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Season 02. Episode 11

Intervention Done Badly, or Not.

I can't tell you how many people have come up to me in the past decade and have asked me to lead an intervention like they see done on TV.

The reality is that an intervention is not a reality show. I want to shed some light on the when and the how as it relates to an intervention, especially if you don't want to or can't hire a professional. I shall address the when and the how momentarily.

One thing that leads to failure is to think that a one-on-one intervention has any chance of working. The odds are close to zero. First the intervener has had no training, and the second factor in failure is the fact that alcoholics and addicts are skilful manipulators.

In their excellent book entitled Love First, the authors Debra and Jeff Jay (no relation to your host) make the point that dealing with alcoholism or addiction effectively - whether in the family, in a treatment setting, or in Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous – is all about working in groups.

The power of the group can triumph over the power of addiction.

That is worth repeating, underlining and putting in capital letters.

One-on-one, an addict can manipulate even a well-trained addictions counsellor, but not an educated group.

I remember as if it were yesterday fooling a well-meaning addictions counsellor who actually lent me her AA book Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. I had her convinced that I was what she called a High Functioning Alcoholic. I had never heard that term and perhaps I fit one of the many types of alcoholics listed in her book somewhere.

If she only knew that I was already circling the drain, that I was not only getting crazy drunk every night and smoking dope and taking pain pills because I was so wrecked, I couldn't sleep so I needed to be knocked out. And I did this over and over and over, and I stayed drunk and high all weekend.

Karen, my counsellor - bless her sincere heart – called me high functioning because she was judging me on the surface I presented. I was still working as a senior executive at an ad agency, and I had come to her because I was “wondering if I was an alcoholic”, and I wanted to know what do about my situation, as I was worried about my job performance. In the back of my head, I was thinking that one day they would fire me. And they did.

Before that actually happened, I was still dressing well, driving a nice car and had the package going, but it was hell keeping up a normal front. So here I was, a real conundrum: looking OK, wanting to know if I was an alcoholic, but near the end, nearing my bottom which came a few weeks later when I did get fired. For real. A six-figure job in the early nineties when six figures had a single guy living like a prince. A drunken prince no less.

One-on-one, I had Karen believing almost the opposite of the truth. I didn't even know the truth myself, not quite yet. I kept Karen's copy of the book. Her name is written in pencil on the inside. Sometimes when I open her book, I think back kindly on her sweetness, kindness and sincerity and I also feel a twinge of regret that I fooled her at the time. Denial is such a powerful force.

Fooling a group is really difficult and nigh unto impossible. I know, because I tried. In early recovery when I attended group therapy sessions - in addition to AA meetings, which are not considered group therapy, for reasons I shall explain in a moment – what would happen is that each member of the group would get to sit in the hot seat, and you were then subject to a rigorous examination of your version of the truth, your motives, your dishonesties. You were always asked “what's the pay-off”? By that I mean that there was always some reward for your bs attitude and behaviour. The usual answer? Shift the blame, avoid a confrontation, avoid working for something, getting something for nothing, and if you're a male, getting sex by lying and being disrespectful.

I still cannot believe how awfully I behaved with respect to the innocent, sincere women I made friends with for dishonourable reasons. You end up violating everything you used to believe in.

So, if I started to rationalize about my bs behaviour, I was quickly, directly and decisively called on my lies or my sophistry. Defined as clever but fundamentally unsound and deceitful thinking.

Little chance to escape the truth in that kind of setting – people can see others a lot more clearly than they can see themselves. And if you have a counsellor who gives license to members of the group to splay each other wide open like that, then that's the kind of pain that gives rise to healing. Group therapy is the most perfect example of the phrase: the truth hurts. And also: ye shall know the truth, and it shall set you free. The knowledge of the truth is a mighty beginning on the path to freedom. Of course, you don't know any of that when you start your journey.

The important thing to remember is to understand that groups are the driving force behind intervention and that the first word in the Twelve Steps is *we*.

AA calls itself a “we” program which acknowledges that an addict or alcoholic rarely, if ever, can get clean and sober on his own.

The when. Whenever the family is united in the need to intervene before “It's too late” in their minds, when they're fed up, when lives are endangered, when the welfare of children is at stake, when they themselves have hit their own bottom – that's when they are ready to take steps toward an intervention.

The four pillars of a successful intervention- credit the authors of Love First – are as follows:

1. The family is united through education and open, honest communication. Reading the book Love First, A Family's Guide to Intervention together is a good start, and a real eye-opener into the mind of the addict/alcoholic.
2. The addicted person hears how much her family loves her.
3. The family members have the opportunity to explain how the addiction has affected them and
4. The addict learns that the family will support recovery but not addiction.

Two other factors come into play in a successful intervention. One, the family has taken the time to learn about the process of addiction, to learn how addicts think, and are able to look at things with an informed perspective; that the addict isn't evil, they are just sick.

The second factor is that the addict/alcoholic hears, likely for the first time, in very specific terms how much she is loved.

This is a quote from the book *Love First*: “Most of us will live and die and never experience a time when the people we care about come together in one room, at one time, to tell us how much they love us, and why.”

Now there is stated a truth that takes my breath away.

Fact is that an addict can deny almost anything but the one thing she can usually not deny is the fact that the family actually does love her. Love is the most powerful force that is able to bust through the denial. Hence the title of the book: *Love First*.

The addict then hears how her addiction has affected the family in honest yet loving terms. There is no anger or blaming, no judgment.

The addict alcoholic also hears the closing statement: that everyone in the group is willing to support only recovery, but no one else is willing to help him stay sick. The consequences of not accepting help - often the family has a treatment centre standing by to receive the addict that very day – are that the addict will no longer be able to take advantage of the enabling he has contrived to squeeze out of his family. It might mean cutting off the money supply or having him moving out of his rent-free apartment. This where the resolve of the family comes into play.

I intervened with my own daughter just that way, and three weeks later, after she was looking at no more free car and apartment, she checked herself into a treatment centre in Austin, Texas. Then blamed me for her predicament. That didn't last too long, but it was funny to me at the time.

So, what did we learn today?

1. Intervention can easily be mishandled if the family is not educated about the proper approach, and it should rarely, if ever, be done one-in-one.
2. The power of the group is well understood in recovery, and it is the principal means by which an intervention should take place.
3. The power of love cuts through denial, and the addict learns perhaps for the first time how much the family loves her.
4. Learning how her addiction had affected each family member and the fact that the family will support *only* recovery sets up the either/or choice the addict is asked to take.
5. The family simply must be prepared for a failed intervention and also be prepared to enforce the consequences. It is well-known that “failed” interventions succeed later, as was the case with my own daughter many years ago.

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