



The Joey Song: A Mother's Story of Her Son's Addiction

By Sandra Swenson

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There can be recovery, even if it doesn't happen within the addict. Sandy lives where love and addiction meet--a place where help enables and hope hurts. When addiction steals her son, Sandy fights for his survival, trying to stay on the right side of an invisible line between helping him to live and helping him to die. By age 20, Joey overdoses, attempts suicide, quits college, survives a near-fatal car accident, does time behind bars, and is kicked out of rehab more than once.

Increasingly manipulative, delusional, and hateful, the sweet Joey from childhood is lost to the addict wearing his face. Working with an interventionist, a judge, and tracking Joey's movements online, Sandy does what she can to save Joey from himself until it hurts more to hang on than it hurts to let go. Through Family Programs, Al-Anon, reading, and learning from her mistakes, Sandy discovers that sometimes love means doing nothing, and that Letting Go is not the same thing as giving up. She also learns that she needs to work on surviving her son's addiction while coming to terms with the fact that he may not.

Years pass. Friends and family no longer ask about Joey; they no longer know what to say. Joey is not in recovery, but Sandy works on hers, trying to keep the poison that is consuming Joey from destroying the rest of her family and her life. She starts a program to teach young men living in a group home how to budget, grocery shop, and cook, hoping that someone will someday help her own son in some way that she cannot. As in the song she sang to him so many times, Sandy keeps Joey down in her heart to stay. There is a place in her life that is exactly his size. One she hopes he will someday want to fill.

This is the poignant story of a defiant addict and the mother who won't give up on him. She finally realizes that it hurts more to hang on than to let go, and that letting go is not the same thing as giving up. Sandra Swenson beautifully orchestrates a mother's lessons of love and loss, while surviving her son's addiction.

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Editorial Review

Review

"With exceptional insight and honesty, Sandy Swenson has diligently documented the roller coaster ride too many families go on with their addicted offspring. Mothers will recognize themselves in her tenacious fight to save her child; her exceptionally descriptive portrayal of a family in crisis will feel familiar. The tears will flow with each of Joey's crashes and hope will blossom with each of Joey's forays into the recovery world. The redemption is Sandy's as she finds peace in "accepting the things she can not change." This will be in the bookshelf of every family touched by addictive illness - and that means everybody." -*Julia Negron, C.A.S., Addiction Specialist / Activist*

"A powerful story of love and addiction, *The Joey Song* is a glimpse into a world too many people don't talk about. The reader is carried alongside Sandy Swenson as she comes to understand that her teenaged son is struggling with addiction, through overdoses and hospitals and rehabs, and, finally, Letting Go. Honest and heart wrenching and unexpectedly hopeful, this is a must read for anyone who loves an addict." -*Barbara Theodosiou, founder of The Addict's Mom (TAM)*

"*The Joey Song* is a deeply personal and intense account of a mother's journey to her own recovery as she attempts to cope with and understand the downward spiral of her son's life. Begun as a series of personal journal reflections and observations, this book takes the reader into the mind, heart, and soul of a mother blind-sided by the rapid decline of her son in the depths of his addiction and related pathology. She describes a frightening, circuitous path from hospitals to detox centers, jails, and countless hours with therapists. When she arrives at Caron Renaissance in Boca Raton, Florida, she has clearly run out of answers but still has many questions. Her description of therapists who engaged her in her own recovery process is something that anyone with this kind of family crisis must read. The mental, emotional, and spiritual path this mother takes leads her to deep gratitude regarding her own recovery despite the fact that her son is still not there. As a clinician, I appreciated her insights about the family also being "the patient." As a parent, I empathized with the debate every parent has with doing too little and sometimes doing too much. As a spiritual leader, I was impressed with how this woman called upon her "Higher Power" and her support system not for the answers but for those times when there were no answers." -*John Bauduin, Director of Spiritual Services, Caron Renaissance*

"Every parent knows the pain of letting go as their children emerge from childhood and move into adulthood. But not every parent knows the pain, the anguish, the guilt of trying to "heal" a child with addictions and when it's time to stop trying to fix it. In *The Joey Song*, Sandy Swenson gives everyone touched by a loved-one's addiction a gut-wrenching glimpse at her oldest son's struggles and those of her family and the decision to let go to save their own lives. *The Joey Song* is a must read, no matter where you are in your journey in trying to "fix" your addicted child." -- *Patricia Rosen, Publisher The Sober World Magazine*

"Mothers of people with substance use disorders often live in an especially painful and heightened brew of anxiety and fear, yet all the while rooted in a tenacious hope that positive change is possible... In telling of her mothering journey with her own son, Sandy Swenson gives us an up-close-and-personal view of this vividly messy and confusing world. She describes the ferocious, undying love that will not be bludgeoned by the trials and tribulations that her son's problems wreak in her whole family's lives. She gives a harrowing

account of how drugs, alcohol, and lies weave their way through her family as they come to understand more than they ever dreamed they would about jails, hospitals, and treatment centers throughout the country. In her tale, Sandy tackles vital issues that are far too seldom discussed: how judgment and ignorance about substance abuse often keep families from getting the support they would otherwise get when trying to parent a suffering child; how difficult it can be to differentiate mental health, substance abuse, and medical problems; and how much guilt pervades a parent's experience when a child is struggling with these issues. Her family's story also illustrates well the fallacy endemic in our country that says will power is the only requirement to recover. Will power and good character don't even speak the same language as the powers of persuasion inherent in compulsive behavior problems. As she says, "Joey has no idea how hard it is for me to constantly wage war against an invisible enemy in what feels like a war against him.... Joey may be the one consuming the poison, but the poison is consuming me." And yet the end of the story does not find her consumed. She steadily learns to practice the skills of a warrior in the battle to save her own life too." -Nicole Kosanke, Ph.D., Director of Family Services, Center for Motivation and Change

"The Joey Song is a moving and touching story of the frustration and heartbreak caused by the disease of addiction. Sandy demonstrates with amazing warmth and wit that it is possible for the families of addicts and alcoholics to recover despite the inability of their loved ones to find recovery. The Joey Song will move you, bringing the terror, despair and joy of recovery into your heart. It is highly recommended for all who want to understand and appreciate the impact of the family disease of addiction and alcoholism." -Bruce Eanet,
Caron Board of Directors

"Sandy Swenson tells the heartbreaking story of her son's journey into addiction with beautiful, descriptive language that captivated my interest throughout. Her powerful tale of parental love and hope will heal the hearts of others who so desperately want to know that they are not alone. While the search for the truth will resonate with those who love a child, her story of strength, determination, and hope for a miracle will remain unforgettable."--Cathy Taughinbaugh, Parent Coach and Author of *Parents to Ph.D.s: 28 Interviews with People Who Share Heartache, Wisdom, and Healing from First-hand Experience with Substance Use Disorder*

"Sandra Swenson shares her gripping account of her son's addiction and captures what it's like to live and love someone spiraling through this brain disease...the constant lies, broken promises, plausible solutions...the dreams and hopes dashed time and again. And the way she captures what it was like for her and her husband and her other son, Rick, is so spot on, as well -- the walking on egg shells around Joey (her son), as well as around one another, all desperate to help in whatever way they can. As someone with several loved ones with this disease, I could feel her pain, desperation, anger, hopelessness, helplessness and desperate need to be in control. I'm so glad to read she found some peace and the ability to live her life in spite of it all, something anyone who is living the nightmare of loving someone with the disease of addiction will want to know." -Lisa Frederiksen, Author of *If You Loved Me, You'd Stop!* and *Loved One In Treatment? Now What!*

"The heartbreak of parenting - and finally letting go of - a drug addicted child can be a very private and lonely hell. Where do you turn for comfort? Who else could possibly understand? In *The Joey Song* Sandra Swenson writes not just from her heart but from deep in her soul. With each page of this beautifully written story you hope Sandy's hopes, walk Sandy's steps and cry Sandy's tears. If you've been in her shoes you cannot ever again feel alone. If you haven't been in her shoes you cannot ever again look at the parent of an addict the same way. It's hard to read. It's hard to not read. It's impossible to forget." -Gwen Carden, Radio

Host and Journalist, Palm City, Florida

"Sandra Swenson has created a heartfelt and tender book, full of courage, honesty, and, above all, love for her drug-addicted son Joey. The book will move and enthrall every reader with this powerful story of a mother captured between fate and hope. For me, as an interventionist, *The Joey Song* should be recommended reading for all parents of young people with a substance use disorder who are struggling to find recovery. A compassionate gem to be treasured and reread again and again." --*Susanne Johnson, Certified Interventionist Sober Coach and Lead Advocate for Heroes in Recovery*

"She shares everything and hides nothing. Most importantly, there are wonderful insights and perspectives... This is a must read for any parent or any loved one who needs a little love, guidance, insight, and perspective on their journey with addiction."--*David Cooke, 100Pedals*

"Over the years, Joey dreamed of becoming a firefighter, a rodeo clown, a fisherman, and a marine biologist, but addict was never on his list. Nor was it on mine.' Throughout *The Joey Song*, Sandy captures an array of emotions that are universal to mothers. Not all have experienced the devastation of an addicted child--but I can guarantee that most moms will relate to her poignant descriptions. She digs deep and we relive those moments and feel the immense power of one of the strongest bonds on earth--the bond of a mother to her child. We travel with Sandy, her two small sons and husband, as they evolve from the 'perfect storybook family' to one that is barely held together--as addiction insidiously destroys her firstborn son Joey. We observe the process a mother goes through as she fights, claws her way through circumstances that are stacked against them. She states 'You can leave an addicted spouse if things get out of control, but you can never, ever leave your child.' Support, hope, lies and excuses, lost hope, holes. She feels her son slipping away, not showing up for traditional family events. Sandy writes, 'Even if Joey had come, our evening would still have a hole in it. Because a hole can't be filled, with something that's empty.' Missed birthdays and holidays. Sandy wrestles with the notion of detachment. She writes 'We are a hurting bunch, detaching with anger, detaching with despair, and detaching with denial, but we're all trying to get to the place of detaching with love.' The thing that makes this book different from all the other addiction-related writings I have read is the uniquely insightful and heart-wrenching descriptions Sandy uses to describe her innermost feelings. Although her thoughts and memories are uniquely her own, she reaches deep inside the reader to strike a chord and hit upon universal bonds that connect all mothers to their children. At one point in the book after attending a parent support group, she recounts 'We're just a drop in the bucket, this roomful of moms and dads. There are millions of us outside these doors, but a deluge of raindrops doesn't make any single drop less wet.' Wrestling with the notion of *hitting bottom* Sandy writes 'There's no telling when, or if, or how, an addict will hit *bottom*, but *bottom* is not going to be hit while lying on a freshly made bed of roses. It'll happen while skating around on thin ice.' *The Joey Song* is interspersed with flashbacks to happier times, memories (memories that are universal to all families--all moms). As Sandy feels herself losing her son she writes, 'I love the son that is mine--the son that's in there somewhere--but this is not my son. I don't know this person wearing my son's skin. This is a twisted caricature of Joey and I hate him. My Joes is gone. Consumed by an addict.' Sandy slowly learns to face the truth and she states '...we have given up on helping the addict. We're done paying the addict's ransom.' There are times in which Joey seems to reappear and Sandy silently speaks to him: 'You are special Joey. Do whatever it takes to find yourself again. Addiction is the only thing you have left to lose.' And then unexpectedly, The Addict awakens." -*Judy Herzanek/Changing Lives Foundation, Co-author, "Why Don't They Just Quit? What families and friends need to know about addiction and recovery."*

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Swenson relates an honest, courageous story of her many years of struggle with her defiant, delusional, and addicted son. Instead of yet another personal memoir from a recovering addict, Swenson displays a valuable focus on how the toxic corrosion of addiction affects relationships with family and friends. She also shares how writing her story helped to release some of the pain, ventilate her anxieties, and allowed her to better manage the never-ending worries about her son's problems and his shaky future, even as he failed to realize that only he had the power to change his life. Swenson candidly admits that her son's addiction remains active and explains how she learned to refocus her efforts on other parents of loved ones suffering from substance abuse who might need help finding a path to recovery. This heartbreaking tale of a hurting family is the flip side of the usual heartwarming recovery story shared in most addicts' memoirs. Coming to grips with the reality that it hurts more to hang on than to let go is a watershed moment in the lives of most parents struggling with an addicted child. VERDICT: Swenson's cathartic account reveals her complex feelings about her troubled son that will connect with readers going through similar experiences in their families.—*Dale Farris, Groves, TX*

From the Author
Together we are stronger.

From the Inside Flap
Sometimes addicts don't recover, but with love and faith their families can.

By the age of twenty, Joey had OD'd, attempted suicide, dropped out of college, survived a near-fatal car accident, done time behind bars, and been kicked out of rehab. Now manipulative and hateful, the once sweet and charming Joey is long gone. This is the poignant story of a defiant addict and the mother who won't give up on him. She finally realizes that it hurts more to hang on than to let go, and that letting go is not the same as giving up. Sandra Swenson beautifully orchestrates a mother's lessons of love and loss, while surviving her son's addiction. Despairing parents of addicts will find comfort in this stark, yet hopeful tale.

-As a physician specializing in the treatment of addiction, and as a parent who has struggled with addiction in my own family, I found *The Joey Song* to be a moving portrayal of a family plagued by the complex issues of a child's addiction.- - David E. Smith, MD, FASAM, FAACT, Founder of Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinics of San Francisco

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joan Burton:

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