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Season 02. Episode 06

Brain Damage – Not In My Family.

Let's start with one of the most famous cases involving brain damage, and that is the case involving Aaron Hernandez. For those who may not know it and are perhaps tuning in from a country outside the US, Aaron Hernandez was the youngest American football player ever drafted, and at 19, he was already seen as a future superstar and had been awarded a \$40 million contract in his second year with a top team in the NFL – the New England Patriots - for the record.

He was a fierce warrior on the field and played hard off the field as well. He was known as a big time marijuana user and boozier even at the University of Florida where he had established himself as a college superstar and part of a crowd of “untouchables” who apparently got away with anything and everything because, you see, Division One college football is the biggest revenue generator you could possibly imagine. And if you're a national champion, you have the power to recruit the very best high school players in the land.

So, what happened to Aaron?

Many of you know the story: he was convicted of murdering his best friend Oden Lloyd, went to prison and while appealing his conviction he committed suicide in his cell. He left behind his fiancé and a little daughter.

Here is where the learning starts: when the scientists commissioned to take a close look at his brain for signs of CTE – chronic traumatic encephalopathy - due to multiple hits to the head – they were shocked to see the massive amount of damage trauma to his brain showed.

Go ahead and Google the three letters CTE, and you'll find a clear definition of it. You will see autopsy photos of healthy vs brains damaged by CTE...it is absolutely shocking.

Here's how CTE is defined by the NIH in the USA, and it lines up almost perfectly with the problems associated with addiction:

CTE is a neurodegenerative disease caused by repeated head injuries. In other words, hundreds of hits to the head, even while wearing a football helmet, will cause CTE...this is a huge issue now all the way from high school football right up to the pros, active and retired.

Further, quote: symptoms include behavioural problems CHECK (committing murder is the worst behavioural problem you can think of), erratic mood swings CHECK, high and happy one minute, raging the next, and problems in thinking CHECK...they're out to get me...with the no evidence to prove that assertion.

Ok, back to Mr. Hernandez. Even though CTE is supposed to show up years after playing and getting hit in the head as a fierce offensive football player, scientists concluded that the other HUGE factor in the man's damaged brain was the massive amounts of high-strength dope and alcohol - together, at least in the same night and when he wasn't playing or practicing (which was at least 6 months of the year) that Aaron consumed. Daily and nightly, every day and every night, non-stop.

And when we examine his behaviour, we get even more clues as to the effect his drug and alcohol abuse had on his thinking.

I should point out that Aaron had been playing football and drinking and using all throughout his high school years, so he got an early start, say at the age of 15. Ten years later, he's done. It is very very sad for a young man to have ended up where he did.

Back to clues about his thinking. First, he always had a posse around him. Camp followers and enablers who got him his drugs and went with him to prowl the nightclubs. No one except for his girlfriend/fiancé ever said: slow down, stop if you can. It didn't help that he had tons of money to waste as he saw fit...he bought a fabulous home, had cars all over the place, rented a nice apartment to which he could bring women and party with them and drink and smoke dope with his so-called friends.

What did him in was his growing violence triggered by his mushrooming paranoia.

He was suspected, formally investigated and tried and acquitted for a murder that took place before the murder of his friend Oden.

This incident was replayed by another close friend whom Aaron was to have shot in the eye after the said incident because Aaron was said to be afraid of his friend disclosing the truth.

Here's the story as it came out in court, as described by the prosecution:

Aaron is out clubbing in Boston with a friend whom we shall call Jason. He comes into a late-night dance club (videos show this part) and is bumped by another guy and Aaron gets some liquor spilled on his jeans and becomes enraged ..I'm gonna kill that motherfucker he says...but Jason settles him down and they eventually walk out of the club, having drunk their fill and snorted some coke too.

On the way, Aaron spots the guy who bumped him also leaving the club with a friend and heading for their own vehicle parked around the corner, so those guys are now out of sight and out of danger. Or so they think.

Now driving away, Aaron in the passenger seat, Jason driving, they pull up next to the other two guys also driving away – a pure but tragic coincidence – and Aaron asks Jason to roll down the driver's side window, leans over Jason and fires several shots from a very big 44 caliber handgun and succeeds in executing both men right in their own SUV. The gun is so powerful, the bullets shatter the passenger side window and explode into the heads and necks of innocent men, immigrants from West Africa out for some fun after a hard week's work.

Wives without husbands, children without their fathers, a family without a loved one, broken forever.

A damaged brain caused not only by hits to the head but by massive amounts of drugs and alcohol. Extreme paranoia, crazy violence and narcissistic thinking that justifies such an insane and evil act.

SO: this episode is about both sides of the same coin. I wish to talk about the brain damage that is caused by excessive drinking and drug abuse, and how that explains almost everything connected to irrational, short-sighted and selfish thinking and behaviour on the part of the addict.

And I wish to talk about recovering brain health, which is a big part of what recovery is about but not talked about enough, in my opinion anyway.

Alcoholism and drug addiction are seen as mental illnesses...now that is really hard for people –especially for those who love an addict/alcoholic and for addicts themselves - to swallow.

Here's what the NIH National Institutes of Health and NIDA which stands for National Institute on Drug Abuse, Part of the NIH, says about addiction and it could not be any clearer as to its scientific definition: quote

“Addiction is defined as a complex brain disorder and a mental illness.” close quote

It is characterized by repeated use of drugs and an inability to stop despite harmful consequences to health, to relationships especially family, to career, to finances, to self-esteem - and to one's standing in the community.

It is also characterized by poor, short-sighted and self-centred, dishonest decision-making where you the parent or wife are the problem because you are in the way of his next drink or hit. So, his drug use is not the problem – you are the problem.

Blaming and attacking others for being the cause of his awful life or depression and anxiety, or for his being fired or arrested is his stock in trade.

He is astonishingly heedless of the effect of his drug abuse and/or drinking have on the people who love him and want the best for him.

That's all because he is operating with a damaged brain. If he does or says something normal, that's either because he is desperately trying to look normal for one minute at great effort – for a self-centred reason, or it's a total coincidence so don't get your hopes up.

BUT the good news is that it is possible to recover from most, not all, of the brain damage. Some brain atrophy is irreversible. The younger you the addict were when you started using, the greater the odds of unrecoverable brain damage. The same holds true the longer you were abusing drugs and/or drinking to excess.

But here is the hope that we offer at SafeHouse Rehab...and quite honestly, we hope you find the professional you and your loved one need wherever you choose. Just make sure the options you consider qualify on all four pillars of brain health: 1. In patient treatment and cognitive behavioural therapy, CBT, has the effect of establishing neural pathways lost to addiction or never there to begin with. 2. A healthy and varied diet rich in dopamine, I. e. brain food, brings needed nutrition to the brain that was denied it during those careless using and drinking days. 3. A program of vigorous exercise and focus on fitness will allow the endorphins to kick in and offer a natural mood lift. 4.

Mindfulness meditation and applied brain technologies like our wellness module are scientifically proven to shorten withdrawal time and boost recovery of brain health.

There's no sense blaming the gym if you're out of shape...which means that for recovery of brain health, i.e. establishing healthy thinking patterns, the client must totally surrender his old ways of thinking at the door, and jump in with both feet and cooperate.

So, what have we learned today?

1. Much as we resist the thought as anathema to our way of thinking, addiction is a complex brain disorder and a mental illness as defined by the best science of the day.
2. Repetitive drug use and/or drinking to excess decisively causes brain damage. The Aaron Hernandez case is an extreme example of how CTE + drug and alcohol abuse conspired to cause massive brain damage resulting in paranoia and extreme violence.
3. Expect active addicts to make good decisions is like going to the hardware store expecting to find bread. Not going to happen. The addict is walking around with a damaged brain. Like it or not.
4. Most brain damage is reversible with cognitive therapy, diet, exercise, and mindfulness therapy and new technologies proven to help the recovery of brain health.

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