

1

We'll Be There for Him

A Family Responds to Relapse

In this chapter a number of members of one hypothetical family, and a doctor, speak in turn. Each states his or her view about how the family is responding, and should respond, to the excessive drinking of the main protagonist's husband. The latter has had a drinking problem for many years and has recently had a relapse after several months of encouraging improvement. This reversion to drinking has thrown into sharp relief the different ways in which family members have been coping, and might cope, with this problem. The family is closely based on the accounts given by a number of different family members, all living with drinking problems, who have taken part in the research I and my colleagues have carried out over a number of years with families affected by excessive drinking, drug-taking or gambling. The family is introduced through the medium of a series of monologues in which each person takes it in turn to express a view.

The cast in order of appearance:

Wendy. In her mid 50s and married to Bob, her second husband.

Karen. Wendy's daughter, Bob's stepdaughter. In her 20s, now married but still living nearby.

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Bob. Also in his mid 50s, and also previously married. Has had a drinking problem for many years and has received treatment intermittently. Has not worked for some years.

David. In his early 20s. Karen's young brother, Wendy's son, Bob's stepson.

Doctor. Has been Wendy and Bob's GP for a number of years.

Ken. Bob's brother, who lives in the same town with his family, but who now sees little of Bob and Wendy.

Wendy. I feel mentally totally exhausted. I feel I've tried everything in the book and nothing has worked. It's as if I've been living for both of us these last umpteen years. This time I've given him an ultimatum, and I really mean it this time. If he carries on this way I shall leave. I was so angry this time I literally blew my top. But I can see both sides of it; he hasn't got much else to live for. Getting angry probably doesn't help. Sometimes I think I cope quite well. I'm not as soft on him as I once was, but on the other hand you can't be too hard. I try to make a joke out of it. I say, 'You know where the money is'. And it makes me feel guilty him not having anything. Should I give him money or not? It would make life easier, but then why should I watch him kill himself. But I'm not sure I have the energy to fight it any more. But if you love someone, you can't just walk away from the problem. It's a case of staying and coping or turning your back on someone.

Karen. I thought, 'Oh no, bloody hell, he's on the piss again'. I've been in the pub with him when he's been drinking and it's so embarrassing, sometimes I just wish the floor would open up. Mum gets so upset but she's very understanding. I've wondered sometimes why she's stayed, but I learnt to take my lead from her, not giving him sympathy, but being hard but not over-hard, saying 'Go on then' if he says he's going to the pub. He knows he can have a drink if he wants one. I think Mum's done pretty well and by and large the family copes well. She's firm and understanding and jokey. We have the same kind of ideas and attitudes, and we help each other. We both had a real go at him this last time, but it does worry me that being angry with him might provoke him into more drinking. I do go home feeling depressed sometimes, thinking there's nothing we can do for him. We both feel so frustrated that he won't talk about what the problem really is. I think there's something in his past that he's not talking about. I've also tipped his booze down the sink, watered his drink down, and marked the bottle, turning it

A Family Responds to Relapse

3

upside down so he wouldn't realize. We really love him and will be there for him.

Bob. I do feel guilty over what I've done to Wendy. It was nice to see them pleased about my progress. They all got a bit angry over my recent slip-up and that made me angry. Why shouldn't I have a drink if I want one? I didn't really take much notice of them. I get angry when they try to talk to me about my problems. It's my problem, and I've got to sort it out. Wendy lets me get on with it, she's knows I'll fall asleep in the end. Sometimes she hides money from me or pours the drink away. She tells me in the morning that I've drunk it, but tells me the truth later when I'm sober. Karen's really good sometimes. She's motherly, slaps my wrists if I'm drinking and makes me feel guilty, but I always have a choice. David keeps out of the way, goes to his room, with a hurt, hangdog expression. The most useful thing I suppose was Wendy and David's hurt expression and Wendy starting to cry. She had a look of genuine hurt and told me I was killing myself. All the fun's gone out of it.

David. I don't know why Mum hasn't left him. She said she would. When he's not drinking too much I get on really well with him. We've been quite good friends. We've had some drinks together in the local pub. But then he drinks too much and asks me to buy drinks for him, which I refuse to do. I've actually been round to the local pubs asking them not to serve him spirits.

Doctor. I've been increasingly worried about their health, both of them. I've advised her to take a much stricter line with him. For example I've recommended that she has no drink at home at all, and makes it a rule not to allow drinking in the house, but she seems to find that very difficult.

Ken. I keep away now. I tried talking to Bob in the past, but it made no difference. I've literally cried to see what he was doing to himself. Goodness knows why Wendy stays with him.

Karen again. He was getting on much better. He seemed much happier, he wasn't saying nasty things about people like he used to, and I never saw him tipsy. We all thought we were coping well. David used to be rather aggressive in his attitude towards Bob but he had come round to the same way as Mum and I, giving him responsibility, making it clear to him that it was up to him. We didn't insist on him promising he wouldn't ever drink too much. That would just make him feel guilty, and there has to be room for a few mistakes. I do wish he would

talk about things so we can get to the bottom of it. He switches off. Talking with him only gets so far and then he changes the subject. We are a bit stuck in a vicious circle now. Sometimes Mum and I think he doesn't really want our help, but I think he does. Mum and I probably talk to each other too much, when perhaps we should be talking to him instead.

Wendy again. The doctor says I should shut the door on him, but if you love them . . . I had this stupid idea that when he's home at least I know what he's drinking, and if he collapsed at least he'd collapse here. I'm sure the hospital staff are annoyed because they think I'm wasting their time – 'You're still with him' sort of thing. Other people, particularly his family, like to turn a blind eye to it, put the shutters down, or simply don't understand drink problems, perhaps they've not had much to do with drink. I try to understand what he's been going through. Talking about it and making no secret of it has helped. It's made us more tolerant, although sometimes I feel more like a mother to him than a wife. I've tried every trick in the book, hated him and loved him, mothered him, even joined in his drinking, which wasn't useful because it just gave him an excuse. I've shut myself in a room and cried, and gone through every emotion. I wonder if I've made things worse by encouraging him to drink at home rather than in the pub, but he now drinks spirits at home. I am tempted to let him drink because at least then you get half a conversation not just grunts and off to bed. In the long run when I thought I'd made things better I've actually made things worse. I wonder if I've pushed him away by not drinking with him, and with my sarcastic comments. But now it's sinking in that there is nothing I can do. It dawns on you somewhere along the line and you become resigned. But I've told him I'm not prepared to sit and watch him die. I love him too much for that. I've said to him, 'You know me, I like a fight'.

Bob. I sense when I'm in trouble. There's an electric atmosphere, the body language, the silence. I pretend it's not happening, I weather it out. It makes me feel guilty, and I think bugger it, I'm not going to be treated like a child. But Wendy, Karen and all their family have been very supportive, they're pleased with me, proud of me, although family support is tailing off a bit. Karen says she wouldn't bring her new baby round if I went back on the drink, but she's only joking. My family [i.e. his brother Ken, other siblings and their families] has a very bad attitude. They can't handle it at all. They treat me like a child. They're ashamed of me. They just think alcoholics are tramps, they don't realize.

Comments

There are many things about this family that are common to families where one of the members drinks, takes drugs or gambles to an extent that it is seriously stressful for the rest of the family. Notice that Wendy says she is mentally exhausted. She says she has gone through every emotion including anger and guilt. She has shut herself in a room and cried. She is now talking about leaving. Karen is now not so close to the action because she lives separately. But she spends a lot of time talking with her mother about her stepfather's drinking. She has felt embarrassed by the drinking in the past, is disappointed about the relapse, frustrated that he won't talk about what the real problem might be. She sometimes goes home feeling depressed about it. Karen's younger brother David, who still lives at home, doesn't say how he feels, but he does talk about how he has been put in the awkward situation of refusing to buy drinks for his stepfather, and has even gone to the lengths of going round to local pubs asking them not to serve his stepfather spirits. His sister says he was aggressive in his attitude to his stepfather, and Bob talks about noticing David's hurt expression. Even Bob's brother Ken, who has removed himself from the heat of the action by keeping away, says he has literally cried to see what his brother was doing to himself. The issue of Bob's drinking is clearly one that has caused a great deal of upset throughout the family. Bob himself, whose drinking is the focus of the concern, has felt guilty about what he has done to Wendy, and when his stepdaughter tells him off that makes him feel guilty again. He says he gets angry when they try to talk to him about his problems. He notices people's hurt expressions and senses the bad atmosphere. He says all the fun has gone out of his drinking. There are a lot of bad feelings around the issue of his drinking.

But there are good feelings as well. Both Wendy and Karen express love for Bob, and until the recent relapse they thought they had been coping quite well. Bob acknowledges the support he gets from them and was aware of how pleased they had been about his progress and that they had been proud of him.

A theme that we shall meet again and again in this book is the desperate search by family members for the best way of dealing with the problem. As Wendy says, she has tried every trick in the book. Like so many family members facing similar circumstances she worries that she may have done the wrong thing, and tends to blame herself if things don't work out. For example what should she do about drinking with him? At one stage she

joined him in his drinking but found that wasn't useful because it simply gave him the excuse to carry on drinking. But she wonders now if she has pushed him away by not drinking with him. Karen in particular feels that there must be something in Bob's past that he is not talking about. She gets him on his own and tries to probe him about it, but it makes him angry and he doesn't open up. She has poured his drink away, watered it down, marked the bottle. These tactics, like David talking to local publicans, are common examples of the kinds of actions to which family members resort in their desperation to get a loved one's drinking under control.

Do such tactics work? And does it help if Wendy gets angry with Bob – probably not she thinks. Should she give him money or not? In some ways it would make life easier, but that might be aiding him in killing himself through carrying on drinking excessively. These are all common and agonizing dilemmas that family members face.

Many of the dilemmas collapse into one big question: should one be tough or tender towards the close relative whose drinking is so problematic? Should one err in the direction of being firm and controlling, in the process running the risk of alienating the very person one is trying to help, and thereby perhaps making the problem worse rather than better? Should one, on the other hand, err in the direction of being supportive and understanding, so running the risk of appearing to be over-tolerant of the drinking, even colluding with it, thereby helping to maintain it? Notice the way in which Wendy and Karen struggled with that central dilemma. Wendy says, 'I'm not as soft on him as I once was, but on the other hand you can't be too hard'. Karen says she has learned to take a lead from her mother, '... not giving him sympathy, but being hard but not over-hard'. She describes her mother's coping as, '... firm and understanding and jokey'. They are clearly both trying to strike a balance. Getting the problem into the open, making it clear they recognize it as a problem, but not being too harsh over it, trying to give Bob responsibility. Wendy thinks this policy has helped. She thinks it has made them more tolerant, although she admits that, '... sometimes I feel more like a mother to him than a wife'. She wonders if she may have made things worse by encouraging him to drink at home. There she at least knows where he is and what he is doing, but she regrets that he now drinks spirits at home.

A second general issue that commonly arises for family members faced with someone who is drinking, taking drugs or gambling excessively, is whether to go on struggling with those dilemmas at all. Would it not be preferable to separate, or at least to put some distance between oneself

A Family Responds to Relapse

7

and the problem? Not surprisingly this is an issue that Wendy talks about. Following Bob's recent relapse, she has given him an ultimatum, saying that she will leave him if he carries on. It sounds as if this is not the first time she has threatened to leave since she says this time she really means it. Her energy to go on fighting the problem is reaching a low ebb. But, as she says, '... if you love someone, you can't just walk away from the problem. It's a case of staying and coping or turning your back on someone'. Both Wendy and Bob have negative things to say about Ken and other members of the family who have a 'bad attitude', who have turned their back, don't understand, and can't handle it.

How do other people respond to the position that Wendy is struggling to pursue? Not always, it seems, in a very understanding fashion. Again, this is a very common finding. Karen is close to her mother, is very supportive of her and tends to see eye to eye with her. She often uses the word 'we' when talking about the way they cope. Their doctor, on the other hand, thinks Wendy should be much stricter with Bob than she actually is, for example over the issue of drinking at home. There appears to be a misunderstanding between Wendy and her doctor. Wendy thinks the doctor is recommending that she should 'shut the door' on Bob, although that is not actually what the doctor is saying. For his part, the doctor construes the issue as a difficulty that Wendy has in being stricter with Bob, whereas Wendy herself portrays it as a difficult decision that she has come to, at least for the moment, over a difficult problem where there seems to be no very satisfactory solution. Both David and Ken express surprise that Wendy has not left Bob, apparently unsympathetic to Wendy's mixed feelings of love and frustration. Interestingly, although we do not hear directly from hospital staff, Wendy senses that they are annoyed with her for staying with him, and thinks that they think she is wasting their time.

Questions

1. Do you find yourself tending to 'take sides', feeling more sympathetic towards one or more people in that story, compared to others? Who do you sympathize with, and why? Is there anyone whose position you feel antagonistic towards? If so, why?
2. Do you think Wendy and Karen are getting the balance right between being tough and tender, strict or tolerant? Do you agree with the doctor

that Wendy should be stricter with Bob? Should Wendy, as their doctor believes, have a policy of not keeping alcohol at home at all?

3. Were Karen and David right to do things like pour his drink away or water it down, or have a word with local publicans?
4. What position should Wendy take when Bob needs money and she is not sure whether to give it to him?
5. What should Wendy's position be about leaving Bob?
6. Have you ever met someone, personally or professionally, who is in a situation similar to that of Wendy or Karen? What did you do? Did you give any advice?
7. If Wendy and Karen came to see you for help and advice, what would your goals be for them? How would you try to achieve those goals?

Exercises

- Take Wendy's part. Take five minutes to explain to an imaginary counsellor how you feel about Bob's drinking and how you cope with it. You might speak this aloud to yourself, or to a friend who takes the part of the counsellor (but who need not respond in this exercise), or write up to 250 words if you would prefer. Then take Bob's part. This time talk (or write if you would prefer) about how you feel about your drinking and how members of the family react to it.
- This exercise needs two people. One to take Wendy's part, the other Bob's. Role-play a conversation about the issue of whether they should keep alcoholic drinks at home. Try it once with both stating your views in a way that becomes angry or irritated, with no agreed resolution of the issue. Try it again and see if, by conversing differently, a resolution might be possible. Carry on with the same role-play, but enlist the help of a third or fourth person to play other members of the family – Karen, David, Ken – who might join the conversation and put their own points of view. You could try it in the form of a consultation between Wendy, Bob and their doctor. Remember that the doctor thinks Wendy should be stricter with Bob. How does the consultation go? How does it leave Wendy feeling? Does the doctor think it was a useful meeting?