

STEPS FOR RECOVERY

Do I Love an Addict (part 1)

Published 10/13/2009 - 1:13 p.m. pst

First of all, the term addict in our society has a very negative connotation. It comes part and parcel with an image. The image is largely stereotyped from movies we have all seen. When we hear the word addict, the image we see is one of scruffy figures, sneaking through dark alleys or holed up in bathrooms with syringes. The image we see is winos in the street with paper bags and we fancy we can even smell the noxious fumes. The image we see is chairs flying, fists hitting, & Marlon Brando in the streets yelling "Stellaaaaaaa." We see these images when we hear the word addict, and we wonder why no-one wants to admit they have the sickness of addiction. Certainly when my fiancée said many years ago that he thought he had a 'problem' (nice word, same image) I recoiled at the very thought.

So what does the term addict really mean. It simply means someone who is addicted to a substance. It could be alcohol, some illegal drug, or some legal drug. We also extend the term addiction to encompass gambling addictions, sexual addictions, food addictions etc.. But for our purposes now, let's just focus on alcohol and drugs. With alcohol and drugs, being addicted means that of the 10 trillion cells in a person's body, that person has more cells that are addicted than cells that are not addicted.

This leaves a wide range of varying degrees of addiction, as you might imagine. We go from the person who has just tipped over the scale and has 5 trillion and 1 addicted cells, to the person who has 10 trillion addicted cells. Addicted cells, by they way, never revert to normal cells and remain addicted for the life of the cell. So when you think of our stereotyped image of the addict, you can probably see that he or she is more on the side of the 10 trillion addicted cells, than the 5 trillion and one. The more addicted cells you have, the more the substance runs your life and the more you become a slave to it. Hence the more down-and-out you look.

So what does an addict look like before he or she becomes Marlon Brando yelling Stella in a dead, unhearing alley? Truthfully, there are as many ways addicts look as there are people in the world. But there are also lots of commonalities. I can only tell you my experience, and later the experiences of others. Perhaps these will help you to see early on that your loved one has a problem. Then you can get the help you need for your life. This may or may not cause your loved one to do the same, but it certainly will help more than it hurts. And at least one of you will have a better chance at health and happiness.

For me the way it started was with lots of little petty arguments. I never saw them coming, and I never connected them to alcohol. It seemed in these arguments that I was forever being blamed or accused, and I was trying to defend against a losing battle. So one sign that addiction may be around is if you feel yourself defending all the time over nonsense and trivialities.

Had I known to look I might also have noticed that the arguments in those days tended to happen after a few beers, and they tended to happen on the weekends. Had I known I might have connected that a lot more drinking was occurring on the weekends. So if you notice more arguments as an evening or weekend rolls on, that could be a sign. You should ask yourself, has my loved one been drinking, smoking, etc. etc.

Now as for signs of intoxication, with Dave, there was never a slurring of speech. There was never a blurring of the eyes. He had in those days what they call a very 'high tolerance', and he could down a lot of alcohol with very little outward sign. Later as I was educated and able to perceive the signs I would notice a slight glossiness of his eyes- almost imperceptible, but it was there. And there would be just the tiniest of muffling of his speech. Now you would need to know Dave very intimately to see these signs, and even the average family member would never have known the difference between a sober Dave and a drunk on 8 beers Dave. Unless he or she knew that he tended to get very argumentative and sensitive- which nobody knew as it easily passed as just a bad mood.

So another thing to look for is just a recurring bad mood in someone on a regular basis.

Now this seeming not intoxicated peculiarity about Dave allowed for another oversight. For ten years I marveled at Dave's sleeping habits. The man could jump out of bed at 6 am, fresh as a daisy. He always took a shower and he always looked and smelled good. But I wondered that he could jump out of bed that early and be on his way without a groan. But then at 6:00 at night, when I was just getting going, he might well be found asleep on the couch. And you truly had a better chance of 'seeing God' than you did of waking Dave up once he

had fallen asleep. I used to struggle to get him to go to bed. Inevitably I always gave up the night and just put a blanket over him on the couch. It was not until 10 years later, when I got to know him for a brief year or two sober, that I realized he was not sleeping... He was actually passed out. No wonder I couldn't wake him up!

So another sign, if someone falls asleep at irregular times on a regular basis, they may not be sleeping, they may be passed out from drugs or alcohol.

So again I can say that with Dave, there was no real way for the layman to perceive in the early years that he had a problem and was heading for a huge fall. Had I been knowledgeable or a professional, however, there would have been one big sign. He drank a heck of a lot. On weeknights without fail he would consume anywhere from 6-8 beers. Beer was his 'drug of choice'-although this must be taken with a grain of salt because 15 years later when he could no longer hide his addiction, he quickly switched to vodka, which is less obtrusive. This is one major attribute of an addict. If he can't get one substance, he will make do with another. Addicts are not real picky and even an alcohol based mouthwash or rubbing alcohol will do to feed a desperate, 10-trillion-celled addiction.

So at any rate, Dave would drink 6-8 beers each and every night, and a couple more on the weekends, before his body took over and he passed out. And I never could figure out why, as the years dwindled down, we could never do anything much on a weekend night except stay home. But the major point to make here is... if someone drinks a lot, you can pretty much just assume they have a problem. Now I've known some weekend alcoholics who binge and lose control. I've known sporadic alcoholics who every now and then lose control, or entire days and weekends of their lives. So addiction can show up in all of these ways. But if someone drinks every day, that's a sure sign. Now I have to say here that it doesn't matter if it's alcohol, or marijuana, or cocaine, or sleeping pills... if they do it every day, that's a problem.

Now I think as young adult I had heard that thing about daily drinking somewhere, but Dave didn't really look alcoholic, and since I didn't at all trust the older generation and their assessments about drugs and alcohol, it never really clicked. And I could do a whole entry on why the older generation's arguments have no validity with the younger generation. Suffice it to say that we talk a big game to our youth, but the question remains-"If my parents can do it, why can't we?" But that's a topic I will save for another day.

So back to the signs of addiction. Another one is that addicted people hide their stash. It could be booze, pills, pot, or whatever. If you're onto someone's addiction, he or she will go into hiding. And they will lie. Every addict will lie in order to continue to drink or drug and there is a saying in the rooms of AA "How do you know an alcoholic (addict) is lying?... His lips are moving."

Now in the beginning, Dave never lied to me or hid his booze. Why not? Because I was absolutely no threat to him. He could drink right in front of me and I wouldn't say a word or raise an eyebrow. But ten years later, when he was on the start-again, stop-again roller coaster and I was beginning to see his game- he lied plenty. And my only advice to you, if someone you love has this problem, is; "If you think he's lying, he is." I say he, but of course it may just as well be a she, as there is no sex discrimination when it comes to addiction. So I will try to alternate between the two sexes when I write.

Now the other reason the addict will lie is a bit profound. You see the addict wants her drug, but she also wants you. She doesn't want to lose you- and rather than lose you, she will lie. Now many people say the addict does not want to lose you because you are the enabler. You are the strong one. You are the bread and butter. This is true. But I am a true-blue sentimentalist, and I say the addict also loves you. He or she loves you, and needs the drug. Both are powerful motivators, so of course the addict lies. So if you are ever wondering if you are loved and wanted, just look at how much your addict lies to keep you around. If you do that, you will have to concede, he or she does not want to lose you, and will do anything in the world to keep you. Except to stop drinking and drugging.

There is a lot more to say about signs of addiction and how Dave's addiction showed up in my life. But it is late and this is long, so I will save it for part two tomorrow.

But I will leave you with this. The task in loving an addict is to see it quicker, and change it sooner. And I don't mean to change him, but rather to change how you are about his sickness- to know you need help and to get it. And be assured, even knowing you need help is a huge step.

I also look down the line. I can see that as we create a critical mass of people around the addicts who see it quicker and change it sooner, the addict will need to do the same. She will have no choice because her jig will be up and there will be no-one to believe her con anymore. Now I can see that this is when a huge scale difference can be made in the disease of addiction. But all this is far down the line, and for now we just need to take care of ourselves. One person and one day at a time.

So keep coming back to my blog, and tell your friends to do the same.

Written by Second Hand Addiction specialist, writer, and spokesperson, Lorelei F.