

**Q&A with Joseph Lee, M.D., author of *Recovering My Kid: Parenting Young Adults in Treatment and Beyond***

For parents with teens in treatment or early sobriety, putting the pieces back together and creating a new home life require effort from the entire family. In *Recovering My Kid: Parenting Young Adults in Treatment and Beyond*, Joseph Lee, MD, medical director for Hazelden's youth services, offers straightforward guidance on creating a new family culture, remaining emotionally objective, and understanding how addiction affects the developing brain. In this Q&A, Dr. Lee discusses the book and some of its guiding principles.

**Q: You write in the introduction that "culture is the key ingredient for preventing your child's drug use and navigating treatment," and that's a big theme of the book. What do you find is the biggest specific obstacle for the parents you work with in changing their family culture?**

**A:** Our kids in some ways appear to grow up faster with every generation. They are tech savvy and articulate and idealistic. For whatever reason, we as a society have bought in to this notion that our children need to be treated like little adults, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary in neurodevelopmental literature. Intelligence and wisdom are completely different things in that wisdom requires sound judgment and maturity and propriety. Our kids might be smart, but they aren't wise.

So, parents more than ever need to be leaders in the home. The toughest obstacle in treatment is in helping parents set up the right kind of culture in the home. This requires leadership, which is so much different than the kind of "hostage negotiations" parents have been accustomed to in their homes. There is such a cacophony of well-intentioned but bad parenting advice out there that it is imperative we reverse our course. Parents are the CEOs of their home. Your house is and never was a democracy! It is time we give leverage back to parents in America.

**Q: Emotions and boundaries are a big subject throughout the book. How important is self-care for parents? And as you meet parents who are emotionally spent as their son or daughter enters treatment, what's the first piece of advice you give them on that?**

**A:** I always tell patients and families that we can't save anyone from drowning if we are treading water ourselves. One of the keys in having a culture of leadership is to learn how to maintain emotional objectivity. Parents who struggle with a child's addiction swing back and forth past the midpoint of emotional objectivity. They lose their cool and get angry. Then they feel guilty and overcompensate by giving in to demands. Of course, when their addicted child lies or steals or relapses again, they get angry once more, and back and forth they go, losing resolve with every cycle.

The first thing I tell most parents is...that they only get a limited deck of cards to play in influencing their kids. Once they surrender the delusion of complete control, they cut themselves some slack in the accountability department, and that in turn leads to a frame of mind that is more conducive to emotional objectivity.

**Q: A tough concept for parents is the idea of letting the consequences of addiction play out, to the point of possibly kicking their child out of the home. What do you tell family members who have a hard time accepting that concept?**

**A:** First, every family is different. They all have different values and perspectives. There is no one-size-fits-all in parenting. My goal is for families to shoot for peace of mind instead of a particular outcome, a place where they can live with the potential consequences of their decisions. In this framework, underlying emotions and intent are perhaps even more important than the act of kicking a kid out of the home. No matter what the parents decide, if they are emotionally objective (not resentful or angry) and can live with the possible fallouts of their decisions, they can achieve that peace.

**Q: The concept of the "and" statement, which you talk about, is something people in longtime recovery are familiar with: you can be a good person AND be an alcoholic, or you can have traumatic history AND still be held responsible for your own recovery. For teens in treatment who struggle with their self-image, what's the key to them understanding that concept?**

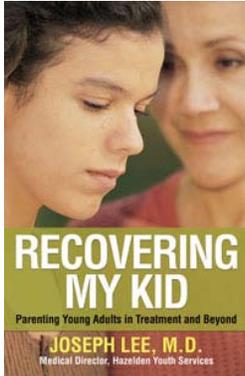
**A:** Nothing in life is really as linear or as one-sided as it seems. I don't believe in butterfly effects. We all have this innate bias where we want everything to be simpler and more dichotomous than they actually are. When it comes to young people struggling with a poor self-image, I often find that they subscribe to a number of such one-sided beliefs about themselves, others, or their predicament. The solution isn't to just give them evidence to the contrary (i.e., "but you are so talented at art"). The trick is to have them become comfortable with entertaining seemingly conflicting thoughts or feelings together, without taking any shortcuts, without jumping to conclusions. "Addiction is not my fault AND I am accountable in it. . . . I've had a tough life AND I am responsible for my future." Honest appraisals can exist outside of judgment. An appraisal free of bias facilitates acceptance. Acceptance is the key to real change. And in the winds of change are sown the seeds of hope.

**Q: When you hear from or visit with former patients who are successful in their recovery, what are the common threads that help them sustain it long after leaving treatment?**

**A:** Recovery is really different from sobriety. I can get very scientific here, but here is the short version: All of us have inherent risks for something or another, whether it be diabetes or addiction. The truth is that many kids who develop addiction had risk factors for a number of problems all along (behavior disorders, mental health issues, learning disabilities, relationship problems, etc.). Addiction then is just one (and not the only one) of the possible outcomes for these "vulnerable youth." That's partly why you see so many co-occurring mental health problems in young addicts.

So when you remove drugs from a young person's body and brain, you still have the inherent risk factors that got them there (trouble keeping friends, lying, inconsistency, emotional dysregulation, thrill seeking, etc.). The kids who do really well in recovery are not just sober, but they have the courage to address those very risk factors. They learn how to be resilient. They learn how to have perspective. They learn to accept and channel their natural desires in

productive ways. In *ye old English* of the 1940s or 50s, I think that is what they meant by "spiritual change." I believe that is such a key, and a great deal of what [Hazelden staff] do is to make spirituality a living, concrete, and functional tool for these youth. This diverges from the content of the book some, but maybe that is a book for a different day.



[Recovering My Kid: Parenting Young Adults in Treatment and Beyond](#)

Softcover, 248 pages

**National expert Dr. Joseph Lee explains the nature of youth addiction and treatment, and how families can create a safe and supportive environment for their loved ones during treatment and throughout their recovery.**

**Raising a child is tough as it is, but when your kid becomes addicted to alcohol or other drugs, it can feel as if you're living a nightmare. You're not alone. In *Recovering My Kid*, Dr. Joseph Lee, medical director for Hazelden's youth services, takes worried, confused, and angry parents by the hand and addresses their most pressing questions and fears: What is addiction? What happens when my child returns home from treatment? How can my family support his or her recovery? What if my child relapses? How can my family get well again?**

**Getting your child and your family well again requires the support and understanding of the whole family, even if feelings and trust were damaged. In his engaging and straightforward style, Lee explains the difficult concepts of addiction, treatment, and recovery in a way parents and families can understand, and he gives them concrete strategies they can put into practice.**

**This book will help family members begin to understand what their loved one is going through and how they can help the addict adjust to a clean-and-sober life while still taking care of themselves.**

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