

Recovery Spotlight:

Lisa Kenney

“I thought my experience with Substance Use Disorder (SUD) was over after I had attended a 45-day residential treatment program many years back.” -Lisa Kenney

Lisa chose recovery. She went on with her life, changed friends, changed environment, and changed her way of life. After all, people, places, and things matter. Nothing came easy but it was better than living life in consistent patterns of dangerous circumstances. Lisa had chosen recovery after years of heart ache due to SUD.

Looking back, Lisa began to realize that many of the battles she fought in life were related to substances and/or alcohol. She had been in an abusive relationship but one day she suddenly began seeing the reality of the damage that was done by remaining in this situation. She was being subjected to mental, physical, emotional abuse, and she was no longer in control of her own life. As much as she loved her husband and wanted to stay with him for her son, she knew things would not change. There were apologies but it would always cycle back, in time, to violence and reckless behavior. Lisa could no longer live in fear and sadness. Her mother was dying of cancer, her son had increased chronic conditions and struggles with his mental health, and she was ready to give up. For the first time, she began to see that the abuse had little to do with who she was, and more to do with his circumstances. He was fighting and losing his own war with SUD and mental illness.

Lisa left their beautiful home, business, all the fun things that they had acquired. She needed to start over, and she grew as a person. She had nothing more than her son and cats, but she felt free to become who she wanted to be. She could finally look in the mirror and see a woman who had more strength and courage than she had thought possible. She no longer hated herself and she embraced her imperfections. She finally believed that she deserved the breath that she took. Lisa wanted to share this early experience to help others find their second chance. Today, Lisa remains friends with her ex-husband, there is no hatred or hidden resentment, just a mutual understanding.

Over the next few years, Lisa would have many more experiences involving SUD. Each one pushed her closer to gaining an education in psychology & recovery and increased her passion for the work. It came in waves of emotion, fear, stigma, and needs, but it was her experience with SUD as a mother that brought her to where she is today.

Very early on, Lisa had been told that she could not have children. She had lost pregnancies, and for her, carrying a child became life threatening. She gave it another try though, she wanted nothing more than to be a mother. It was a risk, but she delivered a beautiful baby boy. As a mother, instinct came naturally to protect her child. She stocked first aid kits, carried extra clothing and healthy snacks, and kept close contact with his caregivers in case of emergencies. She was young and nervous, but she knew that she do it, she could be a good mother. She kissed scraped knees, read bedtime stories, and chased away imaginary monsters. However, nothing could have prepared her for what was to come. A danger that could not be chased away and no night light could make the monster disappear.

Lisa's son was born with neurological conditions and later received many diagnoses for behavioral and mental health conditions. He was challenging to say the least, and worse, he was a follower! He wanted to do all the things his friends were doing but his friends were not on the medications he was on. She

tried to make him understand and stressed to him that alcohol or other drugs could have a very dangerous effect on him. It did very little to deter him.

One morning Lisa turned on the news and there was a report of a car accident up the road. Her heart sank, she knew that she would be the one to break the news to her son, one of his friends, had been under the influence while car surfing and the driver had struck a tree. His friend had died and another was injured. It was awful but she hoped this would stop him from using substances, unfortunately it drove him towards them. Eventually, she couldn't keep him safe from himself and the anxiety began to wear on her.

She didn't know a lot about the new drugs people were taking so she wasn't sure what to expect. The school sent home letters asking parents to lock up herbal remedies, incense, and medicine cabinets. All of this was foreign to her, and it seemed ridiculous that kids were using bath salts to get high and that a stick of incense could be dangerous. Lisa states that this is the moment that she discovered stigma, her own attitudes, thoughts, and perceptions would come back to haunt her during a Recovery Coach Academy (RCA). One of the exercises was to brainstorm all the labels that could be put on people with addiction and the group wrote it all on posters and then as they were hung in the hall, silently they read each term used, just observing. When they returned to the room the instructor called upon her and asked how she, as a mother, felt reading those words. She opened her mouth but couldn't speak and her eyes began to fill with tears. She had used those words, having no real understanding about stigma or how it could impact outcomes. When her son developed symptoms of Schizophrenia induced by his use of substances, she asked, "why would you do something so stupid, you know better, what is wrong with you?"

Then, one day her son went missing. She begged his friends and the people she knew in the community to watch out for him. She received a call from a woman who had seen her posts desperately searching and was told that her son was found non-responsive and barely breathing in her yard. He was rushed to the hospital and placed in the ICU for several days. This was his first hospitalization, but it would not be his last. He was also being treated for a staph infection that had entered his blood and within a year he tested positive for Hepatitis C (HCV). She thought it was best if her son went to finish high school in a residential setting. He graduated and moved into his first apartment; things seemed to be getting better, but it wasn't long before he moved back home. Their relationship became even more strained as he was reintroduced to SUD. He left her home on bad terms and more than a year went by without word from him.

As a mom, Lisa felt like a failure. Her passion to help people struggling with SUD had grown too strong to ignore. She did everything that she could to help others, like her son, connect to services, treatment, and resources. She realized that if it was this hard for her, then finding shelter, food, or support had to be extremely difficult for them. Then, he called, he had been hospitalized again and wanted to come home and she welcomed him back under certain terms, no use of substances would be tolerated.

A few nights after returning home, Lisa found him lying on the bathroom floor, having seizures and then, nothing! She called 911, tried to position him, and waited. He was taken to the hospital, and she sat in a chair by his bedside in the ICU room for days, waiting and praying. She had just gotten him back and was faced with losing him. The night that this ended, and he was safe again, Lisa heard that a boy his age had passed away from an overdose, her heart broke for his family, and she felt guilt for being grateful that it was not her son. At this point, Naloxone (Narcan) was not widely available. She counted herself

lucky because he was now ready for treatment. After treatment, he came home with his girlfriend, and in less than 3 months, first responders had been called to four overdoses at her home. She never knew who or what to expect each morning. She grew suspicious of everyone and made it clear that if she found evidence of any type of substance there would be consequences.

Eventually, his actions began to follow Lisa. She was judged by providers, by first responders, and by her neighbors. She felt anger and shame as she discovered how the stigma associated with SUD can empower or disempower, humanize or dehumanize, and deter people from asking for help. She was all in now. Lisa pursued a career as a recovery coach. Today, she works for the AskPETRA SUD Support Program as a Community Health Worker/Recovery Coach (CHW/RC). Lisa helps others find resources, prevent relapse, understand their disease, and fight stigma. Her experiences had inspired her to become the change that she wanted to see.

Lisa wishes that she could tell you this story has a happy ending for all involved but it does not. SUD and stigma are still persistent issues in her life and community. Many lives have been lost and it could have been prevented. The world needs more empathy. As for her son, Lisa is happy to tell you that the struggle will always be real, but today, he is a devoted and loving father that continues to fight his own war against SUD.

“As hard as this job is, as heartbreaking as it becomes holding safe space for someone struggling, there is a peace that comes from it. A peace that comes from knowing that you have made a difference.” -Lisa Kenney