

Prescription for addiction: A family broken by opiate use

By *TRISTAN SCOTT* of the *Missoulian*

Editor's note

Rather than just look at statistics, we talked to real people who, by publicly telling their stories, believe they can make a lasting difference.

Before she was an opiate addict with three children in state custody, before she realized that years of drug use had taken a devastating toll on her life, Amy Johnson was a committed stay-at-home mom, the kind of fastidious homemaker who might send June Cleaver running for a feather duster.

“Nobody would have believed that I was a junkie because when you came into my house, it was always spotless. My kids were always fed. It killed me when my kids were removed and I was told it was because of neglect,” Johnson recently told the *Missoulian*. “But that’s exactly what it was. I would wake up in the morning and my first thought wasn’t to say ‘Good morning sunshines’ and feed my girls breakfast. **My first thought was to figure out how I was going to get some oxys (oxycodone) or morphine.**”

The Missoula woman spoke with the newspaper on the condition that her last name is changed to protect her children.

Today, after years of keeping up appearances and lying to herself and others, Johnson has been sober for more than a year and her children are all living under one roof - her roof.

But the story of how she came full circle with a second chance at life as a mother isn’t a typical tale of success. She cries while talking about her “lost year,” when the tragedy of losing her three children was compounded by the overdose death of her younger brother, who was also her best friend.

“I never lost so much in so little time,” she said. “It nearly destroyed me.”

Somehow it didn’t, though, and Johnson discovered the incentive to stop abusing opiate painkillers, and regained her determination to provide her children - ages 15, 3 and 4 - with a better childhood than her own.

For most of her life, Johnson was gripped by some form of addiction. At the very least, she was transfixed by a compulsion to use drugs and alcohol, often at the behest of an abusive boyfriend, who taught her to smoke crack and kept her self-esteem in the cellar.

Mostly she self-medicated, using chemicals to block painful memories of sexual abuse and molestation by her stepfather, to forget about the early abandonment by her biological father, and to blunt the budding symptoms of her bipolar disorder.

“I’ve always used drugs to mask those things,” she now realizes.

Johnson’s son was born in 1992, when she was only 16. She took him everywhere - “He’s my other,” she said - and he proved to be the only person she could rely upon for support after her stepmother died of a pain-pill overdose and her entire family seemed to be addicted - cousins, aunts, uncles and her beloved brother.

Caring for and loving her son gave Johnson tremendous strength, but not enough to make up for the pain she’d endured through childhood.

It wasn’t until she tried opiate painkillers that the day-to-day grind of life finally seemed bearable, enjoyable even. Opiates gave her something to look forward to, something she could count on in a world filled with people who had repeatedly let her down.

In October 2004, Johnson had her first little girl with a man she'd met through her brother, and who she is still with today. The following February, her uncle was killed in a car crash while driving to Missoula from Washington state. Her cousin, who is close in age to Johnson's son, was in the car but survived the wreck and came to live with her.

The following September, she had another daughter, and in less than two years had gone from raising one child to raising four.

With Johnson's partner working full time to support the growing household, she stayed home and feathered the nest, tending to the brood. But she continued to struggle with depression, and was always on the lookout for a quick fix.

Johnson discovered opiate painkillers after dabbling in a smattering of other drugs, including stimulants like cocaine and methamphetamine. But speed left her feeling strung out and deflated. She used meth daily for several months in 2005, but the drug made it difficult to manage her family, and coming down from the high was too overwhelming. It was also difficult to hide her drug use from her partner.

Then she started selling Lortabs for a guy she knew, who promised her a little extra cash if she helped him clear his supply.

Johnson ate a Lortab now and again to relax, but she never liked the painkillers because they made her feel nauseous, and because her stepmother and her aunt had died of overdoses from pills.

“That's not uncommon for an entire family system to be addicted,” says Johnson's addiction counselor, Melody Barnes.

Then one day Johnson swallowed a Lortab pill, and an hour later she took another. And then another.

“And it worked. I could cook and clean, my back didn't hurt. I just felt amazing,” she said.

It wasn't long before the guy with the Lortab supply turned her on to morphine, which was a much higher high. Then she was introduced to OxyContin, a time-release version of the potent narcotic opiate oxycodone. Amy had already injected meth with a needle, understanding that any drug snorted has a more immediate, intense effect if smoked or injected.

Oxy was no different.

Everyone told her that shooting the drug trumped every other opiate high. She tried it once, and knew she'd found the drug of her dreams.

“I just fell in love with it,” she says.

Her life became divided into two distinct spheres - the nurturer and the con-artist, the matriarch and the addict.

Every morning, Johnson juggled her duties as a mother with her private needs as an opiate fiend. It was a delicate balance that only an addict could achieve, someone versed in the finer points of deceit and manipulation.

She always made sure she had arranged for a shot in the morning, so she could get high first thing, immediately after she fed the girls their breakfast.

“The morning was always a big deal. I'd go into the bathroom and I could do it in five minutes. Then again when the girls would take their nap, and then later on I would say, ‘Mom's got to take her bath,’ ” Johnson recalled.

Whenever she didn't have enough money to buy oxys - on the street, the drugs run at around a buck a milligram, with Johnson shooting mostly 40-milligram doses - she'd get too sick to do anything and couldn't take care of her kids.

"It's like the worst flu imaginable times 10," she said.

Pharmaceuticals are common currency on the street, particularly among those who hoard and sell their prescriptions as a sort of cottage industry. Through friends, she found a dealer who had been injured in a car wreck and sold his oxys as a secondary income.

"It couldn't have been easier to get," she says. "I never had to go searching."

When she could afford the drug, which was more often than not, she maintained only the faint impression of a mother. Her son and cousin made it off to school, and the two girls ate and napped, but over time the drugs began taking a toll.

The wreckage was obvious to everyone but Johnson.

One day, she was watching television on the couch with her son, who was fooling around with a digital camera. She was high on opiates, but was doing her best to sit up straight while nodding off into an opiate-induced trance. Addicts call this effect of the drug "the nod." For Johnson, it was a battle between the drug's powerful high and her need to keep up appearances.

Knowing his mom better than anyone, her son, then 13, understood that Johnson was using drugs. He'd seen it before. When she finally came to, he had filled up the camera's memory card with pictures of her on the couch, looking pretty far afield from the homemaker image she'd been trying to affect.

In some ways, Johnson and her first-born child had grown up together, so it made sense when, in March 2007, he told a guidance counselor at his middle school that mom was using drugs.

"He was scared for his sisters," she said recently, tears pooling in her eyes as she struggled to reconcile those mistakes with her new course in life. "I was neglecting them all emotionally."

When state custodians from the Department of Health and Human Services showed up at her front door to remove the children, she fell into a deep depression, and continued to use heavily for several days. On the final day, she went to church for the first time in years and prayed.

Suddenly, Johnson felt as though she was faced with a decision; she had to choose between her opiate habit and her children. The two could not co-exist.

"I never even saw what I was doing as wrong. I had to take a long, hard look at what I was doing. I didn't think I was hurting anyone," she said. "I had to think whether I loved my drugs or my kids more. It hit me in an instant."

She stopped using drugs immediately. Throwing out her pills and needles, she asked social workers what it would take to get her kids back, and told her brother, who was living with her, that he had to stop bringing drugs and other addicts around to the house.

Days into her withdrawal, Johnson was in bed watching her soap operas, hardly able to move because of the incapacitating withdrawal symptoms. She hadn't heard from her brother in days, and made a few phone calls to track him down. Nobody had heard from him, so she crept out of her bedroom to check the rest of the house. Unable to find him in the spare bedroom, she eventually noticed the bathroom door was locked. She knocked, but

heard no response.

“I looked under the door and saw his bare feet on the ground,” she said. “I broke the antenna off my radio and poked him. And nothing.”

Like Johnson, her brother was addicted to opiates and the two occasionally used oxy together. But he'd recently come across a gram of heroin and, underestimating its purity, shot too big of a dose - something that happens less frequently with pharmaceuticals. He was dead at 29.

Johnson was traumatized by the loss, and by what the tragedy revealed about her own life.

“What if it had been me? What if the kids had found their mom lying dead in the bathroom, and their dad wasn't coming home for another six hours, and they had to just sit there crying against this dead body? Just think of the horror,” she lamented recently.

She has been clean ever since.

She complied with everything the state required of her to prove she was fit to care for three children - mostly counseling and drug screens. By October, she had her girls back, but her son's behavior problems required seven additional months of therapy at a center for juveniles. Now he's back in school, and back living at home. He's still a “mama's boy,” Johnson said.

“My strength and my sobriety come from my kids and my brother. My brother always wanted to be clean so bad. I'm living his purpose,” she said.

“My son is the light of my life, he gave me my strength. In the dark days, I always had that little smile. And now I've got three little smiles. I've got all I need.”

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