

To Be the Mom of an Addict

By Sandy Swenson 07/09/14

I shouldn't feel like a total failure for having missed so many clues and for not being able to love and protect my child as I promised... but still, sometimes I do. Once upon a time I was just a mom. A regular mom.

When I held my little miracle in my arms for the very first time, I rubbed my cheek on his fuzzy head and whispered, "Joey, my beautiful son, I will love and protect you for as long as I live."

I didn't know then that my baby would become an addict before becoming an adult, or that the addict taking his place would shred the meaning of those words to smithereens.

When Joey tumbled into my world, he arrived without an instruction manual, but I was the best mom I could be as someone with good intentions and no experience. I stumbled through parenthood like everyone else — rocking my baby to sleep, kissing the scraped knees of my little boy, setting unwelcome limits for my sometimes testy teen, and hoping I was doing things kind of right.

Then, slowly at first, came the arrests and the overdoses, the needle marks and the dealers, interspersed with big fat lies. My loving child was turning into a monster, manipulating me and using me and twisting my love for him into knots, but I was befuddled by this scary new world I didn't even know I was in and that I knew nothing about. You see, I thought I was still just a regular mom stumbling through regular parenthood like everyone else. (You see, a mother's trust and belief in her child's inner goodness aren't easily cast aside.)

Addiction is a disease, but not even the professionals have it all figured out yet — and they aren't trying to figure it out while in a blind panic, running through the fires of hell with fears and dreams and maternal instincts tripping them up. So, I shouldn't feel like a total failure for having missed so many clues and for not being able to love and protect my child as I promised... but still, sometimes I do.

Joey became an addict in his teens, lured to drugs and alcohol by a culture that glorifies substance abuse — the same culture that later, so ignorantly and harshly, passes judgment. I am judged for helping or fixing or pushing (or not helping or fixing or pushing enough) the sick child of mine who won't be helped or fixed or pushed. I am judged for over-reacting and under-reacting, enabling and letting go, and, most hurtful of all, as a mother whose love must be somehow flawed.

Once upon a time I was just a regular mom, stumbling through parenthood like everyone else — and then I had to figure out how to be the mom of an addict. I had to figure out how to love my child without helping to hurt him, how to grieve the loss of my child who's still alive without dying, and how to trade shame and blame for strength.

To be the mom of an addict is to be an ambassador of truth and understanding.

No more shame. No more silence.

[Sandy Swenson's website](#)