

Inside Straight Talk by Claudia Black

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Chapter 1: Straight Talk About Addiction and Recovery

What do you say to your children?

Motivation and Expectations

Time to Act

Chapter 2: Breaking the Chain of Addiction

Addiction Facts

Characteristics of Addiction:

Denial

Preoccupation

Loss of Control

Change in Tolerance

Withdrawal

Differences in Usage

Brain Chemistry

Kids and the Disease Concept

Chapter 3: Generational Vulnerability

Family Tree

Genetic Influences: The Facts

Environmental Influences: What's in the Psychology?

Chapter 4: Clarifying the Confusion

Claiming Multiple Addictions

Abstinence

Slippery Places

Relapse

Blackouts

Recovery Practices

Chapter 5: Early Recovery and Making Amends

Healing the Pain

A Child's Many Feelings

Guilt and Shame

Amends

Self-forgiveness

Chapter 6: New Ways of Relating

Reconnection: Offering Validation

Reconnection: Being There

Addressing the Wreckage of the Past

More Guidelines for Addressing the Past

Speaking Beyond the Family

Chapter 7: Creating Healthy Family Traditions

Risk Factors

Protective Factors

A Word of Caution

A Functioning Family:

Affection, Support and Affirmation

Communication

Maintain a Positive Family Identity

Problem Solving

Provide Physical Safety

Reshaping Family Roles

The Responsible Child, the Hero

The Acting Out Child, the Rebel or Scapegoat

The Adjusting Child, the Invisible One

The Clown, the Mischief Maker

The Placator, the Caretaker

Deepening and Mending Relationships

Family Time

Individual Time

Family Meetings

Chapter 8: Never Underestimate Your Power as A Parent

Messages to Children about Use of Alcohol and Drugs

Preschoolers

Children Ages 5 –8

Children Ages 9 – 11

Children Ages 12 - 14

Children Ages 15 – 17

Choices and Consequences

Adult Children

Enabling

Tough Love

Appendix: Tracing Addictions on a Family Tree

Notes

About the Author

Introduction

I have worked in the field of addictive disorders for over twenty-five years, yet I remain in awe of the strength and courage found in recovering people and their family members. This strength and courage can mend damaged relationships and create healthy, functioning families. It is true that parents feel extremely vulnerable when addressing how their addiction has impacted their children, yet their desire to prevent their children from repeating their own addictive behaviors is both deep and primal.

While this book is written primarily for the recovering addicted parent, it contains information that will be valuable to anyone who has addiction in his or her family system. The “other parent,” who may not have an addiction, will certainly find many of the exercises and information relevant. The reader may be a parent who grew up with addiction and realizes his or her child is more at risk than other children. There are few families not affected by addiction in some manner, and all parents can learn from tips on how to talk to their children about alcohol and drugs.

Because addiction to alcohol and drugs is the most notable and predominant of addictions, this type of addiction will be the theme throughout this book. Recognizing that few people are addicted to a just a single behavior or substance, I will make reference to other addictions. If your primary addiction is not alcohol or other drugs, you can substitute the name of the appropriate addiction, with the exception sex addiction. Because of the multitude of ways sex addiction may manifest itself, and the many variables to be considered, I would suggest you share this book with a counselor who specializes in sex addiction and work with him or her about what is and is not appropriate to share with your children.

Addiction dynamics vary greatly in families, so I’ve tried to represent several scenarios. Perhaps you raised your children in active addiction, not becoming clean or sober until they were of adult age. Perhaps your recovery began midstream in the raising of your children, or you were in recovery prior to ever having children. It is also possible that you have not raised your children at all and have had little contact with them.

Certain sections of this book address issues specific to children of one age group versus another, or children still under parental supervision and those now on their own. Overall, each chapter has something for children of all ages.

With those differences in mind, throughout the book I use many people’s personal stories to make my points. I have depicted five recovering parents in an attempt to illustrate diversity in families. The following five families will be followed throughout this book.

The first parent featured is James along with his adult children who had been out of the home for many years when he became sober. Both his children have been drinking since they were teenagers. His son already has two children of his own and is in the process of a divorce. Dillon is the second parent discussed. His children are now young adults. When they were children, he was preoccupied with his addiction, and, aside from being consistent with child

support payments, his relationship with them was that of being a “Disneyland” father. They were left to live with a chronically alcoholic mother who died when they were teenagers. Dillon is so new in his recovery that he hasn’t been able to be talk with his children about the loss of their mother or what life was like living with her.

Next is Kendra. She has one child who has never witnessed the ravages of alcoholism, and a stepchild who has, but who is now exposed to some long-term recovery.

The fourth featured parent is Dina, whose children are still exposed to an angry alcoholic father, even though he is frequently absent from home.

Finally, we will hear of Michael and his children, who have had little exposure to active addiction.

As you come across various scenarios of family situations or examples, simply *take what fits, and leave the rest.*

Let me caution you. You may feel some vulnerability as you read. Because so few addicted people or their spouses claim to have grown up in a healthy functioning family system, there is a strong likelihood you were raised with addiction and its many losses and hurtful experiences.

Some of you may have experienced more blatant trauma having been subject to verbal, physical or sexual abuses. While dysfunction in a family exists on a continuum, usually when addiction presents itself, there has been greater dysfunction within the original family. When that is true it is likely that, as parents, you have had few positive models for healthy parenting. If that is your experience as you are parenting your children, unresolved pain and grief from your childhood is often tapped.

As you read *Straight Talk*, particularly the last two chapters, you may find yourself feeling angry, sad, or depressed. You may think your feelings are inappropriate to the situation described in this book, but you have the feelings nonetheless. Recognizing that your feelings don’t necessarily seem to fit the situation you are reading about is a major cue that you are tapping into old pain.

It will be important to seek a place to talk about the pain of your childhood. This may be in a Twelve Step Al-Anon group, a codependency group, with a therapist, a sponsor, your partner or close friend. Don’t confuse pity with grief. You aren’t feeling sorry for yourself; rather, you are feeling the vulnerability of having been hurt many years earlier. Now you have the opportunity to let go of the grief. Many counselors and therapists work with people in recovery while they do

family of origin work. This will assist you in separating your past pain from present day parenting skills.

Another vulnerability can occur while reading and working through the information in this book. You need to acknowledge that you may or may not be in agreement with your children's other parent.

A critical factor in healthy parenting depends on the primary parents being cooperative and consistent in their parenting practices. This is difficult enough in traditional families, but in families affected by addiction, the likelihood of blended families and children splitting their time between primary parents is even greater. The unresolved conflict that so frequently remains between ex-partners and the possibility of one parent still being actively addicted contributes to even greater inconsistency between parents.

You do what you can to be the best parent you can be. You practice the Serenity Prayer as frequently as needed. You focus of your communication on what is best for the children. You practice good boundaries by not saying negative things about their other parent to your children of in front of them. You breathe deeply when your children try to manipulate you with "Well, when I am with Mom (or Dad), they do it differently...."

In the best of circumstances, parenting is not easy. Parenting requires vigilance. Get support, seek out books about parenting, take a parenting class, see a family counselor if necessary. Take your frustrations and concerns to others you know who have children. You are not alone in parenting! There are many before you and along side of you. Reach out to them, talk to them.

The Chapters Ahead

Chapter One, Straight Talk about Addiction and Recovery, focuses on why a parent would choose to talk to a child about their addiction to alcohol and drugs. I describe for you the concerns of the five recovering people previously noted, telling you more about the varying family situations. Motivation and expectations in talking to children will be discussed and I conclude with ten basic messages that need to be woven into discussion.

Chapter Two, Breaking the Chain of Addiction, helps parents to better understand addiction and its characteristics, such as denial, preoccupation, loss of control, change in tolerance and withdrawal. The purpose of this is to offer some information in a manner that will allow you to feel more prepared to talk about these dynamics if it is appropriate. Brain chemistry will be

discussed. While the focus of the dialogue in this chapter is predominantly oriented toward adolescent or adult age children, I will conclude the chapter addressing the disease concept with young children.

In this chapter you will be introduced to the Discussion Tips. Throughout the book you will see highlighted sections that will offer you a framework for discussion.

Chapter Three, Generational Vulnerability, addresses genetic and environmental influences that can contribute to becoming addicted to alcohol and drugs. While it may not be relevant to cite the research studies to your child, it will ground you in the facts around addiction and genetics. You will have the opportunity to use several models of discussion for talking about the legacy in your family. I conclude by reminding you about the power of your recovery alone in preventing addiction in your own children.

Chapter Four, Clarifying the Confusion, is written specifically for the recovering parent to have discussions about issues such as multiple addictions, abstinence, slippery places, relapse, and blackouts. You will find several Discussion Tips to lead you toward healthy dialogue. In addition to discussing the aspects of addiction, children need to better understand recovery practices, such as why one attends self-help meetings, why one may choose to do that for many years, and the concerns the family often has around the “religious” aspect of Twelve Step recovery. I will continue to share with you the experiences of our five diverse parents and their families.

Chapter Five, Early Recovery and Making Amends, addresses the issues of guilt, making amends, and self-forgiveness. I talk about the many feelings children have experienced and the delicate nature of beginning to trust and allowing openness.

Chapter Six, New Ways of Relating, uses the five featured parents as examples to illustrate a variety of situations and the different ways each responded to his or her children. I talk about offering validation to your children’s experiences and how many parents begin their new relationships simply by *being there*, or in other words, *being present*. I offer reasons why parent decide to talk about the wreckage of their past with their children, and guidelines to follow when it is appropriate. You will find Tips for Listening, and suggestions to support your children in being able to talk with others.

Chapter Seven, Creating Healthy Family Traditions, talks about family risk factors that may increase the likelihood of your child abusing alcohol and drugs and protective factors that would decrease such likelihood. This chapter is most helpful to those who are presently raising or will

be raising children. The Family Functioning section addresses five pivotal issues: 1) providing support and affirmation; 2) communication; 3) maintaining a positive family identity; 4) problem solving; and 5) providing physical safety. I also encourage those with adult children to look at this section, as several of the discussion tips are appropriate for you to explore. Reshaping Family Roles is most helpful if you are currently raising young children, but still important in an informational way to better understand your adult children. Deepening and Mending Relationships will encourage the structure of time with individual family members and the family as a whole. You can be creative with this latter section and discover some wonderful ways to spend time with your adult children too.

Chapter Eight, Never Underestimate Your Power as a Parent, speaks to all parents and reinforces the fact that if you have a positive relationship with your children they do listen to you and you must offer very direct messages to them about not using alcohol and drugs. I will be very specific about messages to offer children from preschool to adult aged children.

You that you cannot make up for the past overnight or in a few conversations; neither can you totally protect your children from the many influences of addiction. As in other areas of your life, this is “a step at a time” process. Some of you will quickly be in step with some children; for others of you, the journey may be slower. This is when it becomes helpful to remember you are not alone. There are thousands of others in recovery with similar experiences and even more parents in general who can offer support and insight. Nearly all parents struggle at times. There is no one prescription for raising children or mending hurt relationships. It is my hope *Straight Talk* will offer you support, guidance, and direction, while allowing you to be present for your children with your own authentic style.

Excerpts

On December 31, 1986, the day after I got sober, the last thing I wanted to face was what I had done to my kids. Prior to sobriety, as a father, what I had going for me was the law, the Ten Commandments, and the tradition that adult men protect their kids. So when I became sober, the first thing I wanted to do was quickly reassert their respect for me based upon everything I had going for me. This might have worked when they were small and I had drank only a short period but by the time I got sober nobody could say that I deserved all the respect that the law and the Ten Commandments provided for. I realized I was going to have to get to

know the kids and vice versa. For me it meant being friends first. The kids really wanted me to be a parent, and I wanted to regain their respect. Today I have been in recovery for several years and have regained that respect, but not by asserting what I had in the first place but by “letting go” of the outcome of my relationships after I had done all I could to change, trusting that God would then do his thing. – Wally

The mother of my children and I met in treatment. While we had our children in early sobriety, my now ex-wife has resumed her use of alcohol and drugs. So even though our children are young, 9 and 7, I am pretty specific with them about addiction. Their mother has primary custody. While it is not a good situation, legally, that is the way it is. My kids tell me about their mother’s hidden bottles, and about her getting silly when she drinks. They tell me a lot. I have told them that when I was younger I used alcohol and drugs like their mother, but in time I found it did not make me happy. I have told them I used because I was seeking something to make my life different and I didn’t know how to do that on my own. The kids know that both of their parents were at one time in a treatment program. I have explained that sometimes treatment works and other times it does not, but when it doesn’t, it usually plants seeds that may make a difference in time. Mostly I believe if I model recovery, then they may have a chance. – Eric

What I remember about my childhood is that my father and his father were alcoholic. When I started coming home loaded and getting into trouble nobody acted like anything was wrong. They didn’t do anything to stop my behavior. I lived with a drunken parent. My dad lived with a drunken parent. The difference is my kids don’t see me drunk. They won’t ever have the visual and mental impact that I had and my father had. For my kids, alcoholic behavior won’t be their norm. I am breaking the link. –Mark

When I went to treatment for my eating disorder I was confronted with how my use of alcohol and drugs was intertwined. My two teen-age daughters were very shocked when they attended family week and heard me say I was an alcoholic and an addict. When I explained to them how my addictions operated as a package, they then understood more about my relapses. I was not able to stay in recovery from my eating disorder until I was abstinent from alcohol and drugs.

My family is pretty tired of my relapses and my multiple treatments, but this makes sense to all of us. It will be easier for them to support my recovery now that we all understand my addictions better. –Pam

If there ever was a time to practice letting go, it is when talking to your kids. –Liz

My two girls were only nine and ten when I got clean. I have a lot to make up for. I started taking diet pills when I was a teenager and it quickly became a full-blown addiction. I made my first suicide attempt at age twenty-three. My poor husband, he really didn't have any idea what he was getting into when he married me. But maybe on some level he did, as his mother was frequently sick and used a lot of pills. Anyway, literally everybody in my family was addicted to one substance or another, and there have been some violent deaths too. My own daughters saw me nearly die in two overdoses. These last three years have been mostly ones of me doing a lot of recovery work, and gradually rebuilding my girls' trust.

In my last treatment program, I sat with them, their father and a counselor and told them I was sorry for all that they have had to see. I was sorry for not having been a good mom to them. I told them I loved them very much and my behavior was not a reflection of what I felt for them. I told them I was going to work very hard to never again take pills or drink; that in our family that is poison. All of the women have been addicted to pills, so I want them to get this message. Since then I haven't said a whole lot directly to them, mostly I try to be home when they get home from school and participate in their school events. They need to trust me before my words will mean much. But it has been better this past year, we laugh a lot more together. –Michelle