

Episode 20: 'Agnes and Daryl'

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Daryl McLeister

Guest Speaker: Agnes (Family Member)

Introduction:

Welcome back to another episode of Life with Alcohol and Drugs, from the Charity Scottish Families.

Interview Begins

Daryl:

Hi Agnes, welcome to our Life with Alcohol and Drugs podcast. I'm Daryl McLeister, the Family Support Development Officer for Inverclyde, and I'm here with you. Would you like to introduce yourself, your name and maybe a little bit about what brings you to Scottish Families?

Agnes:

My name is Agnes Donoghue. Thanks for inviting me to the podcast. I joined, well, I didn't know that I needed to join anything; I was just looking for some guidance to help a loved one. My brother died of alcoholism, and we didn't want to have another victim on our hands, so I thought we would try and find out what's available in Inverclyde and get some guidance.

Daryl:

Thanks for being with us, Agnes. It sounds like addiction is an issue that has affected your life in a few different ways so thank you for being with us today. You recently started attending our group that we host on a Friday morning, our Family and Friends Support Group. I wondered, what would you say to someone who was thinking of coming along to that support group?

Agnes:

I would say it's absolutely essential to attend one of these groups. Even though it is a bit nerve wracking and you don't know what you're going to find out or what guidance and you don't know where you fit in. I went along and it's really hard to even describe how they made you feel.

Daryl:

Wow.

Agnes:

Even though the first week, like everybody else, you don't say much, you just listen, it was so overwhelming to feel the strength of the people in that group. And even though yourself, Daryl, or Candice just chaired it, the minute you sat down it was like offloading, you're like emotional hoovers, it was offloading the stress, and you could feel that in the room. It was a really good feeling and they made me very welcome.

Daryl:

Good, so you felt welcome even though it felt a little bit overwhelming, it felt nice to share that and you could see that happening in the room?

Agnes:

Yes.

Daryl:

Thank you. You described to me how you would feel, and you wanted to say to the listeners how they might feel if they went along to support groups. How do you think someone would feel if they went to a support group like that?

Agnes:

Well, if you are new to something like this, like I am, and sometimes I can imagine that if it was a loved one, you would feel maybe a bit ashamed or helpless and wondering where the guidelines are and what the group can give you advice on, where they are at with their loved ones. I really felt that that was a great help to me.

Daryl:

Great. Thank you. You've described that really well. We've got some questions that we agreed in advance and some things that you are interested in that may be featured as part of your life and your understanding of addiction and understanding of your loved one's addiction. One of the key themes we talk about often is trauma, and one of the questions I wanted to ask you was that you've got a lot of ideas about how someone might resolve their trauma or get a little bit of help and support with their trauma, so I really wanted to begin with that big question: what ideas have you got for helping someone deal with trauma and how does that factor into their addiction?

Agnes:

I'm not generalising on my loved one just on alcohol, and looking at the rest of the group, their traumas sounded even worse than mine, but how they approached it, we were on the same level. First of all, yourself Daryl, you gave me a couple of phone calls before inviting me, so the choice was totally mine. What I like about the Scottish Families and yourself is that you gave me a chance to get to know you before I felt I would feel as though I was pressured to come in - it's not the case at all. I came of my own accord. When I came into that room, I could see things a bit more clearly because of their stress levels, I could see it was difficult for them to see any happy ending or any way forward. And I felt, after a lot of investigation regarding stress and trauma and everything like that, because we've all experienced those in our life, and when you're getting that bit older, you can have a look at these things and see what makes you tick. But these people at this group, they are just amazing. How they could sit there and give me advice, with the traumas that they are going through - and the laughs - oh my god! I came away from that and, honestly, they've kind of changed my life and perspective of people with alcohol dependents and drug dependents. It totally changed my attitude and opened my eyes to let me see that these people that Joe Public see in the street, outside a shopping centre or anything like that, they are these women's children. The more that that's aired the better because they are just absolutely beautiful, strong people. Really strong.

I'm not preaching to you, I've wanted to let people know that anybody that's thinking of coming along, it's like going to your sister's or your brother's or anyone that truly loves you and you trust them. You could trust every single one of them in that room, and I found that in ten minutes. Ten minutes.

Daryl:

Wow. In ten minutes alone you found that you could trust the people in the room. You've touched there on the kind of laughs as well, so it wasn't just a sombre affair for people, there was a lot of joy and happiness to be found in that room and a lot of strength, as you rightly highlighted. So, it's been a big move for you coming to the group then? It has really changed your life you said there. Tell me a little bit more about that.

Agnes:

Well, it changed my perspective on looking...well, I can say without contradiction that I always looked at things like that - drugs and alcohol - as self-inflicted. I'm sure I'm not alone in that. I really feel that people need that attitude changed. I'm not blameless myself, I'm not blameless, and you never know whose door these problems are going to knock on. I really felt that I had to have a look at myself and say, you and people like you need to change your attitude. I know they say it's self-inflicted and they're draining the system and everything like that, but the system should be there for everybody. The National Health should be there for everybody. We're all human at the end of the day.

Daryl:

This is something that you described to me as really changing your stance on this: as you say, you used to see this as a self-inflicted problem, and now your understanding of it is very much guided by understanding that someone might have been through some traumas in their life. There's an underlying reason why someone might choose to drink alcohol or to use drugs. Tell me more about that trauma: how do you think trauma does impact someone using alcohol or taking drugs?

Agnes:

Well, I did quite a lot of study, and even more in the past couple of months to help me understand, and also, I'm going to be mentoring children in school. I'm just waiting for a match, and it made me look at that side of things. I did a big study about trauma and where it starts, and it can even come from the birthing channel. Kids feel your stress. I was reading Gabor Maté, and he said that the best gift you could give your child is your happiness because they really sense the trauma that you're going through and it affects them. That made me think that to look at these things from a young age, not from what happens when you are adults, but to look at them from a child's view and see what they can do in schools to combat that then, and then maybe we won't be sitting round a table with twenty women with adult drug addicts and alcoholics. That's my opinion.

Daryl:

Yes. One of the ways that you're making that a reality, you just mentioned the mentoring program that you're getting involved in. Would you mind telling us a little bit about that: what attracted you to that and what do you hope to achieve by doing that?

Agnes:

Well, when you get to a certain age in your life, you think, well, I think it's time to give something back. You look at life and you think, how could I help and give something back? I did this study and I felt as if I

had something to offer. I've run numerous businesses and I really don't take any medication; I'm quite spiritual in that sense as well. I just feel like I want to give something back.

Daryl:

Thank you. It's great to hear that. What draws you into some of those programs, and those programs are all over Scotland in fact. There is lots of availability for things like that. One thing that I wanted to come back to, one thing that really struck me when I met you for the first time and you told me a little bit about your story was that you used to run a pub. You used to run a pub in Spain, and here you are telling me today about the issues that maybe people run into when it comes to alcohol, so that feels like a big contrast in a way. I wanted to ask you about that. You mentioned that you don't drink at all, you used to run a pub in Spain, so I wondered how that whole experience affected your perception of alcohol?

Agnes:

Well, I don't mean to be too self-righteous about what I don't do because that was just me; it wasn't anything to do with the way I was brought up either. I was always surrounded by alcohol and parties and all that, but I found out, I did a big study on people that drink, because you know the time when things are going to get out of hand, they're ready for dancing or whatever, but I did notice the difference between wanting a drink and needing a drink.

Daryl:

Right.

Agnes:

I saw the happy side of people, however much I always worried that their inhibitions were gone, but you could see what they were getting from alcohol. I could clearly see that: they were dancing and singing and all that, but there is another side to the alcohol, and it's the same as drugs. I think that alcohol is an easier thing to get addicted to because it's so readily available. You can buy it, you don't have to depend on anybody, but I don't know what the statistics are regarding alcohol or drugs or what's worse. I don't know. Maybe you might tell me sometime.

Daryl:

Maybe, I'm more interested in your experiences and what you have experienced.

Agnes:

I just feel that it looked to me like it was more controlled, just because of the type of people that came into my bar, and they were happy. I don't know if you see many happy drug addicts. I haven't anyway.

Daryl:

That's an interesting comparison. There is a place where you can go to in society, to go and be happy while you're drinking, but not necessarily while you are taking drugs. It's an interesting perspective. Thank you, Agnes.

I've got some more questions as well. We talked about the family support that's been offered to you and about the support that's been offered to your loved one, and maybe that's not been offered to

your loved ones as well. The question I have is, if you could change one thing that had been offered to your family member, what would you change about the support that they've been offered? What have they been offered?

Agnes:

Well, there was no support then because it was in an area where it was okay to drink. I feel that the drink and drugs and the material world created the alcoholics and the drug addicts because the haves and the have-nots, as well as the stress and the trauma that they might have experienced about not feeling loved or not good enough, or coming from a big family, and all of a sudden one is...I am from a family of seven, and some of the things in my family only affected me and they see that in a different way. That's just the way it is when you have a developing brain when you are young, in my opinion. But if I could change anything, I would have given my brother more support, and my loved one, I would have given him more support. Just because the world is such a fast world. Everybody wants a better car, a bigger house, and these kinds of demands were put on you. I was one of these people myself. Sometimes we're too busy doing that, we're not blameless but we don't stop to think that although we are creating a material world, things that we never had, what about if they just want love? That's quite difficult.

That's what I would have done. I would have sat down with my brother and said, 'Tell me how I can help you?' Instead of giving him £20 or £30, I would have sat down and done that, see if I could understand how I could help. We were a beautiful family and we could have done that. That's what I would say, and I would say that even though we might not like what we hear, we can fix that. We're not alcoholics or drug addicts, we are - if there is a normal - but we are classed as normal. That's what I would do. I think the families can play their part even though they've been hurt by having a drug addict or an alcoholic in their family.

If they are asked; sometimes it's difficult because they only see that from their own perspective. They don't want to hurt their mother or whoever, but really they should be supporting their mother, saying let's do this as a family. They say that when the family give love, it's just an emotional painkiller. Yes, that's what I would say.

Daryl:

You've used that term a lot, actually, and I really like the idea of an emotional painkiller. I heard you say about coming back to that material world, in another conversation I heard you say, if my daughter had asked me for £100 I would have found it in my wallet, but if she asked me for £100 worth of love, I'd have really struggled to know what that meant.

Agnes:

We are too busy living in a material world. It is still quite a material world. I also joined a creative writing class a couple of weeks ago, and I think Inverclyde is absolutely amazing as it provides all these things. Some people might disagree on that, but when you've lived in a foreign country and the government give you nothing, you'd soon know, but anyway. A woman came out of the kitchen and said, 'Hello, ladies. How are you? Are you enjoying your class?' You could obviously tell she was a cook, because she had an apron on and all that. We said, 'Yes, thank you.' She said, 'That's good.' I said, 'What are you doing? What do you do? Are you joining the class?' 'No, I just came in to say hello. I'm the cook.' I said, 'What do you do?' And she started telling us. The four people that were around the table have worked in banks, mortgages, rugby commentators: they are all in 'normal' jobs, or middle-class jobs. I said, 'Oh, that's good.' She said, 'Yes, but I've got to reapply for my job because it's funded.' I said, 'Even though you're providing for the community, giving them meals for free?' She said, 'Yes. We've got to

apply and we don't really know if we'll get our job.' She told us what she was doing and she was so cheery to come in and say hello. Away she went, I looked around the room and I said, 'Do you know, that's amazing. That is amazing. I know you are all professional people. I've been a professional person in my life as well and I've run businesses, and I said, 'Where would we have ever come across people that do things in the community, to really appreciate what that woman did and does for the community?'

More people should get involved. God forbid if one of them went out and got hurt, and of course they're going to go to the NHS. If they've got a bad shoulder or whatever, of course they're going to go. Sometimes the alcoholics, especially the young people, and the drug addicts, they are actually victims sometimes of the society we live in because we don't help. What was maybe a small trauma in a developing mind, all of sudden everyone's hating them. Where are they getting their love from? Where do they get that love? Everybody deserves that I think, well, I know.

Daryl:

Wow, that's a very powerful statement: where do people get their love from? You're reflecting on how your journey just now, attending creative writing courses and doing something different to what you would normally do, that's helping you to connect with different members of the community who previously you might not have had that contact with. From your perspective, that's been a really good thing.

Agnes:

Yes, there's an understanding. I have an understanding now about that other area that my path didn't cross. Also, I know you're going to ask me about the parents, the mothers of these children, so I'll keep that for now.

Daryl:

Well, let's maybe tackle that just now. You've touched on that a lot of the people that you've come across on this journey are mothers, and we've probably got a lot to cover there. What's your take on that? What do you want to say on that issue, that idea of where people get their love, those connections and the family members that you've come across on your journey?

Agnes:

Well, because of the strength of these parents, and the love that they show their children, they feel let down by the government. They feel let down and they just don't know where to turn. I did another little study on that, to say that most of the time stress brings on chronic illness, and I found that round the table some of them had a chronic illness, and they shared that with the group. Where do they get their love from? And where are they getting their guidance? They're only doing this as a mother or a sister; that's what they are doing, but how would they know how to really support? And they're the only point of contact, it's the mother because she's supporting with, my god, it's just unconditional love. But I also found hate around the table too.

Daryl:

Right. tell me more.

Agnes:

Where they love them but they don't always like them, and sometimes they hate them.

Daryl:

From my perspective, you said a phrase there that really rang true, that rings out in all the groups that I do: that idea of, I love them, but I really don't like their behaviour. I really hate their behaviour. And that idea of unconditional love. In a lot of the groups that I run, that idea of unconditional love is really present, but it often comes at a cost as well. Let me frame it in that way. When it comes to unconditional love, what's good about that and what's not so good about that? What's the impact on other people?

Agnes:

The not so good is how the parents suffered with chronic stress, no money, no sleep, not even concerned about themselves, that doesn't even come into the picture. But if they only knew how much strength they need to actually deal with it, so they need to be healthy and strong; that's a great gift to give their loved ones they are looking after because if they don't do it and they feel as if nobody else is going to do it, where would their loved ones be? So, although they've got to, I feel, they've got to look after themselves because of chronic illness and also, their loved ones would feel more guilt. Where does it end?

I truly think that one-to-one therapy, and I think the mothers need it too, the people looking after them need it too. They need the understanding, which actually is coming with the CRAFT that Scottish Families are providing. It's quite an American way of approaching it, but it's penny dropping. It makes a change from people saying, well, this is what you've got to do and all that. People don't like that either. You don't know how I feel. Even if there was a trauma regarding their parents, whether it might be the husband, it might be the brother or the sister or anybody, these loved ones don't want to hurt their parents anymore, so they'll keep it to themselves and it just snowballs. That's what I see. But with the rehabilitation - that's a good word - rehabilitate. It means to get something back. So, if you give them that, they're going to climb a mountain. If they get to the top of that mountain, what have they got back? They're still left with the trauma that started in the first place. Okay, now to get to that top, it's so important for the parents and their family to get behind them, or even in front of them pulling them up. It's really important for that, to get that something back, who are they? Who are they now? Ten years might have passed. I wasn't the same person ten years ago. I wasn't the same person twenty years ago. Ten years could have passed, and that young child, say from ten, twelve upwards, that they have lost, that's part of their adult, they would now be adults by that time, sixteen or seventeen or whatever, so what's the incentive? It's like any job: you start a job and there's an incentive in it for you, you do this and you get that. But what is there in the government to offer these people to feel normal - if there is a normal. But what is there? What's the carrot?

Daryl:

Just pulling some of those thoughts together, you are describing recovery and people moving into recovery and giving up alcohol or drugs, it's like a journey up a mountain. That idea of getting to the top but they are still left with traumas, and that process of being one of rediscovery, trying to remember who you are, what your values are. In my notes here I've got a quote from you saying, 'I've been about 30 people.' It's that idea of rediscovering who you are. I really loved your quote there about family and friends being behind someone, or sometimes even in front of them to pull them up. Thank you for that.

Just coming back to something you said earlier, you mentioned about the pain of that unconditional love in that sometimes you give so much that you end up with your own health conditions, you've given away so much of yourself that it's really hard to find that again. Where does a family member who is

trying to support someone get their love from? How do they restore their own wellbeing and nourish themselves? I wanted to come back to that because you have been a really big advocate for something called the 'Emotional Freedom Technique', EFT, and you've talked a lot to me about that. I thought now might be a good time to bring that in and hear your experience of that and what you would say to anyone who's listening to this who might be thinking about accessing that kind of treatment or technique, or something similar. What would you say to someone?

Agnes:

Years ago, when I had the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), which I didn't think I needed, which a lot of people might not think that they need therapy, but when you have someone there listening to your words, it's a bit like a jigsaw and you are the pieces, and they were showing you where the pieces go. Every week I resented going. I really don't know why I'm going here. I'm the most in control...but it did me the absolute world of good and I still use that to this day. Because we are all made up of emotions, so if you have the freedom to not be so emotional, it gives you the ability for positive and negative: you are in control of that switch. After you say something, they will give you about ten other positive reasons why that happened, and it's up to you whether you want to choose the positive or the negative. That was amazing for me.

The statistics, which I don't know in Inverclyde because I've not been here that long, I don't know, but they're not working, I can see that things are getting worse and there are still these people round your table, Scottish Families is getting bigger - something's not working.

Daryl:

Right.

Agnes:

I think therapies, natural therapies, EFT and other one-to-one therapies are absolutely amazing. These things are still available, but they cost money. If the government would look at the costs, I understand that everyone's got a house to keep, as does the government, but when you are looking long term, if these loved ones, these mothers won't have so many chronic illnesses so that the hospitals, the doctors and the prescription drugs they give them would all cut down. The people themselves would get the help. The cost of things like stomach problems, lots of sugar, they don't eat well, they don't sleep well - that's all costing money. The same housekeeping could be turned around and with better results and for a better Inverclyde community to live in.

Daryl:

You can really see the value there of deeper therapies, of more holistic and different therapies. I suppose your view would be that those should be offered out more freely and more openly and with a lot more flexibility than what they might be just now. Thanks for that perspective.

That brings me onto another question: thinking about what you said there and the experience of families, we talked a little bit about commissioning services and who is responsible for that. We talked about that idea of families having a bigger voice and the idea of families being involved more and what services might look like. Do you think there is scope, or do you think that families should be involved a little bit more in that level? Do you think that families should have more of a say in what's offered?

Agnes:

I've listened to some people in the group and even on the WhatsApp group, it's absolutely amazing. Absolutely amazing. I've listened to them and I've heard them saying that their loved ones say, 'No. People don't understand. I'm sorry.' But the only people that they can trust with unconditional love would be their families, so I feel as though if their families, which Scottish Families are doing with the CRAFT, I think that's going to be amazing. I went to see a one-woman show yesterday that was introduced by Scottish Families.

Daryl:

That was our Best Fears Love Show, wasn't it?

Agnes:

Yes, and that was amazing. She re-enacted all the emotions, everything. She took it from when they first met. That could have been anybody in that room's story. And that's the same as therapy in a sense because you are actually watching somebody else's life, you can see a light. It did have a happy ending, which is not always the case, but I think with the help of the parents, they can understand therapy, the health issues, not as much stress and everything like that, their loved ones will trust them more. You say, look, this is what we can do, because it has worked here. Instead of them finding it off a social worker or somebody who comes and visits, I've heard them saying something about that, they've actually heard it. So, trust, in my opinion.

Daryl:

That's really interesting, and a core part of our CRAFT sessions is about saying, actually, if we can encourage you as a family member to just change a little bit of your behaviour, not only is that going to help you out, but one of the things it does is that it sort of models that you can change your own behaviour. If I can change mine, then you can also change yours. I think that ties in really nicely with some of the themes around CRAFT.

Agnes:

It's not tough love.

Daryl:

No.

Agnes:

It's not tough love, because ask a mother to give tough love - no chance. Not when they're trying to save their son or their daughter's life. It's not tough love, it's making themselves aware how strong they need to be and this is the time for treatment that they need to keep strong for them. It's shifting the focus onto themselves rather than their loved ones. It looks like tough love but they are really building strength into themselves.

Daryl:

I really loved the way you described it earlier on: you said, looking after yourself is one of the best gifts you can give someone else. I think that's a really lovely way of describing that one. When we look after our own wellbeing, we are actually looking after everyone else round about us as well at the same time. You mentioned during that chat there, a little bit about the WhatsApp group, I just wanted to talk on that thread a little bit because we have face-to-face groups, in-person, we also have a little WhatsApp channel down here in Inverclyde, where we have about 24-25 people in that. Can you tell me a little bit about what that WhatsApp group offers you that might be slightly different from other ways of engaging?

Agnes:

If I'm being honest, again, it was more what I could lend to that group because I felt as though I was a little bit stronger than the women round the table, when it came to the group, all the emotions would come again because whatever happened that day was on that group. It might have been one of their sons that hasn't come home all night and they worry, and this and this. One of the ladies said, if it wasn't for joining this group, I would be calling the police or calling an ambulance. Imagine, she would be abusing the system; that's what she felt by phoning an ambulance for her son or phoning the police to come and settle him down, but instead of that she was turning to the group.

I saw that as amazing support. She wasn't talking to strangers, she knew these people on the group that was she was getting the advice from. You can see through all this, there is an element of trust and love. Honestly. And they are just amazing people. I don't think I've ever met more amazing people in my life.

Daryl:

Wow, that's an amazing statement.

Agnes:

And strong. It would shame you. So, I'll never look at the parents of...when you see their son or daughter, don't think they come from parents that don't love them or care for them. I strongly believe it's the trauma from a young age.

Daryl:

Okay. We are approaching the end of our time together. We've just got a few minutes left and I want to ask you if there are any last messages or last words you want to say to anyone who is listening to this? This podcast might go out to people all over Scotland, maybe even further afield than that, so what would you say to anyone who was listening to this more generally? What are your last words about family support and the needs that people might need to have met when it comes to being a family member or living with alcohol or drug use. What last words do you have to anyone listening today?

Agnes:

If I was listening to myself talking and I had the traumas and the stresses with a loved one that some of the people around that table have, I would say, well it's okay for her because she's strong. I'm not strong. She's not suffering the pain that I'm suffering. She's not suffering the trauma. I might have two people on drugs, and they are right. Believe me, it would be an absolutely amazing thing for them to listen to Scottish Families, take their guidance and go when it suits them because yes, not everybody

needs to be like me, but I have got such a passion for this now that I really want to stand up and I don't want to shout with a whisper, that's what some of these mothers are feeling just now. I would say, don't say, 'It's alright for her.' I would say, is this group okay for me? And the answer to that would be absolutely. The group and the Scottish Families, if anyone has been affected by alcohol and drugs, this is the place to be if you're looking for genuine, confidential support.

Daryl:

Thank you very much, Agnes. That's very kind of you to say that. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon. I'll end things there I think, and I'll see you at group, hopefully this week.

Agnes:

You are welcome, Daryl.

Interview Ends

We are here to support you if you are concerned about someone else's alcohol or other drug use. We can chat, offer listening support and information, and link you either into our own services or services local to you. Contact our helpline on 0808 0101011. Email is: helpline@sfad.org.uk. Or you can use the webchat on our website, at www.sfad.org.uk.