

Scott: Adolescent drug abuse and the impact of the family dynamic. This is Stay Happily Married: Episode #279.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married; your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your adolescent's drug abuse affecting your family dynamic? Marriages require work from both spouses to strive and grow. When you add children to the mix, the marriage becomes a family with more pressure to make things work. With career obligations, chaotic schedules, and responsibilities to your children, there's not much room for disruption. Adolescent drug abuse can be cause of disruption in the family dynamic. What steps should you take to rebuild and strengthen the family dynamic when dealing with a child's drug dependency?

Earning his Masters degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Pfeiffer University, Mr. Jonathan Dotch, Sr. is founder of Dotch Counseling Services of Charlotte where he practices as a licensed clinical addiction specialist associate, as well as a marriage and family therapist. Mr. Dotch, Sr. is the author of, 'New Choices: Reaping the Benefits from Positive Decisions', which is dedicated to troubled youth trying to overcome adversity during the adolescent phase. He has also served others as a mentor, youth care worker for at-risk children and juvenile delinquents, and in community support services.

Welcome to the show, Jonathan. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Jonathan: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Scott: Let's get right into it. What exactly are you seeing when it comes to adolescent drug abuse and how it affects family dynamics?

Jonathan: Basically, when a parent seeks help for their teenage child struggling with drug abuse, it can be an overwhelming, it can be embarrassing for the family also, and lastly, it can also be a hopeful time for the family, as well.

Scott: It affects the dynamics with . . . I can see how it would be overwhelming and embarrassing. What problems exactly do you see that the family experiences when they have a teenager that is struggling with drug abuse?

Jonathan: Some of the problems . . . usually, substance diagnosis is also present with a mental health diagnosis such as depression and anxiety. In addition to that, relationships in terms of the family dynamics, the relationship with the family members can become more conflictual, it can become more distant, more distance in the family if the problem goes unaddressed.

Scott: I want to revisit something that you said on the first question. You said that one of the ways it affects family dynamic is that it also can be hopeful at the same time. Could you elaborate a little more on that?

Jonathan: When I say hopeful, it can be an opportunity where they feel like, 'Great. We have some . . . we get some help,' and so forth, so therefore, they can become optimistic about the process. By doing that, it provided them . . . it can minimize that level of overwhelming . . . those feelings of being overwhelmed and embarrassment as a result of it being hopeful. It's just basically gives them . . . it provides them with an opportunity to become optimistic about getting the child help and getting the family help, as well.

Scott: Thank you for clarifying on that. When we have a situation where the parents are possibly overwhelmed or embarrassed like you said, we've got a teenager who's struggling with some type of maybe depression, anxiety, or something that you've pointed out. What are the negative effects that the family experiences when this teenager's dealing with this type of drug abuse?

Jonathan: Some of the behaviors associated with substance abuse and drug dependent diagnosis can have a strain, like I say, on the family system; keeping the family in that vicious cycle of chaos. Some of the negative piece can also involve, for example, some of their issues that's related to using drugs can be related. From a legal aspect, they can get involved with law. For example, they can get into a car accident [inaudible: 04:11] using while under the influence. Then they have to come out the pocket financially. The parent has to pay for the money. It's so many different negative aspects that comes with it, in addition to this is the medical piece, too. It can put a strain on their bodies, like the fact that they're teenagers and their bodies are still growing. They can also have liver failure, even at an early age; that's more common right now.

Those are also some of the, I guess, negative pieces that's associated with teenagers using drugs right now, or for example, a relapse . . . not a relapse. A relapse or an overdose can also be a negative aspect of those individuals using drugs at the time.

Scott: You said that it has the ability to keep the family in a vicious cycle of chaos, I think is the word you used. Could you describe a little bit more about a vicious cycle, what that looks like?

Jonathan: It can be definitely the parent maybe talking . . . it turns into an argument. It can be something simple and basic that they're trying, or a point that they're to get across and that can turn into a constant argument. When individual's using drugs, they're not in their healthy state. One of the things that they're trying to do is they constantly doing, is constantly arguing and constantly fighting whether it be verbal or physical, because individuals not in their normal state of mind. That's one of the dynamics that will occur.

Scott: Sure. I could see that. At what point do you think teenager's drug dependent? I know probably in that age group, there is a lot of experimentation that goes on. When does it become apparent that there is actually a problem in which the parents need to begin to seek help?

Jonathan: Definitely when it becomes to a point where the teen is getting out of control. For example, they miss . . . it's interrupt . . . it's interfering with their daily functioning; they're missing school, they're missing class, they're cutting class, they're not . . . they had maybe an overdose, they end up in the hospital. The teen is basically out of control.

The other aspect that I mentioned earlier, they may become court-mandated to get help. The judge may require them to seek a certain amount of hours from a mental health service. If they don't do it, then they maybe get locked up as a result. Like I say, when the family dynamic is disturbed and when it's disrupted to the point where everything is just chaotic and it's just the frequency, the intensity of the problem that just continues to increase and exacerbate. After the parents sometimes have tried and failed to solve the problem within the family dynamic, they may . . . that's when they also, when they see that everything that I've tried in the household just doesn't work, then that's sometimes when they may seek professional help.

Scott: I think sometimes as parents, we tend to maybe think that this is not going to happen to our child. We think that this is the problem that happens on the other side of the tracks. It happens to other families, but not us. Have you observed any trends in teenage drug abuse disrupting family dynamics? Are there patterns, are there trends, anything that they could look out for?

Jonathan: Absolutely. That's the thing; addiction or drug abuse, it goes on in every socioeconomic status. It doesn't matter what's your race, your ethnicity, class. It hits everyone, every family, and no one is exempt. That's a common theme where you may have a parent that may come in and trying to get their child help that may ask, "Hey . . ." though they maybe . . . the parent maybe in denial about the problem, thinking that, like you said, that that only happens to other people, it doesn't happen to me. That's a common theme where the parent may come and they maybe in denial, in addition to the child or the teenager. They may be in denial also, but that's definitely a common trend right now.

Any patterns related to . . . sometimes another theme is also the age of the parent. Sometimes the parent maybe so old that they maybe . . . I don't want to say old, but maybe out of touch with some of the different trends that's going on right now in terms of drug use. They may not be knowledgeable about what's going on. Also the family structure; it maybe abuse in the household. There may be some form of verbal or physical abuse that maybe going on and the child maybe trying

to cope with the pain by using drugs. That's another common theme that tends to occur, as well.

Scott: If we have a family and the dynamic has been disrupted now, the house is experiencing this chaos because of the drug dependency of this teenager; what do you suggest that a family would do when it gets to that point?

Jonathan: Seek professional help. Like I mentioned, it's definitely embarrassing, but it takes courage and it takes strength for anyone to step out and seek professional help. One of the things I do is . . . like I say, seek professional help. Before the therapist can disrupt that disruptive pattern, the first step is to get an assessment completed so that we can give the individual a diagnosis, similar to if a car comes in and it's making a lot of noise, it's squeaking; you do a diagnostic so you know what you should treat. After that, the therapist, in addition with the family, a treatment plan will be developed and it'll be tailor-made to fit that family's specific need and also tailor-made to fit the child who's struggling with addiction; give them an opportunity to help them . . . to address that family's specific need or the individual's specific need. Also, therapists should get the parents to be aware of their teen's social activities and friends, while still holding that teenager accountable.

Notice I always talk about the parent. I also talk about the child, because I believe it's very important that everybody's on one accord in terms of seeking help, in terms of the therapeutic process.

Scott: I would assume that it's very important to nip this in the bud, to hit it while they're young. I'm sure you have experience with a lot of addicts, and it would be just my guest that someone who's been struggling with substance abuse for decades has a lot more work to do than if we caught a teenager who was just getting involved in.

Jonathan: Absolutely. It's good to nip it in the bud at an early age. You want to get it . . . you want to talk on that child or deal with the teenager . . . you want to talk with child early about drugs, and as they grow into . . . as they develop into their teenage years, you want to continue to talk about it in a way that's educational, in a way that's just normal. You want to talk to them about [inaudible: 10:18] talk. You don't want to act like the discussion of drugs should be something that the teacher should talk to them about. It should be something that parents should talk to the child about or the teenager about.

It's definitely important that we do that. In addition to that, you want to also remember that this is what we call a biocycle social problem. It could be biological or genetics. You may . . . the child, the teenager may have a parent who struggled with addiction, and then in addition to that, a grandfather who struggled with addiction. It's a high probability that they may struggle with it. When I say biocycle, also in terms of . . . when I say biocycle social, the cycle element goes

back to the mental health problem. It could be beneath the drug abuse. It can be the individual may be struggling with depression and anxiety, where they get very anxious around their peers. They may not . . . and they may have depression where they're sad. They feel hopeless and they feel worthless and so forth. That's what I'm . . .

Then also, social piece of it. When I say biocycle social, the social aspect of it is that they may have easy access to the drug. It may be normal or it may be cool for them to use drugs, or appear to be cool in their social atmosphere. That's why it's important for parents to be aware of the child's social activities and friends and so forth. Keep in mind, it's a biocycle social disease or problem.

Scott: You talked about getting help for the teenager. You have been very inclusive with mentioning the parent's role in it.

Jonathan: Absolutely.

Scott: Besides getting the therapist, and you said a little bit about being aware of their social activities and communicating with them some; what are some specific things that the parents can actually do in the household to help improve the entire family dynamic?

Jonathan: Like I mentioned earlier, parents should not be afraid to talk to their teenagers about alcohol and drugs. They should also ensure that expectation and rules regarding drugs are clear and understood. You don't want to send mixed messages to your child regarding drug use. You don't want to act like it's . . . you don't want to give them that impression that it's cool or it's good to experiment and so forth. You want to be clear and precise regarding the expectation about drug abuse, because this is a problem that you do not . . . that I wish upon no family because it can become detrimental.

Luckily, I never had to deal with that in my private practice, but individuals do over-lapse . . . do lapse in terms of drugs. They may have used drugs to the point where they may end up in the hospital or they may overdose and so forth. You want to be clear as parents to, like I say, set the expectations and the rules so that they'll know. You want to . . . and it goes back to some of the basics. You want to make sure you show your child love, be nurturing, and caring and so forth too, to your child. You treat them the way you want to be treated because that's definitely importantly in terms of keeping the family together.

A lot of times, and one of the other things that I've picked up on, is a lot of individuals who struggle with drug abuse, many of them come from abusive households, whether it be they grew up in verbal abuse where their self-esteem is very low or physical abuse. They may have a parent who was very volatile to them or wasn't balanced [inaudible: 13:22], was very mean to the child and so forth. A lot of . . . that's another theme too, is that parents, they do come from

households where abuse is common. Just being . . . loving your child, encouraging them, and being this set positive role model in their lives.

Scott: Has so much to do with the parents, doesn't it?

Jonathan: It really does, believe or not. Parents sometimes come into the session thinking, 'Just fix my child,' when really, it's about fixing the . . . I always say, "This is not an individual problem, this is a family problem because we are all . . . we're a system." Just like an automobile, you need the engine, you need the tires, you need the transmission. Everything works and think in order for everything to work productively. Parents do play a high role in the problem. It's just a reality that we've noticed in the therapy arena.

Scott: That's great. I like how you put that. When the struggling teen is able to actually implement the treatment plan that the therapist has given them, and the parents are more involved and are communicating well about rules and expectations, what are, then, some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality in the interactions of the family dynamic for the better?

Jonathan: The quality of life changes. It becomes more positive, it becomes much better. Like we've mentioned, the communication piece is very important. Being able to communicate with your child, communication is a very intimate process, and to be able to communicate with your child effectively, problem-solve effectively, you will reap the benefits of that. It's just that's a common theme. When you individuals who come in with that open mind and not . . . and to the point where they're ready to make some changes, because what they're doing is not working, then you will reap the benefits of your efforts. It's just . . . that's the most common theme ever when it comes to therapy.

Just getting them through that denial process and getting them to know that you cannot change what you do not acknowledge. You can't change what you do not see as wrong. Getting them to that point, so it's a blessing in its own way by getting them to that point where they understand that this is a problem and I need to do what I need to do to make things better. You would definitely see positive effects and so forth by putting in the work, putting in the effort, and doing what you have to do to, I guess, maintain sobriety and to make the family a better place to be, definitely.

Scott: I'm sure there's going to be a lot of listeners that seek this episode out because they have a family member who's struggling with drug addiction, and it's placing a real strain on the marriage and on the family dynamic. For the family that has looked this show up for that specifically, is there anything else that you would like to let them know or think that they should know?

Jonathan: Definitely. Whenever you have an individual struggling with drug abuse, whether it be your significant other, your husband, your wife, or whoever it is, whether it

be your child; do not hesitate to get professional help. Encourage them throughout the process to get professional help, because like I say, drug abuse or drug addiction is a detrimental . . . it's deadly and it's lethal to the point where individuals can die. It is a sad reality, but it's the truth in our society. Getting professional help is very important. Do not think that . . . try not to minimize the problem as if it's nothing or they're just experimenting. Get professional help and challenge that stigma that's associated with it.

If someone tells you that getting help . . . one of the things I want to encourage family members is to look at it this way: Getting help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength. By getting help, you're being strong and you're being . . . you're demonstrating your level of strength by doing that. When someone do get help, try not to feed into the stigma like, 'Something's wrong with you because you're getting help.' It's not like that. Like I mentioned earlier, it's a sign of strength. Encourage the person throughout the process. Validate them and help encourage them throughout the process of getting help versus becoming very . . . versus feeding into the stigma of getting help or seeking services. That's definitely the key in terms of helping the individual overcome drug abuse or drug addiction.

Scott: You've made it very clear today that it takes everybody in the family to deal with a situation like this; that the addicts not alone. Jonathan, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Jonathan: I really appreciate the opportunity.

Scott: To find out more about Mr. Jonathan Dotch, Sr. and his practice, Dotch Counseling Services of Charlotte, you can visit their website at www.DCSCharlotte.com or call 704-729-4486 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us as StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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