

Cautiously Optimistic

Mike's Story

Some time back, I had the pleasure of working with an outgoing young man in his early 20's. For his confidentiality, we'll call him Mike. Mike's main purpose in life seemed to be his desire for experience and enjoyment. His source for entertainment was often his time with others. He had an appetite for fun that came by way of more



extreme measures: amateur parkour, befriending strangers in allies, dangerous drug mixing, and jumping off bridges. He had a smile and charisma that could get enemies to trust him and family to once more be manipulated by him. In the past few years Mike already had an extensive history of

drug treatment programs. He came to me because of typical legal consequences from substance addiction-related issues.

Mike's highly impulsive nature, combined with his heavy drug and alcohol use, had taken a toll on his parents and loved ones. His parents bore witness to his seemingly unlimited potential being taken away because of his uncontrolled substance use. Mike's dad did his best to disconnect emotionally from his son, and his mom did her best to steer Mike in a healthier direction.

This was a defense mechanism from the parents because of their ultimate fear of losing their son to



addiction. Over time, Mike's mom began separating herself from hopeful expectations because of the constant disappointment that came with addiction-related incidents.

When I began seeing Mike, I quickly realized his persona was a mask for deep insecurity. I recognized his gifting was his capacity to love and care for others. However, his fear of not being accepted and not wanting to be alone led him into loyal relationships with people that co-authored his poor choices. Prior to our weekly visits, every time I would go out into the lobby to bring Mike in for our session, I always noticed his mom brought him (one



of his consequences of substance use was no license). I would genuinely ask her, "How are you doing this week?" Mike's mom would always answer the

same way, with a forced uncomfortable smile, she'd reply, "I'm cautiously optimistic."

I wasn't sure of Mike's commitment to sobriety because of his history in treatment centers and the light in his eyes when he spoke about drugs and alcohol. It was as if he was talking about an old best friend. Though, as a recovering addict myself, I understood that relationship with substances. Like most people, he also clearly had a chemical bias, thinking some drugs aren't as bad as others, but Mike insisted he was going to get sober because he had legal ramifications for not staying clean. I thought, "I can work with that." Mike had one hiccup early on in treatment, but overall was doing very well.

He began doing the things that are foundational in recovery: maintaining abstinence from all mind-altering substances, connecting with sober people in support groups, digging into his character defects in counseling, exercise, etc. Quickly Mike was able to get employment, showed surprising insight, and was attempting to rebuild the broken trust with his parents. Mike was proud of himself with each week's clean urine test and a job he was excelling in. As the weeks passed, Mike's mom's "I'm cautiously optimistic" response never changed, even though Mike's life had made the positive strides that come with embracing sobriety. The fear of treatment failing was written on her face.

When I received a call one morning from a colleague, the news of Mike's passing stunned me. Working in this field, Mike was not the first client I have had die, and he won't be the last. Addiction humbles even the seemingly most invincible. But what stunned me was the fact that Mike was doing so well, and the report was a suicide.

The news that came later was less stunning, and made the whole thing make much more sense. Mike's chemical bias had come back to haunt him. His belief that "natural" drugs are different cost him his life. Mike had a bad trip on shrooms. For the sake of the family I won't go into any further detail about his death, except to say that it was not a suicide of clear cognition.

The Balance Between Boundaries and Grace

Mike had a beautiful funeral. Over a hundred people had to stand in the back because the church was at max capacity with every seat filled. In a way that he would have thought was awesome, System of a Down blared on the speakers inside the large church sanctuary, as pictures of his bright smile montaged on the large video screen. Witnessing the strength of his family as they spoke about Mike gave me goosebumps. But what his mom had to say will forever leave an impression on me. She stated, "Many of you, who have asked how I am doing in

the past months, may have heard me say "I'm cautiously optimistic."'" Mike's mom paused, cried, and regathered herself. "I really regret the "cautiously" part. Because it kept me from fully embracing my relationship with my son in the last months of his life."



It makes sense that Mike's mom would have held back with caution. It's understandable that in an attempt to secure her own sanity she pulled back from Mike's insane behavior. It seems reasonable that she would begin to prepare herself for his eventual death. She was able to learn the paradox that comes with cautious love. Cautious love is self-protection that attempts to stifle failure in the relationship, but vulnerability is the only way to deepen the connection that is so severely required. What a powerful lesson that we don't have to experience before taking note!

Though your loved one's behavior scares the crap out of you, and though you must have healthy boundaries, love is the primary ingredient for recovery. This does not mean you ought to stay in an unhealthy codependent relationship. Finding out how to live in the balance between boundaries and grace is a learned skill.

This was written by Kenny Hill Sr, CADC II, Certified Brainspotting Therapist. Kenny has a private practice called Recovery Hill in Sacramento, Ca, where he works with people for substance abuse and trauma. Kenny is a combat veteran and recovering addict, who has a passion for working with people. Call or email Kenny today to learn more about non-codependent, unwavering love. 916.995.8635 or kennyhill.counseling@gmail.com