

Healing and Hope - Insights from Dan Lovejoy

Welcome to Peaceful Life Radio

David Lowry: And hello, everyone, and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm David Lowry and with me today is my good buddy, Don Drew. How are you doing, Don?

Don Drew: Hello everyone.

Introducing Dan Lovejoy

David Lowry: Don, I'm really excited about our guest today, Dan Lovejoy. Dan has been a leader of a 12-step recovery group known as Celebrate Recovery in a large city. And he's got a lot of really great things to share with us today. But I believe that we need to take care of a little bit of business first.

Don Drew: Right. Before we get started, we want all of our listeners to be able to find more peace for themselves and others. So we're asking you to download, share, and tell your friends about our podcast.

David Lowry: Don, it was back in 2008 or something like that. My life was crashing and burning. There's just no other way to put it. Anyway, a friend of mine said, "Hey, you ought to go with me to Celebrate Recovery." And when I got there, the leader of this group was Dan Lovejoy. And Dan's group was a big turning point in my life. Dan, I'm sorry. It's taken us so long to invite a person like you onto our program. Welcome.

Dan Lovejoy: Thank you, David. Thank you, Don. I'm very privileged to be here with you today.

Dan's Journey to Celebrate Recovery

David Lowry: Dan, before we begin, tell us a little about your journey in 12-step work to where you are today.

Dan Lovejoy: Well, maybe 18 years ago, my wife and I were trying to find a way forward. The challenge in my life was that I had a huge "father wound," from feeling abandoned by my biological father, and there was just a great deal of pain, and that came out as anger. And it also came out as a wall that I just didn't let people into my life, even my wife. I couldn't talk to her about this very difficult pain in my life. And there was one day I was walking alongside my son, who is maybe two years old, and I just remember I just jerked his arm really hard. It didn't hurt him, but I *could* have hurt him. And I thought, "I have to do something about this unresolved pain in my life."

So, a wonderful church in our area, Memorial Road Church of Christ, had started the Celebrate Recovery program less than a year earlier. So we showed up and didn't really know what to expect, but we found ourselves in this very sacred space where people talked about

their hurts, hang-ups, and habits, and what was really going on, and then we didn't have to feel like we were alone anymore with the problems that we had.

And I think that is the key, and it is proven out by the research, that we can't do this alone. We can't do life alone. So I think my message would be, "You don't have to go to Celebrate Recovery, or Alcoholics Anonymous, or Narcotics Anonymous, or one of these other programs by name. But you can't do it alone." And this is a problem that I think we're seeing more in Western society now as we are isolating. And it doesn't work to help us get better.

A super important thing that I learned: do you remember I talked about walls? So I built these walls up in my life, while a *boundary* has a gate or a door so I can let people in. And what I learned is that I had gotten to keep the crazy out by bringing up my wall, but that kept all the good people from coming in as well.

Don Drew: Yeah. You control that.

Dan Lovejoy: Exactly. Exactly. So healthy people can come into my life now because I've learned how to have healthy boundaries, not just a wall to keep everyone out.

Understanding Celebrate Recovery

Don Drew: When we think about addiction, oftentimes the 12-step recovery system seems to come to a lot of people's minds. How is what you did different, or is it different, than a 12-step program?

Dan Lovejoy: Celebrate Recovery is a Christian 12-step program. If you are a professing Christian, you're going to feel very comfortable at Celebrate Recovery because we talk about how we are professing Christians at Celebrate Recovery. If you are a Catholic or Orthodox Christian or a Christian who isn't evangelical or evangelical adjacent like we are, you may feel like, "Oh, this is very evangelical." And it is because it comes from Saddleback Church in California, which is a great church also.

The great thing about Celebrate Recovery is that you can go to that church, and they are not going to try to change or violate your boundaries. It's really about what you are willing to offer. If you want to give your phone number to someone, or if you don't, you hold onto it. If somebody came once and they didn't leave their phone number with us, that was it. We didn't ever contact them again because we took boundaries so seriously.

Common Struggles and Coping Mechanisms

David Lowry: Dan, when you were doing Celebrate Recovery, you met thousands of people over the years you were a part of all of that, and you saw a lot of stuff. What is the one or two things you see in people's lives that wrecks happiness?

Dan Lovejoy: I think that almost all of these issues we quote, "bring on ourselves" are a result of some sort of childhood trauma or hurt. Our parents may not have known how to raise us, or may not have had the ability to give us what we needed. And everyone is trying to get what they need in life. All of us are. So, we can definitely talk about specific unhealthy coping mechanisms, but they all trace back to some unmet childhood need that causes hurt.

Or, it could be a hurt that was brought on us even later in life. Some terrible hurt that we are trying to compensate for in some way.

And for a lot of people, alcohol will numb that pain for a little while. And then pretty soon, alcohol becomes the problem rather than the solution. And marijuana can also be that. It's very popular to say marijuana is not addictive. Well, I can tell you it's ruined a lot of people's lives. And I don't want to tell people, "Hey, don't use this substance." But I can tell you that anytime a substance gets in the way of having an abundant life, it's a problem for you.

Pornography is a huge problem for a lot of people. Let's step back from the moral argument, which is a good and useful argument to have, and talk about what it does to people in particular, which is, it sublimates their sexual desire, makes them less likely to connect with people to have a sexually fulfilling relationship, it makes them objectify other people. Basically, the excessive use of pornography hurts the people that use it. There are people who call themselves pornography addicts, and I think that is a thing for sure. And those are people who use pornography to the exclusion of other things in their life that are useful, like spending time with family, exercising, or doing good and wonderful things.

We don't have to judge people who use pornography. We don't have to judge people who use alcohol or drugs. We just have to understand that this choice isn't working to give you the abundant life you want to have. And if you want to get better, there are ways to get better.

Don Drew: Dan, what I think I'm hearing is that in our lives, a lot of shame and guilt is carried forward from our childhood, maybe even our early adulthood, we carry that with us. It's difficult to work with. We find ways of coping whether it be alcohol or pornography or whatever it is we're talking about here. And that just adds and builds to the problem and eventually becomes the problem. Am I hearing that correct?

Dan Lovejoy: Yeah, that's exactly correct, Don. It's not just shame and guilt; shame and guilt are huge components of that. It also is pain and trauma, hurt, and feelings of rejection. Those may manifest as shame and guilt, and many times inappropriately because you might blame yourself for your parents' divorce, for example, and that comes out as shame and guilt. Well, you were a child. You cannot be responsible for that, but it comes out as shame and guilt.

As you described, the coping mechanisms that we use to deal with the pain in our lives become problems themselves. There are healthy coping mechanisms. For example, if you go for a walk after work every day, that's great. If you exercise for four hours and don't spend time with your family and are constantly *calibrating* yourself to make sure that you have the right fat and you use the exercise to dull the pain, then maybe then exercise becomes a problem, even though exercise is wonderful.

If you study the Bible to the exclusion of everything else, even things that are good, those things can become a problem in themselves.

David Lowry: We can hide behind almost anything, can't we? Whether it's good or ill, right? Yeah, that's right. And it can become a problem.

The Importance of Boundaries

David Lowry: One of the things that you hear a lot about these days is a term called codependency. Could you explain what we mean when we use this term "codependency" from a 12-step point of view?

Dan Lovejoy: Sure, there is some controversy about the term "codependency" itself, but there is no doubt that the phenomenon exists.

So, whenever a person subordinates their own needs or desires to those of someone else exclusively, that's a kind of codependency. It's a way to get control back. If you feel like you don't have any control over your life, sometimes you can be codependent.

The classic example is, there's a whole group called Al-Anon, a wonderful group of people who are families or loved ones of people who are alcoholics. And Al-Anon is all about teaching you how to set boundaries in your life so that the problems of the person who is the alcoholic don't become *your* problems. And it's really hard to do when you're family. Oftentimes, those problems *do* become your problems. But to the extent that you can, as much as you can, as healthily as you can, set boundaries and say, "You know, I'm sorry that you got your second drunk driving violation and you're not going to be able to drive for six months. It is not my responsibility to drive you to work." Because a codependent would just be like, "Well, I've got to help him because he's having a bad time."

Don Drew: I've got a dear friend who goes to Al-Anon. She had an alcoholic mother, and I know that it has been life-saving for her.

Dan Lovejoy: It absolutely is. I can't say enough good things about it. And Celebrate Recovery is really good at this because of the emphasis on boundaries. Really, really good. If you don't have a Celebrate Recovery in your area or you're not an identifying Christian, you could find an Al-Anon group. Man, that's a great group because addiction is a bottomless pit. You can pour an infinite amount of love and resources and money and time into addiction, and you can't solve it. You can't solve another person's addiction. It's not possible.

David Lowry: I'd like to ask a few questions.

Recognizing the Need for Help

David Lowry: How do you know when you really need the help?

Dan Lovejoy: Well, I would say one clue is that everyone who loves you or is around you is telling you you need some help. If your mood is extremely low. If you cannot get through the day without whatever the crutch is, if you feel like your life is not manageable, there's a little recovery word that we use: "My life has become unmanageable. I can't manage my life." You need some help. But what I will say, David, is all of us need some help. All of us need some help. I need some help right now. Absolutely. There is absolutely no harm in going to a group that is appropriate for your need, and that could be a support group. That could be a grief support group. That could be a divorce support group. That could be Celebrate Recovery. Celebrate Recovery will take anyone for any reason. Whatever problem you identify, you just go to a group and say, "My life is a complete mess, and I don't know why!"

David Lowry: That's important to know because some think, "Well, I'm not struggling with alcohol or pornography or gambling or some of the classically identified addictions," but

their lives are miserable and unhappy, and they would greatly benefit by being around people who are working to get better. What are some of the things that people do to get better?

Dan Lovejoy: What we found, and the research bears out, is that just connecting with other people makes a huge difference. Making those connections and calling people and getting out of our own heads and talking to people and saying, "What's going on with you? How are you doing?" Giving each other updates: "This is what's going on, or I have this particular habit that's really unhealthy." Let's go with exercise because nobody thinks of exercise as a problem like I, I went to the gym for an hour and a half today, and your accountability partner might say, "Hey, didn't we agree that we're just going to do an hour a day? So what's that about? What's going on?"

Here's what I saw how people got better. They were able to see the problem. In other words, even if they couldn't fully recognize the extent of the problem, they were able to at least peek their head up out of the denial and say, "I don't know what the problem is, I don't know what the extent of the problem is, but I know there's a problem."

And then they were able to ask for help with that problem. So I can't tell you how many moms and wives called me and said, "My son needs to come to Celebrate Recovery. My husband needs to come to Celebrate Recovery." And I'm like, "Yeah, have him give me a call." Because the person with the problem has to reach out in order for it to be effective. You can't just be dragged along.

And then finally, the ability to see my own mistakes. A lot of men come to Celebrate Recovery because their wife left them, and in many cases, because of the husband's behavior, right? The husband was unable to get over whatever was causing this rift in the relationship. But the men who were successful and got better just forgot about *her* issues, which may have been many. Just said, "Okay, what is *my* side of the street? What are *my* problems? What do I need to work on?" Because I can't change her. It doesn't matter if it's 80 percent her fault. I can't change her. And the men who came to me and they complained about their ex-wife or their soon-to-be ex-wife every week, they couldn't get better because they were focused on what they lost. They were focused on the other person.

So those are the three keys, and the fourth one I would add is just, I mean, pick up that *Boundaries* book, that first *Boundaries* book by Cloud and Townsend. I just cannot emphasize how great it is to understand the difference between a wall and a boundary in your relationships, because it can be extremely helpful to you.

Remembering that there's no judgment in any of this. We're just helping each other. So if you have a good friend that you trust, probably not a family member, and you have that kind of relationship, you can start that relationship with a good friend and say, "Hey, will you help me be accountable? I am looking at pornography, and I don't think that's compatible with my Christian values at all. And I don't want to do it at all. Can you help me be accountable?" And if you have a good, trustworthy friend, that's great. You might need to go to a program to help you with that, but it doesn't have to be.

David Lowry: I remember when I went into that first meeting, and it was a night where I felt the most defeated, but I will also say that it turned out to be one of the greatest blessings of my life because it was a point where, as you said, I began to meet and connect with other people, hear their stories, and some amazing tragedies they had overcome. But also just the

honesty of talking about what was really going on and the things you had been through, things you were struggling with, in a way that you normally don't do with ordinary people.

Dan Lovejoy: Well, I think that goes back to the ability to be able to peek your head out of the denial a little bit and recognize that there is a problem here, and so I'm going to get some help. And that takes an enormous amount of courage, David. It breaks my heart to hear about that day you felt so crushed, but it makes me very happy that you reached out. You did the thing that humans need to do, which is reach out to other people, and that's beautiful. That is wonderful. So I'm really glad to hear that you did that.

What I would say to our listeners is, recognize if something's not working, if your car's not working, you take it to the mechanic. If you're walking in the street and get hit by a car and your leg is broken, you don't say, "Oh, don't call the ambulance. I don't want to dig this old problem back up. Don't take me to the hospital. I don't want people to know that I have a broken leg." Well, let me tell you, everybody knows you have a broken leg. All of us go to the doctor, and we all have the same kind of problems. All of do.

And I can tell you, because my wife and I led our Celebrate Recovery program for over three years. And there is nothing that you can tell me that I have not heard. Whatever it is that you're struggling with, there are other people probably in your town, in your neighborhood, definitely at your church, who are struggling, or your synagogue, or whatever religious organization you participate in, who are struggling with the same kinds of things. So you are not alone.

David Lowry: That was the secret that I didn't know. I just figured it was just me. Everybody else I saw seemed to be doing just fine, thank you very much. And I felt like, "Oh, what's wrong with me?"

Don Drew: That's what social media is for, so we can see everybody else's great life, right? And how we aren't living that.

Dan Lovejoy: Somebody said that, "When you look at social media, you're comparing your life, your everyday life, to everyone else's best life." And I do think social media has exacerbated that phenomenon.

Don Drew: I'd like to go back to something we talked about a little bit earlier. We've been talking about 12-steps, and I'm not going to go through and read all 12 steps. Some of our listeners will know what that is. I just want to look at the very first one. This is how the Alcoholics Anonymous webpage lists it here: "Step number one: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable." And that's what you've been talking about, Dan. I can imagine a lot of our listeners are wondering, "Oh gee, I'm not sure how unmanageable my life is right now. I don't know if I have an addiction. I don't know what kind of signs or symptoms I should be looking for." What kind of advice might you give them to help them make a first..."

Dan Lovejoy: What we don't want to do is to pathologize everything so that, you know, "I'm sad today, so I have some sort of pathology." But what we do know is that life is hard. Life is really hard. All of us go through really tough times. Whether that tough time involves a substance or an activity, what I would say in self-recovery is, "My own sin or the sin of

others, some hurt that's been visited upon me or some hurt that I visited upon myself," I can reach out to get help to figure out how to deal with that.

You can look at different criteria, for example, problem drinking. And if you have a problem with alcohol, you don't have to hit rock bottom to go and get some help and say, "You know what, I want to stop drinking, and I have tried by myself and I have not succeeded." And that doesn't mean that you're about to become homeless. You don't have to be about to become homeless to want to stop drinking or using another substance that maybe is not helping you. As far as other activities, you have to ask yourself: "Is this activity helpful for me to live an abundant life? Or is this activity getting in the way of me having an abundant life? Is this activity getting in the way of my relationships? Is this activity making me happier or less happy?" Those are some really important questions.

One of the key differentiators of people who really got better at Celebrate Recovery is just the ability to come out of denial—realizing that I am not in control of everything, right? And maybe I can't stop doing something that's not helpful to me, or maybe the pain and hurt of my past, I can't get past it on my own. Maybe it's nothing that I did. Maybe I am not doing any activity that is hurting me or hurting anyone else, but I cannot get past this by myself.

Don Drew: What you described when we first started, you understood where your pain was coming from and where you were building those walls. That was pretty obvious to you. A lot of folks, it may be less so obvious.

We have had guests on our program before that talked about the value of therapy for different kinds of hurts and problems that they're having and so forth.

The Role of Therapy and Support Groups

Don Drew: Is this something you can do in tandem with that? What are your thoughts on that?

Dan Lovejoy: It's important for you to understand that when you hear me describe my problems in retrospect, that you're hearing the benefit of 15 years of therapy and Celebrate Recovery. Celebrate Recovery. A lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of personal work. So when I showed up at Celebrate Recovery, I just know I was angry and that was it. I was either angry or nothing. That's what I felt. Those are my two emotions. It took a lot of work to get through that.

At Celebrate Recovery, we said, "This is not therapy, but we believe in therapy." Don't get us wrong, you should absolutely go to therapy, just understand, this is not therapy. This is a support group, and it's absolutely wonderful for what it is, but if you need professional help, then you need to go see a professional who can help you with your therapeutic needs.

Some people can't afford therapy. If you can't afford therapy, by all means, get into a support group. And then if you are comfortable going to a church, a lot of churches will send you to a therapist who will help you with that, right? A lot of religious organizations will help with that. If you call, I believe, 988, you can get referrals to therapy. There's different ways to get therapy, and 100 percent I believe in therapy, and I have done a lot of therapy.

Final Thoughts and Encouragement

Dan Lovejoy: Finally, I want everyone who listens to this, whether you're a Christian or not, to separate the moral baggage from the effects that these are having on your life. Because something is hurting you, and you can judge that and you can get right with God as you're doing this, but I don't want you to be hurt, whether you're sinning or someone sinned against you. Whatever the moral baggage is that's associated with this, I want you to stop hurting, and shame keeps you from getting better. So we've got to put that down for a while and work toward getting better. Because blaming and hating ourselves and telling ourselves that we're terrible and we've done all these terrible things, it's actually demotivating and it hurts us.

And I want you to know that God loves you, and I love you, and you are of infinite value and worth in this world. So you deserve to get better. And if you have hurt, a habit, or a hang-up, or a problem, if you are a human being and you can understand my words, you deserve to get better, but you're the ones that have to reach out. The problem may not be your fault, but it is your responsibility. So you're the one that's going to have to reach out to try to get better.

Don Drew: Thank you, Dan. David and I want to thank everyone for joining us today. And Dan, thank you so much. This is Dan Lovejoy, and you've been sharing your life and experience with Celebrate Recovery, and we are so thankful for you and really appreciate you. We want to once again invite everybody back next week to listen to Peaceful Life Radio, your podcast for uncovering more peace in your life.