

SHINING A LIGHT ON HOMES OF ADDICTION

BY JO HUEY

What does a healthy family relationship look like? We only know what we've experienced in our lives, then sometimes we discover what healthy looks like. For those less fortunate, it's not a choice but a given to live the life they've been dealt. From a young age I remember having a huge amount of admiration towards my father, wanting to be his "special girl", hoping I was his favourite, trying to please him and make him happy. My Mum is a quiet, kind and thoughtful person, fairly shy and unassuming. Dad was the strong and more dominant character. Mum worked part-time as well as looking after my sister and I, we usually had a house full of students too so she was always busy doing something.

Mostly I remember my childhood was spending time with my older sister and my Mum. Dad often isolated himself from the family, he'd sit in his car and listen to

music and eat in his bedroom instead of at the table with us. This was to hide it, so we wouldn't know, so we wouldn't find out his secret.

I don't know when it started, but it went on for the best part of my childhood. He was a Jekyll and Hyde character when he was drinking, that's what it did to him. The drink made him someone else, unrecognisable from the funny, kind and sensitive person he was without it.

No one really knows what goes on inside homes of addiction so let me open up Pandora's box, because so many can be judgemental about this disease and have limited understanding about the impact on the family. I'm working to change that and this is my story.

I loved my Dad and he was someone I looked up to, I just wanted his love and

support, but he struggled to show it to me, at least not in a healthy way or very often. When he drank he became violent, we feared him. I'd often feel I had to make sure I had enough distance between him and me so I could make a quick exit and run away so he didn't hit me. Not everyone in a home of addiction experiences violence, everyone's situation is very different.

We didn't spend a lot of time together, you see the drink will always take priority, I don't know when it became an addiction for him but it certainly got worse over the years. People that have an addiction aren't scared of death, they're scared of life.

They don't know how to cope so it numbs the pain, or makes them feel a certain way. You can't just stop and it's very dangerous to do that. See it like it's their medicine, without it they'll be in pain. So you see, it's not a case of them prioritising the drug over you, it's about pain or no pain. So they take the drug to not have any pain, it's their priority and it was certainly my Dad's.

As a child I didn't understand that, I just wanted his love. I felt very on edge in my home, it's common for those living with an addict to feel like they're "walking on eggshells". You don't know how the person will react, what they'll say or do.

Money is also an issue because they spend the money on their drug of choice, we had money issues when Dad's drinking got bad. When his addiction was in full swing, the family was affected hugely. People don't realise and nowadays there is a lot of help for the addict but not much for the families.

My Dad experienced hallucinations, suffered with liver damage, developed diabetes and other health issues. We as a family developed our own issues, that of 'Co-Dependency', not that we knew that at the time.

Generally, the addicts will feel shame, blame, guilt, they lie and manipulate, they keep secrets and the family do the same but for different reasons. A family member's addiction is kept secret because of shame and embarrassment, you feel guilty you can't help the addict, you can blame yourself for the reason they're drinking etc. So treating someone's addiction involves treating the whole family.

Sadly, my Dad passed away 2 months before my 21st Birthday. After his son died in a tragic accident and he lost another son in childbirth his drinking worsened and he never recovered. Added to that was the divorce and his drinking eventually killed him. I believe he's at peace and it was just his path, the damage he left in his wake was huge but I've managed to overcome a lot of the issues I experienced with over 20 years of self-development. I now support those affected by someone's addiction and educate professionals so they're better prepared when working with families.

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Inspiring those affected by someone's addiction to seek self-confidence, self-esteem and develop self-care.

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