is high.
- We can apply this important understanding in several ways:
 - Don't make decisions or have significant interactions with your addicted child when your emotional volume is high. It will be too intense, raise their emotional volume, and you won't be able to think clearly to present your thoughts or process their responses very well. The interaction has a low chance of success and a high failure rate.
 - Don't have interactions with your addicted child or other people until their emotional volume is a 3 or less, ideally a 0 or 1. If their emotional volume is high,

he or she won't be able to accurately process and remember what you are telling them. Their high emotional volume could also raise yours, then your thinking ability drops. The interaction is set up to fail.

- Learn what soothes you and brings down your emotional volume as you talk to others. Sometimes, it's a timeout. It could be a Bible verse, prayer or remembering positive times. Try counting to 10, breathing deeply or taking a walk to clear your head and calm down. Teaching your addicted child how to soothe themselves when emotions are high, will help them hear you and make better decisions. Soothing without substances will be a major aspect of developing those healthy coping skills to deal with internal issues rather than turning to drugs to soothe or numb it.

3. Solidify your marriage and the relationship with your most important teammate

I have seen so many marriages become strained or fall apart because of the stress of having an addicted child. But, usually, more dividing are the games the addict plays to pit you and your spouse against each other so you aren't able to put your heads together to hold them accountable with consistent limits, boundaries, rules or consequences. Consider this:

- You and your spouse both love your child, but have different viewpoints and ways to express that love. Mothers are usually more nurturing, affectionate and forgiving. Fathers are usually more direct (when they communicate), blunt, rule conscious, and authoritative. Whatever the case for your family dynamic, your strengths are often complimentary, so your combined package is usually better than the package one of you alone brings in navigating this situation.
- Your spouse is your best friend and you need a teammate and friend to navigate this well. You know each other better than anyone else, so use that wisely to comfort each other and brainstorm answers by combining your skills together.
- The bigger the rift between you and your spouse, the bigger the crack your child is able to wiggle and fall through into the pit of destruction.

4. Talk with a Trusted Advisor

Find someone who has some expertise in dealing with addiction. It could be a family member, friend, church or work resource, or someone professional. You need guidance to see the big picture, then the ability to take small steps to navigate through this storm with as few treacherous dead-end detours as possible. Your addicted child is going to try to take the wheel and guide this process, but we know the outcome. You will need help to counter their desire to take control.

5. Talk with your Addicted Child

This is obviously a difficult conversation, but here are some key tips to keep in mind:

- You won't solve everything in one conversation. It takes a series of conversations over a period of time to get where you need to go so don't get impatient and expect immediate contrition and healing.
- You want to have the emotional control we discussed earlier, with your emotional volume/intensity at 2 or less, so you can think clearly and communicate in a clear, loving, and non-urgent, intense, or edgy way.

- Set aside time to sit down and be totally attentive to this conversation, with no distractions for you or your child. Taking notes while you talk and listen is OK. You can even record the conversation with your child's consent so you can get more information later, hold each party accountable to what they say, and hear what you sounded like from your tone of voice, word choice, how loud and fast you talk, and attitude.
- Have someone else sit with you to make sure you are hearing what is said—another witness and or teammate you trust.
- Speak clearly, calmly and relatively slowly, so you and the listener can take it in clearly.
- Be a good listener; don't be thinking about what you are going to say while the other person is speaking. Take it all in.
- To make sure you are on the same page, you can even repeat what they say. This is called reflective listening, because you are reflecting what they said back to them. For example: "Ok, let me repeat what I just heard. You never used drugs before last week." Or "Just so we are on the same page, you feel the reason you use drugs is because you feel stressed about college and anxious."
- You want to take back control of the situation and the things you have control over. You can't control their decisions to use, but you can show them who is the leader and authority of your house and how you will carry yourself in this situation. You can also let them know and show them that they can't control you or manipulate you like they might have been doing up to this point.
- Above all else, maintain relationship. You will be tempted to throw them out, disown them, cut them off, etc. Realize they will always be your child and you will always be their only father or mother.
 - Let them know you love them and that some of the decisions you will make and things you will say are because you love them. Compare it to this: you made them go to bed at 8 o'clock when they were younger, didn't give them the car keys when they were 12, and didn't give them the three bowls of ice cream - all because you loved them.
 - Let them know you always want to have a relationship with them, that the relational door is always open, but maybe not the actual house door. You will make decisions on how to relate to them based on what you think is the best way for them to move forward to healthy living habits and away from the addiction.
 - Don't expect perfection, but expect sincere effort, intentionality, humility, willingness to take responsibility and absorb consequences when mistakes are made, and evidence of following the treatment plan for substance abstinence and life transformation, whatever is prescribed by the parents, professional treaters, and/or church leaders.

6. Talk with your other children, the siblings of the addicted child

(This will depend on the age of the siblings and their relationship with the addict.)

- If they are younger, protect their safety if the addict is violent, driving or holding a baby while under the influence, etc.
- Tell them their brother or sister has a problem - a disease. He or she is using drugs that make it hard for them to think straight and do the right thing. The sibling they look up to

will make mistakes and will have many emotions that look extreme. Let them know that if their brother or sister gets treatment, they will get better.

- Remind them that whatever the addicted sibling tells them to do or keep from the parents, they need to tell the secrets to the parents because lies are common problems for people who use drugs. Lies don't help anyone and harm everyone.
- Let them know you will try to not let this interfere with your relationship with them, but there will be times when the addiction takes a chunk of your time. Just because you might be spending more time with their sibling doesn't mean you love him or her more. Don't, however, send the message that using drugs or causing problems gets a family member more parental attention.
- Ask them how they would like to spend time with you and the family, and whether they want their sibling involved or not.

7. Finding the right treatment situation

Remember, it is better to err on the side of safety and choose over-treatment rather than taking the life-threatening risk of under-treatment and then having a significant event show that more intensive treatment is actually needed.

If your child has any ONE of the issues below, then residential treatment is the safest and most needed option:

- Unable to stop using the substance on his own
- Only able to stop when under constant supervision at school and at home
- Has very strong cravings for the substance when not using
- At risk of having withdrawal symptoms; these are very uncomfortable, and the use will resurface in an attempt to get rid of the painful psychological and physical withdrawal
- Engaged in risky or dangerous behavior to get the substance or when using; these behaviors must stop so they don't risk injury to themselves or others
- Your child has a psychiatric illness, such as depression, PTSD, anxiety disorder, ADHD or psychoses, or medical illness including seizures, diabetes, or heart or asthma issues that will get worse with substance use or body neglect
- Unable to function at school or work because of their addiction
- Unreliable, impulsive, and/or aggressive

If your son or daughter doesn't meet the above criteria, then outpatient therapy with a seasoned licensed therapist who has experience with addictions might be the right option. Remember, both the child and the therapist need to address the underlying issues as well as the actual addiction behaviors.

Also important is family therapy for family healing and to re-structure the rules and communication patterns of the house for everyone's safety and movement forward.

Insurance coverage is also be a tricky arena to navigate. Insurance companies make money by trying to get patients to choose the least intensive and least expensive option. Even professional therapists, doctors and pastors have difficulty navigating the complex healthcare system to

understand what kind of facility is the best fit and how to manage treatment with the least out-of-pocket expense.

I started Lighthouse for this very reason - to provide you with hope, answers and encouragement. Trust our staff to do the difficult work of finding the best fit for your situation and finances. We work with the insurance companies every day, speak their language, know their games and know how to appropriately push them to honor the policy you paid for. We also work with facilities and know which questions to ask to find out more about their medical, psychiatric and therapeutic expertise, as well as spiritual depth. These are the important factors to get the best treatment situation for your child.

We are your advocates and can always bring about a better outcome than if you trudged through the tough and sometimes frustrating legwork on your own, as Lighthouse Network has built good relationships with a number of quality programs. Please call on us at the Lighthouse Network Helpline—1-844-LIFE-CHANGE (1-844-543-3242).

Obstacles to your child's health and well-being:

1. **Taking the addiction personal:** So many times, parents or spouses of an addict feel the addiction and the associated behaviors are a personal attack on them. It really isn't. Your child is struggling, is too immature and prideful to realize it and dig out on their own, and is just trying to do life their own way. It isn't about you or a personal attack aimed at you, so don't take it that way. This will open a much more positive bridge to look at the issue more objectively and be a good parent and teammate, not opponent, to them.
2. **Valuing your child's obedience instead of a relationship with them:** We would love to have a relationship with our child and their obedience to our authority, but if we could only have one, always choose relationship, just as God does. Remember Mary and Martha, or the thief on the cross. Too many times, parents focus on just the behavior and not the core of who the child really is. Your child might not be open to your relational desire at this time, but keep at it, and they will. Really listen and take an interest in who they are, what is ailing them and how you can really help them. Remember, valuing relationship doesn't mean you have to say yes to their dysfunctions and demands.
3. **Losing emotional control:** Remember the *emotional* and *thinking* volume buttons we discussed earlier. You will avoid sabotaging yourself if you can learn and apply this concept.
4. **Beware of codependency:** Codependency is dysfunctional help, where one person supports or enables another person's addiction, poor mental health, immaturity, irresponsibility or under-achievement. Codependent enablers often find themselves in relationships where their primary role is rescuer, supporter, or shoulder to cry on. These helpers are dependent on the other person's poor functioning to satisfy their own purpose or emotional needs. Codependents usually ignore their own needs, while being excessively preoccupied with the needs of others. Codependency may also be characterized by denial, low self-esteem and control issues. Mothers, especially ones who grow up with a dysfunctional, single, or addicted parent, are at risk for having a codependent personality. If this fits you, consider getting some professional counseling to help you break free of this pattern.
5. **Focusing on shame, guilt or blame:** You've made mistakes. Own them, but don't let your child use them to manipulate or play you. Don't be overly critical or beat yourself up. Confess your mistakes to God and the one you offended, then learn from them and try not to repeat them.
6. **Living in a war zone:** You have probably been in a battle for a while and might feel like you have to walk on eggshells. Battle fatigue might set in, leaving you overwhelmed and irritable. Remember to take care of yourself and take back control of your home. If your child is making your home a war zone, then he or she should live in a residential treatment facility or with someone else who is willing to tolerate their games.
7. **Enabling - or making it easy for your child to continue their addiction:** You love your child. You don't want to see them sad or hurting. But loving your child doesn't always mean

saying 'yes' or giving them what they want. Say 'no' lovingly, but firmly, and explain why 'no' is the best response for their health, safety, and growth right now. Your child is dysfunctional and will make dysfunctional requests, so the loving and healthy response to dysfunctional requests is 'no.'

- Along with this mentality of not wanting to see our child hurt, we often don't want to see our child bear the consequences of their behaviors. Don't protect them or absorb those consequences. Let them experience the consequences, either the ones you deliver, or those that society and other systems deliver. That is a significant component to help them learn healthy living skills.
 - Don't nag and remind them what they need to do to avoid the consequence. Tell them once and then deliver the consequence. They will start to remember when you are consistent with your word and stop nagging.
 - Sometimes consequences stem from legal issues. Parents often worry that a legal record will hinder their child's future, but an ongoing addiction could be deadly. Press charges or don't hesitate to call the police if they are dangerous or doing something illegal. I went to jail, and it was the turning point of my life. I am thankful God put me there, as that was the safest place at the height of my dangerous behavior to myself and others.
8. **Letting the addiction infect you:** Addictions can contaminate and infect anyone in contact with the addict, infiltrating their mind and leading to thoughts and behaviors they would never normally have or do. Don't let the addiction and the addict infect your mind and your soul. Develop a healthy resistance through these tips and other resources.
9. **Ignoring your own care:** As we discussed earlier, you need to put on your own oxygen mask first, then you will be able to help your child. Avoid the mentality and easy trap of thinking, "My child is hurting so much and needs more help than me; I will get my help once they are OK." Get your care, as your own healthy and clear thinking will be a more valuable help to your child.
10. **Trying to control your child:** No one can control another person. As a parent, you would like to control your child's thoughts, emotions and behaviors - but you can't. What you do have is influence. So your role is to exert your influence as wisely as possible. Sometimes it is verbal influence; sometimes it is through appropriate rewards. Other times the influence is applying consequences when a rule or behavioral contract is broken, or allowing other systems' consequences to impact your child. But remember, what your children do with your influence is between them and God.
- a. Your role as a parent is to help your child see a situation clearly, understand his or her options, and know the pros and cons of those options. Then it is in your child's power and control to make the choice or decision. If they ask your advice, you can give it, but you can't force them to make any decision. Just fulfill your role and exert your influence with a positive and caring heart and attitude. Let God and your child do the rest.

11. **Setting premature finish lines:** We are very impatient and want immediate results, and when we don't get them, we assume the worst. Life takes a while and is a marathon. Just because we are behind after several laps doesn't mean the race is over and we have lost. God is a God of miracles and great comebacks. Hang in there and be patient. Don't leave the game at halftime or the play at intermission. Be sure to stick around for all the great twists, amazing comebacks, and awesome climax.
12. **Confusing 'loving' with 'condoning':** You can love your child, but not condone certain aspects of their behaviors. Your child might yell at you and accuse you of not loving them. This is an attempt to try to get you to change your stance, view, or policy decision in that particular situation. Remember, they are trying to get your emotional volume button to shoot up to a 10 so they can put you on the defensive, make you feel guilty, not think clearly, and give in to their dysfunction.
13. **Giving in to the "then I'll kill myself" threat:** Again, your child will go to great lengths to push your emotional buttons and manipulate you. If you think he is suicidal, get him to the ER and, if he refuses, call the police. Tell your child you are taking these actions because you love him, don't want him to die, and believe he is serious when he says he is suicidal. Remember, no matter how much you screw up, God is always there, and your child won't die unless God allows it. If it is your child's time to die, nothing you can do will stop it.
14. **Isolating yourself:** Having an addicted child can be embarrassing and draining. The last thing you feel like doing is connecting with others. But make sure you connect to your spouse, other family, friends and church family. Build your own personal Board of Directors - people you can count on to encourage, support and advise you in this complex season of life.
15. **Closing the door of communication:** No matter how dysfunctional your child gets, always make sure you keep your side of the communication bridge open. Let them know you are willing to have healthy discussions with appropriate conduct and language. You're willing to discuss ways to help them get sober, be the person God designed them to be and achieve their God-given potential of a joy-filled, peace-full, life.
16. **Thinking that God abandoned you:** God is always present, but He will still give your child free will. God will try to narrow their options or allow consequences to catch their attention. Believe me, God has extended your child so much grace during the course of this addiction, trying to protect him or her from the addiction consequences, but sooner or later, God will allow the consequences to take effect and, hopefully, hitting rock bottom will change your child's decision-making process.
17. **Putting in more work than they do:** This is *their* life. Once they are past age 10 or 12, they need to be putting in at least as much energy and effort in moving their life forward as you do, if not more. Once they are 16, they definitely need to be putting in more effort than you. Addicts often trick others into putting in more effort to help their life along than they put in themselves. If you find yourself being tricked into this, stop, step back and start re-investing that energy into yourself, your spouse and your other kids/family/God.

18. **Being tricked by the “You wouldn't drug test me if you really trusted me.” trick:** Don't let them guilt you into not drug testing. Find a good urine drug test at your local pharmacy and don't be afraid to use it. Trustworthiness and credibility flew out the window when they started making poor decisions to use drugs. They are acting like a little kid who can't resist the cookie, so they need to be supervised and checked accordingly. Also, the urine tests are not punitive, but part of the accountability and safety enhancers to keep them motivated and pointed in the right direction and not falling back onto a destructive path. Random tests are best so they can't plan accordingly. Build in appropriate rewards for clean urines, and consequences for dirty (drug positive) urines, and have these determined ahead of time so your emotions after the test results don't skew your ideas.
19. **Giving big rewards or the death penalty consequence too quickly:** When you set up a behavioral system or contract, rewards for good decisions and consequences for poor decisions are essential components. We often feel compelled to produce incredible results quickly, so we come up with extreme rewards and consequences to catch the attention of our child. So they immediately get kicked out with a dirty drug test. Or they get a new car or college paid for if they are good for a week. Skills take a while to build, so extreme rewards and consequences should only come after a continuous track record.
 - a. Start small, then for example, if they are clean for a year, are showing consistent progress, and can handle more freedom, then you can pay for a semester of community college and assess how they manage that privilege, temptation, and responsibility.
 - b. You want to be fair to you and your child and make the reward and consequence really in line with what they are accomplishing and the skills they have.
 - c. If your 13 y.o. child does great at video car driving or at a go-go cart event, you don't give them the keys to the real car. But you can reward them with praise, an ice cream, paying for another go-go cart outing, taking them to a ball game, or \$10 to their car insurance when it's time.

Obviously, these aren't the only traps, but most of the others are variants of these. If you can navigate these mines, you should be able to handle most of the other obstacles well.

Conclusion

Here at Lighthouse Network, our hearts go out to you and your family. Having a child with an addiction might be one of the most difficult issues anyone ever has to deal with short of the death of their child. The helplessness you feel can be overwhelming especially if you are trying to understand and manage it on your own.

Please reach out to God, grow your relationship with Him, then start to understand how He will work in this situation to impact your child, you, and the people you touch. We can't predict the future, so don't. Just try to manage the present and only the elements you can control.

Know that you are not alone. God is with you, and many parents have traveled this difficult path. Equipping yourself and making good use of the resources and knowledge gained by others will comfort, encourage and bring hope, then equip and provide strategy for you to do your best in the areas where you have some control and accept the areas where you have none.

Over my career, I have seen many miracles in the most desperate and seemingly hopeless situations. I am not going to lie - I have also seen a number of tragic situations as well. The most important piece of advice is one that has helped me when I was in trouble in my addiction and in jail: *"You (God) will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is fixed on you, because he trusts in Thee."* Isaiah 26:3

It took me a while to get it - to learn to trust God rather than in my own ways. This one simple principle and skill has changed my life. It will also change the impact your child's addiction has on you.

Resources

Free Lighthouse Network Helpline: 1-844-Life-Change (844-543-3242), for help navigating the system and finding treatment for your child. I started Lighthouse Network for the very purpose of bringing hope and helping people find the right treatment for their loved ones:

- <http://lighthousenetwork.org/services/addiction-and-counseling-helpline/>

Email or call me, Karl Benzio, MD, with your questions or prayer requests:

- KBenzio@LighthouseNetwork.org
- Cell: 215-630-8846

Intervention—a very specific meeting to help convince your child to go to treatment:

- <http://lighthousenetwork.org/interventions-step-by-step/>

Not Alone Radio Minute—tips and encouragements specifically for parents of addicts:

- <http://lighthousenetwork.org/ln-radio-short-features/>

Parenting addicts tips and articles to help in specific areas:

- <http://lighthousenetwork.org/free-resources-for-parenting-addicts/>

Stepping Stones Daily Devotional—equipping for personal growth, tackling everyday life with practical insights:

- Sign up for email delivery Monday through Saturday
- <http://lighthousenetwork.org/stepping-stones/>

“Life Change with Dr. Karl” Radio Minute—a biblical and scientific view of addiction and mental health issues:

- <http://lighthousenetwork.org/life-change-with-dr-karl/>

Community Parent Support Groups:

- Celebrate Recovery—Christian support for your personal growth and adversity management: www.celebraterecovery.com
- Tough Love or BILY—Because I Love You—Secular support for parents of troubled children: <http://www.bily.org>
- Al-Anon—Off-shoot of AA but specifically for the family members of addicted loved ones: <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org>

Books for sale by other organizations:

- Hit By A Ton of Bricks by John Vawter (many parents of addicts telling their stories): http://www.amazon.com/Hit-Ton-Bricks-Youre-Childs-ebook/dp/B00M0DTYRU/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1418145757&sr=8-1&keywords=hit+by+a+ton+of+bricks

- Detour Through Hell by Danny Velasco (the story of how a lifestyle of glamour and excess led to heroin addiction and homelessness): http://www.amazon.com/Detour-Through-Hell-Danny-Velasco/dp/057803025X/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8

Helpful DVDs, books and resources for sale by Lighthouse Network:

- Many DVDs covering addictions other mental health issues: <http://lighthouse-network.org/store/training-products/>
- Curriculum to be a Godly decision-maker and be transformed (used in Lighthouse Christian programs): <http://lighthouse-network.org/store/video-curriculum/>
- Books about individual recovery from addiction: <http://lighthouse-network.org/books/>
- Special awareness bracelets that make great gifts and prayer prompters: <http://lighthouse-network.org/store/jewelry/>