



**Opinion**

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# Enabling and Codependency: Why Recovery from Addiction and Relapse Prevention is Difficult in Asia



Joyce SH Djaelani Gordon<sup>1\*</sup>, Wisma Arjuna<sup>2</sup>, Wisma Srikandi<sup>3</sup> and Banda Aceh<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Yayasan Harapan Permata Hati Kita (YAKITA), Drug Recovery Center, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Men's Center, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Women's Center, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Recovery Center, Indonesia

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**\*Corresponding author:** Joyce SH Djaelani Gordon, Psychologist and Director, Yayasan Harapan Permata Hati Kita (YAKITA), Villa Pandawa YAKITA, Jl. Ciasin No. 21, Desa Bendungan, Bogor 16721, West Java, Indonesia, Email: [joyce.d.gordon@gmail.com](mailto:joyce.d.gordon@gmail.com)

## Opinion

It is well known that substance abuse and addiction has now become a major issue in Asia. Some countries in their fight against drugs has taken drastic and draconic measures, such as passing death sentences, exterminations of drug dealers and addicts, massive push towards rehabilitation and lengthy prison sentences for possession of drugs. It is easy to understand that this is a sign of frustration and anger in the public level that have pushed for stronger stance against drugs. Families are angry with the drug dealers and want them dead.

Addiction has brought into these otherwise normal and loving families, problems with *addiction related diseases* and blood borne *viruses* such as HIV and HCV for those injecting heroin, *unwanted pregnancies* and *sexually transmitted infections* and its related issues, *crime* since the addict would steal from their families, and commit violence just to get their money for drugs, and often drive a family into poverty. Such is the disease of addiction. Addiction carries a storm into any household and into any nation. Yet, we are failing to provide help if we simply work to punish the dealers, put the addicts in a recovery center, and fail to look into family dynamics in the Asian culture.

It really does not matter what drugs the addicts are on, as it could be heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, alcohol, ecstasy, marijuana, medically prescribed medicine, steroids, just take your pick. The addicts want their drugs, and they want it now. Living under the oppression of addiction in the family, families and communities go on a rage and try to control the situation, and simply want all dealers caught and killed. In their perception, dealers have taken their children and turned them into addicted monsters. And, it is always someone else's fault, miserably failing to put the addict themselves to take part of the blame. And also, families, perhaps out of their own sense of guilt of having failed

to prevent their family members from addiction find a need to look for someone or something outside themselves to blame.

Asian families love their children, source their pride from their children, and often live precariously through them. The success of their children, is also considered to be their own success. Families may try to do everything in their power for their children to succeed. We are all too familiar with dragon mothers who would send their children to different courses to make sure they excel in everything. Others provide their children with many things that the parents themselves may have been deprived of growing up. Some provide children with many toys to make up for their not being home due to work to justify being away from home, creating the current millennial children with a sense of entitlement. The gifts from parents come with a catch. They hope of course, their children would make them proud. But as with life, not everything happens as planned. Many children fail. And often their failings would often become too harsh for families, parents, to bear.

Some parents, including those who are highly intelligent, find it embarrassing to have a child who is addicted. They coddle their addicts, talk in a merry go round manner with the addict, rather than being assertive and often would refuse to have an intervention talk with their children in fear of upsetting the children. Some honestly say that they are afraid that their children would run away from home if parents were to set their foot down. But in truth, in the many decades of working with addicts in Asia, I have yet to see any addict that ran away from home longer than 3 weeks. Why? Because money is available at home and addicts could not really make it 'out' there.

In Asia, where families are still closely associated with their extended family, problems perceived in any family members

may also be scrutinized by the extended family. Parents would be scrutinized by their elders for failing their roles. Moreover, everyone in the family has an opinion. Often, mothers are the ones most admonished and take the blame for being bad mothers and not being able to protect children from drugs and addiction. Hence many such mothers become increasingly codependent, and end up with depression. So it is often a natural self-defense that parents would lie about how their children are doing, and keep the addiction a secret until it gets out of hand. We have had cases where mothers would lie to their husbands when their children is in trouble because she would be at the receiving end of both the husband's and the addict's violence. And no matter how bad the child is behaving, it always end up being other people's fault. The teacher at school that is not a good teacher, his playmates that are the bad influence, the mother that is not a good mother, all are fault, but "my child can do no wrong" kind of attitude. I have seen many families who continue to blame others for their children's failings.

Among those who are married and where the men are addicted, wives may also get the brunt of anger from both the addict and there in laws for their spouse's addiction. And if there is domestic violence due to addiction, this may be kept under the lid. Everything looks good on the outside, and no one takes real action.

The culture of keeping things under the table and not 'airing dirty laundry' is a very cultural thing that keeps addiction in wraps in many Asian family, and may give addiction much space to grow until it gets out of hand. The tendency for Asian people to be warm, accommodating and to keep negative feelings to themselves, can be an enabling tendency which can be unhelpful in the face of addiction crisis as it would continue to enable the addicts. Speaking out and talking about treatment to their addict may not be an option for people with codependency in fear of repercussions.

Other families are afraid that their community and extended family may find out about their children being addicted, hence secretly hope the addict will stop on their own and come to their senses. Going to residential treatment for some, may not be an option since they are afraid that people will start asking. We have seen many parents who continue care taking the addict (and the spouse and the addict's children) throughout their addiction. They do everything, except insist that the addict find real help. So, addiction goes on, for decades. In my opinion, there are several things that families need to learn when faced with addiction:

- a) Learn about how their actions or non-actions is enabling dysfunctional behaviors in their family to continue
- b) Learn to strengthen their own boundaries, and be assertive in regards to their own needs. Be strong, not angry.
- c) Learn to let the addict face the consequences of their own action. This allows them to grow up.

d) Learn to disarm the addict's weapons: anything they use to make you feel guilty, anxious, afraid, or worry. These weapons are used by the addict to avoid seeking help.

e) Learn about addiction and seek counseling and help for the addict and for themselves. Facing addiction needs to be a family effort since it affects everyone in the family.

f) Understand that their children's behavior do not always reflect parental failure. It would be helpful to imagine addiction as a disease. Like any disease, addiction happens, and not always because of parental failure. It does not matter how you get the disease, what matters is you seek help to treat the disease

g) Support health seeking behavior, and do not reward dysfunctional behavior.

Learn that if the drug use is still supported and rewarded, with little consequence, they would continue using. This reminds me of a case when an addict relapsed a few months after treatment, and the family gave him a vacation abroad. The parents simply said that their son relapsed because he wanted a vacation. It was not clear to the family it seems that this simple action was rewarding the addict for relapsing. It was not long before this addict reached the inevitable end. He died of an overdose.

Another family has tried putting their daughter in rehabilitation for 9 times, but never completely finishing any residential programs. Every time the daughter sounds or looks better, both parents would take her home, to yet another relapse. Their reason for taking their daughter out is simple. They miss her, her children (from a marriage to another addict) miss her, while sounds loving, it is totally codependent act and this is the game. Naturally their daughter relapsed over and over again often within days after returning home. Imagine for a second, taking home a patient who is under surgery, before the surgery is completed. It can be deadly. Parents, families, must learn to face their own pain. Consider, short term pain, long term gain, rather than short term gain, long term pain.

It is a valid question to ask, whether Asian culture is at its heart, a strongly codependent enabling culture. And it is in my opinion that Asia must look into the dynamics of enabling and codependency that may be part of the Asian culture, and learn to get a handle on this. Hence, education and counseling for parents and families of addicts must also take these issues into consideration. I understand that we Asians love our families, but we need to learn to love smarter so that addiction does take advantage of the weaknesses in our culture. We need to find a way to bring forward the strengths and wisdom of our culture. Without understanding this, Asia may continue to grapple with addiction and face tragedies in their homes due to addiction.



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