

OPINION

Why some become addicts

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(Photo: Torin Halsey/Times Record News, AP)

Many years ago, as a court reporter in the Wichita County Courthouse, I would sit in my elevated position next to the judge and look down on inmates as they were brought before the judge in shackles. I remember thinking, "Why don't they just shape up? What a nuisance they are to society!" Through the mission work I did on Indian reservations, I came to see the truth about these forgotten ones behind bars. I came to understand why it is they don't just shape up — they have no clue how to do that.

Let me introduce you to my friends from another world, the world of drugs, life on the streets, addiction, and incarceration. Their darkness is much more bleak than most of us can even imagine.

Almost without exception, the people I have met in 10 years as a jail chaplain have had very rough childhoods and were forced to grow up too fast. They were born into chaos. Many had drugs in their systems at birth, and one told me, "At age nine I huffed some paint in my adopted dad's garage, a defining moment in my life. It lit up something in my brain that delivered me from all the pain in my life, and I knew I would do anything to get more of it." By age seven another was being molested by her dad and was also having to change a younger sibling's diapers. A third told me she and her brother were instructed to hide under the bed when their mother

prostituted and to pick the pockets of her customers. And all my friends know one young man I visited —they remember him as a kid sitting on the doorstep at trap houses where drug deals were taking place, people going in and out.

It's not surprising these kids enter into gang life. A new identity offering strong bonds with people who know their pain is irresistible. A marijuana cigarette offered by their new friends "just to make you feel better" leads to the nightmare of addiction to harder drugs, typically methamphetamine, because it is inexpensive and easily accessible. Desperate for money to support their cravings, their criminal activity begins.

Picture the addict's brain like this: The first experience with street drugs is like they have crossed a field of tall grass and left a trace of their path. The next time they cross the field on that same route, the path is becoming more recognizable, and each time they walk on it, it becomes more pronounced until the addict cannot recognize that there is any other way to cross the field. Likewise, with repetitive use their substance of choice becomes a compulsive coping tool to counter the raw edges of their traumatic life events, a trail so familiar that a rut becomes a gulley and morphs into a deep canyon that destroys all other options. They find themselves controlled by the drug's effects and will sacrifice all for more of it — job, spouse, children, vehicle, health, reputation, future, and ultimately their very lives. It has become their god.

I am told that the way your brain reacts to that first "hit" will determine whether you become an addict. A friend tried weed but said she quit using it because it made her indifferent when her newborn cried. Thank God she could reason herself away from the path of addiction ... she did not have a predisposition to become an addict.

Meth is more addictive than cocaine, heroin, or alcohol, with a relapse rate of well over 90 percent. Users report feelings of confidence, euphoria, invincibility, and increased sexual drive. The added perks of weight loss, sustained energy, and long periods without the need for sleep are also enticing. But as the addict's brain runs out of the chemicals triggered by meth use, they find themselves needing larger amounts of the drug just to function. Obtaining more becomes their sole pursuit. My incarcerated friends tell me that by the time they are arrested they are tired of running from the law and ready to go to jail, that they would have died had they not been arrested. By the time I enter the scene, the criminal drug addict behind bars is finally open to exploring other options on how to do life.

When they request that first visit with me, I am ready.

Proverbs 24:11 Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.

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