



A Q&A with Douglas Lyons

Addiction cuts across all boundaries: class, race, gender. But what are some unique problems for the well-off and the well-known?

Very often in these families, you have multiple generations of hugely successful people: legendary founders, cofounders and parents and grandparents who have been icons, scions or very respected members of their community. The children grow up with everything: the swimming pools, the drivers, the tutors, the nannies, the planes, the vacations, the housekeepers. All these things simply exist in their world.

Parents and families don't mean for this to happen, but, ultimately, when kids experience this much wealth and privilege, they are often deprived of a chance to develop their own way of being in the world and to experience the satisfaction and drive that comes from longing for things and planning and saving.

Dr. Madeline Levine wrote about this in her bestseller, "The Price of Privilege" [Harper Perennial, 2008]. She noted the "enormous amounts of attention and resources" that adults pour into today's children, and how, "paradoxically, the more they pour, the less full [the children] seem to be."

Add to that the almost relentless push to be successful, especially if you come from a family that is well known nationally or in the community. The pressure is often unstated. What you hear is, "We just want you to be happy." But what's implicit is the expectation that you will follow in the very impressive footsteps of your progenitors – from their prep schools to their colleges and beyond.

There's a recent American [Psychological Association study](#) that found that Millennials and Gen-Xers are much more stressed than the "mature" generations. It appears that they're haunted by the thought of not succeeding. We see this with our clients: If you haven't developed a sense of who you are by a certain age (which usually requires bumping up against some difficulties in life), then it's hard to find the kind of success that comes from having achieved something rather than from having acquired something.

Affluence is actually meant to bring richness and resources to bear on life. It's difficult to come to terms with the fact that in doing so, we may be inadvertently harming our children.

How do privilege, prominence and pressure contribute to or interact with addiction?

Those who come from affluence have greater access to money, and that can certainly contribute to greater access to as well as the likelihood that a person may use or abuse alcohol or other drugs. Another dynamic that wealth confers is the ability to mitigate and/or avoid common consequences for legal issues that are caused or exacerbated by substance use disorders.

The fact is that everyone gets some relief or pleasure from using drugs or alcohol – let's face it, if it didn't offer some form of pleasure, escape, or social lubrication, no one would do it. But those who are predisposed to this illness have a limbic system that initially or ultimately responds in a different way to potentially addictive substances.



After a party where drugs or alcohol are used, kids may talk about the experience subjectively – as a 5 on the Y-axis, if you were to chart it. They’ll all say the same thing: “Wasn’t that fun?” But we know for a fact that some of them are having a much stronger response – a much more powerful pleasure sensation – a 10 or perhaps a 15 on the Y-axis – and we know it’s a biological response related to dopamine. When they take that first drink or that first drug, we often hear that they remember where they were, how they felt, and that they have never felt a greater sense of peace or freedom. Their “subjective” experience with drugs and alcohol is very different from other people’s – even though everyone is having the same “good time.”

So when some of the psychosocial and spiritual factors of affluence are combined with a biological predisposition, you have a great set-up for addiction. A kid who has little sense of self, no history of self-achievement, too much and/or easy or unfettered access to money can easily cross that invisible line from use to a substance use disorder.

Given that they can’t relive their lives, how best to help them gain a sense of self and a foothold in recovery?

Wealthy people who struggle with addiction have the added stress of a less-than-empathic response from society at large and often from within their own (loving and understandably frustrated) families.

From the greater culture, they hear: “How on earth do you have any problems at all, when you never have to worry about a bank account and the rest of the world is slogging every day?”

From their families, they hear: “We have given you everything: the best upbringing, the best education, the best travel experiences, treatment centers. What is wrong with you?”

Our goal is to take them out of the crosshairs and steer them into what I call soul work. This means much more than checking off the standard 28 days in treatment. It means spending three months, six months or doing whatever it takes to peel away the layers of the onion and explore that eternal existential question, “Who am I?”

Most people have never been asked that question – we’re all too busy running 9 to 5. But there’s a psychological and emotional healing that takes place when people examine and look at their history and the pain in their lives. And who hasn’t had some? Sometimes it’s loss. Sometimes it’s trauma. Sometimes it’s just actually making it OK to be sad when you grew up with everything, and giving yourself permission to say, “Hey, even though I had ‘everything,’ my life wasn’t that easy. I was still lonely, sad or lost.”

I always tell our clients: “You’re the luckiest person in the world. Here’s what your resources will afford if you choose to get off the spinning ball of mud for a while and examine who you are, where you came from, where you are going and what you are doing here; what kind of legacy you want to leave for your family, your business, your children, and what it is you want to do with your life in sobriety.”



Because abstinence unto itself is not meaningful. If people don’t find a reason for being, then no amount of abstinence is going to eliminate cravings and lead to fulfillment. That comes from accomplishment and finding a way to be in the world in a deeply meaningful way – not just as a kind of hopeless ghost. And it comes from knowing that you have an innate right to be here.

What else does Clere Consulting do to help those who come from high-profile families, have access to unlimited resources and have experienced multiple treatment episodes?

We choose the right treatment plan: We look beyond the facility itself and match our clients with programs and therapists best suited for them. We go to great lengths to make sure our clients receive the highest level of assessment and care. We maintain continuous contact with centers and our clients while they are in treatment. We work to make sure that we have open releases in place so we can assist our client and their families in this critical time.

We work with families: Substance use disorders have an impact on everyone in the family. It’s vitally important that we find and maintain support for family members. How will they find their true north in the context of their loved one’s treatment and recovery? One of the worst things you can do is send someone off to have a life-changing experience and then have them return to an unchanged system. If your spouse, your child, your business partners, your siblings or your parents have had no education about your illness or their response patterns to it, or a chance to answer some of their own existential questions, it’s a bit like sending the lamb home to the wolves (albeit well-meaning wolves).

An addicted person enters treatment covered with rusty armor. They begin to take the armor off, start examining the hard questions, and get vulnerable. When they come back to the daily pressures prone to relapse (the addicted brain takes time to recover, often upwards of one year), it’s important that loved ones have had their own healing time and education. We make sure this happens. We provide family workshops and education as well as continuous consulting.

We work with family attorneys: If a person has access to unlimited financial resources and they have an addiction that’s raging, it’s hard to put out the fire. So one of the things we try to do at Clere is understand where our clients are in relation to financial resources: Are they at the end of their money? Are they getting money from trusts? Are there distributions? Until it’s understood where the money is coming from, who has the leverage, and how the money is impacting our clients psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually, it’s hard to design a solution and really effect change. For starters, we’re skilled in developing trust language (which can be used as incentives or to set boundaries) that helps families maintain and sustain recovery across time.



Finally, we stick around: We're available to our clients for the long haul, 24/7, 365 days a year. We know that the first 18 to 24 months after treatment are critical: letting the brain heal, letting the person's spiritual life recover so they can find meaning and purpose. Sometimes it's a career change. Sometimes it's a first career. Sometimes it's the first job a person has ever had. One of my clients was elated after getting hired at a yogurt store. From his perspective, he'd died and gone to heaven.

What are some of the things that have brought meaning to your life, to help you develop a sense of self and maintain sobriety?

After I got sober, I went to work at a treatment center for indigent people in Portland, Oregon. I had never seen that slice of life except as depicted in mass media. These were people who did not have intact families, who had come out of abject poverty and the prison system, whose lives depended on food stamps and bus vouchers. They had nothing, at least by comparison to what I had come from. And many more than I would have guessed got sober, lived in a meaningful way, and were joyful and happy. While I worked at that treatment center, I went back to school and started working toward getting a chemical dependency certification in Oregon. The experience was an equalizer for me. I realized that I belonged in the universe and that I was no better and no worse than anyone else. The equalizing nature of Twelve Step recovery was the most powerful thing that's ever happened to me, and it remains so to this day. I've had a craving for 23 years, but it's not about drug or alcohol use, it's about how to live my life constructively and give back what was given to me.