

If Only

If only, I didn't have the addictive gene. If only, my personality didn't change because of the addiction. If only, my body didn't crave all the things that are bad for me. I wish there was a pill I could take to make me better and make this all go away. I would stop, I swear I would. If only, there was a pill I could take to make me better.

Loss doesn't just happen because someone dies. We lose people everyday and they're sitting right in front of us. We lose them long before they die. That's just a fact. And it's called addiction.

I heard a statistic the other day from an addiction counselor. He said 3.3 million people die from addiction every year. The number is staggering. So I looked up the statistics for cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates for 2015 that 1.6 million people will be diagnosed with cancer this year alone, and 590,000 will actually die from it. It's in black and white, the statistics - that is. And they're telling me that more people will survive cancer, than they will addiction. The dreaded "C" word has a brighter future than addiction. I'm stunned, and sad. I have been witness to the cancer gene, and the addiction gene. They both ransack a body, but one ransacks the mind and the spirit as well.

The same counselor told us that in active addiction reasoning is only at 20%. That's why reasoning doesn't always work, maybe never. Maybe some. He said that with addiction you are dealing with the frailty of humanity coupled with, and complicated by, addiction. I know that's what he said. I know it, because I was taking notes. He also said, quite bluntly, but with resigned authority, that addiction has one goal: to isolate the individual, and then to kill them.

That's what we as bystanders all witness as we stand by holding the hands of the one's we love while addiction takes them away from us - right in front of us, even while they are still living and breathing.

The counselor said that the best, and maybe only way, to get someone to agree to get help is by using a platform of compassion and dignity. You have to touch their heart - it's the most powerful tool. I know that's what he said, because I wrote that down also. That particular instruction was new to me. The times I've been involved, in trying to get someone to agree to get help, has been peppered with an all out tough love approach. Remember tough love? You know, zero tolerance and all that. Well, I am still a huge proponent of that. I was raised by the Colonel, after all. But then I was forced to engage in this new abstract - this new way of thinking and of processing this new modality. I liked the way it was before - the tough love. It makes sense to me. Setting boundaries that the addict can't cross. No more, no way - you are not going to take over my life anymore. You are not going to dominate my every waking hour worrying about you or covering for you or babysitting you. All the while, you are my sister, my brother, my mother, my father, my daughter, my

son, my friend. Addiction is everyman. It knows no distinction. Either way – I’m not going to take it any more.

But this new approach piques my interest at the same time it angers me. Because I actually have a lot of anger for all that my person has put me through. I mean, I’m really angry, and hurt, and really scared, and anxious, and well, just plain – worn out. But the counselor says that in full addiction, the addict is only going to hear Charlie Brown’s “wah, wah, wah.” There is no attachment to the words, but only to the visceral impact of the emotions on display as each one of us tells how this addiction has impacted us, and continues to impact us.

I interviewed my friend Andi about what it was like to lose her brother in 2009, and both her parents in 2011. She has had her share of loss. Her parents were both 94 when they died, just 5 weeks apart. A true love story. A beautiful tale actually. But as we sat, she introduced me to her brother Peter, who was an alcoholic, and also addicted to Oxycodone and Vicodin, initially prescribed for a back injury, but because of that, died at the age of 55. Robbed of life, because of addiction.

She talked about his personality, his strengths, his weaknesses and maybe the demons that seemed to plague him throughout his life, right before they took it. His life - that is. Demons and addiction. He was a great creative talent – wonderful photographer that had a great eye. But maybe he was a little iffy on his own self worth and maybe fixated on the successes of others, maybe even in his own family. Nonetheless, he never seemed to get to the heart of the matter. The same addiction counselor said there’s a saying that alcoholics and addicts are many times egomaniacs with inferiority complexes. Maybe that combo is at the root of a lot of addictions, or maybe they are borne out of them. I’m not sure. But Andi seemed to think that could accurately describe her brother fairly well. It seemed that Peter always had a contentious relationship with her father for a myriad of reasons. The father that was FBI, and the father that expected him to get his act together. But yet as the addictions progressed, that same father looked for any and every glimmer of hope and progress to ensure his son’s safety and success. For most of us that are on the other side of a loved one with addiction issues – success is never about money or paychecks. After years of all consuming and ultimately debilitating worry, success to us is just black and white: sense of self, contentment and hope. It’s what we pray for.

But as Andi told me Peter’s story, she described his journey as one of isolation. His marriage failed 20 years before his death. The marriage died because of addiction, long before it claimed Peter for the same cause. The marriage ended not because of a lack of love, or a lack of hope. There was plenty of that to go around. It failed because he loved the drink more. Or his body did anyway, and then his soul. Addiction robs you of everything. Not always, but a lot – like 3.3 million times a year it does.

As we talked about the isolation, we discussed what it's like to try to help someone struggling with addiction. As our loved ones become emotionally unavailable to us as the addiction process plays out, they become more and more attached to the stimulants that are sucking them dry. As true emotional connectivity wanes, we suffer in the realization that we are losing them, or at least – in the process. But in reality, we start to lose them long before addiction actually takes them. But as a support system and in order to self-protect, we too detach, in order to not get hurt, or get hurt further.

I remember being taken aback by the line in the movie “The Hunger Games,” when Donald Sutherland’s character said: “hope is the only emotion stronger than fear.” I know this to be true, because it is how I got through Wes’ cancer journey. Hope trumped fear. Until it didn’t anymore. And yet we continue to hold onto hope even as fear is always just roiling beneath the surface as we continuously worry about our loved one that struggles with addiction.

Andi’s parents were alive when Peter died. Her mother was deep in dementia at the time of her third child’s death, so possibly couldn’t comprehend it, or at least hang onto the information. Her father had to shoulder that pain for the rest of the family, but also, had to now house the anger at his son for not trying harder and seeing his recovery through. And of course, the inherent guilt that he didn’t do enough to get his son help, but they tried, of course they did. Peter was in rehab 6-8 times before the addiction’s goal was fully realized. As Andi ponders the loss of her brother, she thinks he may not have meant to kill himself. Having a flair for the dramatic, she thinks Peter would have made a bolder exit – a note, or something. It’s what she thinks anyway. This exit wasn’t exactly his style.

Peter died alone, in Huntington Beach, CA, in 2009 from an overdose. She struggles with the horrible way he died, as she thinks he drank his favorite canned Manhattans and maybe got his medications mixed up. He probably took too many and then went to sleep and then passed away. The last week of his life, he wasn’t communicating with anyone or answering his phone, and true to form – was isolating himself. But she rationalizes the fact that Peter chose his path, whereby losing his wife and daughter, and many or most of his friends. She tried - they all did. But she said it doesn’t stop her from running the full cycle of what ifs and maybe she could have done more. Maybe, just maybe, she could have gotten him more help. Maybe another trip to rehab would have worked.

Thank you Andi, for giving us a glimpse into the harsh realities of addiction. It’s a heck of a burden to put on those of us still living and questioning what else we could have done to help, as we contemplate the magnitude of addiction as it relates to our loved ones, and as we can’t help but think - if only.....

