

POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 16

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES: EXPLORING WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD A HAPPY HOMES

Christin D'Ovidio:

Welcome to The Power of Prevention Podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you of people who are working tirelessly for their professions, their families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening, in this case, substance misuse.

This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention.

We know the emotional wellbeing of young children is directly related to the health and wellness of their caregivers. When parents and caregivers have support, resources, and coping skills, they can then show their children that they care. They can communicate their expectations and stay connected even through challenging times.

We are excited today to have Susan McKeown join us, and she's going to talk about what it takes to create strong and resilient families. Her parenting and relationship advice isn't what you would expect to hear because she wants you to know that the caring needs to start with yourself. Parents need to care for themselves first so that they can then take care of their families.

Currently, Susan runs a weekly support group for family members that are struggling with substance misuse or the death of their child or a loved one. For over 20 years, she's offered guidance, grace and space to grieve.

She's the author of two books on the subject: *Beyond the First Dance*, and *Beyond the Tango: A Guide to a Thriving Marriage while Juggling Careers, Kids, and Chaos*.

Welcome, Susan. We are so pleased to chat with you. Thank you for coming to talk with us.

Susan McKeown:

Thank you, Christin. I'm happy to be here to talk about a subject that's near and dear to my heart.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I'm excited to get to hear what you say, too. So we're going to learn from you how important it's to care for ourselves so that we can care for others. How did you get into this work, and where do you draw your passion from?

Susan McKeown:

Well, I think that is probably something that comes both from personally and professionally. Professionally, I worked my 41-year career as a pediatric nurse practitioner and unusually in the same job, which was a real privilege for me.

I had the opportunity to work with families over three generations, and so I really saw the impact of adult relationships on the stability of the family. When they're healthy relationships with adults, there was a positive outcome for the children. And likewise, when there were unhealthy relationships in the family, the children suffered. Sometimes, sadly, that has long-term consequences for the child.

We talk a lot about trauma in children, and that's really where it starts at a very young age. And then

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personally, having been married for a long time and having raised four children, I certainly see the challenges of parenting and know that it is hard work and requires a lot of commitment and paying attention to yourself, your spouse, and your family, and always remembering really in that order where things happened. I look at it as a foundation of spouse and spouse, two adults, whatever. They are the foundation of the family, and then they are first and foremost individuals, and then they're a couple, and they're a family, and then they have individual children.

And sometimes in my work, I found that the kind of triangle, as I call it, I designed it as a hierarchy, is often inverted. The child is the one that is getting attention at the expense of the family, mostly of the individual parent and the individuals as a couple.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I was thinking about the titles of your book because you started with a building and a foundation and then went to a triangle. And then your titles are Beyond the First Dance and Beyond the Tango. You've gone through this other framework of thinking about it. Just wonder if you could speak to that a little bit.

Susan McKeown:

Well, for what it's worth between you and me, if you can see that triangle at all, can you, spouse on the bottom, that's what I see as the foundation of the family. You need to take care of yourself as an individual, encourage that with your spouse, and then take time as a couple. That's the best stability that you're going to be able to give your family and your child.

And too often in my work, as I said, I saw it inverted. It was the child that was up-to-date on their immunizations, their physicals. They had music lessons. They had their sports lessons. They never missed a birthday party, a sleepover, everything for them. And then I would ask parents, "So tell me about you. When was your last physical?" They couldn't remember. When was the last time that you went on a date alone together without children? And one time I actually had a couple say, "Oh, I guess it was eight years ago. Right, honey? We haven't been out since we had the children."

They think they're doing well for their children, but I would maintain that they're missing the foundation of that family and strengthening it.

Christin D'Ovidio:

How do you change? Where do people go with that if they're at that place?

Susan McKeown:

Well, at first acknowledging that, wow, I never thought of that before, that I am putting a lot of energy. I've got my job and I've got my children. And no, I guess we haven't had much time to actually connect and thinking that that's okay, we'll get to it later.

Well, later gets put off a lot. There's a thing out there, it's a very real thing, and it's called gray divorce. It is referring to couples who are married 25 to 30 years who are calling it quits. One could say, "Wow, after all these years?" Well, when you start scratching at it and look at the situation, it's that they have put

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themselves off in the back burner. They have put their marriage on the back burner and the focus has been on children. And then the children are grown and gone and they look at each other and who are you? We haven't had that much time. We really haven't had that much fun. I have 20 years left and I don't want to spend it like this.

It's the largest segment of the population that is divorcing and it requires prevention. That's what we're here to talk about today, is prevention. All my work is directed towards that, and it's why I wrote the two books. The first one is geared towards couples who are in a serious relationship contemplating marriage and what they should be thinking about before making that commitment.

And then the second book is, you've made the commitment, now you're into it with your partner, your children, and the kid's career's and chaos. And how are you juggling all that and how are you going to make it last?

Christin D'Ovidio:

Parents and care give, protect the emotional health and wellbeing of their children by establishing routines and expectations.

Our guest shares how we can make small changes in our daily lives to build strong and healthy connections with our family members.

Susan McKeown:

Absolutely. This stuff doesn't require more time. It really requires more thinking and prioritizing. One of us, we all feel we're very short on time and we are. We're very busy. And so when I talk about things, I like to keep them practical in the fact that they integrate them into the things that you're already doing. We pretty much all eat dinner every night.

The question is, are we eating dinner together or are we eating dinner separately on the run when I come home? And then we got to take the kids to the sporting event and get this one over to a music lesson. And so yeah, everybody's fed its own way some time, a lot of it in the car.

Well, eating is something that happens, but can you designate 20 minutes to a mealtime consistently? It doesn't have to happen at the same time. I certainly know raising four children we did not set the clock by 5:30 was dinner. It could be 5:30, 6:00, 7:30, but it happened and you knew it was going to happen, that this is a time where you're going to sit down together. You're not going to have cell phones. You're not going to answer the telephone in the house. You're not going to listen to any podcast or anything else. You're going to actually just sit there and chat about your day.

As my grandchildren have come to label it, the thorns and the roses, which is, I think, great. It's the highs and the lows. What was good about your day today? What really was hard about your day today? Each gets to talk.

It's good for children also to hear about their parents because they think that, well, we're above all this other stuff. And in fact, we do have stress. The boss is on your case about a project. You're having a difficult time with a colleague. There are things that go on. Can be great teaching moments for adults to share with their children. Likewise, certainly for parents to hear from their kids about the bully at school, the recess that didn't go well, the math quiz that he's failed. These things are important to find out

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ahead of time, and this is what's on kids' minds today.

If we don't have that time to connect with them and hear that, we're missing a huge, huge segment. There's a big talk sometimes about quality versus quantity. While quality time is all nice, you can't make up for quantity sometimes. You got to have the time to connect. You got to have that dinner time. You have to have that bedtime, particularly with young children.

But I find even with older kids to know that when you're ready to settle in, we can sit down and just take a deep breath and talk about the day and how it's been. That's where you can find out things with your kids. It's kids that don't have that sense of belonging and connection that have the greatest difficulty.

We've certainly seen in the last three years, anxiety, depression, just a feeling of isolation and disconnection. We talk a lot about substances. We're talking about prevention. The opposite of addiction is connection, and that's what a lot of people are missing is connection. I really think it starts right at home.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Well, you've alluded to the past three years. What happens when a family is going through a resources issue or a health issue?

Things have taken this left-hand turn and the stress has just skyrocketed.

Susan McKeown:

There certainly has been that. I think connecting again with outside resources, hopefully you have a healthcare provider and we should be using that healthcare provider. We think that, again, if you have children, I'll bet they've been seen. It's, are the adults taking the time to be seen themselves? Are they dealing with stress?

I'm always amazed that we have certain people built into our life for our own support systems. And then my example is if you have a car, I'll bet you have a car mechanic. That if your car's skipping today, I bet just who to call and have a look at it. Likewise, with a leaky pipe, an electrical outlet that's not working. You've got a plumber, an electrician. You've got these people in your life.

Then you say to people who you talk to when you have an ongoing stress that's just not getting better, who's your counselor? A lot of adults will look at you like, well, I don't have a counselor. Well, that should be a person that's part of your team, okay?

Do you have to see them all the time? No, you don't. But if you're plugged into somebody that you have a good relationship with, trust, a good rapport, their professional expertise can be invaluable to you in getting through difficult times.

Now, I'm certainly aware that right now is a challenge connecting with mental health. That's really been tested these last few years. I would say, well, I'm just somebody that plods forward anyway. Look in the back of your health insurance card. If you have Medicaid, you still have it. You have private insurance, on the back there's a place for behavioral health. There are resources in there. I think you need to think about, do you want to talk to a man or a woman? Look at the geography. Is it close to you?

Go through and remember that you are the consumer here so that you get a name of somebody you think this might look good. Call and say, "I'd like to know if I could have a brief appointment to just meet

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you and have you meet me and see if that could be a possible connection for us for ongoing counseling." And usually they will give you that.

You go in and you don't have to tell your entire life story, every issue on the plate. But if you can get a sense of the, and this is what I'm dealing with right now. Is this something that you're comfortable dealing with and get a sense. I like this person, it was easy to talk to. I felt that he was listening to me. Great. Move ahead and set a full-time appointment with them.

And if you don't feel that sense, your gut is telling you, "I don't think this is a good connection," move on to another one. On your list of providers. You are the consumer, and that relationship can be absolutely wonderful.

And then you set up a time and they get to know you. When you go back each time, it's a kind of, what's going on now? What's on my plate? What's on my agenda that I need to talk about? You can really get into things. I call them a professional friend, okay? It's somebody that knows you, but they've got the expertise and the objectivity to, not give you answers, but help you process an issue and really come out with some answers that can work for you.

I find it very valuable, and I'm a big, big proponent of having a counselor as part of your team in your support system.

Christin D'Ovidio:

I think that's great advice. What can we do as a community to support families that are going through this and the wellbeing of children? What can we, individuals, put in our community?

Susan McKeown:

Well, every child goes to school and they're going to school earlier, at three for preschools, and kindergarten and then grade school and junior high and high school. And certainly build in systems within those schools. We have student assistance program people, hugely important. Every once in a while you'll hear the cuts are happening. Oh, well, let's get rid of the SAPs as we call them.

Well, for goodness sakes, that's not who you want to get rid of. That's a support system. You want to integrate those into our schools' integration of behavioral health. And that's happening here. So we are making progress in some areas, and that's really important.

As workplaces go, we are making some strides and having work-friendly workplaces where people can talk about stress and mental health issues, if they're having substance issues, without the threat of losing their job. They can talk to somebody in the human resource department or their supervisor without feeling that they're going to get let go because of it.

The pandemic has certainly brought to light that one out of five people have some mental health issues. Substance issues have soared during this pandemic, so this is just not unusual. You feel like you're alone when you're experiencing depression or having increased substance use. You're not alone. You're not alone. And the more we can talk about it, the better able workplaces in the communities are going to be able to deal with it.

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Christin D'Ovidio:

So 20 years of being there to support and provide a space for people that are breathing, dealing with substance misuse or substance use disorder and challenges and relationships and families, what are some lessons learned? Because you've learned a lot that can just help them maybe feel less lonely as they struggle.

Susan McKeown:

Yes. I often say that our group, or the FASTER Family Support Group. FASTER is an acronym for families advocating substance treatment, education, and recovery. That's what the word stands for. And so we've met weekly, 20 years at Waypoint, formerly Child and Family Services, in Manchester every Tuesday evening. In fact, the room should be bursting at the seams, right? Because we know how prevalent substance issues are for families.

And it's not. We've had a continual stream over the 20 years and we've seen some remarkable things happen. So what have we seen? Well, I will tell you that. When the new person comes in, and I will point out that it's often the mother that comes in, okay? Occasionally it is a couple, but more often it's a mother. Sometimes the father will join later. Mothers are mother bears. By the time they come in, that's usually, sadly, out of desperation.

Now, that's not what we call prevention. I'd like to get them early. I would like parents there when their kids are 14, 15, smoking pot, stealing a beer. They're thinking, "Oh, I don't like this."

But oftentimes parents don't want to look at it as a potential problem and say, "Well, it's a phase. All kids do this. They'll get over it. She'll outgrow it." Don't count on that. Come. Come early. Come early and learn some prevention techniques and how to intervene early. So oftentimes we are getting parents that are the parents of 22, 25, 30, 35, 45 year olds. And this is because they finally gotten to the point now they're desperate. I'm afraid my child is going to die. That's why I'm here.

Well, we in prevention want it way, way before that. So when they come in because they're there out of desperation. I have great respect for people that walk in the door because they are feeling that, well, what am I doing walking into a room full of strangers to tell them how disruptive my house is, my life is, my child is? This is so painful.

I always tell new people, "Please just relax, sit down. You don't have to say anything." We have guidelines and principles that we go by and we go around, we get an update so they get to hear from everybody. And then I just ask them, "Did you want to share something?"

And if they pass, and really I've had one parent pass in 20 years. Every other parent speaks up because after they hear from other parents, they realize, "Oh my God, I'm not alone. These people get it." They get it and they feel comfortable sharing some of the very difficult situations that they're living in. We end the meeting with a very important thing. I call it the most important part of our meeting.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Susan stresses the importance of self-care and the benefit it has on those shoe loves. Self-care is not selfish. It is an act of love.

Susan McKeown:

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Okay, now what are you going to do for yourself this week before we meet again next week? And for yourself means just that: for yourself. Self-care. It means it's not anything to do with your job, your spouse, your child, or your house. It's you picking something to do for an hour. I also, in 20 years, have never had a new parent be able to answer that the first night. Deer in the headlights, they are just thinking, me?

That's exactly what they say. "You mean me? Just for me?" Because they have been so focused on this case. It's their child with substance use, or spouse or sibling by the way. It's for adults who have a loved one. They haven't thought of anything else besides this.

Even if substance use isn't the issue, I find overall people are self-care deprived. They're not thinking of themselves. They mean to, but by the time they get through taking care of the other people in their life, there's really just no time or energy left for themselves. So it really gets them thinking. And I will tell you, some of them have taken up to six months to really answer that question. Some of them catch on pretty fast and say, "Okay, I'm going to do it." And one might say, "I'm going to go for a pedicure."

Okay, that's a good beginning. You're carving out an hour for yourself. What I'm hoping that we get to is not just an event like a pedicure but an integration of wellness in their life. So that they say, "I'm going to start walking every day," and they're doing that as part of their lifestyle every day. I'm going to meet a friend and go out to a movie or something, that they're just doing something alone or with somebody else that they haven't had time to connect to.

This is the beginning, and you need to think of the different areas. When we talk about self-care, you need to think of the five areas of your life, if you will. The physical, emotional, financial, social, and spiritual. I call those the legs under the table. You've got a problem, doesn't matter what it is, being self-care deprived is the problem. Or it can be you have a loved one with substance use. Or you have a challenge in your marriage.

Whatever it is, you need to get some support here. What are the legs that you're going to stick under your table? One or two legs is not going to do it, okay? You need a minimum of three legs, and I suggest those five to really build a stable table. That's going to be hard to destabilize yourself if you're really working in those areas.

Christin D'Ovidio:

Oh, that's great advice. That's true. Once one of the legs is gone, if you don't have enough, then you're back where you were before.

Well, as you know, the name of this podcast series is The Power of Prevention. We like to end it when we get to ask all our guests the same question, which is, how do you describe prevention or what is your definition of prevention?

Susan McKeown:

I think prevention for me is being proactive, of anticipating some of what problems might be. Building strengths within yourself and helping other people. Looking at it first, as we've talked about, as individuals, and then as a couple and as a family and as a community. So it happens on all those levels.

I see it when you describe prevention or the definition of it. I got to see it taking an active role. I have

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this personal mantra that is show up, speak up, and cheerlead. And by that I mean when there is an issue that you are passionate about, and it comes up in a community forum, maybe you see it as a political group getting together to discuss this issue, and it's something that you're passionate about, show up, okay?

When you're there, say something. Don't dominate, have one or two sentences that address the topic and say it, okay? It puts you out there. We happen to be very fortunate that we are in a small state. My saying about New Hampshire is you show up once, you're involved. You show up twice, you're famous, okay? They remember you. If you speak up and say something, they remember you.

The third part of that was cheerlead. All I mean by that is connect yourself with the other people that are also passionate about this topic and what they're doing and support that group, cheerlead that group, work with that group. And so that's to me is prevention in action.

Christin D'Ovidio:

That's great. I'd like to think of it that way. That's like a great framework for it.

I would like to thank you so much for joining us today, Susan, this was Susan McKeown. It's been wonderful to speak with you.

Susan McKeown:

Thank you. Thank you for taking the time, Christin. Really enjoyed it. And keep up your good work because it's very, very, very important.