

Through the Lens of Life Experience

In 2020, the Community Drug & Alcohol Strategy created the Peer Advisory Committee. This 12-member committee provides local agencies opportunities to consult community members who have lived/living experience with addiction, through monthly closed session meetings. Between December 2020 and June 2021, the committee met with six local agencies and consulted on topics such as harm reduction outreach, community paramedicine, and drug treatment court. More information can be found at www.drugstrategy.org.

In advance of the July 2021 County council deputations, Peer Advisory Committee members were given the opportunity to submit a personal reflection in response to the question, "If you could tell a policy maker one thing (in 100 words or less), what would it be?". Eight members submitted their reflections. Individual submissions are compiled in this document.

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Is the heart attack victim denied compassionate care, treatment, and medication? Absolutely not, such would be a travesty. So, consider, why is someone with an alcohol or substance use disorder judged and often without the needed medical and social supports? Is it due to the opinion of decision makers, health care professionals, and society at large that addiction is a personal choice? Perhaps, but it is also a personal choice to eat poorly and not exercise which are contributing factors to heart disease. However, the person with the cardiac issue does not experience the level of societal shame as the individual with a substance use disorder. It is due time to end the stigma of addiction and offer meaningful services and supports.

Addiction comes from all walks of life and the stigma needs to be smashed. I am a mother of 3 well rounded children, I own my own business, my husband is a professional firefighter, and we have a good life. Even with all of this, I got sucked into the depths of alcoholism which brought me down hard, to the point of almost losing everything, including my life. Thank goodness for the love and support I had all around me otherwise I would not have pulled myself out of that hell. Addicts are someone's daughter, son, mother, father, family member and friend. They are people who are spiritually sick and need some love and guidance and hope.

Addiction affects the functioning of a person's brain. The frontal cortex (the part of the brain responsible for decision making, response inhibition, emotional regulation, planning and memory) become impaired in the presence of addiction, much like the heart in someone after a heart attack. This is so important to remember!! Working with a person experiencing addiction can be frustrating; she may not be able to make and keep appointments, follow through, budget wisely or remain abstinent. This may look like the person does not care or is not committed which can perpetuate stigma—what this needs to perpetuate is COMPASSION. This is a difficult shift in mindset to make for many. Do not think help is unappreciated when someone with addictions does not show up, and do not take it personally; instead, realize that this individual needs support, advocacy and continued opportunity.

As a recovering alcoholic, from the age of 5 years old, I felt disconnected from my family, friends, and society. There was, and still is an emptiness within me that I have had to battle my entire life.

I think a lack of connection is a part of this, as well as generational, environmental, circumstantial, genetic, and behavioral issues that surround the addict from a young age. The one thing I needed to hear when I first reached out for help, was that I was no longer alone. This applied directly to not only my alcoholism, but my severe mental illness as well.

Once, when I attended the hospital in a suicidal state, I was asked by an emergency room doctor, "What do you expect me to do for you?" From my experience we have a lot of great initiatives with amazing potential, but they end up having low reach and impact because of lack of staff or the right kind of staff. I believe that a focus increasing the quantity and quality of the workers in direct contact with individuals in crisis should be an initial first step in addiction services and support. It does not matter how many times an alcoholic or an addict reaches out for help, the person is to be shown empathy, loving kindness, compassion, and support always. People battling addiction and mental illness are the strongest people you will ever meet, they deserve our respect, they deserve to be treated as anyone else deserves to be treated, and they always need to know they are loved, they are not alone, and that they will never be turned away. To turn an alcoholic or an addict away who is reaching out for help is literally life or death.

When I was in the grip of my addiction, absolutely nothing else mattered but getting and having alcohol. I would go to any lengths to always have it available. I was sick and dying from this disease and I did not care. It was the first thing I put in my body when I woke up and the last thing I took before passing out. Nothing was stopping me. Not even my morals of knowing I should not be going to work with it or driving my car while my kids were in it...NOTHING!! It has got to be the person's choice to get better!!!! No one else's.... but punishing deepens the shame and guilt, therefore leaving the addict wanting to use more and more.

There is a need to bridge the gap between the addict and the people who love them. Growing up with an alcoholic and 40 years later becoming one myself, I have come to realize that we do not help families connect. Addicts are told, they need to be selfish in order to recover, families are told they need to be selfish to be able to draw boundaries and protect themselves from the chaos addiction creates. It is possible for both parties to find healing and hope in each other and work towards the same goal. As a family member who has lost a loved one because of a fentanyl overdose, you come to realize substance use disorder is a progressive medical condition that if ignored becomes worse. No one intentionally decides to be an addict. Addiction treatment centres need to be available locally to support the addict and the family—physically, mentally, and socially. These services need to be accessible and economical for all.

Recovery is **not a single** thing. Think of it like a spider web composed of multiple strands in interconnection that come together to serve a common purpose. To that end, things like physical exercise, community or peer support, housing, ongoing mental health practice, purposeful employment, and good nutrition and hygiene, all serve to support the individual. Just as no one single thing in the past could cause a person to seek relief through substance overuse, no one single thing will help to make life better. A comprehensive, long term approach is necessary.