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The "Rock Bottom" Myth - Learn How to Raise the Bottom

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Yeah, when he hits bottom he'll be ready. A user has to hit bottom before he will change. Sooner or later she will hit bottom. Then she'll be ready to get some help.

Raise the Bottom.

This whole idea of "hitting bottom" is out of date. Some people will wait years-even decades-for their friend to reach this mythical point in their alcohol and drug use. But why wait for them to "hit bottom"? Why not help them by raising their bottom? There are ways to encourage someone to reach for help much earlier. In doing so, we can avoid a lot of unnecessary pain and heartache-and maybe even save their life. *For some people, hitting bottom will be six feet underground.*

I'll use my son as an example. Jake is a great kid and is doing well in college. He's studying and has found a major that he is excited about. He also works at a part-time job where he has recently been promoted to manager. We are extremely proud of him. But life hasn't always been this promising for Jake.

He began his early teen years pretty much as I did. At age thirteen, Jake began to experiment with alcohol and pot. He did this in spite of the fact that his father was an addiction counselor (or maybe subconsciously because of it, since that would be a good way to rebel against Dad). Jake was also very aware of how genetic predisposition could play a role in his life, as he knew my own addiction story well. However, he made some wrong choices, which to me reconfirmed that there was some truth to the genetic correlation.

At times he was out of control, and as a result he was often suspended from school. He got in trouble for fighting and pulling the fire alarm during school. He even managed to get a ticket for reckless driving in the school parking lot. He and some friends tore up a golf course one night with a 4 x 4 truck. He was also selling drugs. One night we had four police cars in front of our house when he was arrested, and they searched our house with a drug-sniffing dog. His probation officer came by frequently, and he had to take random UAs (urine analysis tests for drugs). At one point, he couldn't leave the house for several weeks because he had an ankle bracelet (a monitoring device on his leg as part of one of his probation requirements), so he figured he would sell drugs out of our house

Eventually the principal of his high school told him, "We've had it, don't come back." Right

before our eyes, he had almost turned into a stranger. Jake was frequently running away from home and running from police. He soon found his life swarming with issues he could not handle because of his substance use. For a time, Judy and I were on edge, just dreading to hear the phone ring. Someone was always calling us about Jake. Although his police problems were not major, we did often have a patrol car in our driveway. It was great excitement for the neighbors! We had many sleepless nights worried about our son's safety. At least four of his friends had been killed in alcohol-related incidents. *How long was this going to last? How much more trouble could he possibly get into?*

This painful phase of drug abuse in my own life had gone on for sixteen years, which made me determined to help Jake all the more. I couldn't bear to see him go through the same thing I did. Judy and I pursued counseling, parenting seminars, and other resources for support. Most of our attempts did little to help. There were some very low times for us. During one counseling session Jake got up, told the counselor to f*** off, and left. Nothing seemed to be the answer for our son.

Though we continued to try, we learned that this was not something that we could control. All we could do was hold things together and continue to hope for Jake. Addicts like me, and potentially my son, often need to learn things the hard way. Judy vividly recalls a time when Jake was about three years old. She was ironing and told him not to touch the iron-that it was hot. He looked directly into her eyes, stuck out his finger and touched it. At that moment she knew this was not going to be an easy road. *Jake was going to have to learn things the hard way.*

The Value of Pain.

Pain can be a wonderful teacher. Pain usually means that something is wrong or perhaps broken. Without pain, most people would have even larger problems. Pain is a signal that we need to do something different if we want it to stop. *We decided to not rob Jake of these pivotal learning opportunities at hand.* We weren't going to lie for him, put up his bail, or pay for lawyers.

When the police brought him home late one night, we let the law take its course. A traffic infraction while Jake was on probation had turned into a search, and drugs were found in the car. The officers told me what happened and asked me what I wanted to do. Jake was a minor, under the age of eighteen, so I was still responsible for him. I asked them what they would normally do if we had not been home. The officer told me that the normal course of action would be to put him in jail. I said, "Okay, go ahead, and do what you would normally do if we were not here." I was told to pick him up in the morning.

It wasn't easy for Judy and me to watch them put handcuffs on him and drive away. This would be the first of three incidents like this. Jake learned that we were not going to rescue him. From then on, we allowed the natural consequences be his teacher. For ten days in January, he was sentenced to wilderness work camp (unofficially called *hoods in the woods*), where he slept in a tent, high in the Rocky Mountains. He later spent ten days in juvenile detention, and we didn't bail him out or hire a lawyer. All this was painful for him and for us as well.

Jake didn't like being locked up, and he was beginning to connect the dots. But still, we

endured a few more difficult years. He didn't change overnight and his problem continued to be a strain on our family. His problem was all-consuming, taking up the majority of our energy for a time.

Eventually, Jake's substance use took its toll on our marriage, as we didn't always agree about what to do next. Judy was always willing to give Jake the benefit of the doubt. In an effort *not to unjustly accuse Jake*, she felt a need to almost be an eyewitness before she would accept his drug problem. Mountains of circumstantial evidence were not enough. I, on the other hand, looked at the situation differently. Although I wasn't an eyewitness, I was convinced that Jake had a substance abuse problem. This strained our relationship. Sometimes we were cold and silent toward each other, not communicating for days.

How did we make it through this? We remained committed to each other and to our marriage. We attended counseling, seminars, read books, prayed, and just plain "stuck it out," believing this too shall pass. Eventually it did. It's not easy for a parent (especially a mom) to watch her child suffer- even when she knows it is exactly what is best for him. We believe the decisions we made concerning how to handle Jake's problems made a significant difference in his life.

Jake eventually graduated from a special high school, located in the courthouse outside of the juvenile court room. This school, Justice High, consists of kids whom many people have given up on. Jake played on the football team, graduated as class valedictorian and was inducted into the National Honor Society! I believe that as a result of our tough-love approach, our son's problem ended. What could have gone on for many years was cut short.

Sometimes our natural inclination is to rescue those we love, but often this is the most harmful thing we can do. For Jake, his big battle was from about age thirteen to seventeen. It could just as easily have been from ages thirteen to twenty-nine-just like his Dad. What did we do? We raised his bottom. We allowed the consequences to pile up fast. And we allowed Jake to take care of them himself. His personal victory over his struggles gives him great motivation and confidence as he now realizes that he has what it takes to succeed in life.

So Does Everyone Have to Hit Rock Bottom?

I would say *no*. Tough love can prevent a substance abuser from prolonging their usage. There are loving ways to refuse to rescue someone that in the long run will help him or her to choose recovery. Loving means doing the right thing to help. *This can take all of our strength and energy at times*. We all hate to see someone suffer-even when the suffering is a consequence of their bad choices. This approach, or some form of it, is something you might consider: Raise the bottom. Whether it is a teenage son or daughter, a spouse, boyfriend, aunt or uncle, the same principles can apply.

A Few Nights in Jail Could Be the Best Thing That Ever Happens to Them.

The next time this person you care about appeals to you to get them out of a bind (loan them money, pay their electric bill, buy them gas, pay for a lawyer), think twice. You just might be prolonging their disease and *robbing them of the natural consequences that they need to experience-in order to seek help and begin to connect the dots.'*

*This article excerpted from chapter 17 of "Why Don't They JUST QUIT?"
Winner-Best Self-Help Book 2008/Next Generation Indie Book Awards*

Joe Herzanek, a man who battled his own demons of addiction over twenty-five years ago, says, "I know people can change. If I can do it, anyone can!"

A recovering person himself, Joe is the president and founder of Changing Lives Foundation and author of the award-winning book "Why Don't They Just Quit?" As an addiction counselor in Colorado he has spent over thirteen years working in the criminal justice system.

His passion for helping men and women struggling with addiction, as well as their family members and friends, inspire him to offer hope and solutions.

Joe offers words of encouragement: "Addiction is not a hopeless situation," he writes. "Addicts and alcoholics aren't crazy, and they can quit."

Joe and his wife Judy have three children, Jami, Jake, and Jessica, and enjoy the beautiful Colorado outdoors with their two Cairn Terriers, Lewis and Clark.

For more information on Joe's book, "Why Don't They JUST QUIT?" What families and friends need to know about addiction and recovery:

<http://www.whydonttheyjustquit.com>

For resources and information on recovery:

<http://www.changinglivesfoundation.org>

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