



SafeHouse
a modern approach to recovery

You can listen to all SafeHouse Podcasts at:

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



Season 04. Episode 09

Podcast Title: You're the Addict, Not Me

I'm Bruno J.

I've spoken in earlier episodes about the idea the whole family becomes sick when there's an active addict or alcoholic in your midst. Even if the loved one is currently recovering, the disease has done so much damage over the years (yes, years) that it takes a long time, if ever, before its effects are acknowledged and even longer to repair the damage. Some damage lasts a lifetime.

An example of the point just now is what happened on my own journey of recovery which started in 1993, 27 years ago if you are listening to this in 2020.

Part of recovery in a 12-step program - and I hasten to add that 12-step programs do not have an exclusive claim on recovery - is to do what is known as a 4th and 5th step, which has us do an autobiography of our life with a focus on our shortcomings which caused damage to the people in our lives. The lies, the stealing, the hostility, the unjustified blaming, and so on. This part of the process lays the groundwork for growing up and holding ourselves accountable, as sick people, not as bad people.

We are not off the hook at that point by any means. If anyone says to you: "Oh those AA people just make excuses for their immoral behaviour and messed-up lives". The truth is quite the opposite. There's a reason for our behaviour and there is the need for accountability. The reason is that we were in the grip of a powerful disorder that robbed us of the power of choice, but it is not an excuse, either. That's where accountability comes in.

After we acknowledge the wrongs we have done, we literally make a list of the people we have harmed and go forward to make direct amends to *all the people we have harmed*, a little or a lot. If we have to pay them back, we pay them back, if only a little at a time. If we were unfair or unkind or neglectful to our family, we own up to it and promise to mend our ways...and this time we actually mean it.

There are some things that one cannot ever repair, and our teachers in AA wisely acknowledge this truth.

One thing I cannot repair is the psychological damage I inflicted on my young daughter with my absences and neglect and the lies I felt I needed to tell while I was drinking and using. My choice of girlfriend who hated my kid and how I didn't stand up for my kid still hurts to think about. My daughter and I have a wonderful relationship today, thanks more to her forgiving nature than to my commitment to be a good, loving father every day.

One day, years ago, as my daughter and I were discussing our family history, she said in the most casual way: "Dad, of course I am an ACOA and have gone to some of those meetings and talked about it to my therapist, too".

OCOA stands for Adult Child of an Alcoholic. There are millions of adults who grew up in an alcoholic or drug-abusing family, and most have no idea that the family disease of addiction and alcoholism has damaged their psyches, has crushed their self-esteem, and has them responding to life in unhealthy ways.

In some cases, the pain caused by their mom's and/or dad's insane behaviour has them seeking refuge in substances that will numb their thoughts and feelings of anger, shame, and desperation. Keep in mind that many of today's addicts started their using careers right under their parent's noses.

In other cases, the parents brought their children into a using life by making addictive or drunken behaviour totally normal.

The after-effects of living in a dysfunctional family include severe co-dependency where the adult child feels overly responsible for the behaviour of others and becomes easy prey for manipulative people. Then there is the tendency to choose absolutely the wrong partner because the potential partner's behaviour is somehow familiar.

I happen to agree with the assertion among many experts that ACOA's can't recognize normal. So, the guy who is behaving more like the woman's drunken father actually might look the most "normal" guy in the world. It's what she is used to. I used to joke with my daughter that it would be a good idea if she ended up with a man who was the exact opposite of her dad.

That digression aside, let's first examine what's likely been happening in your own home if you've been living with an addict or alcoholic, under the same roof or not.

For many in my audience at this moment, the question and the quandary that persistently presents itself is this: what can I do, what can my family do to get our loved turned around?

I hate it when I have to say that the short answer is: "Nothing. You are dancing with the devil and you didn't even know it, and now you have to detox yourself from the effects of this disease".

The irony is that the more we tried to control our addict loved one's behaviour, the more we were drawn into behaviour that resembled the very addiction we were vainly trying to vanquish.

Perhaps this helps explain why we call alcoholism a *family disease*. The disease has caused every aspect of family life to become dysfunctional, at first in subtle ways and since the disease is progressive, it always, without exception, gets worse. After a few years of torture, the family picture is unrecognizable.

Family members end up behaving just like the addict or alcoholic without using alcohol or drugs; the vibe is toxic, trust is non-existent, drama prevails, and resentment rules the house.

The main effect of the disease is the introduction and rampant growth of co-dependency. Co-dependent behaviours and habits are self-destructive. We are reacting to people who are destroying themselves and we react by learning to destroy ourselves. These habits can keep us in destructive relationships that do not and cannot ever work.

These behaviours can also sabotage relationships that may otherwise have worked. I can testify to the fact that my cousin, who is an ACOA, drove away a perfectly nice young man because she tried to control every aspect of his life, typical behaviour of someone who grew up in an alcoholic household.

The reason I have titled this episode YOU'RE THE ADDICT, NOT ME is simply to call attention to two things: your addict loved one, if he or she is still using, will throw stuff back in your face, accusing you of the same things he is obviously guilty of, like YOU'RE THE ADDICT (I have witnessed this myself), and he or she will deny they have a problem, and make YOU the problem, *because you stand in the way* of his or her using or drinking.

Twisted but true.

What you should start thinking about, if you can relate to any of this, is to make it your mission to take much better care of yourself. I hope that you come to realize that your energy is of little use in trying to change the downward trajectory of your loved one's disease.

You have more options than you think: look up Al Anon online and find a beginner's meeting where you will find love and understanding; connect to a sponsor who will serve as your tour guide through your own recovery; buy Melody Beattie's book Co-dependent No More or get Love First, a book about intervention by Debra and Jeff Jay. Or find yourself a qualified AODA (Alcohol or Drug Addiction) counsellor. Make sure the counsellor/therapist is specifically trained in addiction; typical therapists are not qualified to deal with issues of addiction and have been known to give advice that could indeed do harm.

It is a scary thing to let go of your loved one. It feels cold and uncaring at the moment when you make the turn to taking care of yourself instead of obsessing over the addict. Here is the truth of it: all of the things you were trying to do for your loved one were well-meaning, but they were utterly misguided.

You had not yet been educated to the reality of addiction: that you are just as powerless over his addiction as he is. Once you surrender to this simple but essential truth, you begin your journey of liberation.

What did we learn today?

1. People in recovery, whether in AA or Al Anon, or other 12-step programs must hold themselves accountable for their behaviour as part of their progress in personal development and healing.
2. The after-effects of living in a dysfunctional family include co-dependency where the adult child feels overly responsible for the behaviour of others and becomes easy prey for manipulative people.
3. The irony is that the more we tried to control our addict loved one's behaviour, the more we were drawn into behaviour that resembled the very addiction we were vainly trying to vanquish.
4. Liberation from the grip of addiction on family members starts with surrender to the truth that the caregiver, the mom or wife or dad is as powerless over addiction as is the addict himself.
5. There is plenty of help available if one is at the point of "enough is enough". We caution those seeking help from a professional make sure that he or she is a qualified AODA practitioner, lest uninformed advice prolong needless suffering.