An Anthology of **Denial**

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The first time we hear the term denial at a meeting, the concept takes on a whole new meaning. Many of us realize that the very reason we are at our first meeting is because we have “come out of denial” by admitting that there is a problem of addiction in a loved one and that it is affecting us negatively. Just as the addict lives in a distorted reality through the use of mind-altering substances, we have distorted our reality through the use of a denial system.
First, we didn’t know there was a problem, then we didn’t believe there was a problem, then we rationalized and minimized the problem, then we thought we could control the problem, and at times we even thought the problem had gone away...all these are ways we stayed in various levels of denial.
We finally break out of denial, accept that there is a problem and accept that we cannot control. We keep coming back to meetings and as we do, we realize the subtle ways we slip in and out of denial. It’s a way we distort our reality in order to survive with a minimum of pain.
Once we face our denial, it hurts, yet it is the critical step we need to take before we can move forward in our personal growth in recovery.
On the following pages, a group of people, ordinary people in many ways, have presented the dynamics of how DENIAL worked to slow the realization of what drugs were doing to them and their families. They also tell how they discovered what was happening and what they did to overcome the rut they had dug for themselves.

As you read this, we hope you will find the common thread of denial, realization, hope and finally recovery and that you can see yourself in their story.

Denial - A Father's View

Denial is a subject which is both common and difficult to identify when it comes to someone who is dependent on mind altering substances and they are people we care about. A philosopher once said "things are not as they are but as people perceive they are". This is particularly true when it comes to identifying and dealing with drug abuse in loved ones.

We have developed defense mechanisms to help us cope with situations that we encounter in everyday life. When these mechanisms are effective, we use them over and over again. They become our "filters" through which we see and interpret life. They become the means by which we can deny reality, or perceive reality in a way which is acceptable to us.

We begin to run into trouble when reality becomes so different from what we perceive it to be. Then denial of that reality prevents us from growing and developing. Until we adjust our filters so that we can perceive and deal with the reality of a situation, we simply deny that situation exists. So it was with my experience with drug abuse in my daughter and the way it was perceived and dealt with.

My view of the world when it came to drugs was formulated early in my life. I was brought up in a household where drug users were referred to, derisively as "cokies" and people who drank wine were "winos". They were pictured as dirty, sub-humans with whom nice people did not associate. That view of the world positively precluded me from seeing the signs and signals that my daughter was sending which could have given me a clue as to her problem. My filters converted them to more acceptable signals. My simplistic view of the drug world also prevented me from learning about drugs and their effect.

When my daughter told me she was a drug addict, I could no longer deny the fact, so I simply adjusted my "life filter" and went onto the next stage of denial. This based on another myth of childhood. You see, fathers are omnipotent and are directly

responsible for the well being of their children. If my daughter was a drug addict, it was my job as a father to intervene and to guide her to recovery, no matter what it took. That filtered view of reality is very difficult to change because failure to fix the addict implies, not an incorrect view of reality, but a failure to do one's job as a parent. Our filtered view of reality doesn't let us see that we cannot change another person's behavior. When we come to the realization that our perception of reality is not correct, we can alter it and begin the journey up from the bottom. We can begin to develop new perceptions of reality, which focus, not on other people's actions but on our own.

People with a drug problem aren't dirty sub-humans. They are average folks with a disease. One that can be controlled if they want to make a commitment to do so. A father's job is to raise his children as best he can with the tools available to him. Unless he can control all the genetic traits that his children possess and can regulate all the stimuli and interactions that his children receive during their entire life, he can't determine the outcome. When I was able to remove the filter and see the simple fact, I could begin to accept "a better way.'

Denial - A Wife's View

Once upon a time I had a dream that turned into a nightmare. I had a dream of a wonderful life with my charming husband, building a business together, having children, pursuing our interests. For years we played together, spent weekends camping, and traveled the world.

When we started our business, money was tight. Our business grew and still money was tight. I worked sixty hour weeks and still there was no money. I would misplace my wallet or checkbook and find checks written to unknown persons. My husband would work until all hours of the night. Still there was no money.

I felt neglected, unloved and questioned if he was having an affair. I tried to win his affection by keeping the business and our home in order. I got pregnant. I miscarried and we tried again. I got pregnant again and still felt lonely, confused and suspicious.

I would find drug paraphernalia and confront my husband. He would claim he knew nothing. I would talk to my friends and they would say, "He is going through a phase" or "You are just moody" or "Your hormones do strange things to you when you are pregnant."

I went on kidding myself, blaming myself for being incompetent. I isolated myself, and my problems. I withdrew. I pretended my life was not the way it was. I knew that "it" was somehow my fault. God was punishing me for all the horrible things I must have done. I was scared. I blew everything out of proportion. The smallest incident became a major catastrophe. I wanted to shrink myself so I would take up no room and be in nobody's way. I could not see what was right before my eyes.

To understand denial and how it incapacitates us is very powerful. To be able to identify when we are in denial, helps us to take the power away from our denial and gives it back to ourselves. There is a real freedom in truth.

To be able to see our life situation as it really is and to see our role in it is the first step toward recovery. Once I was able to see the reality

of my situation, I could then choose a course of action. With the unconditional love and support I received in Co-Anon, I could progress at my own rate and pace. I was loved and accepted when I was doing well and I was loved when I slipped.

When I was in denial I could not admit to myself the obvious. I ignored clues from my environment that something was not right. I would rather rationalize away inconsistencies. I felt a constant discomfort, even during times of relatively low stress. The discomfort grew and there seemed to be nothing I could do to relieve it. I would do a "reality check" and confront my addicted husband. At first I felt relief when he would offer me a logical explanation for the situation. My discomfort would always soon return. I became suspicious and when I started to play detective, my fears were verified. I found cold hard proof that my husband was an addict.

I was tremendously relieved to know that all the craziness was not just my imagination. I was tremendously relieved that I had found the problem and it was not me. I also felt tremendous fear because I was not sure what I needed to do.

I did know that as a loving, supportive wife I needed to get help for my husband. I needed to get him to a drug rehabilitation program. I became obsessed with helping him. My life became crazier. I had not yet hit bottom. I was still living under the delusion that I could make my husband change his behavior.

My friends in Co-Anon would gently relay their own experiences, strength and hope. They shared with me their stories of powerlessness when it came to controlling someone else's life. They helped me to see that by pretending I was okay I was only fooling myself and prolonging the pain. They helped me to see that life outside denial can be a wonderful place.

Denial is a two-fold problem. We deny what we see, what we hear and what we feel. We then deny what we have become. Our life becomes chaos and we don't know why.

The insanity caused by not believing my feelings increased. As I discredited my own perceptions I would rely on other people for my reality. Often I would rely on my addicted husband. My self esteem dissolved as time after time my suspicions and uncomfortable feelings were invalidated by my husband and friends. I isolated myself until the only reality check I had was an addict's. When the pain became too great and my self esteem too low I knew I needed help. Even after I accepted that my husband was an addict and that his lies were part of his addiction, I continued to believe him.

Using the teachings of the Co-Anon program I learned to love myself enough to listen to my feelings and acknowledge them as real. Slowly I gained strength to look at the reality of my situation. With the truth came freedom. Once I knew my situation I could make choices. One of my choices was to do nothing until I really knew what I wanted to do. That took a long time.

Even now, especially when things are going well, I fall into denial. I pretend that my husband is normal. Occasionally, I am shocked back into reality, but more often than not when I hear newcomers talk, I am gently reminded and I truly love them.

Denial - A Mother’s View

As I look back on my involvement in Co-anon I am compelled to remember the troubling months before I found my first meeting. There had been so many changes in my eldest son's behavior and appearance that I found myself worrying about him constantly and even verbalizing to my husband the fear I felt that there might be drug use causing these changes. Deep down, though, I didn't want to know the answer. It seemed easier to not have to confront the fact that one of my children could be a user. This unwillingness to face the facts was denial.

Rather than pursue my suspicions, even to take some time to learn the symptoms of drug use, I refused to accept the possibility that a child of mine could be doing drugs. However, when I was finally told that my son was on cocaine, I became obsessed with the idea that somehow I could find a way to fix this problem. My days were spent on the phone, calling different programs hoping to find a way to change my son and his girlfriend's addiction. I became frantic, my emotions were out of control and I was not even aware of the futility of this effort. I now know that this too was denial.

Denial is a coping mechanism, but it is nonproductive and can delay the road to reaching a better way to be...this I would learn after attending Co-Anon meetings.

Focusing on another person's problems, unwilling or unable to see the reality of a situation and losing touch with oneself are all products of this thing we call denial.

In Co-Anon, by listening to what the program offers and beginning to apply the twelve steps, one day at a time, I begin to let my addict go and to concentrate on my responsibility to myself.

This story is one of ultimate denial-the denial of one's own existence. The individual focuses upon the outside world and denies the existence of his or her own feelings and needs. Recovery is the realization and validation of these feelings, needs and desires and learning how they fit into the world as a whole.

Denial of Self

I was always searching for a reason to explain my husband's behavior. I needed someone or something to blame. At first, I blamed myself. I thought it was something I said or did that made him stay away. Maybe he had a lover, maybe he was depressed, maybe it was his job or the kids.

I didn't want to see what the problem really was. I couldn't accept the facts that were clear to everyone else. I thought my love for him should be enough. Why couldn't he see how much I loved him? Why couldn't he accept what I had to offer? Why wasn't my love enough? Why couldn't he see what he was doing to our lives? Why?

When I came to Co-Anon I thought someone would give me the answers to these questions. I thought the answers would solve all of my problems. I thought these were my only problems. Instead I was told to stop focusing on him. I needed to look at myself. I thought they were crazy because there was nothing wrong with me. I was not the addict, he was. They told me to stop depending on his love and to love and nurture myself. I learned to stop giving with expectations of getting something in return. I couldn't live on just his love, why should I expect that my love should meet all his needs. I learned to detach from his problems and to realize that he was hurting himself, not me.

At that point the real work began. The uncovering of my own character defects. I discovered that I was not perfect. There was a lot of work to do on me. If I kept working on my shortcomings I would have little time left to obsess on him. This is not an easy thing to do!

After years of controlling, manipulating, nagging and scolding it was hard to remain focused on myself. With the help of the Co-Anon program and my Higher Power, I learned to be good to myself. I learned it was common to slip back into old behavior and not to beat myself up over it. I could keep starting over again.

I could learn from my mistakes. It wouldn't be easy to let go of the old ways, but with a conscious effort it could be done - one day at a time.
In Co-Anon I was given the tools by which to create a better life for myself. If I choose to use the program and work the steps of recovery, I can find peace of mind. By sharing my experience , strength and hope with others, I may help them but I know I can help myself.

Co-Anon Family Groups
are for friends and family members affected by the disease of addiction.

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