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Season 01. Episode 10

Podcast Title: The greatest barrier is stigma, AKA ignorance

In this episode, I discuss how the stigma associated with alcohol and drug abuse is the greatest barrier to healing at the personal and societal level.

Believe it or not, even with all the research and publicity surrounding alcoholism and addiction, there is still these myths that say:

All you gotta do is say no.

Straighten up and fly right

It's a matter of will power

It's a sign of weakness

It's a moral failing

A few nights in jail will straighten them out

It's a lifestyle choice...a bad one, but still a choice

Do some of you remember a TV ad campaign for the Partnership for a drug-free America that showed a young woman holding up an egg and saying this is your brain...then she breaks the egg into a pan and scrambles it and says: this is your brain ... on drugs.

Great idea, perfect metaphor. One of my all-time favorite ads. It made people cringe, especially those who had a loved one in the family who was a drug addict. What did it do for the drug addict? Nothing. Why? Because with active addicts, all of whom, I said all, are in denial, they don't even pay attention...I know I didn't and I was just a garden variety alcoholic addict.

After extensive research, The Partnership made a decision years later that shifted the focus of their multimillion dollar ad campaign from trying to change addict behavior to dealing with that invisible but real barrier: changing societal attitudes about addiction, overcoming, smashing, destroying the myth, the stigma that persists stubbornly in people's heads to this very day.

I was lucky to have been part of this new campaign which my ad agency was chosen to launch after a competition to see who had the most compelling campaign. Should I mention my ad agency? OK..it was and is BVK...if you want to look us up, go ahead at BVK.com. I am still grateful that I was chosen to represent our firm as the senior account planner, along with an incredible artist and producer Terri B. Imagine me as a thinker, a broken down old drunk who experienced the miracle of recovering his brain function, or enough of it to become a useful member of society.

Why am I telling you this? Well herein lies a great lesson for some of you who have yet to jettison your old ideas about addiction, and you may be holding on to those old ideas, but I guarantee you the result of that will be more pain and confusion, and you will be of little help to the addict you love and to your family as a whole.

Our campaign didn't beat around the bush. We came straight at the stigma.

Imagine a young woman staring into the camera. She looks to be in her late 20's, ragged around the edges, and you are not sure if she is still using drugs or not. A small title beneath her face shot says: Amelia, addict and she says, I need treatment, not jail. She then says: we have thousands of addicts in jail where we

spend millions housing them and then they get out and go right back to using. It would be way better if we changed our attitudes as a society so that we could treat addicts the way we treat any disease, and we would save millions of dollars and thousands of lives.

Other TV commercials and ads, example:

A young 30-ish guy says: I'm a sick person, not a bad person

Another one: a young woman says : if I had cancer would you judge me?

And so on...

What was different about this approach?

1. It was directed to an entirely different audience: the general public as opposed to addicts, and also to the people who might be more directly affected by having an addict in the family member.
2. It took on the stigma directly by having you empathize perhaps for the first time ever that addicts are not the "other" but human beings like you and me.
3. It tried to change the conversation from punishment to treatment, from judgment to caring, from addicts being bad people to being sick people and who believe it or not, deserve treatment, just like someone who has cancer or diabetes.

I sometimes introduce myself at my recovery meetings this way: hi I'm Bruno and I'm an alcoholic addict and addicted to my opinion...I always get a chuckle with that one.

One thing I came to believe over the last years both as a recovered addict and as an observer of social science research in my profession is this:

One of the most difficult things people are faced with in their lives is to change the way they think. Our cherished opinions become part of our identity. Just look at our politics today...identity politics rules the day.

So when my view of the world, my worldview as some call it, is challenged, when my cherished opinion is challenged, it rocks my identity...especially if my opinion is strongly and tightly held, and fits neatly into the tapestry of my belief system. If I believe that stopping the use of drugs is just a matter of willpower, it will take a lot

to change my mind. To understand that by the time the person is addicted, he has lost his power of choice and his behavior is compulsive, overriding any will he might still possess to not do this.

Me and my opinion are inseparable...uh oh.

I think you would be able to say whether a person was a liberal or conservative with just a few questions and would be able to predict that person's opinion on several other topics. Why is that?

Because that person's world view, to be make sense in his eyes, requires that he also believe other things are logical strands woven into the tapestry of his beliefs.

And it is also important to him, of course, that he has social support for his beliefs...reinforcement without which he would be hard pressed to defend, as those beliefs are part of his social aka social media identity.

Are you bored yet?

Well, if you believe that drug addicts are being coddled and we need stronger enforcement, would you call that a liberal or would you call that a conservative opinion?

What about you as a parent or sibling or close friend or colleague of a known addict?

Do you have it in your heart to change the way you think about his addiction?

Can you have compassion for his state of mind, knowing now that his brain is damaged and he is in the grip of a disease, that he is channeling the disease and not thinking clearly, that he lies so as to protect his ability to continue his using?

NO? It's hard isn't it?

You *can* change the way you think, if you haven't already done so.

What you may need at this point is help in making a truly well-informed decision about what to do in this stage of your life.

That's where we can help, here at SafeHouse Rehab Thailand where we stand ready 24/7 to answer any we mean any question you could possibly have about the possible options open to you and your loved one. Just contact us at

info@safehouserehab.com or visit safehouserehab.com and if you like, call the number that matches the country you are calling from. Local call, any time or day, just like that.

We offer a life-changing experience in the perfect environment for recovery. And we also offer a \$1,000 airfare allowance to make it that much closer.

This is the kind of help your loved may need, compassion and caring in the right way.

Some say that when you show compassion for the addict, you're just a bleeding heart and excusing his actions. You are NOT excusing his actions. You are EXPLAINING his actions...and that is a fairly simple thing...this is what addicts say and do...they are in the grips of a disease that

1. Tells them they do not have a problem. It's the only disease I know of that tells the affected one that he has no disease. To an addict, denial is a river in Egypt.
2. Has him blaming others, or bad luck, or someone out to get him, for his misfortunes in life. And there are so many misfortunes.
3. Has you sympathizing with him, nodding your head in some agreement to the point where ... he thinks he can ask you for money.
4. Shifts the focus from his drug abuse as the problem, to YOU as the problem, because you are in the way...either he gets pissed off at you for not lending him money which he will never pay back...never, or you won't give him the car or drive him to his dealer, aka as his friend, or you won't bail him out of jail...it goes on and on.

What we say in recovery is that our bad behavior is explained by our disease, but *it does not excuse it either.*

And just like growing up, or growing up decades after we were supposed to have grown up...we ARE a case of arrested development...there is that part of the 12 step program that has us making DIRECT amends not to ask for or get forgiveness (that's different right?) but to own up to what we did, to the people we have harmed, to hold ourselves finally accountable, and this is very important: to not condemn ourselves either.

We do not grovel. We look you in the eye and pay back the money, acknowledge the lies and hurt we caused, express a sincere apology and strive not to repeat the same mistakes. The main object is to sweep our side of the street clean.

When we were drinking and using, when an addict is using he is an infantile personality, thin-skinned, hypersensitive to criticism, a king baby, domineering yet dependent. He craves your approval and he has a very low opinion of himself, but projects arrogance and rigidity.

We've said this before: he is an egomaniac with an inferiority complex.

So addicts can be thoroughly unlikeable people. Or they can, like chameleons, morph into someone you feel is a "nice guy" because he works so hard to be liked and fit in because what you think of him is the most important thing in the world...he does after all not think very highly of himself.

Easy to judge this guy, right? But if you were fully cognizant that all of the behavior I just described is driven, determined, characteristic and symptomatic of addictive disorder, you might see it differently, right?

In other words, if not for this disease, would this person still act this way? How would we know?

Well, we DO know. We compare the who we once were with who we are now.

There are few addicts who wouldn't nod their heads to the portrayal of the person I described.

This is what we say in our recovery language:

...what it was like, what happened and what we are like now...

so many of our personal stories of redemption follow this simple structure: to shine the light on what we used to do, what was the event that brought about surrender, and what is life like today, sober and grateful and giving something of ourselves back just to stay clean and sober if nothing else.

All that said, there is still a powerful societal stigma associate with alcohol and drug addiction...more so with drug addiction...

That is kinda weird, don't you think? Like it's more Ok to be an alcoholic than it is to be a drug addict. What if you are like me, both?

Now you know I doesn't make sense, that it doesn't have to to be real, just like racial or gender bias.

And this prejudice, this bias, this stigma is more important than maybe you think.

Hate to break the news this way, but your own preconceptions about addiction could be standing in the way of getting an accurate assessment of your loved one's problem, so instead of being mad at him, you should get mad at his disease, and get help for him, because again, you cannot do this one your own...it's way bigger than you and your addict son will ever be.

In the bigger scheme of things, too, at the societal level, this is what the experts at shatterproof.org and the Milken institute of Future Health say about stigma:

Quote:

"The BIGGEST driver of our country's addiction crisis is The UNJUST stigma associated with substance abuse disorders..."

I repeat: above

Stigma equals prejudice

Stigma equals bias

Stigma equals misunderstanding

Stigma equals contempt, even hate

What does a drug addict look like, in your head?

The odds are that the addict is way more likely to be a 30-something decent looking white boy...no what you thought, maybe.

This whole issue of the myths surrounding addiction is very important to me as you can tell...that's why I decided to call my podcast Busting Addiction and Its Myths. I can't bust addiction literally but I can help arrest it as in You're Busted! And I can sure help explode those dangerous myths that might be keeping addicts enslaved unnecessarily in my humble opinion.

So what are things we learned today?

1. The typical myth is that somehow an addiction is a moral failing and that the addict just needs to exert his will power to “get over it.”
2. Some of us need to change the way we think if we are to be truly helpful, that is to see addicts as sick people, not bad people. But not to excuse their actions either. We are not all there yet.
3. We stay addicted to our opinions, because our opinions are a part of our identity.
4. The biggest driver of our drug abuse epidemic is “the UNJUST stigma associated with substance abuse disorder.”

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