

## GUILT

For every unfortunate event that occurs in people's lives, there is an instinctive human need to establish blame or fault, and to answer the question, "why?" Every year, trial lawyers make millions of dollars exploiting this human need. Whether it is marital discord, loss of job, automobile accident, illness, death, criminal activity or even lifestyle choices, we as a society look for ways to establish accountability and then seek ways to "right the wrong." In many cases, blame is easy to establish. Often, in marital friction, one spouse or the other behaves in a way that the fault can easily be established; job loss is often the result of situations outside the control of the victim, such as a poor economy or corporate downsizing; automobile accidents are frequently the result of traffic violations by other drivers or weather conditions; illnesses and death can often be a product of medical malpractice, carelessness on someone's part, or a crime committed by another; economic and societal circumstances are often blamed for criminal behavior and homelessness. In all of these examples, blame can be relatively easy to establish and the "why" question can be answered. But what happens when the blame and "why" for any of these tragic events cannot easily be assigned? How do we deal with our need to establish blame and answer the "why" question? Frequently, we blame ourselves and carry a heavy burden of guilt, reproaching ourselves from a mistaken belief that we have done something very wrong.

This willingness to assume personal guilt is particularly troubling when it visits the families of people suffering from substance abuse and addiction, especially parents. Because of some of the common parental behaviors that almost always accompany a family member's addiction, such as denial and co-dependency, finding someone or something other than ourselves to blame is very difficult. We almost never blame the affected family member, despite the fact that the first decision to use an addictive substance was their decision and theirs alone. We'd like to blame the school or workplace, but deep down, we know that it really isn't their fault. We'd like to blame "bad friends," but we know that our affected family member is the "bad friend" that other parents would like to blame. We'd like to blame our high-pressure society for creating a competitive environment that incited our loved one to "drop out," yet we see other people, often within the same family, who are thriving in this new world. And then there's the influence of rap and heavy metal music; Hollywood; the War on Terror; bullying; economic circumstances; social circumstances; genetic tendencies; and on and on the list goes of possible reasons and guilty parties, with each one being invalidated almost as fast as it is conceived. So what's left? We blame ourselves for our loved one's addiction and suffer deep feelings of guilt and depression that seem to last endlessly.

In my experience with other families of substance abusers and addicts, I have found that parental feelings of guilt are almost always unwarranted. Does that mean they always did everything right? Of course not. Parental perfection just isn't feasible no matter how attentive, educated, devoted or conscientious we may be. Parenting is like many other aspects of life...some do it better than others, but most people give it their best effort. Unfortunately, though, the curse of addiction can visit even the "best" families, with the strongest structures, greatest love for one another, most traditional value system, strongest rules and attending consequences for breaking them, and faith in God.

In my opinion, if parents of addicts were successful in most (**not all**) of the following parenting attributes, they should begin the process of cleansing guilt from their minds and transferring it to where it belongs: with the addict! Once the guilt is cleansed from the family psyche, the "why" will be less consuming and the energy previously spent dealing with the guilt and answering the "why" question can be more productively spent concentrating on recovery.

#### DID WE/I

- Demonstrate our faith in God and provide moral direction for choosing between right and wrong?
- Set an example of good citizenship by obeying laws, participating in school and/or community activities, respecting the property of others, and living harmoniously with our neighbors?
- Establish rules of conduct in our home, live by them ourselves, and enforce consequences for breaking them?
- Assign responsibilities in the home and hold family members accountable for them?
- Teach a strong work ethic and set the example?
- Celebrate successes and counsel failures?
- Take an interest in knowing friends, their values and influence?
- Monitor activities and enforce curfews?
- Create a loving and trusting environment in the home?
- Encourage academic achievement?
- Support extra-curricular activities through school or other organizations?
- Take immediate and forceful action when the substance abuse problem first became known?
- Make good faith efforts to avoid enabling and co-dependency?
- Assist in locating and funding rehabilitation?
- Celebrate achievements along the path to recovery?
- Demonstrate strength, courage, tenacity and unqualified love even in the darkest days of the active addiction?

I suspect that the majority of families reading this essay could answer in the affirmative to **most** of these questions and many could answer affirmatively to all of them. If you are in either of these categories, I contend that your feelings of guilt are unfounded, misplaced and impeding your ability to assist in the recovery process. If you can accept the frailties and imperfections that characterize humans generally, then you can accept your own shortcomings and recognize that the addiction is NOT your fault, you are NOT guilty of negligence, and that the feelings of guilt are NOT helpful.

So how do we as families shed this terrible burden? I think the answer is to simply look at all of the life events that preceded the addiction and view them clinically, dispassionately and analytically. Once we can **intellectually** ascertain that the environment we created, the values we espoused, the example we set and the “life lessons” we taught were the right things to do, then we can more easily dispatch our **emotional** feelings of guilt. The joy of doing so will be in the relief that we feel, the new-found energy we can expend in helping in the recovery process (see essay “Helping vs. Enabling”) and in the emancipation of our spirit from the bondage of an unfounded depression.