

**PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBMISSION TO HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY
AND HUMAN SERVICES**

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF ILLICIT DRUG USE ON FAMILIES

SUMMARY

My submission is an account of the impact on my family of, and our journey with my brother supporting him through, the effects of illicit and legal drug use and resultant financial, social, personal, legal and mental health issues. Points covered are family history, contributing factors, "the system", harm minimization, strengthening families, recommendations, conclusion.

FAMILY HISTORY

My brother and I come from a close and loving family and extended family. My brother was a high achieving scholar, sportsman, businessman and community contributor, winning many awards and scholarships in all these arenas. My brother, although not perfect, was a handsome, charismatic, charming individual; he is three years younger than I, and my much loved and only sibling. In fact, I adored and idolized him. There is paternal family history of some alcohol dependence and a presence of alcohol during our childhood, due to a military lifestyle which, at the time actively promoted and condoned alcohol use by its members. Our father rose to the top of his area of expertise within the military, receiving an MBE for services to the military. Our mother was unconditionally loving, kind and capable, and supportive of her entire family always.

EVENTS CONTRIBUTING TO ILLNESS

In 1986 our much loved mother died a traumatic death from cancer, followed a year later by her much loved brother, who had lived with our family, also suffering a traumatic death from leukaemia. Not long after these events my brother, who had been operating his own successful insurance/financial services business for about five years, at the age of 28, lost his business and suffered bankruptcy due to complex and altruistic reasons.

These events, I believe, were the catalyst for my brother experiencing an emotional illness, underpinned by some genetic predisposition and some previous marijuana and other illicit drug experimentation (not heroin).

FINANCIAL, SOCIAL, AND PERSONAL COST TO OUR FAMILY, INCLUDING THE IMPACT OF DRUG-INDUCED PSYCHOSIS OR OTHER MENTAL DISORDERS

As a result of my brother's illness, the following events transpired, chronologically:

NEGATIVE IMPACT ON MY BROTHER

- My brother used marijuana and alcohol heavily to "self medicate"
- He experienced and exhibited marked personality changes, becoming unpredictable, irrational, having extreme mood swings and would often be uncontactable and his whereabouts unknown for months at a time
- He has experienced homelessness and unemployment on and off for nearly 20 years
- He has had to attend court for minor breaches of the law on several occasions, some of which involved misrepresentation of the truth by authorities. He spent a week in legal custody in a remand centre and had a defamatory and derogatory article appear about him in relation to one of these incidents in a local newspaper
- He became unethical in some of his dealings with people
- He developed associations with other people using illicit drugs who were chronically unemployed, some of whom died due to their drug use
- He has had difficulty maintaining and forming meaningful relationships with the opposite sex and remains single and childless at the age of nearly 50. (This was not the case prior to this illness)
- He did not (nor could he be persuaded to) seek any medical or psychological assistance for his symptoms
- He attended two Mental Health Tribunal Hearings initiated by me, which resulted in Mental Health Treatment Orders being made
- He complied with the second Order, attending appointments with a mental health professional over a six month period, but refusing to take medication prescribed by this mental health professional (telling me this, but not the mental health professional!!), who apparently remained oblivious to this fact
- This mental health professional was unaware of the extent of my brother's marijuana and alcohol use during his treatment of him (which continued during this time unabated – as advised to me by my brother) and did not include drug and alcohol treatment/program attendance as part of his case management plan for my brother
- My brother exhibited considerable impairment of intellectual abilities at times
- He has put himself in life threatening situations often
- Three years ago he had a near fatal car accident and now has a damaged right rotator cuff injury preventing lifting his arm above his shoulder independently
- My brother has been frank about his marijuana and alcohol use with family and friends

- My brother has repeatedly told me over this nearly-20 year period of his strong desire to discontinue using marijuana and alcohol and of his insight into its dangers and effects. He has repeatedly tried and failed to do so
- He tells me at this time that he is not using marijuana and is preparing to discontinue using alcohol
- I observe evidence of this being so, in that he has recently secured reasonable shared accommodation for himself and a job, and I have observed emotional healing taking place from within him for about the last two years (I have also observed that this healing has involved him becoming more self-assertive and keen to correct perceived or real injustices to himself and others)
- He has maintained throughout this period that the cause of his demise is the loss of his business for altruistic reasons (he has managed to put together a legal case in this respect, which remains unresolved), and that its resolution will assist his well being. He concedes that his marijuana and alcohol use have exacerbated the situation, but does not attribute them as the cause of his demise/illness.

IMPACT ON MY FATHER

- As my father was financially involved with my brother, he suffered the loss of his home and most of his personal finances, assets and investments (in the millions of dollars)
- Loss of financial and personal independence
- Chronic humiliation, conflict, grief, anger, confusion, fear, trauma and loss of relationship with his son for some time (now healing) - over a nearly-20 year period
- Disruption of family relationships
- Physical health impacted seriously, but recovered well at the age of 82 years.

IMPACT ON ME

- As I was also financially involved with my brother, I suffered the loss of my home and a large proportion of my personal finances
- Loss of financial and personal independence
- Chronic humiliation, conflict, grief, anger, confusion, fear, trauma and intermittent loss of relationship with my brother – over a nearly-20 year period (accompanying him to court appearances/remand centre visits, antagonistic phone calls and visits from his associates and police, not knowing his whereabouts for months at a time, fearing his death etc.)
- Disruption of family relationships, including with my husband (adversely financially and emotionally affected by my brother's illness)
- Having my brother live in my family home for over a year whilst unwell and intermittently at other times
- Negative impact on my daughter (now 13)

- Negative impact on my health
- Told by my family GP that the medical profession considers “people like your brother to have a terminal illness”. I replied I consider my brother’s situation can be overcome and healed with a lot of love, knowledge and support
- Impetus to study (and graduate with) diplomas of alcohol and other drugs/youth work/massage therapy, and other study (philosophy/spirituality) over last 10 years
- Now working in these fields in the community

“THE SYSTEM”

During this time, in our dealings with doctors, mental health professionals, Mental Health Tribunals, police, legal aid lawyers, judges and chief magistrates, my brother and I have encountered some incredibly helpful, kind and competent individuals and systems, who went way above and beyond the call of duty and for whom we are most grateful, and some incredibly unhelpful, unkind and incompetent individuals and systems, with the latter lacking intelligence, relevance, compassion, flexibility, competence and creativity. For example, at no time during his dealings with “the system” was my brother required to enter into a drug and alcohol treatment/rehabilitation program.

During the times when I was feeling desperate about my brother’s health, I rang different service providers for advice/help, to be told **every time** there was absolutely nothing could be done except to wait until my brother was ready to accept help for himself. Whilst this may be true, it is absolutely not what you want to hear when the life of someone you love dearly appears to be hanging by a thread. In the end, when all else had failed, I turned to myself for answers, help and hope.

IMPACT OF HARM MINIMISATION

Harm minimization is where we allow people to use alcohol and other drugs, pointing out our observations of negative impact on the user and others, and setting boundaries to protect ourselves and others accordingly. The above studies, courses undertaken with the Family Drug Support organization and others, and ensuing work with people with alcohol and other drugs dependence and homeless young women, have given me insight into the effects of harm minimization and its usefulness in many circumstances.

However, the greatest insight I have gained in this regard was the significant change/improvement/healing in my brother’s health and our personal relationship, and consequently relationships with wider family members, when I started listening and relating to him **non-judgementally**, allowing him to come to my home under the influence of alcohol/marijuana and listening to what he had to say at that time. In fact, it was during these times that his most profound self-disclosure took place.

Previously I had told him he could not be here if he was under the influence of these substances (although there were exceptions, but I was not open to talking to him then). Towards the end of his year-long stay with us, I gave him an ultimatum to stop using these substances or leave – he chose to leave and was lost to us for a very long time.

Some time after, I realized that my attitude towards my brother had mostly alternated between subtly judgemental (with some moralizing and lots of advice-giving thrown in for good measure) and profound grief/pity (including self-pity) and sorrow (with a lot of love and compassion in between), with no real acceptance of the situation. It was not until I allowed myself to just listen to him – be with him - that healing took place for both of us. I was then able to articulate to him in a positive manner (without judgement) how I felt about certain of his behaviors and set more positive boundaries for myself, which he was consequently more able to respect than previously.

Harm minimisation programs, such as that offered by Family Drug Support, I found to be extremely beneficial in facilitating a process of healing for myself and my brother. I am not saying this is easy - I am saying it is possible.

WAYS TO STRENGTHEN FAMILIES WHO ARE COPING WITH A MEMBER(S) USING ILLICIT DRUGS

- Education
- Promotion of individual autonomy and power
- Providing intelligent, insightful, functional, relevant, flexible, creative, authentic and compassionate service providers/treatment programs
- Foster and promote self care programs complementary to those of “mainstream medicine”, which can be extremely beneficial for those with problematic substance use and their families/carers, such as meditation/yoga/herbal medicine/homeopathy/acupuncture/massage, to name a few.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Encourage policy makers, service providers and all those affected by another person’s problematic substance use to:

- Adopt a non-judgemental approach to people with problematic substance use and listen, listen, listen
- Be aware that true acceptance of the situation, whilst putting in place strong boundaries to protect self and others, may precipitate a healing process for all concerned by changing the dynamics of relationships and circumstances
- Be careful of labeling people and be wary of putting people in “boxes” – they just might prove you wrong!

- Promote individual autonomy and power
- Recognise the individual as the greatest resource
- Empower individuals through education and encourage self-knowledge and self care, as well as care of others (knowledge is power)
- Investigate further causes and effects of co-morbidity of alcohol and illicit drugs use and disseminate information widely
- Have faith in self and others to heal
- Practice forgiveness (of self and others)
- Never underestimate the power of love

CONCLUSION

I would like to acknowledge the many friends, other family members and strangers who have helped my brother, my father and me. We are most grateful for your generous support.

It is 11.30 am on Thursday 21 March, 2007. My brother has just rung me to say he has had a successful first day in a new job. He is sounding positive, determined and committed, he has somewhere stable to live, and is preparing to further pursue his own legal case. He has told me he has moved on from his illicit substance use and is working on giving up his legal substance use. I have had about fifty phone calls like this over the past nearly-20 years. Dare I believe that "this is it" - is this really the beginning of a truly healed life? Time will tell, and I will never give up believing it is possible.

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