

‘Substance Abuse’ – I Kill You

I long for the day when the term ‘substance abuse’ is permanently dropped from our lexicon. If it’s in your vocabulary, I implore you, I plead with you, I appeal to your decency... kill it. Please don’t utter those two words together ever again.

First, the term ‘substance abuse’ is not technically accurate. Back in the late 80’s, I had given up alcohol on my own, but when offered a snort of cocaine, I had no internal defense. My cocaine addiction soon ran rampant. It’s still frightening to think about 30 years later. And even though I was snorting massive quantities, I never once abused the substance.

At all times, I knew where my cocaine was. I protected it fiercely. I kept it well-groomed, clean and close by. I loved my substance completely and unconditionally.

I never, ever hit it. Not once did I assault it. In fact, I don't think I ever yelled at it.

Given this context, can you see the absurdity in calling addiction ‘substance abuse’?

Second there is a deeper issue. No one describes it better than my colleague and friend, Bill White.

“Of the words used to describe addiction and recovery, the ‘abuse’ terms are among the most ill-chosen and pernicious. Terms such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and substance abuse all spring from religious and moral conceptions of the roots of severe alcohol and other drug problems. They define the locus of the problem in the willful choices of the individual, denying how that power can be compromised, denying the power of the drug, and denying the culpability of those whose financial interests are served by promoting and increasing the frequency and quantity of drug consumption. To refer to people who are addicted as alcohol, drug, or substance abusers misstates the nature of their condition and calls for their social rejection, sequesterization, and punishment.”

To carry Bill’s perspective a bit further...

“It’s easy to abuse the abuser.”

I wish I had come up with this line but that credit goes to Bob Curley who wrote an article for Join Together many years ago titled, "Wrong" Words Used to Define, Defame Addiction and Recovery. It is a powerful piece. Think about where the term abuse is used most commonly – child abuse, domestic abuse and sexual abuse. Don't they all have a heavy, dark connotation? Does substance abuse fit with these?

Killing ‘substance abuse’ isn't going to be easy. This harsh undertone exists at the highest of government levels. SAMHSA lives under Health and Human Services.

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Know what SAMHSA stands for? Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration. The federal government chose a damaging term (substance abuse) to lead the title of the most powerful recovery agency followed by a much more positive term (mental health). No wonder that people struggling with addiction are vilified and demonized. Just to emphasize this point, under SAMHSA control are CSAT and CSAP, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment and Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

All is not lost however. We have made some progress in the last few years. The DSM-5, short for Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) eliminated the word 'abuse' that had appeared in prior editions. It used to be substance use, misuse and abuse as your disease progressed.

We can all become part of the solution. First, if you find these words emanating from your mouth, stop them. Mimic Achmed the Dead Terrorist. Say to yourself, "Substance Abuse – I Kill You."

The real challenge will surface when you hear someone else using the term. Will you politely, kindly and firmly offer a challenge?

In 2015, I finished a thruhike of the entire Appalachian Trail, a trek of 2,189.2 miles. It took 189 days and 6 pairs of boots. During all that time alone with my Creator, my purpose in life became more precisely defined. I am, simply, to coach recovery. Recovery saved me from an early demise and brought purpose to my tattered life. I have learned that I'm a coach to my very core. I am blessed to put the two together. I started work at the Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR) in 1999. I became the Executive Director of this recovery community organization in 2004. I have trained the CCAR Recovery Coach Academy© dozens of times and have a hand in modifying, improving and adapting various recovery coach curricula. I'm old enough now to start considering my legacy. This is a way for me to share things I have learned in my recovery, in my role as Executive Director and a trainer. I find that when I speak I present the same messages over and over. It's time to write them down.

Phil "Right Click" Valentine
Recovery established 12.28.87

