

STATE OF MIND #2
(DRAFT)

I have a 25 year old son whose life seems on hold. We're not sure if the problem is drugs or what. He's unemployed, hardly leaves the couch, is moody. Seems he's wasting his life. Every time we approach him about the problem, it quickly becomes a battle. I'm starting to have trouble keeping my mind on my own work – this is all I think about. He's ruining our lives. Help

Unfortunately, you are not alone with this kind of a dilemma and there are no simple answers. More and more families are being confronted by unmotivated and hostile adult-children who cast a black cloud over their parents' homes. Their resistance harms siblings and often increases conflicts between mother and father that can extend to grandparents, other relatives and friends. They are really good at making themselves seem like victims who are misunderstood and deserving of special attention. Initially, you may feel like the "bad guy" who is willing to accept blame that has heaped upon you, but eventually all parents tire of such unwarranted abuse.

By the time help is sought, the patterns are pretty well entrenched and the "slug" is in control of the emotional tone of what happens in the family. Changing the situation demands a major sustained and strategic effort that puts the power back in your hands. You will have to make drastic changes in the way you are doing things so as to break up the predictable and inevitable cycle. It has probably taken many months if not years for this to develop, so the first thing to realize is that things may not get better immediately. You will have to redefine and internalize the way you show LOVE and CONCERN to your son.

The first step is to have agreement between the parents and anyone else to whom your son may turn that will block his efforts to avoid facing that his behaviors have become unacceptable. Differences in parenting style must be eliminated. This will demand "tough love" that takes the natural instinct to protect your child and replaces it with a resolute determination that his negative behaviors will not be tolerated. Changes may occur in inches, but once ground is gained it must be held. Actually, this is not a battle; it is war...A campaign to save your son from himself and harmful influences on his life.

Of course, it is essential to try to determine the basis for this infuriating lack of appropriate behavior. Ruling out some physical problem (e.g. thyroid, diabetes, etc.), substance abuse or emotional difficulties such as depression is critical. The best place to start will be with your family physician who can check the status of your son's health. Just to make things a bit more complicated, often these troubles are not mutually exclusive and it is highly likely that your son will refuse to cooperate. With proper planning you can compel him to go for an evaluation...this is only a start.

Usually, the dysfunctional pattern is grounded in long-term personality traits that may be exacerbated by drinking and drugs. Sometimes emotional conditions coexist with substance abuse. A word of caution...short-term treatment programs for alcohol and drug problems do not lead to lasting positive changes. Most participants relapse. Entering a thirty-day rehab program touted by celebrities is a stop gap measure. The most successful programs go for no less than 90 days and often extend follow up for a year or two. This is best done out of the environment in which the troubled person has lived. Sadly, these programs are not readily available in West Virginia and out of state facilities are costly...but they do offer hope. Sometime a child's college tuition or inheritance may have to be used to provide a different type of education...one that will save a life.

All of these factors must be considered as you set your plan into action. You cannot expect things to go smoothly. Each time you make a move, you must anticipate counter attacks. Remember, your son is better at being his dysfunctional self than you are at being the new parent who demands change. You must not buy into his baiting...you need to make him respond to your demands. You will have to begin to withdraw those things that enable him to continue to escape dealing with his own life. No money...no car...no cell phone...no privileges without demonstrated responsibility. You must prepare for escalations in his attempts at emotional blackmail that may include suicide gestures or physical threats to you and your spouse. If he acts in an illegal manner then he should be treated like a criminal. He may have to suffer before he will make any real commitment to get off the couch and get back into life.

This may sound draconian and a bit overwhelming, but if you develop an overall game plan that has defined realistic goals, you will feel better and be firm in your belief that what you are doing is for his good. Yes, there are potential threats to his safety, but if he continues as he has without you retaking control, what future will he have? The best plan must be defined and proactive rather than reactive to whatever crisis your son creates. Initially this whole effort will distract you a bit more from your work as you get used to being different...With proper guidance and support you can bring a sense of personal peace back into your life and let your son decide whether he wants to share the good things that you have to offer.