The Twenty-One

Lessons from one father's experience loving an adult child through addiction and recovery.

WITH STORIES · J.S. ASHWORTH

These are things I learned loving my son through addiction and recovery. Most of them I learned the hard way. And even today, I still find myself coming back to them.

Each lesson has a story behind it. Read one, read them all, or come back whenever you need to.

The Twenty-One aren't twenty-one separate answers. They overlap. Sometimes I need one. Sometimes I need three or four.

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1 You didn't cause it. You can't control it. You can't cure it.

Say it before you pick up the phone. Say it again after you hang up.

FROM THE BOOK

About a year into this, we attended a couple of Nar-Anon meetings on Zoom. That was where I first heard the Three C's. At first, I thought they were a cop-out. Surely there was something I could do.

Years later, my son told me how my absence when he was young had hurt him. This time I listened and apologized, without defending what I had intended.

I could own my mistakes as a father without taking ownership of his addiction and recovery.

WHAT I DO NOW

I remember the Three C's.

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2 Meet them before you meet the addiction.

Remember the person you knew. Addiction can hide a person. It can't erase them.

FROM THE BOOK

When my son was little, he lined up the dining chairs like an airplane and gathered everybody in the house to be his passengers. He could have been the pilot. Often he chose to work the aisle, looking after everyone.

Years later, when I wrecked my car far from home, he drove a day and a half to get me.

Before the drugs and the phone calls, that was my son. He still is.

WHAT I DO NOW

I remember my son before his addiction.

3 Love and rescue are not the same thing.

Love stays. Rescue takes over. If you can't tell which one you're doing, pause.

FROM THE BOOK

My son found a job in another state. He applied, interviewed, and got it himself. He was proud, and so was I.

Not long afterward, he relapsed.

I flew out. This time I was cleaning out his apartment, dealing with his employer, and sorting through the mess left behind.

The job was his. He had earned it. But almost everything around it, I had taken responsibility for.

Some of what I did was love. Some was necessary. And some was me automatically stepping in to solve problems that weren't mine to solve.

At the time, I couldn't always tell the difference.

WHAT I DO NOW

I ask: Should I help? Then I decide.

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4 You cannot spend someone into recovery.

Money can buy treatment. It can't buy the decision.

FROM THE BOOK

I once put $30,000 on a credit card for a long-term residential treatment program for my son. I barely hesitated. If this was what it took to help him get better, I was willing to pay it.

He stayed one day.

One.

To the program's credit, they refunded almost all of the money. We lost about $1,000.

But that wasn't the lesson.

What stays with me is how easily I committed $30,000. I was desperate for something to help save my son.

I could pay for treatment. I couldn't make him stay.

WHAT I DO NOW

Before I pay, I ask: What am I actually paying for, and why?

5 A safe place is not the same as recovery.

A bed is not recovery. Safety matters, but it can't promise what happens next.

FROM THE BOOK

After a relapse, my son spent eleven weeks with my sister. He started to recover, went to meetings, and began sounding like himself again.

He interviewed for a good job, received an offer, and accepted it.

I thought we were finally there. I started helping arrange the next stage of his life.

While I was driving out to meet him, he relapsed again. This time, police were involved.

WHAT I DO NOW

I accept that it's his life to live, and his consequences are his to face.

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6 Fear is not evidence.

Real danger is real. Answer it. But fear speaks in the same voice as an emergency. Ask what is actually happening right now.

FROM THE BOOK

One night, I was convinced my son was in real trouble. I spent about an hour driving around trying to find him.

Eventually, I tracked down where I thought he was and knocked on the door. A guy answered. "No. He's next door."

I went next door and knocked again.

My son opened the door.

"What's up?"

I'd spent the last hour imagining every possible thing that could have happened to him. And he looked at me like I'd stopped by to say hello.

WHAT I DO NOW

I ask myself: What do I actually know, and what am I imagining?

7 Stop breaking every fall.

Their discomfort isn't automatically yours to fix. Two people collapsing doesn't help either one stand. You can love them and stay on your feet.

FROM THE BOOK

My son called, unhappy where he was staying, and asked me to get him. I said yes automatically. Then I stopped.

From what I knew, he was upset, but not in immediate danger. I told him I wasn't coming and asked him to speak with his house manager. He said he was disappointed in me.

A few hours later he called to thank me. They had worked something out.

That day, he handled a problem I would once have taken away from him.

WHAT I DO NOW

I ask myself: Do I really need to be involved?

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8 Support recovery, not addiction.

The line is blurry. Ask anyway: does this move them toward recovery, or make the addiction easier?

FROM THE BOOK

My son asked me to take him for books and a notepad. Then he called to postpone because he wasn't feeling well.

My mind could have turned that into a warning, or turned the original request into a whole plan for his future. This time I let it wait.

About a week later, we went. He chose a book and a magazine, and I paid.

He was reaching for something healthy that he enjoyed. I could support that.

WHAT I DO NOW

I pause and ask: Will this actually help his recovery?

9 A boundary is something you do.

It's not a rule they have to obey, and it's not a punishment. It's what you'll do, whatever they decide.

FROM THE BOOK

After we told our son he could no longer live at home, he came over for a visit. We played Catan, ate dinner, and talked.

When it was time to leave, none of us wanted him to go. One night. What would be the harm? I wavered.

Then I hugged him, told him how much I had enjoyed the day, and drove him back.

Writing the boundary had been hard. Holding it after a good day was hard too.

WHAT I DO NOW

I remember why I set the boundary, and I uphold it.

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10 Pain is not a plan.

Wanting the feeling to stop isn't the same as knowing what helps. If your next move only makes you less afraid, it may not be the right one.

FROM THE BOOK

After a terrible relapse, I was desperate for a break. I needed somewhere for my son to go to give us all some breathing room.

On the intake call, I asked what would happen if the program wasn't right for him. The woman told me they had been doing this a long time and that families like ours saw results.

There was a bed available. I booked it.

I still didn't know whether it was right. I just needed something to happen.

WHAT I DO NOW

I pause, take a deep breath, and think before deciding.

11 You can change without waiting for them to change.

They don't have to get clean for you to get honest. Your life isn't on hold until theirs begins.

FROM THE BOOK

There was a stretch when my son was gone for three days and I didn't know where he was. I had fear, but no concrete information like I'd had during an earlier crisis.

This time I stayed home. I kept my appointments and trained with my daughter. I slept badly. Nothing about it felt peaceful.

Eventually he called his house manager and asked to return.

I can't say my staying home caused that. I know I had begun responding differently before I knew the outcome.

WHAT I DO NOW

I ask: What would I be doing today if I knew my son was going to be okay?

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12 Remember the people who are still there.

Your other children. Your marriage. Your friends. The person who isn't calling in crisis still matters.

FROM THE BOOK

My daughter trained hard for a competition, placed, and came home with medals. I missed it. There was another crisis with her brother, and once again my attention went to my son.

I could explain why I wasn't there. That didn't fill the empty chair.

When she began preparing for another competition, I promised I would come. And I did.

I even followed her training program, and we laughed our way through the workouts.

She won a third-place medal!

I was so proud.

She didn't need me to fix her life. She needed time with her dad.

WHAT I DO NOW

I make time for the others in my life.

13 People can love the same person differently.

One talks, one holds it in. One moves toward the crisis, one steps back. Different doesn't mean less.

FROM THE BOOK

I needed to talk about our son. My wife would listen, reach her limit, and leave the room or change the subject. I would get frustrated and wonder whether she cared.

She was trying to get through it too, in a different way.

When I gave her the marriage chapter to read, she reminded me that she and our daughter had also seen things while I was away. They just responded differently.

I wasn't the only one carrying memories. I was just the one talking about mine.

WHAT I DO NOW

I respect that others cope differently.

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14 Privacy does not mean isolation.

Their story is theirs. Your truth is yours. You don't have to tell everyone, but you were never meant to carry this alone.

FROM THE BOOK

For a long time we went out, smiled, and said very little about what was happening. Eventually we told a few people we trusted.

They began telling us about their own families. Some had seen recovery. Some had lost someone. These were people we already knew, carrying stories we had never heard.

It didn't make our situation easier, but I stopped feeling quite so alone. I could talk about what I was going through without telling every detail of my son's life.

WHAT I DO NOW

I tell someone I trust how I'm really doing.

15 Learn from the past. Don't make them live there.

Promises aren't actions, and trust comes back slowly. But if today is good, let it be good. Yesterday gets a voice, not the final word.

FROM THE BOOK

On one visit, my son sat at the table with us, playing games, having lunch, and chatting. And for a few hours, there was nothing to solve.

In the past I would have watched his eyes, listened for something in his voice, and searched for signs. That day I tried to enjoy the man in front of me.

I hadn't forgotten what had happened. Our boundaries were still there. But he didn't have to spend the afternoon reliving every bad day before it.

WHAT I DO NOW

I don't use the past against him.

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16 Conditions change. Value does not.

A life can go off course. That doesn't make the person worth less. They don't have to earn back being loved.

FROM THE BOOK

During one of my calls to 988, I was overwhelmed about my son. I unloaded. I complained. I swore. I went through everything that had happened and everything I was angry about.

If I'm being fair, I was tearing my son apart to a stranger on the telephone.

The person on the other end listened. Then said four words.

"They're still human beings."

It jolted me.

And I remembered the man. My son.

WHAT I DO NOW

I let him know that my love will never change. Ever.

17 Trust and love are not the same thing.

You can love them completely and still need to see actions before you trust again. You can say no and still love them.

FROM THE BOOK

I used to give my son access to credit cards and co-sign apartments because I wanted to help him get established. After enough broken starts, I stopped doing that.

I still helped with groceries and toiletries, paying his house manager directly.

Trust hadn't returned simply because he was doing better. I needed time and actions. But I didn't need either of those things to love him.

I could change how I helped without changing who he was to me.

WHAT I DO NOW

I ask myself: Has he earned this trust back?

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18 Hope does not require a contract.

Hope isn't predicting recovery. A good day can just be a good day. Bank it. Don't make it carry tomorrow.

FROM THE BOOK

My son worked hard to be at his sister's wedding. He danced, played with the children, and laughed with the family. My daughter was happy. It was one of the best days of my life.

Not long after everyone went home, he relapsed.

Later, my daughter and I talked about not knowing how any of this would end. But we had the wedding.

Nothing that happened afterward could take away a day we had already lived.

WHAT I DO NOW

I bank every good day for what it is.

19 Leave something for your own life.

Your health. Your energy. Laughter, fresh air, the things you love. Loving them was never supposed to mean losing you.

FROM THE BOOK

For years, my own plans were the first things to go when something happened with my son. I would get back to them when he was doing better.

Then one day he came over for a visit, and I went to the gym anyway. He stayed with his mom. Later, I drove him back to where he was living.

We had time together, and I had time for myself. Such a small thing. It had taken me years to let it be that simple.

WHAT I DO NOW

I keep one thing that's mine and don't give it up.

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20 Their journey is theirs. Yours is yours.

Walk beside them. You can't walk it for them. They shouldn't have to recover for you to be okay.

FROM THE BOOK

My son was supposed to visit, but he called to say it wasn't a good day. He had been awake all night, had spoken with his sponsor, and needed to sort some things out.

I was disappointed. A year earlier I would have tried to talk him into coming anyway. This time I told him, 'No problem. Let me know when you're ready.'

Afterward I realized he was learning to make his own decisions, and I was learning to respect them.

WHAT I DO NOW

I respect that his choices are his to make.

21 Stay with the Moment. Let tomorrow arrive.

You can't fix yesterday. You can't control tomorrow. Find your feet. Breathe. It won't make the moment easier. It brings you back to the only place you can do anything: here, now. When your mind runs ahead, come back.

FROM THE BOOK

I once hit a golf ball toward the trees and started walking, already annoyed about the shot. The lady I was playing with told me not to worry until we got there. It might have hit a tree and come back out. I couldn't see it yet.

She had no idea what I was living through with my son, but I recognized exactly what I was doing.

I was spending the whole walk reacting to an ending I hadn't reached.

WHAT I DO NOW

I say to myself: Stay with the Moment. Let tomorrow arrive.

These are the lessons. The book is what each one cost.

SCAN TO READ THE BOOK
STAYWITHTHEMOMENT.COM/BOOK

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU LOVE IS IN CRISIS, CALL OR TEXT 988.