# Parents experiences of living with an adolescent with a drug use problem: A call for coping support

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**Abstract**

The impact of adolescent substance abuse is widespread and significantly compromises the psycho-social well-being of those closest to the adolescent. This is evidentially so for parents who are required to cope with the adolescent’s misconduct along with their own psycho-social distress. Recent headlines in South African media have been intrigued by the latest release motion film release entitled the ‘Ellen Pakkies story’. This film tells the real-life story of a South African mother who murdered her drug addicted son in 2007 after suffering several forms of abuse at the hands of her son while he was addicted to crystal methamphetamine. Ms Pakkies confessed to the murder of her son and indicated that she had strangled him to death in a fit of rage while reflecting on the verbal and physical abuse she had endured at his hands. According to Ms Pakkies, she had been tormented by her son for several years, especially when he was euphoric and experiencing cravings or withdrawal. Although she had made numerous attempts to seek formal assistance and police protection, she did not receive the support that she needed and responded with desperation and violence. It is surely accepted that Ms Pakkies’ response to her son’s drug addiction is extreme, however her experiences present an important, yet often unheard, narrative of how parents lives are disrupted by adolescent substance abuse and how parents are unable (and unsupported) to deal with the significant distress that they endure. The anger, hopelessness, and devastation she felt is not unique but resonates with the experiences of mothers and other family members worldwide.

Another example of this form of violence was more recently reported when a 62 year old man murdered his son (28) who had been addicted to drugs for approximately 13 years. In a print media interview, Mr Abrahams described his experience of living with his son as “hell”, but maintained that he had not meant to kill him. While this act of violence was perhaps not premeditated, the frustration, anger and hopelessness that Mr Abrahams described, resembles that of Ms Pakkies and of the parents that participated in this study. Against this backdrop, the current paper describes the experiences and parental responses of mothers and fathers who live with adolescents who have drug use problems. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of providing adequate support to parents in order to prevent extreme and aggressive responses that ultimately disrupts family life even further.