

# Understanding Addiction, Part Three: Stories From the Front Lines

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While treating a group at a recovery home, I met the wife of an actor named "Noreen," who was in treatment to deal with her alcoholism. The next week, I turned on the news and heard that Noreen had been found dead in her swimming pool. She died from an overdose of drugs and alcohol. Because her husband was a well-known actor, the story was all over the news and in the tabloids. Her husband, understanding the power of the disease that is addiction, relapse and the need for quality treatment, raised a million dollars and purchased a new building for the recovery home, which often had a waiting list.

The young son of a well-to-do couple was addicted to drugs and went from one posh treatment facility to the next, relapsing continually. The couple feared for the life of their son, who seemed incapable of becoming clean and sober. The son entered a no-frills, 12-step residential treatment facility, and went on to stay clean and sober. The couple was so grateful to the facility for the help it gave their son, they donated \$10 million to the center.

The 21-year-old son of a physician I worked with 15 years ago entered a treatment facility for his heroin addiction. While sitting in the lobby, just prior to being admitted, the son went into the bathroom to shoot up his last bit of heroin. He walked back into the lobby and collapsed from an overdose. The paramedics were called and revived him. The son remained in residential treatment for two months, and is still clean and sober today.

I have witnessed the power of addiction destroy and take the lives of many people who, for whatever reason, chose to pick up a drug or drink, not knowing it would be the one that would take their life. I have witnessed people who looked as if they would never come off of drugs, yet have stayed off of them. I have seen people who had everything going their way, and who were sober for many years, relapse. Addiction is a life-and-death disease. It affects people physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Addiction is often a family disease. It is not unusual to see multiple family members addicted to drugs or alcohol. Often, there is a parent or sibling who is not addicted, but is rather an "enabler" to the addict. The enabler is often the addict's caretaker. It is common to hear adult children of alcoholics talk about the experience of taking care of an alcoholic parent. As children, they learned how to adapt to the insanity of an alcoholic household.

The television show "Access Hollywood" was recently at a treatment facility. The hosts interviewed the son of a rock star. The father was recovering from a lengthy heroin addiction; the son was addicted to cocaine. I remember the father being in treatment 20 years ago in a hospital I worked at. I recalled the father not for his fame, but for the fact that he went into treatment programs 18 times before he was able to get clean and sober. The dad has now been in recovery for 12 years, but the son, now 23, is

unable to control his addiction. He was born addicted to methadone: a result of the mother's pregnancy. The mother was a heroin addict on methadone maintenance during her pregnancy. The previous year, while working with a group at another facility, I met the 23-year-old's sister, who also entered a treatment program for her heroin addiction.

A well-known and beloved physician who was recovering from his own addiction to opiates had a very successful private practice. He was known for the number of high-profile personalities that made up a considerable percentage of his practice. He was married, with beautiful children. After more than a decade of being clean and sober, the physician relapsed. One day, he picked up a narcotic, thinking he would take it just once. He found that he could not stop, and ended up losing his practice and everything that was important to him.

A young heroin addict/alcoholic lived under a pier in Venice Beach, California. One day, sick and tired of being sick and tired, he walked into Alcoholics Anonymous and never left. He has been clean and sober for 25 years, and is the founder and president of a Fortune 500 company. He spends much of his time giving freely to others in AA who want to stay sober.

These are only a few examples of the heartbreaking and heartfelt stories of addiction that occur every day. This is the yin and yang of addiction, in that the lives and deaths of people reflect the darkness and light of addiction and recovery. It is through the combination of hope and hopelessness that treatment facilities and 12-step programs abound and continue to flourish.

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