

My seventeen-year-old daughter's face looked ashen. Why wasn't she happy to see me after two weeks in a treatment center? Her crestfallen demeanor concerned me.

"Honey," I asked, "what's wrong? I know addiction treatment isn't fun."

"No, it's not that. I like it here . . ." she hesitated. "It's just that you wrote the book they gave us here in treatment."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Well, the psychiatrist called me in, and said it was a joke on you – that you wrote the book, and now your daughter is an alcoholic."



"Repeat that. He said the joke's on me?" She nodded. Alcoholism and addiction runs in our family. In fact, it is very aggressive within the Marshall family. My mother, father, uncle, brothers and cousins all suffer from this destructive brain chemistry disorder. Today, most of us are clean and sober. The few who aren't are in the process of destroying themselves or have already died from the disease.

After becoming sober at the age of 21 in 1969, I wrote a book for young people entitled *Young, Sober and Free*. Gathering stories from around the country, I put together workshops for clean and sober young people. We wanted to help others our age. Adolescent treatment centers sprang up everywhere, and I was an advocate for them even though I had never been in treatment, nor had I been a parent struggling with the addiction of a child.

I had to rethink my many years of supporting adolescent treatment centers when I heard, "The joke's on you." Then the counselors told me how sick I had become because my child was an alcoholic. The staff actually told me that it was I who had the greater problem; and if she had been raised correctly, my daughter would not be in this condition.

I didn't blame my mother for my alcoholism.

If addiction is a disease, as propounded by most professionals, then how would raising my daughter correctly keep her from having it? She was born to a sober mother, never exposed to my drunkenness. I certainly didn't blame my mother for my alcoholism, so why were they blaming me for my daughter's alcoholism?

It was several months before I realized the professionals at the adolescent center were wrong. Every single young person who went through treatment with my daughter began using again within 30 days of discharge. My daughter managed to hang on for a few months before she, too, went back out. I listened to the tortured self-blame of the other parents in my therapy group, as one child after the other went back to what they knew best – using with their peers.

Nuts to this. I knew we were not bad parents as the group leaders would have had us believe. I did not then, nor do I now, believe that “addiction is a family disease”, meaning everyone in the family is sick. Addiction certainly affects everyone in the family. As with juvenile diabetes, it is not the parents giving ice cream to kids; rather, it is that the cells needed to break down carbohydrates are missing which causes the disease. Young alcoholics have messed up brain chemistry (see <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications>). I am not saying that parents can’t aid in the prevention of drug abuse among their children. However, saying that eating too much sugar results in getting diabetes is just as inaccurate as saying drug abuse results in being an addict. This is an important, but often blurred, distinction.

Who is responsible for addiction?

I began reading the work of Phyllis and David York, founders of Toughlove. To my amazement, I found that they, too, felt professionals had it all wrong. Phyllis wrote: “The therapists who assume that kids’ parents are responsible for their teenagers’ behavior are dramatically reducing the chances that the kids will change for the better. Why should they bother to change when the therapist has excused them and blamed their parents? Let Mom and Dad change. It’s their fault.” – Toughlove Solutions, pg. 24

At this point I decided parents needed an advocate in the field of addiction recovery. My brother, Dr. Michael Marshall, a research psychologist in private practice who is now teaching at West Liberty University, and I designed several studies to assess recovery and treatment for teens.

We found some interesting results published in four peer-reviewed journals:

1. Young people treated with adults in adult centers had a recovery rate equal to the adults, whereas young people treated in teen centers generally used more drugs coming out of treatment.
2. Professionals from teen treatment centers gave less stringent recovery plans to young addicts than those given to older addicts. Professionals in multi-generational centers tended to prescribe similar plans to both groups.
3. Young people with parents in recovery or other self-help groups were more likely to respond to treatment than those with parents who were not in community support groups.

So my advice to parents with addicted kids is if you have a choice, put them in a center that treats adults and young people in the same setting. Additionally, consider learning to “sober coach” them when they get out.

You are not responsible for the bad choices made by your son or daughter; but given the right training, you can help them make better choices. Without the right training, you may become an enabler and may make the problem worse.

You are not responsible for the brain chemistry of your addicted child, although allowing them to use drugs of any kind at a young age increases the likelihood of addiction in at-risk children.

You are responsible for seeking help for children in trouble with mind-altering chemicals, just as you would be if they had juvenile diabetes. If the health care professional you choose doesn’t recognize the difference between abuse and addiction or excludes the disease merely on the basis of a young age, find another health care professional.

If the health care professional you choose tells you that you are the cause of your son’s or daughter’s choices and/or their disease, find another health care professional.

Why? Because if addiction is a disease, then it may strike anyone at anytime. Addiction isn't "infectious", and your kids won't "catch" it from you (although your DNA may have passed along the predilection to addiction). Addiction is a functional disease (see the graph) which means a part of the body doesn't function properly and causes dis-ease, such as heart disease or COPD.



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So does this mean you can't help them? Not at all. There are many things a parent can do to help their addicted child, but taking the blame isn't one of them.

So find the right health care professional, educate yourself about the disease, don't buy into the blame game – or as I was told, the "joke" will be on you.

*Shelly Marshall, a Hazelden author and small publisher, has dedicated her life to working with young recovering addicts and their parents. Her books *Day By Day, Young, Sober, & Free* and *Pocket Sponsor* are recovery classics. This article is based on her method for teaching parents to sober coach their young addict: See <http://SoberCoachingYourTeen.com>.*