

A Real Mom: Self-care is anything but selfish, anything but expected

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It was just about this time last year when I recognized the exorbitant toll I was paying with my emotions, my energy, my relationships and my mental health. In short, my parenting approach was affecting everything and everyone in my life. It was well intentioned and had served me well - until it stopped working.

I was in a constant state of observation, problem-solving and investigation. I was collecting evidence. I was taking copious notes to ensure I didn't forget things or get my facts mixed up. I was holding back on judgments lest I mislabeled my son's addiction. I was having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep because my mind would replay incidents and anticipate the next turn on a twisted path.

At the same time, I was happily married, blessed with wonderful children, family and friends. My career was successful. My physical health was excellent. In short, not unlike the elusive, invisible nature of my son's chemical dependency, there was no reason to believe I wasn't doing well.

Except that I wasn't. I held back my emotions, fearing if I showed these, it would irreversibly overwhelm the situation and undermine its ability to improve. I couldn't even cry.

What a dichotomy: I was holding it all together, putting on a positive front; I was distracted, a wreck.

True, my actions, feelings and beliefs were well intentioned and had served me well - until it occurred to me this was no way to live. I knew what it was like to feel well and this was not it.

Without realizing it, I had just taken Step One, admitted I was powerless over my son's addiction and that my life was becoming unmanageable. It would be a few more months before I truly knew the extent of what my son's life was becoming but I needed to take care of myself, my life.

Counterintuitive? Yes. But I needed to put myself first even though it seemed selfish. There comes a point in the path of parenting an addict that you must put self-care at the top of the list. Thus began a new trail for me, and what a fantastic decision that has been.

A guide is essential for the soul

It started with finding a therapist for me. The consumer magazine Psychology Today has a vast database on its website that allows you to search for counselors by geography, specialization and other criteria, and each therapist has a customized description of their practice.

This resource led me to such an influential, transformational guide. I connected with a "healed healer" who had first-hand experience with addiction in his younger days and went on to attain a master's degree in psychology as a LACD (licensed alcohol and drug counselor) designation.

With different backgrounds, cultural experiences and perspectives, we not only hit it off as professional and client, but developed a meaningful and fulfilling rapport that has brought deeper understanding and appreciation of life, self and human nature.

Read, write, pray

At 40-something, I was confident that I knew myself and had figured out most things in life. That's not to say I thought I had all the answers; obviously I did not, still do not. But I felt mature and ready for just about anything until addiction got its grips on our son.

Hungry for understanding, reasons why and ideas on how to travel forward, I decided I needed to wrap my head around things outside my ordinary routine. All summer, I read Buddha and The Talmud. I re-read The Four Agreements. I re-connected with Simple Abundance. These texts and more accompanied me when I traveled for work, when I took my lunch hour (a new behavior for me), when I sat in solitude in my back yard each Friday afternoon (a commitment I made to myself for the entire summer).

I started writing - my feelings, insights, ideas, questions and concerns. I learned and practiced meditation. I started to pray, really pray, in new ways. I became a human being instead of a human doing.

The discoveries and revelations filled my head and my heart, and my emotions returned and began to heal. Tears and smiles.

Recovery isn't just for the addict

Although I was familiar with Al-anon, my perception was it was for family members of alcoholics, especially spouses or children, and I didn't believe it extended to drug addiction or parents. After thinking on it, however, I decided this program might worth further investigation. The

website offered state-by-state listings and specific meeting dates and locations. For many reasons, this has been one of the more enlightening, engaging and unexpectedly enjoyable fellowships ever.

DrugFree.org launched a public awareness campaign earlier this year that validates my personal discovery - we, parents and family members of addicts, are not alone. We need each other.

I found a haven with an online community. Never before had I participated in this type of forum, but its safeguards protect members and create a place for honest communication. The facilitator is a parent with respectable, credible and compassionate experience. She and the other parents might as well be angels!

Finding, expressing experiences

More than anything, I hope my writing here will be less about my journey and more about how parents can adapt - even thrive - when the journey includes young-adult addiction. As odd as it may sound, in selflessly taking care of ourselves and opening up to unexpected opportunities, we make greater strides forward for everyone concerned.

I wish each parent on this journey the opportunity to discover a self-care path that nurtures and refreshes weary spirits.

Peace to you in finding your own self-care path. Peace to us who join together. And, peace to our young addicts, who are central to our core being.

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