

When there's an ELEPHANT in the room... Dealing with all types of addiction.

Presenters from all sides of the subject talk about addiction.

Addiction is a killer. It kills people, it kills families, and it can kill businesses. Everybody knows addiction is a force to be reckoned with, but there are people on the frontlines everyday helping to combat this disease. The event, hosted by the Family Business Council, featured three of these very people talking about their work and experiences with addiction. The speakers included psychologist Carol Ann Caeser, human rights activist Kitty Dukakis, and interventionist Doug Lyons.

Carol Caeser is a psychologist with The Vance Caeser Group and also teaches the certification program at Cal State University Long Beach. Her goal for the evening was to help people understand how addiction works and what it is like for the addict. She began by defining addiction as an overwhelming interest in a substance that persists even when things "go bad" for the person. She included two diagnostic terms. Drug abuse is when a person regularly uses a substance, they don't necessarily display symptoms of addiction but their substance use does get them into trouble. Drug dependency is characterized by a person who goes through withdrawal when they don't use a substance. These people can often develop a tolerance, meaning they need to use more of the substance every time to get the same affect. She talked about dual diagnosis. Addiction often occurs when there are underlying mental health issues. Addicts are often only treated for their dependency, neglecting treatment for an underlying issue like anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, or an array of other mental health issues which may have fostered the addiction in the first place. Missing the second diagnosis will often lead to relapse. Carol then went on to explain how addiction is a disease and not simply a reckless behavior. There are chemicals in the brain that give people a sense of enjoyment. These chemicals are part of the natural learning process. People learn to pursue activities that release these chemicals such as eating or sex. This learning is more than just an unconscious connection; it is a change in the physical structure of the brain. Drugs can duplicate or trigger the release of large amounts of these chemicals putting people into a state of euphoria. The brain changes and adjusts to these large amounts of chemicals, so when they wear off it leaves the person with a lower than normal amount in their system causing depression. This creates a state of dependency. Through the natural learning process the person has developed an overwhelming desire for the substance. The brain can heal, but generally not without professional help. She says one of the problems is that drugs are getting stronger and stronger. "It's not your grandmother's meth anymore." Addiction develops quicker and to a stronger degree for more powerful drugs. Many people will look at an addicts life and ask "Why don't they just stop?" but it is not that simple. As Carol explained an addict has a changed brain that doesn't allow them to make the same logical choices as a normally functioning person might. It is important to understand the addict's position before trying to help them.

The next speaker was Kitty Dukakis. Kitty is the wife of former Governor of Massachusetts and presidential candidate Michael Dukakis. She is actively involved in support groups around the country, and shares her story as a testimonial for electroconvulsive therapy. Kitty has struggled with depression

and addiction from the time she was a 19 year old junior in college about to be married. She started taking diet pills and amphetamines to lose weight for her wedding. She rationalized her drug use, telling herself that as long as she moderated it she would not become an addict. The wedding came and went but the drugs stayed. For the next 25 years she lived with an addiction to drugs and alcohol. When she finally identified her addiction she started going to support groups which helped her quit using drugs, but as the drugs left her life depression set in. Kitty suffered from depression for years until a doctor recommended electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). She tried it, and said that it worked from the very first treatment. She has been an avid supporter of ECT ever since, speaking at colleges and hospitals about the treatment's success. Her point is supported by researchers at Stanford University, saying that ECT is widely recognized as the most effective therapy for all types of depression. Kitty said that support groups are essential for addicts trying to recover. The support of people who have recovered is tremendously important for recovering addicts. She said that "As human beings, we have to try & help one another".

Our third speaker was interventionist Doug Lyons. He performs interventions for families and businesses, or often times family businesses. The message he wanted to drive home was that intervention works. Doug is a recovering alcoholic and cocaine addict with a history of addiction on both sides of his family. His family intervened on him and he has been in recovery ever since. When he helps a family prepare for an intervention he makes sure they understand that "it's an illness in and of itself, and not a moral or ethical problem", and that 70% of the time it is working in conjunction with another illness. He then went on to explain his process. He first tells the addict about the impending intervention. He says that each family member will only get 5 minutes to speak, and that the addict will get to say whatever he/she wants to as well. Then, he talks with the family about the nature of addiction in general, not specifically the addicted family member. This is all they talk about for the 2 days leading to the intervention; he does this to help the family empathize with the addict. Doug says that he usually gets a call out of desperation, meaning that things are already in terrible shape "It's a heavy phone to pick up". He can get an addict to come to the intervention 80% -90% of the time, but he can't guarantee that they will go to rehab. He can, however, promise that he will "Ruin their using for them" and help the family learn how to cope with having a loved one fall prey to this illness.

It was inspirational to see the devotion these speakers had to helping others. The audience was moved and a couple people even got on the microphone to express their gratitude. Addiction is a painful experience for everyone involved, but it can be overcome. The people who do recover often go on to do amazing work towards helping others recover as well. My hat goes off to these three and I wish them the best of luck in their work.



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