



WHEN YOUR CHILD IS ADDICTED

by Nan Reynolds

Sometimes the hardest things we have to do as parents of adolescents who are using chemicals are the things we need to stop doing.

When you are in a relationship with someone who is operating from an addiction, there are many opportunities to be "helpful". These opportunities are all of the behaviors, attitudes, and feelings that we have been taught by our families and by religious ethics to bestow upon someone we love who is having a problem. When we try to alleviate the pain and discomfort of our children it is deemed to be kind and loving. This is normal, natural, automatic – and not at all effective if the problem is chemical dependency.

When up against the power of addiction, a logic that is the reverse of what we have been taught must be used. It holds

"PAIN IS THEIR ALARM CLOCK, THEIR CALL TO ACTION."

that doing less is really doing more. This logic states that the most loving, kind, and helpful response to addiction is to allow pain to happen and to allow the addicted persons to feel the discomfort of the consequences of their behavior. Most of us only wake up and take a different course of action when the discomfort increases. Think of a toothache and how we postpone the trip to the dentist. Think of a bad relationship or an uncomfortable workplace situation; we take action when it is more painful to stay than to change.

The conflict that evolves when we step aside and allow others to have

their pain is that it puts us outside of our own value system. It seems so unloving, so unhelpful, so uncaring. And, so "unparental". Parents are supposed to teach, protect, rescue, shield, and sooth against all adversity. Anything else can feel like failure. We do not know, or we lose sight of the fact, that really effective parenting promotes independence.

We need to fully recognize that addiction is powerful. Many of our well-intentioned, benevolent and responsible efforts are really like putting out an oil well fire with a squirt gun. Pain can be our most powerful ally. Pain can be a friend. Allowing the pain by allowing the consequences is truly the most loving and helpful response to addiction.

When you are pitted against someone's addiction (and it is important to

remember that it is not the person you are pitted against, but the addiction), you are really in battle with the person's denial, delusion, and compulsion. If lecturing and

yelling and rescuing were effective, we would not have one addict in the country!

Pain is their alarm clock, their call to action. Pain is what we have the most trouble allowing, yet it carries the greatest hope for change. Pain is not the worst thing that can happen; it can be a motivator.

The hardest behavior change for a parent is to stop taking the situation personally and to see clearly that the most effective and loving behavior is to let the child take full responsibility for bad behavior. This logic switch is truly loving, helpful, and respectful. "I do not detach from you, but I do

detach from the agony of involvement in your problem."

Our children need us to stop reacting. They need us to stop taking it personally when they are acting out of chemical use. They need us to be clear, constant, and consistent. They need us to be on the job, vigilant, and educated about what's going on. They need us to stop worrying about being popular, and they need us to present a unified front, as parents, with the "Rules of the Inn." They need us. Period.

Nan Reynolds, ACSW, MSW, RN, CACII, is Supervisor - Adolescent Substance Abuse Program at Oakland Family Services, in Michigan.

TEN GREAT THINGS ABOUT TAKING ACTION

By Stephanie Abbott

1. The sun manages to come up without your help.
2. Therapy finally kicks in.
3. You can stop apologizing for what someone else did.
4. Other people can solve their own problems or not.
5. You really know you didn't cause it.
6. The statute of limitations has expired on your old mistakes.
7. You let other people be wrong—even though you could improve things given the chance.
8. It's okay when other people can see that you and your life aren't perfect.
9. Worry is no longer a virtue.
10. You find Al-Anon, and it feels good.

Stephanie Abbott, MA, is editor of NACoA NETWORK