

## Episode 10: 'With Author John Taylor'

*Podcast Transcript*

*Life with Alcohol and Drugs*

Host: Richard Watson (Scottish Families) Guest

Speaker: John Taylor

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### **Introduction:**

This is Life with Alcohol and Drugs. A podcast from the charity, Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs.

Interview Begins

### **RICHARD:**

My name is Richard Watson and I work for Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs as a Connecting Families Development Officer, and I'm here today chatting with John. John, do you want to introduce yourself?

### **JOHN:**

Yes, Hello, good to see you again. My name's John. I am the Friends and Family Lead for Turning Point Drug and Alcohol Service. We are based in London. My role is supporting friends and families who are affected by other's substance use.

### **RICHARD:**

Great, John. And we're here today to talk about your book, which has just been released on digital form. You've got a hard copy coming out soon as well, which is really exciting. I was very honoured to get access to a draft of this. I read it and I loved it, John. I'm just so pleased you got in touch with Scottish Families and have given us such great access to the work you've been doing.

How's it been? How are you feeling about this book being launched?

### **JOHN:**

Yes, listen, thanks. I'm really honoured that you've taken it on. Obviously, a lot of the story is based in Glasgow and Milton of Campsie and Lennoxton, a lot of the trauma I suffered down to my mum's alcoholism was based up there. You know yourself, [inaudible 2:03] Nacoa and ADFAM, the free organisations who I went to because, obviously, my passion is about families.

It's funny; how am I feeling? I'm feeling a bit strange, especially in the last couple of weeks because I have probably finally let go of it. It has been all-encompassing - I think that's the word for the last couple of years, and now it's out there. Yes, a couple of people have started reading it on digital, so yes, probably I'm in a little bit of no-man's land. I'm going away tomorrow on holiday so I probably need a holiday. Yes, I'm in a bit of a strange place at the moment if I was being honest.

**RICHARD:**

It must be. For the audience who don't know, I'm in recovery and you're in recovery yourself, John, and I think that's one of things that I learned in my recovery journey; to watch out for these emotional highs and lows. It must be quite a major thing for you? I'm not surprised that you're not quite sure how you're feeling. I know that if I'd been working in a huge project like this, how long was it? What was the duration it took for you to write the book?

**JOHN:**

So, it was about 18 months, and then the last 6 months have been putting it together, a little bit of tidying up, adding bits. So, 18 months it was finished and the last 6 months things have been coming up, adding little bits, little stories.

It actually started just after lockdown, so about March. It's just been under 2 years. Probably the writing took 18 months, properly.

**RICHARD:**

Has that been a nice distraction from Covid?

**JOHN:**

Do you know what? It's funny, isn't it? It was! The strange thing is that about 6 months ago I got in a place of feeling a bit lost because all of a sudden, days off and when you were locked down and all that, it was like, right, I'm on the book. Then it was like, oh, I haven't got the book to write anymore. What do I do now?

It was definitely a distraction even though some parts of it could be traumatic, it was definitely a distraction. Definitely, yes.

**RICHARD:**

It's a great book. And like you say, the book starts...I hope that the people listening to this podcast will go and get a copy of it. It's called [alcoholstolemymum.co.uk](http://alcoholstolemymum.co.uk), and we'll put that link in as well.

The story is kind of chronological really, isn't it? It starts off in your younger days, growing up in Scotland with your mum, and then moving down to London and the rest of your journey. What I really like about the book as well is that you kind of tie it in, there's a wee theme of football going through it as well. I'm a bit of a football fan. It's difficult when my team gets beaten quite regularly. But it's really nice and it's not just football, there's a lot of sport.

I guess what I liked was that...at first I thought, oh, you talk really openly about the team that you support and it was a big part of your upbringing. Do you think it would have been any different if you had supported a smaller team? The fact that it's a big team, how important was that to you?

**JOHN:**

I mean, I spent a lot of my time...obviously, the start of the book is me in London but my mum and dad were both Scottish and I spent a lot of time, obviously, in Scotland. And the start of the book is really like a love story of me and my mum. I absolutely adored my mum. And the start of the book, up to the

age of 8 my life was like Little House on the Prairie, you know? Or it was like this beautiful, lovely mum and dad, little sister, and then all of a sudden it just turned, obviously, with everything that happened.

Football for me, I was like a normal kid; just obsessed. My dad was an Arsenal supporter so I was an Arsenal supporter in like my English team. And then when I went up to Scotland, obviously, being a Catholic, brought up a Catholic, Celtic. I was told about the Celtic-Lisbon lions, the stories. I remember as a young, young kid, because of everything going on for me, Tich, I just used to immerse myself in football books or cricket books.

You know how you talk about escapism, I used to read these books from cover to cover, just every bit of fact to get away from the sort of madness that was going on. It's really funny, my sort of safe places were like Celtic Park and Highbury because I knew that, well, especially in those days, all the games were played at 3 o'clock on a Saturday. They're not anymore, I knew that at 3 o'clock on a Saturday, I was going to be there. It was the only thing that was consistent in my life and the only thing that was safe for me, you know? And that went on for all sports: playing or watching sport, it was the safety thing, yes.

#### **RICHARD:**

I think the fact that when you talked about football, I totally get that escapism. I remember being quite young and as my family broke down, just being able to be out all day, for those long summer nights, and life felt quite safe then, you know? It was like you got called in, it was a very different world then.

But also, with that, something chimed in your book with me and it really touched me, it was the scene of the school sports day. It wasn't quite the same, and we'll go onto that in just a second, but I used to remember waiting for my dad to turn up to watch me play football, and he never did. I always thought, maybe this will be the week he turns up, and I'd be [inaudible 8:37] the game, and I've got a wee half-eye on the side line to see if he's turned up. And he never did.

At that age, when you're a young person and you're trying to...for me, it was so hard to get into the football team. It was that thing about being accepted by other people, getting accepted into that football team, and I wanted to celebrate that that had happened to me. I felt that I guess I wanted the acceptance from my dad as well. That's a different story, but that link between sport and childhood is really strong, isn't it? In your book it is really strong.

Do you want to talk through about that scene that you describe in your book that we've talked about a bit before, but it was really prominent for me? What was it like on that sports day for you?

#### **JOHN:**

I mean, just before I talk about that, the first thing with my dad, I tried to get my dad's approval all my life. Always, always trying to get his approval, so I definitely identify with you there.

The sports day was a massive thing. there were two incidents which I wrote in the book. What had happened is that I had started learning to run away from my mum because my mum was drunk. My reaction was just to run away from her. And I wouldn't even find out if she'd been drinking or not, I just had so much shame around her, I used to run away from her. So, there was an incident before then when I was serving Mass as an altar boy. She'd come into the church drunk, and the shame, and I couldn't run away. I remember feeling more shame. But that service only went on for...it wasn't very long, about an hour, but it was still bad enough. It was like a build-up.

On the sports day I remember waking up in the morning, thinking, sports day! I remember thinking I'm going to get four medals here with my mate, whatever we were doing: the three-legged race, the egg and spoon, whatever we was doing, I remember thinking, yes, I'm definitely going to win loads of medals. My mum turned up in this field, you know, drunk. She staggered through the field, fell over, and I just remember at the time having this sort of shame that everyone knew.

The story is that I had been hiding, everyone knew in the village, my mum was the alcoholic, but bearing in mind that I'm 8 or 9 here, I'd try and keep her indoors because I thought that if I could keep her indoors then no-one would know that she was...everyone knew she was an alcoholic. But when she turned up, first at church, at church there was only...I don't know how many people were at the church, 30 or 40, but at sports day it was the whole school. So everyone knew. I just remember the feelings of just wanting to die. Just thinking, I just wish...you know, and watching it and then watching her fall over, picking her up and then she just disappeared to the toilet with her little half bottle. I knew what she was doing all the time. And after that...so just the crippling sort of like shame of my mum turning up, and looking at the other kids with their mums and their dads, they were all hugging them and really proud of them.

I write in the book how after that I started having this recurring dream, I don't know if you remember it, Tich, when I'm in a theatre and my mum's up on the stage and I'm trying to stop her from getting up on the stage. It was like a recurring dream of the shame: don't go up there, don't shame me, mum!

The thing is, Tich, if you remember a bit later on, where my mum is buried, she was buried next to my school. And as she was getting lowered into the ground, I looked over and I could see this sports day at [inaudible] school, I could see the sports field.

It's interesting about this sort of trauma, childhood trauma, it's like a form of PTSD. It was how many years before? 25, 30 years before, and still those feelings come up, you know, of how I felt all those years ago.

It was really good how you picked up on that, Tich, and I think on the quote as well, we used it, it was really good.

**RICHARD:**

Yes. Just when you were talking there, I wonder, I kind of felt for you and I wonder about that period in the '80s, did the school say anything? Did you get any support from the school? I went through a few things and in my adult life, when I was in early recovery I sat with a woman and we talked through trauma and various things that had happened to me, and she was kind of shocked at the amount of opportunities that, whether it was the police or it was a court, school or a hospital or someone, a professional had an opportunity to make an intervention, there was all these missed opportunities for some sort of support.

But I think you might get that now, but I think looking back, I don't know if schools were equipped to really make those type of interventions, of the culture at the time, especially around alcohol, was a little bit more forgiving, a bit more accepting that a lot of people drank and drank heavily. I'm not sure what your take on that is? Did you feel that someone ought to have done something, or did someone actually give you any support?

**JOHN:**

It's funny you say that, when was that? That was about '79. If you remember, Tich, the story starts in London, when all of a sudden, I'm the loveliest kid in the class and I've become the baddest kid

overnight. I'm 8. My behaviour is terrible and it has changed. One time I am left in school and they never came to pick me up. It's like 3 or 4 hours that I'm left in school. Now the rule is, well, it is down here, if there's no contact from a parent and a child is half an hour late, there's a call to social services. So that's sort of what you are saying: there was nothing.

My behaviour changed so much, but also I was changing from school to school, but no, there was nothing. My behaviour was so bad from being such a lovely kid to changing like that, now it would be flagged up, definitely.

I don't know, yes.

**RICHARD:**

I know in your book you go through when you actually got into recovery yourself and you went into the Priory. Was that the first time you really started to discuss the impact of your mum's behaviour and your mum's alcoholism? Was that the first opportunity you got to discuss it with anybody or had something happened prior to the Priory?

**JOHN:**

No. That was it because I had self-medicated for 18 years really. It's funny, isn't it? You talk about this self-medication, I talk about the first time I ever had a drink when I was about 15. I'd obviously had all this stuff buried, you know, what I'd witnessed, and then it's like the world's change from black and white to technicolour.

I think I'd describe it like that when I first have a drink. I'm walking around the West End, Covent Garden, where I'm from, and it's like, wow! It was like I felt okay. I felt great. Then I was a functioning alcoholic for years and years and years. I kind of thought, that's your childhood; get on with it, that's got nothing to do with it, you're a man now. I mean, I've heard a lot of this with clients as well, the problems really started...I mean, I was always unwell. If you look at the drugs overdose with the cocaine, it nearly killed me what I was doing there. I was always like 100 miles an hour with everything.

But I think when it started really affecting me mentally, when I couldn't get away, maybe because the drink and the drugs stopped working, was when I had kids. We know this a lot with clients that what happens is that the kids come and all this stuff that you've buried comes back. All the thoughts and all the feeling that I had as a kid, and I talk about it in the book, come up. It was like all this childhood trauma that I'd buried was just coming up. And when it was coming up I had to drink more and take more to bury it, to bury these feelings even more, and it's a cycle. It's definitely a cycle.

I come from families of alcoholics and addicts, I mean, they say it's a family illness; it certainly runs in my family, for everyone. There's so much addiction.

**RICHARD:**

That spot, I think, is lovely in story is that in recovery and through your relationship with your own daughters now, that you've broken that cycle, haven't you? It might still be there. I've always seen my personal...when people ask you, how did you end up in the situation you've ended up in? How did you end up being addicted as such, or being an alcoholic? I always say that it's maybe a part genetic, partly environment, but mostly just life experiences and a lot to do potentially with the habit-forming nature of my ways of escaping. All of that I see like a cocktail and everybody's cocktail is a little bit different.

Some of us probably...actually, I always thought that it was because of my dad that I became an alcoholic, but actually, I think it was probably dealing with my dad's behaviour at a very young age that was it. So it was him but necessarily in a genetic way. You don't need to know, do you? We don't need to know that, we just know that we've got ourselves in a bit of a stick and we need some help to get out of it.

**JOHN:**

Definitely. Addiction is a funny thing. I run it in the groups all the time and when I do training, because we've all got different opinions. We don't really know, we've all got different opinions as to where addiction comes from. Most people, a lot of people think it's from childhood trauma. There's a high percentage of that. Writing the book, it's like when you look at it...I think the thing we can agree with is that addiction is like escapism in some form. That's the thing you can agree on. And my personal experience is that, as I said, once I picked up that first drink, it was a perfect escapism from everything and to carry on and carry on.

I definitely agree with what you said there, Tich, especially when I worked in rehab as a counsellor, people, and they kind of like shut me away from this, especially in early recovery, people are obsessed about why am I an addict and where it comes from. For me, maybe later on, if you want to have a look at it, but especially in early recovery, that's the problem. This is about the solution.

Still now, you read the book and people think, what chance did you have? I said to you, didn't I? My ex, and I felt a bit funny, but my ex-wife, the mother of my children, I let her read it. We're really good friends. And I was a bit worried because there were some bits in it, you know, things I'd done to her that, you know, that she was...I asked her if it was okay to use her name and she went, fine. The bits she picked up on, which was interesting, she said to me, I'm surprised that you didn't start drinking when you was 8! I made a joke, I said, well, I would have done if I could have got the vodka off my mum. You know, it's that sort of joking around a serious situation, but I just thought that was nice. And she found it really hard because she knew my mum and dad. She did find it hard reading. Mostly, I think, as a mother, as any mother will, with what that little boy is going through. What this little boy is watching in his home, that's the thing. A couple of my friends, Claire who helped me a lot with the book, and my sister, they struggled as they were mothers with what the little boy is going through.

**RICHARD:**

One of the really difficult bits in it is the talk, and I don't know if it's in Australia when you first witness domestic violence, or is it before you go to Australia?

**JOHN:**

Yes, yes.

**RICHARD:**

So what's it like, how difficult it is when those children, they might have their mother or their father on a pedestal and then you witness this really bad behaviour. How was that to bear witness to?

**JOHN:**

Yes, Tich, I remember having therapy around it and realising that it was Cup Final. I think I might have witnessed bits and pieces before, but it was Cup Final. Arsenal had reached the FA Cup Final. I'd come home from school really excited. I think I talk about how I'd just scored the winning goal in the cup final

in the playground. I was buzzing and it was Cup Final. I'd come home from school and my mum was lying in bed after being beaten, well, beaten to a pulp by my dad. She was lying in bed battered. It was only years later, when I was having therapy, that I realised that I shut down from then. Up to that time I shut down, because up to that time life was quite normal. As I said, everything was going alright, and I can still get in touch with those feelings now because I'd come home, my mum was lying in bed, who I loved, beaten. I knew my dad had done it, and that sort of trying to adjust, the world had become really unsafe. My house had become unsafe. Who could I trust? I couldn't say anything to my dad because I might get what she's got. I shut down. And even now, that was the major, you know...And when I look at it, Tich, out of everything that happened to me, witnessing domestic violence in the home was the thing that harmed me the most.

Like I said to you, I was a specialist domestic violence worker for 5 years. We got a thing called MARAC, I was a MARAC representative when you go into and listen to all the cases. So many times I'd be in there and it would just take me back to that little boy, you know, I'd literally just...because you go in there and you listen to case after case for 10 hours sometimes, and it just affects me so much as I was just back as that little boy.

Personally, you know, this thing about domestic violence, personally I still don't think that enough is done in this country. I was abused as a child because of what happened to me. There's a saying: a witness to violence is a victim of violence. It was a form of child abuse because it caused me more harm than anything else, Tich, watching that going on. And there's still this thing, in my opinion, certainly down here, it's almost like it gets a pass, domestic violence. It's a form of child abuse. If there's domestic violence in the home and there are children in the home, that is child abuse. The reason is we talk about hidden harm, but the hidden harm carries on right into adulthood. It's something that I'm really passionate about.

In my recovery, in my book, my ex-wife, in blackout, we'd had an argument and I'd give her a black eye. Do you know something? Even now that's still something that...I can forgive myself for most things and me and my ex are great friends, but it's still something that I have problems with. And I think if I were to look at the route of it, Tich, it's because I'd turned into my dad - like the monster. I'm just saying what I put in the book.

**RICHARD:**

Yes, it's very brave of you to talk about that. That's what's so great about books like yours, and there's not so many of them that are so unflinchingly honest, where you just really shine a light on those dark places. It's very difficult and that's absolutely how we go about trying to address stigma, and that could be whether it's about alcohol or drug use, domestic violence or whether it's about things that we've done that are difficult to talk about. People carrying that stuff, carrying that shame and that guilt, it can just push people further and further away from the support that they need.

I think that's really lovely about your book as well. I was just thinking as you were talking there, especially when we were talking about domestic violence, how useful you must be to so many families. It's great to be able to take all these personal experiences and it must be a real comfort to families you are supporting to know that you are talking from a place of experience. It's really sad for you, obviously, but it must really help others so well done.

Do you get a lot of people who recognise that? I mean, there must be extra weight to everything you say because of your experience?

**JOHN:**

Do you know what? Since we spoke about this, do you know, my clients, I've never self-disclosed, which is interesting. I've been working at Turning Point, doing the family stuff for about 10 years. Before that I used to work in rehab, like 12-step rehabs and all the counsellors in there are in recovery. When I worked in Turning Point, there was a thing of like, well, someone said about not self-disclosing. So I've never self-disclosed. I've just thought, you know what? I'm not going to self-disclose. Of all my clients, only one might have asked me and I think they know what I'm talking about, you know? Our service is like a real...I spoke to the top man in Turning Point, and he said that because of the success of the family service we've run, Turning Point nationally, which I think is England, I think it has nothing to do with Scotland now. Turning Point in England, when they attend services, they make sure that if there's money, which we have, that there's a family service, so I've always been like, my job is singing about the harm this causes families. There's still a lot of people who have said, from professionals, clinical leads to people on the ground like me, I knew there was support for substance use, I didn't know there was support for families.

Sorry, just going back to your initial point, I've just let them know this week, my clients, about my book. I think I'm feeling a bit strange about that as well because none of them know. Some of them have known me for years, lots and lots of years, and they've never asked. So I think that's probably another reason why I'm feeling a bit shamed. It's probably good that I'm leaving the country tomorrow for a week to get away from it.

**RICHARD:**

I think you did a great job. We might just make sure that...I think there's so much more to explore here, and I know we want to keep this podcast to a reasonable time, but maybe we should do another one once we're a bit further down the line, because I've got so much I want to ask you, John. Well, I hope this book reaches many people and it gets the credit it's due. It certainly will be from our end. We look forward to having you up in Scotland. Thanks a lot for your time today, John. You've been excellent. I don't think this will be our last podcast. I look forward to many more.

**JOHN:**

And thanks a lot, you guys up there. I look forward to coming up again. And thanks a lot for your support as well. Brilliant.

**RICHARD:**

Great. Have a lovely day, John. It was a great way to recognise Drug and Alcohol Awareness week. Thanks for that.

**JOHN:**

Take care. All the best, Tich.

Interview Ends

**Exit:**

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at [helpline@sfad.org.uk](mailto:helpline@sfad.org.uk). We also have webchat and further information on our website [www.sfad.org.uk](http://www.sfad.org.uk).