



SafeHouse
a modern approach to recovery

You can listen to all SafeHouse Podcasts at:

<https://safehouserehab.com/safehouse-podcasts/>



Season 04. Episode 04

Podcast Title: Stigma Kills

I am Bruno J and I do hope you are doing well during these challenging and often sad times. Life becomes that much more difficult when you combine a raging virus, economic insecurity, and the presence of addiction in your family.

So, I would like to call this episode Stigma Kills

First, I will quote some news from a well-regarded not for profit organization in the US called ShatterProof whose ambitious mission is to change the way society views and treats - or mistreats- addiction as a huge public health issue.

It turns out that one in three US families are affected by substance use disorder, now known as SUD. That makes it 43 million households and potentially 107 million people affected by this disease either directly or indirectly.

The disheartening fact is that only one in ten seek treatment for SUD, which leaves almost 40 million families adrift.

What's going on here, even knowing that Substance Use Disorder is the third-leading cause of preventable death in the United States?

It's about Stigma. Stigma prevents those who abuse drug or alcohol from seeking help.

Here's what Jerome Adams, Surgeon General of the United States, says about stigma:

"The biggest killer out there is stigma. Stigma keeps people in the shadows. Stigma keeps people from coming forward and asking for help. Stigma keeps families from admitting there is a problem."

I will add here, and this is based on my direct experience, that there is a great deal of needless shame associated with having a family member affected by addictive disorder. "What will people think?"

(Important to keep this a secret until you can't keep it secret anymore.)

What an advanced society we live in.

Here's what a recovering gentleman named Rodolfo M. says about Self-Stigma: "My stigma meant that I accepted and internalized negative stereotypes about myself. This had to change. I had to accept my diagnosis and follow my treatment plan to get better just like any illness. I am not morally flawed, nor am I stupid or self-destructive".

Public Stigma means that negative attitudes and fears isolate those with addiction. Isolation is a killer in and of itself. Families become frantic trying to reach their loved one; isolation travels with mental illness along with addiction; it leads to low self-worth, depression, and self-harm in the extreme.

Then there is stigma against medication for those in treatment, the belief, the myth, that medications "trade one addiction for another". Emily B., a recovering addict, has this to say: "A lot of people don't consider someone sober if they are on medications, but I am more productive, more hardworking, and much more attentive. Different things work for different people".

Structural stigma takes yet another shape. This is the type of stigma that excludes those with addiction from opportunities and resources. I ran into this myself a while ago. My employer feared that I would not be able to handle myself on a long business trip knowing that I had undergone treatment a year prior. It all worked out, but I have to tell you I felt hurt that he didn't show the trust that I thought I had earned.

An example of structural stigma from another quarter comes from Audrey C. Audrey states: "There are many barriers to treatment and most of the domestic violence survivors I know cannot access recovery resources that are helpful and supportive".

In other words, if you are an addict, even clean and sober now, your history would disqualify you from getting other help that you so desperately need. That is oh so cruel.

It's amazing to me that after all this good, accurate education about alcoholism and addiction, there is still such a huge stigma surrounding this topic.

Even when the science is indisputable, that addiction is a chronic disease that changes the brain, we want to believe that that's not true; it's just too much to swallow. Your addict is walking around with a damaged brain; should you be trusting him to come back home on time and with all the groceries you needed and change from the \$50 you gave him?

Reminds me of an old Al Anon saying: "Don't go to the hardware store and expect to find bread".

We have these expectations that our loved one will somehow snap out of it and start acting normally. Reality is that once the disease gets embedded, it only gets worse, never ever better left untreated. It is gospel that *Addiction is a Progressive Disease*.

What is baffling to many is that, with alcohol for example, free choice played a role initially whether or not to drink, how much, and when. We alcoholics are taught that at some point; however, we *had lost the power of choice* and that's when drinking (or using drugs) became compulsive.

So, this is what happens in a family that is not yet educated in the ways of addictive disease.

This is what I call the Dancing with the Devil and Don't Even Know It part.

Mom realizes at some point that her Jimmy is slipping away. He smoked marijuana in high school and when caught with it, was able to slip out of it, minimize his use, say that he smoked only now and then with his friends, when in fact he got stoned and stayed stoned most of the day.

So, his mom saw his grades start to suddenly slip badly in his junior year of high school. Maybe the extra stress of his parent's divorce or another life-changing event triggered his desire to escape an unpleasant reality.

Then the stigma kicks in for mom. She suspected, perhaps was even convinced, that Jimmy was an addict, but now she's terrified about admitting it. And if she has a husband at home, he might be the type to kick Jimmy out as soon as he's 18.

What the family doesn't know is that all the things that they think will help Jimmy kick it are well-intentioned - yes they do love him -but these actions are woefully misguided and the family ALL ends up dancing with the devil and don't even know it.

DENIAL is an acronym that stands for Don't Even Notice That I Am Lying...that's how insidious this disease can be.

Fear, resentment, anger, dishonesty, blaming, shaming (this is the worst one), loss of self-worth (how stupid of me), jail, economic insecurity enter the family and they strongly feel that they can't be their old selves ever again. Stigma and fear of loss of face keep it all a secret and block any move to seek help.

The illusion we have in our society is that we are a do-it-yourself nation. We are rugged individualists who carry the weight of the world on our own shoulders. We abhor collective action. We worship the bankrupt ideology of Ayn Rand whose books now belong in the shredder.

We need each other now more than ever.

The heroic people at ShatterProof are instigating collective action toward destigmatizing addiction so that more families will see the light and gain the courage to seek help, and to promote legislative and community action to decriminalize non-violent drug offenses so that young people get help and not end up in jail.

The family needs to understand that the stigma is just another Myth waiting to be smashed, that addiction is a serious business and that it only gets worse if left untreated. There is mighty powerful treatment that will arrest the progress of the disease.

There are superbly trained addictions specialists, MD's who are trained in the field, counsellors known as AODA's (Alcohol or Drug Addiction), there is Al

Anon, Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and more help if you need it and want it.

What did we learn today?

1. One of the strongest barriers to seeking help with an addiction is the stigma associated with the concept of "addiction".
2. Much of our society still sees addiction as a moral failing and that addicts need to be locked up, not helped.
3. Addiction is not seen by our society as a valid disease that causes the addict to lose his power of choice and engage in purely compulsive behaviour, heedless to the consequences.
4. The whole family becomes sick with the twisted emotions and dishonesties that obliterate normal life when there is an addict "in the house".
5. Families have more help available than they realize if they care to educate themselves on the possibilities for reaching out and truly helping the one, they love. www.aa.org and www.al-anon.org
6. Supporting organizations such as www.shatterproof.org can go a long way to bringing help, not punishment, to those who still suffer.