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# Thriving in Surviving - Compassion

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What I am compelled to share is in response to a reader who commented on an article that was written about Adam’s accidental drug overdose. My response is a bit long, but I couldn't help myself. I hope it is received with my hearts intent to shed more light and awareness. I am allowing myself to be vulnerable, to share my thoughts, to be open, taking the risk that goes along with speaking about ones own personal truth through experiences that bring about understanding where understanding wasn’t possible before the experience.

It’s difficult to understand addiction and have compassion if one hasn’t been personally or directly affected or connected to one who has struggled. It is usually a long journey and one that takes many directions. As a parent with a child who is struggling, the road is extremely difficult and challenging in every way imaginable because it’s uncharted territory and there is no set way of dealing with it, there is no road map to navigate through the unknown.

Recently there was a response from a reader to one of the articles that has been written on Adam’s untimely death and the fentanyl epidemic. It was cold and heartless (or maybe just uneducated or unexperienced), stating that a choice was made to use in the beginning and so in the end he chose his demise. A view and opinion that is her own (and probably the opinion of many,

but haven't said so directly to me), I give her that as we all have a right to express, but if she had had more information would her view be different.

Here is more information – a very short version of the very long road we travelled as a family:

Adam's challenges started as a youth navigating his way through dealing with a death sentence given to his oldest brother and all the emotions and fears that go along with being told; "your brother has terminal brain cancer and is going to die". Adam ended up self medicating his fears and heart ache with alcohol and drugs. I'm sure it didn't start out that way, as he was just having fun and experimenting like most of his friends at the time. But, as time went on and the pressures at home increased, it switched to partying with friends on weekends to something more and bigger than he could handle. He was too young to have the maturity to deal with the potential loss of his big brother, the one he looked up to as being strong, invincible and yet at any moment could leave us. He didn't know how to deal with the frailty of life, the worries, the fears and unknowns. He watched his brother slowly decline and change in appearance, personality and physical function, losing hair, sight, hearing, cognitive abilities and being limited in all areas of his life. Changing what seemed over night from the star athlete and prodigy musician to one who struggled with simple, daily tasks.

Adam was angry, he had questions, but no-one could answer them. There was just the steady ticking of the clock and he knew time was running out.

As parents, we exhausted every limited resource and support over the years doing everything we could for Adam. We found that most doors weren't

open to us. In desperation, I reached out to the ministry talking to whomever would listen.

There was a particular social worker I connected with during Adam's mid teen years begging her for help, asking for resources, support, education, intervention, options, always with the heart of wanting to 'do it right', desperate to work through it and come out successful on the other end. Her only reply was that there was nothing she could do, her hands were tied since our family wasn't on assistance, single parent or low income and that I'd have to look at private support, which we did - to no avail.

Both our boys had an illness, yet for years I saw it in this way;

- Our oldest son was sick, but had no choice and the illness happened to him.

- Our youngest son was rebellious, had choices, and that he chose poorly.

Did Adam have a choice many years ago as a young teen? Maybe so, but as we know with young people and most parents of teens would attest to this, that their child's choices during the vulnerable teen years aren't always the wisest. They act now and think later, they are in the moment, spontaneous, jumping in with both feet, taking on the challenge, the adventure, the experience with risk of consequences taking a back seat. They're not thinking as they take their first drink or first toke that one day they will be an addict and have no control over using legal or illegal substances.

In time and in all honesty, more recent than I'd like to admit, I learned to see things differently.

- I have learned that illness is illness and that when one is sick with disease whether a cancer diagnosis, addiction, mental illness or any illness or personal struggle, that loving, tender care and specialized treatment for the individual is needed.

- I have learned that one illness over another isn't wrong or bad, or one more serious than another, it just is and it's just different based on the individual and circumstances.

- I have learned that one doesn't deserve punishment and the other a medal of honor.

The contrast we experienced with the 2 different illnesses was extreme! With Marc and the diagnosis of terminal brain cancer, we experienced an outpouring of tremendous love, compassion, community and medical support, resources and funding, all which were unlimited.

With Adam, the extreme opposite was experienced with, closed doors, backs turned, hands tied, judgement, with limited to no resources.

In 2015 just days before his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, Adam asked his employer to be laid off from work so he could go on assistance which then would provide subsidized funding for a treatment facility. It was the only way he could pay and be admitted. He said to me it was one of the hardest things he's ever had to do. He was embarrassed and felt humiliated walking into the Resource Office but that's how determined he was to get well. Adam put his

heart and soul into recovery, he wanted the good life, to marry his fiancée and have the family he had always dreamed of.

A huge obstacle for Adam was the set back with relapse in his recovery process. For someone who knew the ease of success in almost every area of his life, 'failure' in recovery disheartened him and made him question his ability to get better.

It was in this vulnerable time of questioning that the fatal night happened.

Fentanyl is no respecter of persons. It has no grace and is not selective of its victims. Adam fell victim to a senseless crime of drug lacing. He thought he was using one thing and it turned out to be something else. Adam wanted to live, he wanted the good life, he wanted all the experiences of being a husband and father. He was a best friend to many and he inspired, encouraged and mentored and helped to motivate others in their own personal struggles. He expressed one day not long ago that he saw himself as a youth councilor and a motivational speaker. He lived what so many are going through. He experienced first hand the judgement & stigma. He experienced the lack of support and limited resources that is he so desperately needed. He wanted to be a voice, to speak out about what hasn't worked and what we as a society can do to make things better.

7 days before the senseless tragedy Adam shared how excited he was about his future and that he was applying himself 100% to getting, being and staying well. His opportunity to fulfill his dreams was taken.

Each story and journey is unique and I truly believe no-one makes a conscious decision that they will be an addict one day. Overcoming takes huge strength and support of family and community collectively.

I hope the harm stops, not only with drug lacing with fentanyl but the stigma and lack of support and compassion that surrounds addiction.

To the reader who felt compelled to comment - I must thank you. My reaction of anger and hurt initially to the insensitivity and judgement is what compelled me to write. In a strange way it has been therapeutic. Hopefully with me sharing it will help to open the eyes of others to see that more education and resources are needed for understanding this complex issue that affects so many. The most important change in my opinion and the words of Adam's coroner is; "compassion". This is her plea and message to others. She spoke of the overriding and most important thing that is needed in this crisis is open hearts, love and compassion for those that are hurting. Not condemnation, judgement and punishment.

With all said, may I be a voice for Adam. May I help to bring about the change that is so desperately needed. May Adam's death be not in vain!

I'm sure there will be a – to be continued...but for now, with a broken heart and the deepest grief of the loss of my boys, I sign off for now.

*Melanie*

