Beyond Addiction: Hurting at home

by William_Moyers

Parents always are asking me about how to spot or react to drug and alcohol use by their children. I've got a lot of suggestions. But an e-mail from a reader last week reminded me that sometimes the most effective advice or insight I can offer is with the practical experiences of teenagers themselves.

Dear Mr. Moyers: I am 16 years old, and my name is Jac Z. I'm from a big town in the middle of this country. I never have done cocaine, don't drink unless I must and hate pot. Yet I am already an addict. I've spent years hiding my addiction to painkillers, which I just take right out of my parents' bathroom or, when I am over at my granny's house, from the shelf over her kitchen sink. My family and loved ones don't know that for four years, I have used constantly and barely ever have been sober from these pills in any part of my life.

You know, it's funny, but I'm not even sure why I started taking them. It could be because I saw my parents use them, I think for depression or pain or something that bothered them. It didn't seem to cause them problems. Both of them have good jobs, too. We're a religious family, and we live in a nice house, which always has been my home here in this quiet neighborhood. I've been getting away with this selfishness of hiding it from everyone, to the point that now I just can't stand it. I am hoping to get caught, but nobody sees what I feel. I guess that's my excuse. If nobody sees it, then it must not be that bad, but underneath it all, it's not a good thing anymore. There are even some days I feel so bad I want to blame my parents for not figuring this all out.

Last week, I started Narcotics Anonymous meetings on my own. Someday I want to have as many sober days as you. By the way, while I'm writing this, I have to think that I doubt you'll care about any of this, because you probably have heard people saying things like this to you all the time.

Jac didn't ask me for any advice. And even though I sent him an e-mail lauding his honesty and encouraging him to stick with his recovery meetings, he never replied. My sense is that he's struggling.

But his story is a stark reminder that drug abuse isn't a problem down the street or around the corner in a bad neighborhood and that it doesn't only invade fractured homes â€” that it can involve legal substances found in parents' medicine cabinets and that parents can be ignorant even when their children live, play, eat and sleep at home.

Still, I wonder whether there is more to Jac's story than what he shared. How is he doing in school? Has he been in any trouble with the police or acted out with inappropriate behavior at home or with his friends? And what about those meds he's stealing from his parents? Why haven't they noticed the missing pills? Might they, too, have a problem?

As Jac's story shows, drug problems don't always wait for kids to come of legal age. But teenagers like Jac can grow up pretty fast when they are ready to get help.

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