



Jackie and her family became social outcasts after her sons were outed as heroin users.

Katie Burrell on how families are fighting to rid themselves of the shame heaped on them not only by friends and neighbours, but by society as a whole

Shame on who?

“**W**HENEVER there’s a burglary in the area someone will say, ‘it’s the druggies’ and blame the parents. You just want to go home and cry. I felt that when I went out of my house I should have covered myself up because I was so ashamed.” These are the words, not of a drug user, but of his mother Jackie.

Jackie is one of thousands of family members across the UK who are painfully aware of how a community’s prejudice and fear can stigmatise and isolate the mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters of known problem drug users. Like many in her position, she feels people blame her both for not stopping her sons from trying drugs and for failing to make them quit once the problem got out of hand. Families living with substance use talk frequently of the shame that they feel and the need to hide away.

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“In social situations I don’t talk about my kids at all. I avoid family events, even at friends’ houses – it’s difficult when you see other families doing well and your family isn’t. I found it the hardest thing to explain to people and let them know what was going on.”

TAINED LOVE

The reaction of those closest to her have been hard to handle. “I can talk about it with my husband and when he sees me sad, he’s sad for me too, but he just wants his little world to be good and nothing to interfere with it. He won’t have the boys at home. He doesn’t want people to see them come to the door – he doesn’t want the drugs to taint him.

“Eventually I told one of my best friends that Steven was using drugs and she told me to wash my hands of him. When I said I couldn’t, she made it clear that she wouldn’t stand for that from her kids. People just don’t

understand, but I probably felt the same before I was in this situation; that you don't want them [drug users] around; you don't want any bad influence."

Jackie's two sons, Steven and Pete, both in their 20s, now live away from the family home – on a housing estate in Lincolnshire. Word of their drug use, which started at school, slowly became common knowledge on the estate as the boys' friends told their parents who told their friends. Two years ago, Pete, the youngest son, was driven from his flat on the estate after 'anti-smackhead' vigilantes smashed his windows and broke down the door. He slept underneath his bed because of threats to his life.

To add to the pressure, Jackie's work colleagues found out after Pete turned up at her office clutching a methadone bottle. "They were surprised – they didn't think I would be a 'druggie's parent'. But if anything goes wrong in the world they blame 'the druggies'. You just cringe when you hear it," says Jackie. "I try not to think about it because otherwise I wouldn't go to work. When you leave, you wonder what they're saying. You want people to respect you and talk well of you."

ANTI-STIGMA DRIVE

One of the worst effects of the shame is that it stops people finding help – at a time when they most need it. It triggers stress, depression, and can eventually cause family breakdown, thus weakening the power of communities and family members to handle drug abuse. Families of drug addicts feel that, despite a recognition in the government's updated Drug Strategy that families of drug users need support in their own right, their voice has so far gone unheard. Later this year, family and drugs charity Adfam will launch Breaking the Silence, a Home Office-funded campaign to tackle the stigma experienced by families of drug users. It calls for dedicated family workers for every family affected by drug use.

"Families are an integral part of tackling drug use," says Vivienne Evans, chief executive of Adfam. "And if families of users don't speak up it means that no-one is addressing their needs. Society's reaction and the government's response to illicit drugs has traditionally been as a criminal justice and anti-social behaviour issue and this is the focus of how communities are affected. But families struggle to cope with the stress and anxiety drug use can cause, and they struggle alone. They need consistent support that will make a difference to how they can live as a family, not just to be viewed as a route to the drug user."

Sometimes the stigmatisation of families is increased for religious reasons. Nina, a community worker whose son is a former drug addict, says there is tremendous shame attached to families of drug users within the Asian community. "The social structure is very clear that children are to be good and bring pride and honour to their family. It is the responsibility of the household to bring up the children with the right values and conduct. When there are drugs, the whole community looks down on you – it brings dishonour to the family." She says her husband seemed to blame her for their son's habit. "He told me I was the mother, I should have taught him how to behave."

Dr Chris Ford, a London-based GP, says she has witnessed how this shame limits a family's willingness to access services for themselves. "If you get into a victim role then that can be a really difficult and

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unhelpful state of mind," says Dr Ford, who has initiated programmes to improve understanding amongst GPs towards drug users and their families. "But this is a huge job. Many families report a lack of understanding and sympathy from health practitioners. GPs are still people with their own assumptions – sometimes not as sympathetic and understanding as families would like – and they can see the attitude of 'this is your fault, you've failed to create a family unit that has kept your child away from drugs'." Some GPs, wary of being over-stretched, can't understand why someone is coming to see them if they are not directly affected by drugs themselves.



Janet Groves:
"Eventually people do start to feel sympathy"

DAM-BUSTERS

But there are positive signs for the future. Janet Groves, who set up the Shropshire-based Drugs Anonymous Movement (DAM), one of a network of helpline and support groups in the UK which offer a lifeline to families isolated by drug abuse. "People used to think that drug addicts' families were the lowest of the low; it's only by speaking out, and standing up and being counted that it will change."

She says she didn't allow herself to be affected by the stigma. "I never felt shame, I just felt that I should do something for my son. You can talk about your experience and

what's going through your life and eventually people do start to feel sympathy and come round to a more balanced point of view."

Encouragingly, the Royal College of Psychiatrists' 2003 survey of public attitudes towards mental health and drug and alcohol addiction showed a marked decline in the proportion of the public who thought that substance addiction could be solved by people 'pulling themselves together' and that the problem was 'self-inflicted'.

Jackie said joining her local support group meant she could finally talk about her problems. "It was so good to walk through the door and speak to people who'd been through the same and understood the hurt.

"I brought my kids up the best I could. I was always home when they got in, they always had their meals ready for them. You think you're to blame and then you see other mothers who think that too. It could have happened whatever I did. It does help to understand that." She worries for families who haven't had the encouragement or the nerve to come forward and find help. "I know that there are thousands of families at home now worried about this, but who aren't even tell anybody." ■

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