

Ending the Silence & Stigma:

Part 3 – The Saddest Family Secret

With nearly 20,000 opioid users now in Ireland, and many more who struggle daily with other kinds of addiction, where are the families? They are suffering, silently in the shadows, often for years – sometimes unable even to grieve. It's due to the punishing stigma and judgement around being a relation to someone in active addiction. MQI's Will Carroll is on a mission to end that stigma...

MQI project worker Will Carroll has a good idea why data on the number of Irish people with a loved one in addiction is so hard to find. Families are afraid to come forward. But their suffering is well-known to him. For the last ten years, in addition to his work at MQI helping people who are homeless and in addiction, Will has facilitated our Family Support Group in Riverbank every Tuesday evening.

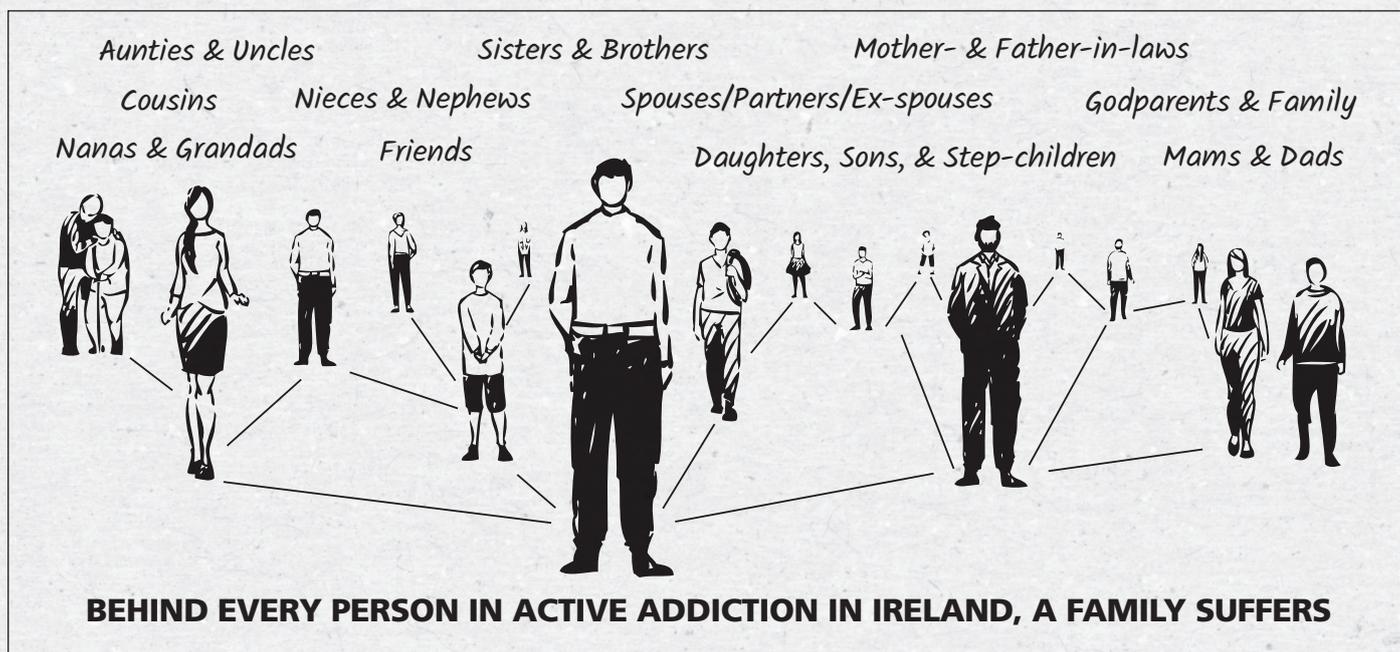
A hidden and damaging shame

"It comes down to shame," he says, shaking his head. "The

hidden shame that is there. People are afraid to come and say, 'my son is addicted to heroin,' or 'my sister is an alcoholic,' or 'my husband is a gambler.' They're afraid because it's not even looked at by most people as an illness. Society sees addiction as something you brought on yourself. So by the time the family comes to us, or to another family support group, because of this stigma, it's nearly too late. We've had families who've lost a child to addiction, and they can't even grieve in a normal way. People have said to them, 'Ah well, if you're going to go taking drugs sure that's what's going to happen to you.'

Coping with the chaos of addiction

So every Tuesday evening at the Family Support Group, Will works to break down the stigma. "Our goal is to try and help the families and extended families of those in addiction to cope with addiction and its many facets. Families are isolated, then they come into this group and they are supported by other families. More important, they are being listened to and understood in a non-judgemental way. Other group members share their experiences as well, and offer advice. They form this peer support which often operates



The Saddest Family Secret, *continued*

outside the Tuesday evening. We encourage that. For me it's the behaviours of addiction that the families have to engage with. My job is to find a way to help them cope with this."

Lifeline to practical help

Whenever possible, Will advocates for families. "There's an almost overwhelming amount of things to think about. There's the emotional toll and mental well-being of the family, or there could be grandparents left to look after the children of the person who is addicted. There could be a physical toll, we've had people who are suffering parental violence. Or bank accounts cleaned out due to debt.



“The truth be known there is not a family in this country who hasn't got a very close connection to someone in addiction. It doesn't matter what the addiction is, society sees the family as a pariah. They are totally silenced and lost. It destroys people. That's what I want to sort out. I want to help them.”

— Will Carroll, MQI Project Worker and Family Support Facilitator

Intimidation is also huge for families dealing with addiction. So we'll work to refer people into the right support services. Sadly, sometimes we are linking families in with bereavement counsellors. It's the families who suffer all alone with these things.”

The most important thing to do

Through MQI, Will is working to fight the stigma faced by families of addiction on as many fronts as possible. If you are the loved one of someone in addiction, he says, don't wait. “Just pick up the phone and call. Ring me, or another family support group. But don't wait. Call.”



If you have a family member or loved one in addiction and you need support: MQI Family Support includes advice and information, peer support, drug awareness workshops, and group work, and is always open to new members.

If you are in the Dublin area, contact Will Carroll at MQI on 086 183 2343 or will.carroll@mqi.ie. In Laois, Offaly, Westmeath, and Longford, contact Amy McGranaghan on 086 602 9012 or amy.mcgranaghan@mqi.ie. ■

Numbers of Irish People With Loved Ones In Addiction Still Unknown

Precious little data exists about the number of Irish families with a family member or loved one who is, or has been, in active addiction. Scour the internet and you'll find that existing data comes from elsewhere, via surveys of people who self-report. What's more, addiction comes in many forms, not all of which are drug use. These factors make the data below to be far more likely an underestimate:

- 19% of people in the UK say they are related or connected to someone with a personal experience of addiction¹
- 25% of the population of Scandinavia's capital cities say they know and worry about a person using drugs²
- 46% of adults in the USA report they have a close friend or family member who has been addicted to drugs³

Sources:

¹Challenging Stigma: Tackling the prejudice experienced by the families of drug and alcohol users,' Adfam, 2012. www.adfam.org.uk/files/docs/adfam_challenging_stigma.pdf

²Measuring the harm of illicit drug use on friends and family,' Hans Olav Melberg, et. al., 2011. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2478/v10199-011-0012-5>

³Nearly half of Americans have a family member or close friend who's been addicted to drugs,' John Gramlich, Pew Research Center, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/26/nearly-half-of-americans-have-a-family-member-or-close-friend-whos-been-addicted-to-drugs/>

“Ending the Silence and Stigma” is a special four-part series for MQI's supporter newsletter, *Quay Times*.

For earlier issues or extra copies, ring **Emma on 01 524 0965** or email to supportercare@mqi.ie.