

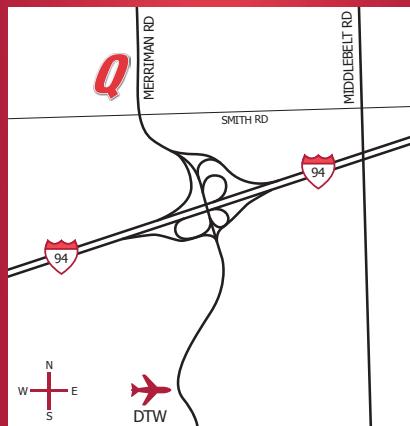
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Substance Abuse

Prevention and recovery is a family affair.

Maureen Lyn Bernard | Special to the Jewish News

Sam C. is in his mid-40s, has been in recovery from alcohol and cocaine addiction for more than 10 years and takes his recovery very seriously. He actively participates in 12-Step fellowship by going to meetings and serving as a sponsor. Sam credits Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous with saving his life and his marriage of 18 years. He is very proud of his two children, 12-year-old Sarah and 16-year-old Jason. Both children do well in school, have a variety of friends, and are involved in sports and synagogue youth group.

Sam had been in outpatient counseling for more than a year for help with interpersonal communication when he requested a family session with Sarah and Jason. The new schoolyear had started, Sarah was beginning that seemingly endless round of bar/bat mitzvah parties, and Sam had heard rumors that alcohol was available to the kids at one of these parties. There had also been reports of kids at Jason's high school selling their prescription Ritalin and Xanax.

Sam started the session by asking me — an addiction counselor at Jewish Family Service — “Can you tell them how to say no? I would think they would have learned by watching my struggle, but what if they haven’t?”

Sarah and Jason’s eyes (characteristically) rolled as they sighed, “Oh, come on, Dad. We’re good kids. Don’t you trust us?”

And Sam (characteristically) turned to me and said, “See, they just don’t get it.”

October is National Substance Abuse Prevention Month, an observance that focuses on the role prevention can play in eliminating the damage caused by alcohol and drug addiction. The American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) defined addiction as “a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry.”

Addiction is further “characterized by the inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, cravings, diminished recognition of significant problems with one’s behaviors and interpersonal relationships and a dysfunctional emotional response.”

“Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment

or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.”

It’s easy to understand Sam’s concerns. Yet “just say no” seems over-simplistic and doesn’t address the real issues that Jason and Sarah will face in the next few years as they navigate the tricky and ever-changing roadmap of adolescence.

Many of us have had a drink and possibly tried a drug, probably more than once. It is estimated that 10 percent of the population has a diagnosable substance use disorder. What makes that 10 percent more susceptible to addiction?

As our understanding of brain chemistry develops, so does our understanding of the complex interplay of cultural, societal, genetic, psychological and developmental factors. No single factor determines the probability of addiction.

There are many positive factors in Jason and Sarah’s lives that could increase the likelihood that nursing a beer at a party will not lead to alcoholism. Some of these strengths include good physical health, supportive family, a variety of activities and friends, and a positive outlook with long-term goals.

Negative risk factors include a genetic predisposition to alcoholism and their ages. The adolescent brain processes alcohol and drugs differently than the adult brain because the executive functioning part of the adolescent brain — the part that allows for complex decision-making, understanding cause and effect and predicting negative consequences — is still developing between (approximately) ages 12-21. And other risk factors, negative or positive, might not emerge until they are older or they find themselves in specific situations.

What can I say to Jason and Sarah that will address their parents’ concerns while not inducing additional eye rolling?

I know that preaching, moralizing,



shaming or scare tactics disguised as education will not be effective. I also know that minimizing the real-life potential consequences will be interpreted as encouraging poor judgement.

Rather, I admit that I cannot predict the future, nor can they. So I ask them to share their concerns, their knowledge, their stories. I ask them what they know about addiction. How do they feel about the poor judgment some of their peers are exhibiting? And, most importantly, what are the things in their lives that give them pleasure, happiness, a sense of fulfillment and what can they do to enhance those things?

Encourage the adolescents in your life to be involved with positive, constructive activities and people. Be realistic in your expectations of self and others.

What if they choose not to follow my sage advice and manage to get themselves in trouble? Seek out help, quickly. It is not necessary to wait until someone’s substance use leads them to hit rock-bottom. Addicts, alcoholics and their loved ones do themselves a disservice by minimizing, ignoring or denying the mounting evidence of problematic substance use.

The most effective way to stop the damage caused by addiction is to prevent it. During National Substance Abuse Prevention Month we recognize the importance of modeling and providing choices that support optimal physical, emotional, behavioral and mental health in lieu of substance use. *

Maureen Lyn Bernard, LMSW, ACSW, CADC, CCS, is a licensed masters-level social worker, certified addictions counselor and clinical supervisor at Jewish Family Service.

Resources

In Oakland County, we are fortunate to have access to a variety of substance use disorder treatment providers that can address all treatment needs regardless of income, age, gender, sexual orientation and medical status:

- **The Daniel Sobel Friendship House** offers a welcoming Jewish recovery community, www.friendshipcircle.org/friendshiphouse.
- **Jewish Family Service** provides outpatient individual and family therapy. Contact the Resource Center at (248) 592-2313 for further information.
- **Alcoholics Anonymous**: www.aa-semi.org/meetings.php
- **American Society of Addiction Medicine**: www.asam.org
- **Narcotics Anonymous**: www.michigan-na.org
- **National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence**: www.ncadd.org