

Strength in numbers

[Experience](#), [Anger](#)



Brandee English 111 October 8, 2012 Strength in Numbers “ Hi. I’m Jordan and I’m an addict slash abuser, I guess. ” I watch my son shrug his shoulders and hunch over, clasping his hands in his lap after uttering these words. He speaks the words quietly, but his apathetic tone and body language read loud and clear. He doesn’t believe the words he’s saying and is merely being cooperative. After a loud and cheerful “ Hello Jordan! ” the group turns their attention to me. “ Hi. I’m Brandee, and I’m Jordan’s mom. ” We continue like this around the circle until every patient, parent, sibling and friend has been introduced and welcomed.

Despite the warm, welcoming nature of everyone here, there is nothing pleasant about this. My 15 year old son is in rehab and this is family group therapy. We sit in a large circle in cold, hard plastic chairs with shiny metal legs. The room is large and cold with white painted concrete block walls and a stage at the front end. It feels less like a hospital and more like my sons elementary school auditorium. The large banners above the stage boldly spell out the “ 12 Steps to Recovery” and “ The Serenity Prayer” and are a harsh reminder to me that this is no place a school play would be performed.

There are about 20 of us altogether: 8 or 9 teenage patients and their loved ones, as well as Matt, the head counselor for this group. Most of the kids, the patients, are wearing sweatpants and socks or slippers. There is no need for shoes since they won’t be leaving tonight with their family members. Some of them won’t be leaving for a very long time. I sit in the circle for 30 minutes or so listening to the stories. Every patient has their own story, as it’s referred to by the staff. It’s their own personal truth about their journey into drug or alcohol use and subsequent abuse.

They are encouraged to own up to these truths and reveal them to their loved ones and the group. One boy, just slightly older than my son, is leaving the hospital tomorrow. He sits with his mom and we all listen as he reveals his fears about returning to his old environment. Matt gives him some suggestions and advice and we move on to another patient. There's a girl without any family present for this evening's group. She's been in and out of programs several times already at the age of 16. This time it was a court order that placed her here for treatment and it will most likely keep her here for a long time.

Another boy, Keldon, is around 17 years old and sits between his dad and his older sister, with his step-mom on the other side of his dad. He looks terrified and pale. He had overdosed the night before and almost died. Fortunately his family was able to have him transferred to this facility after the immediate medical need was attended to. The stories continue with horrific and elaborate tales of overdoses and multiple arrests for various reasons. Some were arrested for vandalism while under the influence. Some had stolen from their parents or even from stores.

All had difficulties in school. Initially, I felt a bit of relief as I began to realize that my son's story was so much less colorful than what I was hearing. After all, he'd only been arrested once, by my own doing, for sneaking out a window when he was grounded. I almost felt out of place and began to think maybe I had gone too far by bringing him here. What were either of us supposed to gain from sitting here listening to these kids sharing horror stories? I had brought him to this place searching for answers and I was only getting more fearful for his future with every person that spoke.

When my son began to speak, to tell his story, all the frustration I had felt over the past several months began to rise to the surface. There was something about the way in which he told it that actually angered me. He spoke as nonchalantly as if he were reporting the weather on the local six o'clock news. He gave his truth, but with no emotion or expression whatsoever. I desperately wanted him to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation. His choice to use and distribute drugs had been the cause of so much stress in our home and in this moment I found myself feeling almost entitled to see him express a little bit of remorse!

I was already familiar with Jordan's story. I had lived through it all first-hand. My discovery of his drug use had come via text messages and they had revealed to me far more than I had ever wanted to know. He had never thought to erase his messages, and the previous summer I had reason to confiscate his phone. Because it was unexpected, there had been a very incriminating text left on the screen when I grabbed his phone from his hands. I was compelled to read others stored on that phone and over the course of two days I read things that I don't know to this day how to process completely.

My sweet, quiet son had been living a secret double life for several months and I didn't have a clue. How could this have been going on behind my back? Where were all the usual signs every parent reads about in parenting magazines, the ones I had always kept a watch for? I never considered myself naive and had such an open way of conversing with all three of my boys, and their friends. Ours was the house that all the kids gathered at. The core group of them had been friends since the second grade and I knew

them all so well. If drugs could be brought into an equation like that, they could be brought in anywhere.

Right under my nose, under my roof, on my watch, these kids began to experiment with various prescription drugs and marijuana. At the time of my discovery he was not only using drugs but was also playing the role of middle man, acquiring marijuana for his friends from some adults who were dealing in his father's neighborhood. In this new, expanded group he was no longer the witty but quiet kid in the background. Here he was the "go to" guy and that power was something I feared would be as addicting and dangerous to him as the drugs he was involved with.

A few months after the discovery, he was rushed to Riley Hospital with a spontaneous lung collapse. Thankfully, he healed quickly but we were told that he was prone to another collapse due to a condition on both of his lungs. The doctors warned him that any type of inhalation on his part would most definitely bring on another collapse and possibly even cause death. He had ignored the warning! He chose drugs and his new lifestyle over his health. He felt he had done well by cutting back on his almost daily marijuana use, but he was using alcohol as a substitute.

He began binge drinking and it was a close call with alcohol poisoning that had led me to find this place. And now he sat in this circle and despite his cooperation with the program by telling his story, he was behaving as if none of it mattered and I had overreacted. As all of this came back to me, I knew for the first time for certain that I had been right in bringing him here. My son was in denial and I no longer would doubt the certainty that I now felt

about that. When he finished talking, I found myself unable to control my emotions or my words any longer.

I started yelling at him and crying. " How can you sit there and behave as if this is all no big deal? " Another shoulder shrug. One thing I had noticed since we had first arrived the day before is that he would not look up at me. He would not even attempt to look me in the eye. Perhaps it was a sense of guilt he was feeling that caused this reaction, but to me it appeared he felt nothing at all. To me and everyone in the group he appeared quite apathetic. He simply could not see how any of this program applied to him.

I sat there speechless, feeling completely helpless until suddenly Keldon's step mom broke the silence and addressed Jordan directly. " What do you dream about doing, Jordan? " she asked him very gently. I wish I could say that this question tapped into something in him that made him aware of other interests and hopes and dreams that were being wasted on drugs. It didn't. What I can say, however, is that one question, posed by a stranger, at that moment, had a profound effect on me. This woman's son had almost died less than 12 hours prior and she was focused on reaching out to my son!

The amount of genuine concern that she expressed with that one question is indescribable. The support and empathy continued to flow in our direction from other members of the group. These peoples' stories may have advanced to a more extreme place than ours but they had all begun from almost identical places. They had all been there, done that, and completely understood the helpless feelings I had been experiencing I've never felt like

sharing my personal problems in a group setting would be beneficial for my own growth or healing.

It seemed like an unnatural concept for complete strangers to open up to each other about their problems and feelings so readily. I, like my son, had come and participated because the program required me to do so. This place, this group, changed that perspective for me. I now know how empowering it can be to be surrounded by a group of people who understand because their stories have similar chapters as yours. I suddenly realized that the answers I had desperately hoped to find here would not come.

There would be no answers given for how to get him to recognize and learn how to cope with his attachment to things that could harm him. Those were answers he would have to choose to search for when he was ready to accept them. The purpose of this group, and so many others like it that are held all over the country at any given time of day is to help people recognize they are not alone in their search for answers. A topic like drug and alcohol dependency is not something anyone feels comfortable discussing with even their closest friends and family.

It is a subject that is dark and depressing and filled with far too many emotions to allow you to feel comfortable with openly talking about it. Unless you have been personally touched by addiction in some way there is not complete understanding of the fear and guilt combined with frustration and anger. It takes a group of strangers, brought together and sharing their stories, to bring comfort and support when there really are no answers. It

took this group of strangers to show me how to accept a situation I can not change or fix and how to survive it.