

Inventing the wheel

In common with many loving parents, seeing her youngest son in the throes of alcohol addiction drove **Sue H** to despair and the point of illness. Constructing her own 'Recovery Wheel' gave her a way of coping, as well as highlighting the professional support that would have made a difference earlier on.

It's a November evening and I am sitting in the Bristol Hippodrome watching *Cats*, a wonderful production, people all around me with looks of sheer enjoyment on their faces. So why is it I feel so sad? So very sad that I feel tears starting to roll down my face.

It's just one of the many confusing feelings going on for me right now. Next week my youngest son enters treatment for his addiction to alcohol. Why am I sad? Because of 12 years of living with addiction in the family. It's something that as a parent I never thought would happen to us – particularly with alcohol, a legal substance, that lots of people have a great time with.

My youngest son's drinking has taken our family down a road of darkness I would never have dreamed about. Sadness is only one part of it. Guilt and shame, anger, frustration, hate, loss, fear, isolation, confusion, despair, and the big one – powerlessness – all take their part on a daily basis. For a long time I did not cope. I went into a deep depression, a black hole that I could see no way out of. Looking back now it feels scary that I was so close to ending my life because I just could not stop my son from drinking. I had reached the point of giving up because I could not find the help I needed.

But something happened that put me on the road to where I am now. It feels good to be alive now – I have a serenity in me that I thought did not even exist. I was asked to speak at the SGDAS (South Gloucestershire Drug and Alcohol Services)

three-day Family Forum as a family member. I had to speak for about 15 minutes on what I needed, and perhaps what I did not get.

How could I illustrate 12 years and the pieces of the puzzle that had got me to where I was now? This was how my Recovery Wheel began. Armed with board and coloured pens, I stepped back in time 12 years and began my journey once more. The feeling of desperation for help felt as real as it did then. One particular memory of a visit to the GP sprang to mind. I was in absolute surrender for help and it brought me nothing. When I left that day if I had thought of it, I would have laid down in the main road outside of the surgery. I had hit my rock bottom and I hope that no family member now would ever need to feel like that. I changed my GP

So what do I need?

This is the beginning of My Wheel...

I need an understanding GP. If you are a GP, please listen, acknowledge my pain, and have access to at least one service or a 12-step fellowship that you could direct me to for help. Take responsibility for trying to keep in touch with new services for family members – in the long run it could make your job much easier!

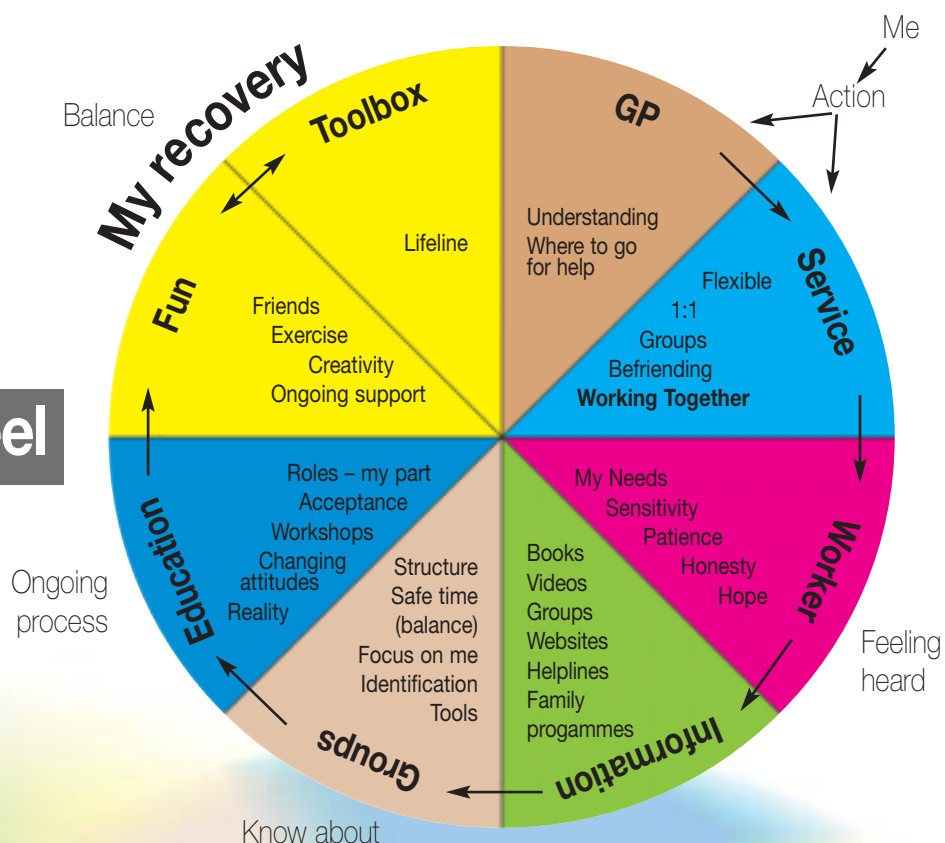
I need a service that will fit me. If you have a service, please let me know it is there. This is the place where I am ready to take action. Many family members find this the hardest thing to do. I am ready

– be there for me, help me find the right support. Be flexible, don't just expect me to fit the service. We are all unique and have different needs. Opportunities for one-to-one, group work and a 'buddy' system will encourage me to share my experience with other family members and help me to help myself. If your service does not have what I need, then direct me to one that does. Give me options and choices, and be a service that does that willingly.

I need a support worker that has sensitivity and

patience. I may know what I need to do, but it can take a long process to get the courage to do it. I need ongoing support to enable me to make small changes – fear can keep me doing the same things over and over; I used to fear that if I stepped back or detached, my son could get worse or even die. Help me to focus on my own needs and stop me spending the whole time talking about the 'other person'. Getting me to focus on myself for maybe an hour a week is a huge start. I need to build a very special rapport with you, so I can be totally honest with my feelings; the slightest hint of feeling judged and you might not see me again. You may experience my incredible anger or unpleasantness – my life is in chaos and I am full of emotional distress. Please not only listen, but hear what I am saying! I also need honesty from my worker, it's no good giving me false promises. I need to be facing reality not hiding from it. But at the same time, help me have hope. Take me to an open Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meeting to help me see that people do and can get better.

Recovery wheel



I need as much information as possible. I need to know where to find local groups for family members like Families Anonymous and Al Anon, good literature like books on co-dependency, informative websites, and any national organisations with publications. Twenty-four hour helplines can help in the middle of the night when the fear is too much to bear. Help me to build a library of information for when I need it.

I need education on family roles. I need to know about enabling, controlling, changing my attitudes, listening, communication, acceptance. How do you learn to accept that someone you love so much is slowly destroying themselves and you are unable to stop them? Acceptance of reality is so hard; I need to learn how to put the focus back on me, and how to say 'no' and set boundaries.

I need groups to empower me. I want to feel safe in my group and know that anything I say there stays there. Attending a group can be scary for all sorts of reasons. When you get me at your group, try and ensure that I stay. If I am too dominant, shut me up. If I am quiet, please see me; don't assume I am OK. And please give me 'tools' to help me cope with my situation - don't let me leave feeling more depressed than when I arrived.

I need to have some fun again. Fun got lost very early on. How am I going to get any of that back in my life? It's not easy to begin with, so help me to do that. I need pushing, I need to see the value of having fun.

I need tools to help me along. Over 12 years I have built my own toolbox. It's a silver bag with a label that says 'thanks for being there', sent from another family member who shared a similar experience. In the bag I have a range of objects - a bottle of HP sauce, which reminds me I need a Higher Power to 'help me along', as well as headphones, spinning top, an acceptance card, candle, earplugs, battery, rubber, and a small ladder - all of which have their own significant meaning to me. Help family members to build their own toolbox and they will be able to help themselves. Living with someone who has an addiction is like being on a rollercoaster - at its highest and then its lowest within seconds. The rollercoaster can be just as big for family members: So many professionals think we do not need support when someone goes into treatment, but it is often needed more, so that family members can continue to change alongside the person in treatment.

This brings me back to the beginning of the wheel, and it's an ongoing process. My journey into the past comes to an end, I am back in the moment. I shall enjoy the rest of *Cats* - I know I can, because I have the 'tools'. I know that in reality I shall have many moments of sadness, and that's life. But I also have my Recovery Wheel, and it is achievable.

Let's help family members to help themselves, and by doing so give them a healthy way to help the one they love.

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