

## “Substance Use Disorder: A Criminalized Illness”

The “War on Drugs”, is the guiding principle in the overarching approach to substance use, and substance use disorder (SUD). This campaign was enacted before I was born, but has played a significant role in my life and development. The way we currently battle in the “war on drugs” makes it harder for people to recover from substance use disorders. I believe a new approach that focuses on reintroduction into society would help turn the tide in this fight. Throughout this paper I will try to discuss the scope of the issue, why our current war on drugs strategy is ill advised, and how destigmatizing SUDs and allowing people a path back to society could be a core piece in fighting the drug epidemic.

In 1971, President Nixon declared that drug misuse was “public enemy number one”, and the war on drugs began (A History). When this “war began” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Data, recorded 6,771 overdose deaths in the United States (Centers). Contrast to 2020, Ohio had a record year of overdose deaths, with 5,017 people dying from overdosing (Cauchon). 2021 is projected to blow that number out of the water. A report from the national Center for Health Statistics reported that “Ohio saw a 26.6% increase in drug overdose deaths in the 12-month period ending April 2021, compared to the 12 month period ending in April 2020” (Boggs). After 50 years and over a trillion dollars fighting this “war on drugs”, the drugs are winning. Almost as many people are dying in Ohio now, then dying in the entire United States when this war began. People are not safer from the harmful effects of addiction, more people are dying, families are being shattered, and society is becoming poorer and more fragmented. Larger sections of our community are excluded and shunned from society for mistakes they made, with no way to successfully reintegrate.

The harmful effects of the war on drugs is staggering in its magnitude. According to the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health 57.2 million people, aged 12 or older, admitted to Illicit drug use. This is approximately 21% of all people over 12 in the United States (SAMHSA, pg 14). About 15%

of the State Prison population is there because of drug offenses (Sawyer and Wagner). Nearly 100% of people in prison in the US will be released back into the community, and 67% of those will reoffend and return to prison within 3 years (Mathews). This issue is more than just numbers to me, I have been affected in every way by the drug epidemic. I am a child of addiction, I am a sibling of a person who struggled with substance use disorder, and ultimately died from a drug overdose, and I am a person recovering from a substance use disorder.

In 2009 I was at the race track. I worked there mentoring kids. I would take my nephew, my son, and some of their friends who didn't have an active male role model. I would take them to the dirt bike race track and would teach them how to ride, and how to repair and work on their bikes. On the day in question I was getting ready to race for the first time in a long time. I was doing the practice lap before the race, to make sure everything was working. I took a jump and was showing off, doing some tricks and another racer passed me and got in front of me. I did not want to hit the kid, and I lost control. I did not make it back onto the bike and I hit the ground hard. I had thought "it is just a practice lap" and hadn't put on all of my safety equipment. I didn't have my pads on and hadn't zipped and buckled my boots all the way, so when I landed I was pretty messed up. I shattered my heel, fractured my arm, had a concussion along with an assortment of bumps and bruises.

I was misdiagnosed at first. They said I had a mild fracture and it would heal. I was a single dad and my son was completely reliant on me to get back out there to work and provide. I was working for a landscaping company at the time and needed to be on my feet and using my arms all the time. To get through the day I was using a lot of pain medication. Back then the VA would over prescribe medication and just give out more and more pain medication if it was requested.

I didn't have insurance besides what I got through the VA. So it took a month before I was worn down enough to risk the hospital bill for a second opinion. After that evaluation it was determined I

needed emergency surgery on my foot. Without insurance this wiped me out. I needed to move out of my apartment and get help from my family.

My mom was already deep in her own addiction, and when I was no longer able to get pain medication from my doctors she wanted to help me with my pain. Buying opioids off the street was expensive and it was cheaper to get heroin. She was ill but in her own way wanted to help her son, who was struggling trying to work a physically demanding job while recovering from multiple broken bones, and so she got me something she thought would help ease my pain. That first hit was the most horrible thing I ever experienced. It was euphoric and felt great and for the next seven years of my life it controlled me.

I have been clean and sober for almost five years, but my past still haunts me. Just this past weekend I was told I would never be more than a drug addict. That no matter what I tried to atone for my past mistakes I will forever be judged and treated based on the worst version of myself. I am not extended the same grace and forgiveness when I struggle as my peers who have not struggled with addiction. I am looked at with suspicion and distrust.

During the 1980's and 90's there were anti-drug campaigns called D.A.R.E and Just Say No to drugs. Founded by LA Police Chief Daryl Gates, who famously said "casual drug users should be taken out and shot, these programs were taught in school, mainly aimed at elementary school students, who did not have the skills to search for biases (A History). They taught that drug use showed a moral failing. It allowed people to look at people who abused drugs as less than or morally unfit (McGrath). It gave a tacit permission for the general population to stigmatize people who abused drugs, this can be seen in the popular, catchy jingles that McGruff the Dog would sing like "Users are Loser" (Vintage). Science has proven that addiction is more complicated than a moral failing (Volkow, "Punishing"). The UN General Assembly and all of the 193 member states define "drug addiction as a complex multifactorial health disorder characterized by (a) chronic and relapsing nature" (Volkow, et. al). Substance abuse is a disease

that society treats like a criminal act. Yes, people have to use drugs before becoming addicted, but many people start their journey into addiction with legally prescribed medication. In 2016 the American Society of Addiction Medicine reported that 4 out of 5 heroin addicts started with prescription medication (More). Why then, do we look at people who develop a substance use disorder as trash and no good? Type II diabetes is a disease, and people consider it a disease. Genetics can play a role in development but lifestyle choices such as lack of exercise, unhealthy eating, or obesity can also play a role (Leontis and Hess-Fischl). In the case of Diabetes, even if some of the reasons for the onset of the disease can be self-inflicted no one blames the sufferer. Society looks at ways to treat, and cure the disease.

Substance Use disorder does not just affect the individual that uses drugs or alcohol. It is a disease that affects the entire family. Parents of people addicted to drugs feel guilt, shame, and/ or a sense of responsibility when their child has a problem. Loved one can enable the substance user, because they are trying to protect their loved one, or hide the extent of the issue (Lander). When I was in the midst of my own addiction my grandparents would try and help me out by giving me money for food or because they didn't want to see me struggling, and while I was not in a position where if they hadn't stepped in I would have stopped using drugs their actions had the unintentional consequence of putting off my rock bottom.

Siblings of people addicted to substances are also impacted, depending on their age and the age of the person with an addiction. If both siblings live at home the person with the issue tends to receive more of the emotional labor and investment from the family. Parents tend to focus on the child that is sick or struggling, leaving the other children to take a back seat (Lander). The parent rationalizes this by thinking they need to focus on the child that is in a bad spot, and their other children need them less to get by, but this can lead to resentment and frustration. The "good" child can feel punished for doing the right thing. As adults there can be pressure from the family unit to take care of the individual with a substance use disorder. That can take the form of providing shelter, if the sibling becomes homeless, providing food, when they are hungry, or even answering their calls at 2 am when they are in a jam and going to get them.

If you don't do these things the sibling can feel shame, or be shamed. My sister was a substance user. She would regularly get in bad situations, be homeless, have no job, no food, no legal transportation. She would call me at all hours of the night and it was expected that I would help her. One time I said no, to driving her to a store at 2am. She went anyway and didn't have a license. She was pulled over, and in the eyes of my family I was the bad guy, because she called for help but I said no. Another time she called because she was in a dangerous situation. I did go to pick her up, but we ended up getting in an argument and she got out of the car angry and upset. That was the last time anyone in our family saw her before she overdosed and died a few days later. I know I am not responsible, but I have to live with that.

Children of addicted parents face a wide range of problems. They can have trouble with school. The trouble can range from truancy, a higher rate of dropping out before graduation, not having help with homework, and an unstructured home life. Laura Lander pointed out that "it is difficult for children (affected by parental substance use) to focus on higher order thinking and learning when basic survival needs are not met (Lander, 201)." Sometimes children need to be taken from their parents but that has its fair share of problems too. Landers reported that "any long-term separation will have a negative impact on the child's ability to attach, regulate affect, and can lead to a trauma response of numbing or hyperarousal (inability to discriminate and respond appropriately to stimulus)" (Lander, 200), and many children long to be with their biological parents.

This isn't to say people should not be held accountable for their actions. If a person commits a crime, they should be held accountable for that crime. Just having an addiction, however, should not be a felony. Having an addiction is a brain disease; it is an illness not a crime (Volkow, "Addiction). Allowing people the grace and ability to recover and be accepted back into society helps the whole family. Children of people suffering with addiction have high rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which can have lifelong consequences . Seeing their parent's overcome addiction and reintegrate and become productive members of society, can be a powerful healing tool for children experiencing ACEs (Mayo).

Not only does this help with overcoming ACEs, it also allows the parent to model resilience, which is a powerful lesson all people need to learn. For parents, having a path to redemption, allows them to reconnect with their children. If they were the person suffering from a substance use disorder, they can make amends to their child and try and rebuild relationships. If they are the parent of a child with a S.U.D., it can allow the relationship to move forward in a positive and healthy direction and out of the shame or codependent cycles. Like the prodigal son from the bible, restoring community and familial bonds allows people to be figuratively reborn and restored to the people that love them.

A system that allows forgiveness and reintegration is better than our current system that requires lifelong punishment and distrust, and a backward looking mindset. Our current system is set up in such a way, that people recovering or suffering from a substance use disorder are distrusted. People coming in contact with them look at their past convictions and are waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for a relapse or for the person to mess up. In the state of Ohio, any amount of certain drugs (like heroin) is considered a felony. It doesn't matter if you only have less than a gram of heroin. A felony conviction comes with secondary consequences including the inability to secure a job, inability to secure housing, the loss of voting rights, and more. While there are laws protecting against housing discrimination, these laws have loopholes that allow landlords to legally discriminate against people with felonies (Hoskins). In many places in Ohio, landlords can deny you housing if you have a felony conviction within the past decade. Where are people supposed to live and work on recovering and thriving, if there is no place that will rent to them ("Discrimination")? The system I want to see allows for accountability but balances accountability with forgiveness and a forward looking mindset. It looks at where the person is going and the road to recovery instead of focusing on the mistakes. A road to redemption means the person takes responsibility but can move forward for healing and forgiveness. Without this road people are stuck, forever with a scarlet letter branding them as a deviant.

Humans are not solitary creatures and in fact they live and thrive best as a member of society. In his TED talk Johann Hari makes the case that “the opposite of addiction is not sobriety but connection” (Hari). He refers to Bruce Alexander’s monumental study “Rat Park” and talks a lot about Portugal's response to the addiction crisis. Prior to Alexander’s study researchers found that if given the choice between a water bottle of water and a morphine and water solution, the rats in the study would choose the morphine and water. When the rats were tethered with an IV and could inject themselves with the drug, the rats in the study would forgo food and water and inject themselves until they eventually overdosed and died (Alexander et al., pg 175). Alexander suspected that there might be something else going on. Rats are social creatures in many of the same ways Humans are. They need connection to other rats to stay healthy and happy (Weiss). Alexander wondered if the solitary confinement - being cut off from rat society - led to an increase in the use of the morphine. So he created “rat park”. He had some rats in solitary confinement where they could not even see other rats, and he had a large communal cage for other rats. He then studied whether the rats in solitary or the rats in a communal setting used the morphine water more (Alexander et al., pg 175). Hari overstated the case that no rats in “rat park” died (Alexander et al., pg 176) , however, the conclusion of the study was that there appeared to be a link between housing and the use of morphine (Alexander et al., pg 178). The study used a small amount of rats, and replication results have varied in their upholding the findings from Alexander’s study. However it is apparent that society place a role in recovery efforts (Gage, 918-920)

Portugal had the worst drug problem in Europe, nearly 1 percent of their population had a substance use disorder (Hari). So in 2001, they made the bold decision to decriminalize all drugs, and spend the money they had previously used for incarcerating people who had a substance use disorder on social programs. They pay for treatment programs and social support, but they also pay 50% of an addicted person’s salary the first year they return to the workplace (Weiss). Incentivising companies to hire people struggling with addiction, and giving the person with an addiction something to get up for in

the morning and an opportunity to meaningfully engage with society. This reintegration approach has led to a decrease in drug use across all sectors of the community (Weiss).

In the United States however, people who are struggling with addiction have no path to reintegration. “Upstanding citizens”, have regular society and try to push out those they consider “other”. The stigma attached to drug use, even if the use was in the past, and having a criminal record push marginalized groups into the dark corners of society where they can be ignored and don’t have to be seen (Volkow, “Punishing”). Recovering addicts struggle to find acceptance in the community. For their own sobriety many of the people they used to associate with need to be cut out of their life, either because of breaking probation if they are in the company of another felon or more simply because they need to cut ties with their old life to keep from relapsing. Yet regular society doesn’t want recovering addicts to reintegrate. People see addicts as a threat to society and a person with low moral character. In fact Former President Trump called for drug dealers to be given the death penalty, even though the majority of drug dealers arrested are low level offenders and not the king pins (Moraff).

Social isolation is a real and painful experience (Cook). In its extreme forms, like solitary confinement, it is considered a torture technique. Matthew Liberman, a neuroscientist, discovered that connection is “as fundamental as our need for food and water” (Cook). Cutting people off from connecting on a meaningful level is extremely harmful. Humans are a tribal species, and our basic biology wires a need for meaningful human interaction. We see this in cultures that prioritize a communal focus instead of an individualist approach, that communal cultures tend to have better mental health, and have longer, healthier lifespans (Weist). A person who is shunned or cut off from society is doomed to have a sicker, less mentally healthy life, and struggle with being cut off from society. One of the reasons people turn to drugs and alcohol is to escape and forget. Is it any wonder people relapse after they find isolation after they try and recover?

Our current system of punishment is clearly not working, and in fact is setting people up to fail. After a drug felony, if a person is released on probation there are a lot of terms and conditions they must live by that makes it difficult to reenter society (Sawyer). When I was on probation, I had to call the Adult probation office every day Monday through Friday. When I called if I would find out if I needed to report to probation during their open hours to be drug tested. If the probationer did not make it when they were told to report, for any reason, the probation officer could recommend that your probation be revoked. The meetings at the probation office can be as short as a five-minute eye scan to hours, depending on what else the probation officer is doing. It can make holding down a job. You can't make your schedule around probation, and not all jobs are able to be flexible enough that they will allow an employee to leave for hours during the day with no notice.

Society is better off if people don't relapse (Collins and Best). Society is better off if families are whole. Society is better off if people can become productive members of society again. The Surgeon General's report estimated that substance misuse costs US society "\$442 billion each year in health care costs, lost productivity, and criminal justice costs" ("Time"). Our society would be better if people were allowed to get well, if they were able to get jobs and become productive members of society.

In conclusion, our current war on drugs is a failure. More people are dying from drug overdoses now, then when this "war" was started. It has been a drain on the country's finances. With the amount of money we spend on the war on drugs we could make all public universities and colleges tuition free, or end hunger and homelessness in the United States of America. The American Medical Association defines substance use disorder as a "relapsing brain disease" (Volkow, "Addiction"). We should be helping sick people, not punishing them. If society can't get totally away from punishing people with a substance use disorder, we need to offer a path to redemption so people can recover and become productive members of society. Drug use should not be a felony that follows you forever. We should encourage people to get help and get treatment, not send them to jail. That being said, I am talking about

people who are using drugs and low level drug dealers. For people that are trafficking drugs I still believe there should be stricter punishment and laws, and a felony may still be appropriate. People should be forgiven if they are working to change their life, and be able to be a contributing member of society and the community. It is better for the person, their family, and the society as a whole.

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