



Day 16: Lessons from Laura

Take a look at my daughter Laura who was in the first grade when this was taken and my son Ross who is only a couple of years older. Although she was only 6 years old, Laura was already at risk of developing the disease of addiction. Could you tell from that picture? Addiction was formally diagnosed when Laura was 18 and took her life on December 21, 2017, just shy of her 30th birthday.

Addiction is a Disease - Understand Who is at Risk

Most of us are paying attention these days to our family history of diseases. When you get a checkup or fill out a medical form, you are often asked your family history of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and a range of other diseases that run in families. It's accurate to say that we believe that a family history of the disease is a predictor of one's future risk of coming down with it.

So what if you have a family history of heart disease? How do you manage yourself differently? You might change your diet, exercise more, monitor your cholesterol or get more regular health checkups. What about a family history of breast cancer? You might get a genetic test, start your mammograms earlier, avoid estrogen-based products or have discussions with your doctor.

If addiction is a disease, then how do we identify who is at risk? And, once we've determined that there is a greater risk, what actions should we take?

Understanding the Risk Factors

Developing an addiction begins before the age of 18 in 90% of those that eventually become addicted.

And once you are in the disease state and as the disease progresses, it becomes much more difficult to treat. That is why it is important to identify who is at risk when they are Laura's age in the picture. Here are some markers to consider:

- Children are 8 times more likely to develop an addiction if they have an immediate family member who is also addicted. Understanding the family history is critical to determining who is at risk.
- Children who have suffered an "ACE" - an acute childhood event such as divorce, death, move to a new school, etc are also more at risk. Their lives have been disrupted and they may seek substances as ways to cope with these ACE events.
- Children who have learning differences such as ADHD, processing speed index problems or other issues that make it harder for them to succeed in school. Studies reveal that 40% of children with ADHD began using drugs or alcohol as teenagers compared with 22% of those without the diagnosis. Those children with ADHD tend to be more compulsive, leading to their willingness to try drugs.
- Certain personality traits that put them more at risk: sensation-seeking, impulsiveness, anxiety sensitivity, and hopelessness.
- Children who have been adopted (at any age) with no information on their family history. At Phoenix Outdoor, our adolescent wilderness therapy program, 30-35% of our clients were adopted, and most were addicted. That held true across the industry.

My Takeaways

If you wait until high school to determine if your child is at risk for addiction, then you are already too late to take important corrective actions at a much younger age. Those corrective actions may help prevent the slide into addiction that often becomes too difficult to treat or in Laura's case, fatal.