

How Craig Melvin Helped His Dad Conquer Alcoholism | Clips | Dad Saves America

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SUMMARY

Craig Melvin shares his journey of confronting his father's addiction to alcohol and video poker, detailing the impact it had on their family dynamics. Through a series of interventions and therapy sessions, Melvin and his family learned to address their feelings of disgust and contempt towards his father, ultimately leading to a successful intervention that helped his father seek treatment and begin recovery.

- Melvin first recognized his father's addiction during middle school when his drinking escalated to dangerous levels.*
- His father's addiction included not only alcohol but also video poker, leading to significant financial loss.*
- The family's attempts to intervene initially failed, as they did not approach the situation effectively.*
- A pivotal therapy session helped the family articulate their feelings and confront the long-standing issues caused by the addiction.*
- The family devised a plan to stage an intervention, using letters to express their concerns and feelings clearly.*
- The intervention was successful, leading Melvin's father to enter rehab, although he was heavily intoxicated at the time.*
- After treatment, Melvin's father transformed, becoming actively involved in his recovery and reconnecting with his family.*
- The experience emphasized the importance of addressing addiction with compassion and the need for the individual to desire change.*

- When did you first realize that your dad was suffering from addiction? - [Craig] Hm, that's a good question. - How old were you when it went from, my dad's not around, he's not with it to, oh, something else is happening, something else has its grip over him? - You know, it's a hard question to answer because we view addiction differently now than just a few years ago, but certainly 35 years ago when I was growing up, we just thought that Dad drank too much, but there were other folks in the family who drank a lot and there were other people you'd see from time to time.

My dad, you talk about drinking and driving, he would literally drink and drive. I remember being in the car with him, front seat, '73 Pontiac LeMans, no seatbelt. He's got the Budweiser tucked between the two seats and he'd take a swig and

he'd drive and we'd stop and he'd take a swig. He threw the can on the floor, he'd take another one out. So I grew up like that with Dad literally drinking and driving, despite my mother even back then saying, "Lawrence, really, you can't drink and drive with the kid."

And he said, "I'm gonna two, I had two!" (John laughs)
- [John] Oh no! - I think we knew it had become a problem when he would drink to the point where he would throw up or he'd be passed out for a day. And that didn't start until we were probably in middle school. - Oh, and that's a hard time for that stuff to hit, too. - Oh, and what did not help is he would go up to this place called Tom's Party Shop.

And back then, video poker was legal in South Carolina. And my dad, he didn't just have one vice at a time, he had multiple vices. Typically, they lead to others. So in addition to his alcohol addiction, he became addicted to video poker to the point where he blew pretty much his entire life savings. - Well, I think that's what we see, right, I mean, that addictive personality, it overlaps. - [Craig] Oh yeah. - And a lot of times, to get out of one, you've gotta replace it with another.

- Right, and so he would go up to Tom's Party Shop, he'd have his tall boy Budweiser and he's sitting there playing video poker. And as I get older, my friends would go into the party shop to buy chips or soda, whatever and they'd see my dad in the back. And by the way, he's driving this lime green '73 Pontiac LeMans, which is pretty recognizable in the late '80s. And it was a small neighborhood. - He's got like a Batman villain car.

- Right, so my friends would come to school and go, "Yeah, I saw your dad up at Tom's." And he worked third shift at the post office. So he'd get off work, he'd go to Tom's, he'd drink his beer, play his video poker and my friends would see him in there, come to school and say, "Hey, I just saw your dad." And so, imagine the embarrassment as I got older of having my friends see my dad drunk playing video poker before 10 AM and coming to school to tell me all about it.

And it only got worse from there. He got in a little car accident when I was probably in middle school. He runs

into this woman's
yard and he knocks over a bush and he convinces the woman
not to call the police by telling the woman he would
come and replace the bush with the help of his son who has to get up on a Saturday morning at 0 dark 30 to go
dig up the bush, replace it.

So we knew he had some
issues in middle school, but we didn't know he was a full-on addict until I was in my early 20s. And we tried to
get him some
help, we staged an intervention before we really knew how to do it. And basically, the intervention consisted of
us sitting him down and
berating him with stories of his drunkenness and
insisting that he get help. And so naturally, that didn't work. - Yeah, what was the thing that you think worked
the last time 'cause I understand that
you did ultimately succeed in helping him change his path.

- You can't help someone who's an addict unless they want to
actually change their lives. When someone decides, you know
what, I do have a problem, I do wanna fix that problem,
I am going to get help, that's when you can do it. - Do they have to hit rock bottom, is there a rock bottom
thing? - You have to get pretty close. And my dad was headed for rock bottom. And the fact is, he had a couple
of DUIs.

- Not great. - Yeah, I mean, he had been
detained by the police once or twice, but he had not
thankfully hurt anybody. He hadn't killed anyone, he hadn't... But that's where it was headed and that's what we
saw as a family. So for him, he retired
from the post office after 40 years as a mail clerk, and what was recreational
pretty heavy drinking quickly turned into binge drinking to a point where he would drink
all day Monday, black out, spend Tuesday hung over and recovering and do it again on
Wednesday, Thursday recovery.

So this became his life. And he was out driving on
a main thoroughfare there in Columbia, South
Carolina, Broad River Road and I get a call. I'm at the Today Show and I'd
gotten a call from someone who is in law enforcement. And they said, "Just so you know, "your dad is
developing a bit
of a reputation in the area "for driving drunk, and
it's just a matter of time "before something bad's gonna happen." - So you were at Today
when this was happening.

- Oh sure, sure. - So that's also weird, 'cause you're on a national stage. - Yeah, yeah, yeah, I was in the spotlight, although that wasn't really a concern. He ends up hitting this woman, not terribly, but there's a fender bender. He's coming back from Wendy's, doesn't remember any of it and he hits this woman. Fortunately, we knew the woman and we convinced her that we would take care of the damage to the car and we would get my dad some help.

The woman was fine, my dad definitely was fine. But my younger brother and I had a conversation after that. And we're like, you know what? Forget Dad being an embarrassment or hurting himself, he's gonna kill somebody. - I mean, my dad was rear-ended by a drunk driver and it ended his medical career. So this stuff hits me hard when I hear these stories. - And we didn't want that to happen. And we knew that's where it was headed, so this time, thankfully, I'd been a journalist for awhile and I'd done a number of stories over the years.

In fact, I did a big piece a few years ago for Dateline on addiction and how the way that we treat addiction in this country fortunately has changed dramatically, the ways in which we can treat it. And so I was armed with some new information. And I had an assistant at the time whose stepfather ran a non-profit called Shadow Proof and they dealt with addiction. I was talking to her, she's like, "You should talk to my stepdad."

And her stepdad had some friends who'd been in that space for awhile. So I call him up and I'm being a good journalist, I'm information gathering and this goes on for about a week. I call my brother back, I'm like, you know what? We've gotta bring in a professional. And we found a woman, thank God, down in Columbia, South Carolina who talked me through the steps that we should be taking. And step one was to sit the family down and to have a therapy session- - Without your dad?

- Without my dad.

- Yeah. - And I'm like, well, this doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense, but okay, this is part of the process. - Was that partly about trying to wring out some baggage so you don't bring it into the room when there's that time? - Ding, ding, ding, John. That was part of it. And the other part was to just let us vent about all the ways in

which his alcohol addiction had bothered us, almost destroyed our family.

And we had not... And you know, and this may be true in your family as well, but in my family, you don't talk about (blank). You bury it, you just pretend it didn't happen. I mean, maybe if it's huge, you might acknowledge it during the holidays, but you certainly don't go talking about it. And so, it's me, it's my younger brother, it's my mom, it's my dad's nephew. There were six or seven of us in this room and the session's supposed to go an hour.

We're in there for three hours because people had been bottling all this stuff up for years. Finally the therapist is like, "We're gonna have to probably do another session, guys, "I gotta go." And she said after the fact that she wanted us to hear how my father's alcohol addiction had... I mean, I had developed this borderline hatred for my dad that I hadn't even realized was there. I was disgusted by him, I just...

- That's something that a good friend of mine, Arthur Brooks, has talked about this a lot, the disgust. Disgust is this poison, it's right there with contempt of relationships where you find yourself rolling your eyes at your spouse or this just ugh! And it's a toxin that you ingest and it takes over the system if you don't get rid of it. - And my mother, and we talked about it. My younger brother and I had gotten to a point with her where we used to just tell her all the time.

It's like, you know we're older, we're fine, you're clearly miserable in your marriage. You could just leave him now. Because what we had done unknowingly was we'd written him off years ago. We had decided he either wasn't worthy of our continued worry or that he was incapable of change. And I left that session on Devine Street in Five Points, South Carolina, I remember it vividly, I left that session, it was an aha moment as Oprah would say.

I left more determined than ever to save my dad. - What was the turn in that moment where you went from the disgust to the mission? - I saw in that meeting what he had done to my younger brother, what he had done to my mother and what he was doing to me. And here I was, again, pretty

successful professionally, I'd gotten married, I was getting ready to start my own family and I was having to grapple with these feelings that I had never really addressed before.

And it became clear that this disgust, this disdain, this contempt, this borderline hatred that I had developed, it was a cancer inside of me. And I had to save my dad, not just for my dad, I had to save him for myself. And so the mission started. And this woman, she helped us in the next meeting develop a strategy to basically kidnap my father and sit him down in a room. And we had to write these letters to our dad because if...

And she noticed if we were just to talk to him, we were all gonna get worked up and cry and be angry, but if we wrote a letter and just read it to him, then he would hear us and we could make sure that our thoughts and our feelings were conveyed in a clear and concise way. And so on a Sunday morning, we had developed a scheme to pick up my dad to tell him that my younger brother needed some help with a project at the house.

So first thing Sunday morning- - Little white lie, it's just part of the process. - My younger brother goes and picks him up, brings him to the house, he walks in reeking of booze and we sit him down and even in his drunken stupor, he realized that something was amiss, treachery was afoot. And we start to read our letters. - Did he try to escape? - No, he didn't and we thought he would. And we said beforehand, we were fully prepared for this to take a few times.

He sat and he listened to all of us read our letters. And my mother brought up the rear, and she read hers last. And she talked openly and wept about how she over the years had lost this man that she knew, this guy that she'd fallen in love with. She didn't know when it happened or how it happened, but his alcohol addiction had essentially ended their marriage years ago and they were roommates. Dad sits there, we had his bag packed for this inpatient rehab facility that we had found in Statesboro, Georgia.

Said, Pops, gonna throw you in the car and your nephew's gonna drive you three hours to Statesboro, Georgia

and you're gonna be there for at least eight weeks to save your life. I said it and the therapist was there, she said something else. Father goes, picks up his bag, hops in the back of the SUV, goes, "All right, guess I'm going to Georgia." And we all looked around, like, oh, did that just work?

- That's amazing 'cause you've been through this a couple times and it's like- - Well, John, we found out the next day when we called the rehab facility, we talked to the doctor down there who was going to oversee and he's like... I said, how's he doing? He's like, "Well, Mr. Melvin, this isn't uncommon, "but when your father showed up, "he was three to four times the legal limit "in terms of his intoxication." - He was lost.

- And we asked him about the intervention, he didn't remember anything. - How did that make you feel, all this work? - He showed up, he was blackout drunk during the intervention, he had the letters with him in his bag, he read the letters, he was deeply moved by them, but "Your dad's on the road to recovery." And that was John, what is this, 2023? That would've been 2020?

Hadn't had a drop of booze since. It really has been transformational. Part of the treatment program requires you to go and you have to help him make amends, and we each had to do it individually. And I flew down, I took a morning off from the show, flew down to Statesboro, Georgia and as soon as I walked in and we hugged and he's crying and I'm crying, I knew then he was a different person. And he was the mayor of his treatment program.

He's taking me around to introduce me to all of his "addict friends", as he called them. And it was like, "Oh, Melvin," they call my dad by his last name, "Melvin's been talking about you for weeks." He was so proud, he was so proud of me and his other two boys. And you know it was one of those things, John, I was only there for eight hours and we walked around, we played Frisbee golf, it was very strange.

But I left there knowing that he was going to be different and he has been. - If you enjoyed this clip, we've got more where that came from. Be sure to check out my full conversation with Craig Melvin. And one of the best ways

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