

[Editor's note: As a result of the below letter, an Asifa (gathering) for Rabbonim was convened (summer '11) in Lakewood. Rabbi Dr. Avrohom J. Twerski presented some basic information concerning addictions to this Asifa. This same summer the "Chosson Rebbes" of BMG were also addressed on this same topic by another mental health professional.]

S-ANON's LETTER TO RAV MATISYOHU, Shlit'a

לכבוד הרה"ג סולומון, שליט"א

The משגיח said in the biannual כינוס לנשים (appx 7 years ago); "הכל בחזקת סומין עד שמאיר הקב"ה את עיניהם". This concept has been a tremendous source of חיזוק that helps me deal with my נסיונות. But I would also like to apply this concept to the fact that הקב"ה is blinding many Rabbonim in the areas of mental and emotional health. I would like to be a שליח of ה' to help open the eyes of the Rabbonim ("עיני העדה"), so that no one else should suffer the way we did - seemingly unnecessarily.

This letter is not in any way referring to the way the משגיח deals with mental and emotional health, rather, it is a plea to the משגיח to speak to the Rabbonim - if not all over, then at least in Lakewood. The point of my letter is to ask the משגיח to make the Rabbonim aware that they should treat a mental or emotional illness the same way they would treat a physical illness.

Imagine a woman would come to a Rav saying that her husband has יענע מהלה at the beginning stages. Would the Rav give the wife suggestions/advice about how she can cure the illness? Or would the Rav send them straight to a doctor? If the Rav would try to help them cure the illness on their own, the disease would just spread, and the husband would deteriorate.

Well, that's what happened to me! We caught my husband's addiction in the beginning stages. To make a long story short, I was dealing with Rabbi X (Lakewood), Rabbi Y (Another major Chareidi community), and Rebbetzin Z for 7 years, and I was terribly misguided (we thought my husband could fight his *יצר הרע*). His addiction kept getting worse, and I kept on telling and writing to the Rabbonim that my husband was deteriorating in front of my eyes. We did not realize that an addiction is a real disease, and the only way to help addictions is through therapy and a 12-step program (*heard from R' Abraham J. Twerski and R' Yehoshua Kaganoff*). Not only did the rabbinical advice not help, but it enabled my husband to continue in his addiction for many more years, and caused a lot of damage to our entire family. I have 4 children *קע"ה* who were definitely affected.

Not only was my entire family in major *סכנה*, *לדורי דורות*, and I, *ולנצח נצחים*, I was also in physical danger (of catching STD - sexually transmitted diseases)! We are dealing with matters of *פיקוח נפש*!

The same way a Rav would not even attempt to cure a physical illness by giving the patient or the family members advice; he should realize that a mental/emotional disease is completely out of his range. The Rabbonim must learn to recognize the signs of mental/emotional illness, and learn to differentiate between people in need of rabbinical advice, and people in need of a doctor.

ב"ה my husband is in therapy and a 12-step program now, and is on the road to recovery, and my [child] and I are also going for therapy because of all the effects the addiction had on us. But besides for dealing with the pain of the situation, I am dealing with the pain of having suffered, seemingly, unnecessarily (I am working on myself to recognize that everything was *באשערט* and happened because that was *רצון ה'*)

If even one person can learn from my mistakes and the Rabbonim's mistakes, it would give me some נחמה.

I know the Rabbonim are there to help us, and most of them are extremely well-meaning. May הקב"ה open our eyes, and help the Rabbonim to help us.

Sincerely,

(I met with Rebbetzin Salomon in person and spoke to the Rebbetzin on the phone a few times)

S-ANON's LETTER TO HER RABBONIM

רבב"ד Rabbi X, שליט"א (A prominent Rav in another major
Chareidi community)

רבב"ד Rabbi Y, שליט"א (A prominent Rav in Lakewood)

[editor's note – separate letters were sent by Mrs. Anonymous to each Rav without mentioning the other.]

I am the one whose husband has an addiction to Arayos.

We have a lot of הכרת הטוב for all the Rav has done for us over the past 7 years. I want to stress, that I have absolutely no טענות on the Rav. I would just like to explain our situation, since I have more clarity and understanding now. The reason that I'm writing this letter, is only to benefit other people that might seek the Rav's advice and הדרכה.

Right now, our entire family (except our baby) is suffering from the effects of the addiction: I am emotionally unhealthy because I suppressed my own needs, desires, and feelings for many years, and my self-confidence decreased from the abuse I got from my husband. Our 9 1/2 yr old needs a major ישועה. S/He is going to therapy now, and it's a slow and painful process, and the outcome is not guaranteed. Our 6 year old is extremely difficult and also needs help. Our 7 1/2 yr old is very codependent. Although I always thought divorce would be the worst option, I am now realizing that if הם ושלום my husband does not recover, then divorce would be the best option. His addiction is destructive to our family. We are clearly seeing the destruction it brought on all of us. We hope and daven that we can repair the damage and only get stronger from this.

Several months ago, my husband and I both joined the SA & S-Anon (Sexaholics-Anonymous) support groups. We feel, after all these years, we have finally come to the right place. Yes, there are support groups for close relatives of addicts, because we have a sickness called "**Codependence**" or "**Co-**

addiction". The abridged definition of codependence: Attempting and thinking that we can **control** the addiction, taking **responsibility** for the addict, **neglecting** our own needs, doing more than our share, **suppressing** our emotions, being **unassertive**, and being a **martyr**. As the book says, codependence is "a normal reaction to an abnormal situation." I am a paradigm of codependence. Therefore, I need the support groups to help me recover.

Let me explain in more detail: For many years, I tried to control the addiction (based on the guidance I received) by: constantly trying to make things easier for him and reduce stressful situations for him, giving him unconditional love and warmth, building his self esteem and showing him respect, showing him that I wanted our intimate relationship, always being physically available for him, not letting him drive our car and chauffeuring him all day. But as I am learning, all the aforementioned things did not help at all, and instead they **enabled** him to continue his addiction. How? Because by my taking **responsibility** for his behavior, he did not have to suffer the consequences. And why didn't my efforts help? Because we are **powerless** over the addiction. There is no way an addict can overcome his addiction by himself – the only way an addict can become sober is by working a **Twelve Step Program** and joining support groups (*heard from Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski and Rabbi Yehoshua Kaganoff*). The **ה' יסוד** is to realize we are powerless and only 'ה can help us, and to take moral inventory and become honest with ourselves. One of our slogans for the Co-Addicts, is "**3 C's**: You didn't **Cause** it, You can't **Control** it, and You can't **Cure** it".

This has helped me to understand why the Rav's guidance didn't help the addiction. For example, I was advised that it would help if I would be physically available to my husband, and even initiate the relationship. But most of the addiction

specialists hold the opposite – that I should **abstain** until my husband is completely sober. An addict has to be dealt with in a tough way, and suffer consequences for his behavior. Most of the time, an addict needs to be threatened in order to pull his life together. In other words, Rabbi Kaganoff told me that if I accept my husband unconditionally, he will not feel the need to get his life together.

In any case, it's impossible to have a relationship with an addict, unless he is sober. Therefore, whatever I had been trying to work on to improve our relationship – being warm, respecting him, making him feel good, being physically available for him, and making **בית שלום** my main focus, etc.... was all for nothing. I was trying to accomplish the impossible. I was being told to create **יש מאין**. Why? Because an addict is not emotionally present, and is wrapped up in his own fantasy world, unless he is completely sober.

Although the Rav meant well, and sincerely wanted to help us improve our relationship, the Rav's advice really did the opposite. How?

Addiction means **self deception**. The addict fools himself to the point that he doesn't even realize he is lying. He has **distorted thinking**. My husband was completely **deluded**. He thought that I loved him, wanted him, desired him, and accepted him unconditionally. And the fact that I was guided to show him this, only helped him continue in his self deception and delusion. An addict must be treated with toughness, and must suffer the consequences of his behavior. Also, our therapist – T M – who is a marriage counselor that specializes in addiction is working with us to develop an **HONEST** relationship. The Rav was telling me to show my husband love, but that was not real. The only way we can have a good relationship, is if it's real and honest – meaning that we can both express our true feelings to each other.

Also, our whole intimate relationship has been so traumatic for me: I did things that were disgusting to me, against my will, and for the wrong reasons. I never got any pleasure from it. It became something that I dread, and have no interest or desire for it. I need major professional help in this area.

Our entire family was/is in a מצב of סכנת נפשות. But besides for the danger in ריהניות, I must make the Rav aware that I was also in physical danger – of הם ושלום getting an STD (Sexually Transmitted Disease). There are frum women in my support group - in Lakewood - who actually did catch these diseases. The danger is real! When we started dealing with professionals, I was told to get myself tested for any of these diseases. I should have been told this, right after we found out that he was picking up prostitutes, because I was living for 4 years in danger without being tested!

My main point is: The same way a Rav would not even attempt to try to cure a physically ill husband, and a Rav would not give a wife advice how to cure her husband, a Rav cannot cure or help a mental/emotional illness. I think that Rabbanim must learn to recognize the difference between a situation that requires rabbinical advice, and a situation requiring Professional help. Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski told me he wrote a book for Rabbanim.

Again, I would like to express my utmost הכרת הטוב for all the time, advice, and היזוק the Rav gave us over the past 7 years. We know the Rav only had our best interest in mind, and the Rav's help was pure חסד, and we really appreciate the Rav's sincere caring and desire to help us. This letter is only for the sake of others – that they should receive the correct guidance.

Sincerely,
Anonymous

S-ANON's 2nd LETTER TO HER RAV

שליט"א, רבבי X לכבוד

The last letter I wrote to the Rav (over a year ago) was when I had first joined the S-Anon support groups for the wives of Sexaholics. B"H I am greatly enjoying and benefitting from the group and the 12-step Program we work. I am now in the Program for almost 1 and a half years, and I have B"H grown tremendously in my emotional health, as well as my understanding of the dynamics of my situation.

I know that in my previous letter I explained some important concepts, but now, since I have come to a deeper level of understanding, and (I hope) I am a bit older and wiser, I would like to explain even further.

The difference between 1 and a half years ago and now, is that I have learned to focus on myself, instead of my husband. In my previous letter, I emphasized the fact that my behavior and the guidance I had received, enabled my husband to continue his addiction. Obviously, this is excruciatingly painful, because we tried so hard to stop his addiction, while in reality we accomplished the opposite.

But now that I am focusing on myself, I am realizing that my behavior and the guidance I tried to follow, caused a lot of damage to myself. Besides for the joint sexaholism that I have to recover from, I also have to recover from the way I acted for many years.

Let me explain: Codependence means "controlling others and not caring for yourself". Well, that is exactly what I did before I joined S-Anon: I tried to control him (with not letting him drive the car, with trying to "keep him busy in the bedroom" etc ...), while

neglecting myself. I neglected my needs, desires, and feelings. I was a “caretaker” - my whole focus was on him, not on myself. It was like I didn't count, my feelings didn't matter, my wants and preferences didn't make a difference, and my needs were unimportant.

I know the Rav tried explaining this to me, but I honestly, truly, did not understand. The only way I was able to begin to understand, was with the help of S-Anon. And that is why, in the past year and a half, I have been able to change.

I am now learning that my needs, desires, and feelings are very important, and should be taken into consideration. I am realizing that being a martyr for the sake of controlling someone, does not benefit anyone, and usually backfires. I am learning the importance of taking care of myself.

I often think of this whole concept in terms of **אם אין אני לי מי לי, וכשאני לעצמי מה אני**. Our case was a living example of this *mishnah*: I am proof of **אם אין אני לי מי לי** If I don't take care of myself, who will? I really neglected myself. And [my husband] was a proof of **אני וכשאני לעצמי מה אני** because an addict is completely wrapped up in himself. Now, I am learning how to be for myself.

This goes even deeper: The root of codependence is low self esteem / low self worth. I had a very low self worth, which caused me to feel that my thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires were not worth anything either. But now the Program is helping me realize that I am worth it, and my feelings, needs, and desires are worth a lot.

I would like to discuss one of the biggest tragedies of my situation: **I have not been to the mikveh in approx 15 months.** I know the Rav probably finds this mind boggling, and the Rav is probably wondering, *"Doesn't that make it harder for him?"* So let me answer that question: Although it might be making it harder (even

though some hold that it doesn't make a difference), *it is not my responsibility* to go to the *mikveh* just to help him, if **I would be hurting myself**. And now, according to the professionals we are dealing with, I would definitely be hurting myself by going. **And in the long run, it will not benefit either of us.**

Why would I be hurting myself if I would go to the *mikveh*? Let me explain: For many years, I used our intimate relationship as a tool to control his addiction (In other words, if I would fulfill his needs, he wouldn't have to go elsewhere to have his needs fulfilled). Besides for the fact that this was a totally ineffective tool, because it is impossible for me to control his addiction, this caused MAJOR trauma for me.

Our intimate life became a horror story: The only emotions I felt were dread, tension, pressure, guilt, fear, pain, frustration, helplessness, desperation, and relief when it was over. We had intimacy for *all the wrong reasons*. It was the *complete opposite of what it is supposed to be*. I did 100% for him, and he did 0% for me. He was not interested, he was not at all “present”, and he did not participate physically or emotionally most of the time. I did things that were absolutely disgusting and *echeled* (ed - revolting to) me.

Before our abstinence, each time we were together I had a lump in my throat from beginning to end, and sometimes it even turned into tears. As soon as the bedroom door closed, all my negative thoughts came tumbling and swirling into my head. Everything he said or did, triggered a negative mental association or memory. So with a huge lump in my throat, and trying to hold back tears, how can I be an enjoyable partner to be with?

Whenever I even think about being together with him, I feel such a tremendous sense of dread. I am at a point that I feel like I don't want “*intimacy*”, I don't need it, and I can live my life just fine without it.

But aside from my issues, [my husband] has not been sober that long. And when he was not sober there was nothing to even talk about, because it is not possible to have a relationship with an addict who is not sober.

Recently, since he's doing pretty well now, I decided to think about going to the *mikveh*. I did not know how to approach my problems, so I went for an evaluation to [a Frum world-renowned therapist], who specializes in these issues. Her answer was clear and unequivocal: I have suffered severe TRAUMA in my [intimacy] life. I need specialized "Trauma Therapy". I am not up to working on anything sexual, before I reduce the trauma. So I am starting treatment with an expert therapist IY"H, (Although not Jewish, she is given top ratings by Echo, who refers Chareidi people to her for services on a regular basis.), travelling 1 hour 15 minutes each way, and paying \$200 per session.

It is so painful to see the damaging results of my behavior and attitude, that were based on the guidance I received (and my own unhealthiness). There is no one else in my support group (out of the 40) who suffered so much trauma in this area, because most of them were fortunate to have joined S-Anon right away, when they found out about their husbands' addiction. If I would have joined S-Anon earlier, I would have known the 3 C's: I didn't Cause it, I can't Control it, and I can't Cure it.

It is *tragic* that I wasted so many years, and I spent so much effort - tears, toil and sweat - trying to do the impossible ... while throwing myself away.

All I can do now, is work on my *emunah* that everything I went through was meant to be. Also, I can daven and put in my *hishtadlus*, to undo the damage and become healthy and whole. And part of my healing is to spread awareness among Rabbanim, so that others should get the proper help as soon as possible.