Books: 'Beyond Addiction' explores alternative to interventions for substance abusers

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Tulsa World | Posted: Sunday, April 20, 2014 12:00 am

Addiction touches at least 1 in 4 families in the United States. Each year, more than 22 million individuals have problems with substances that can be classified as dependence or abuse. At some point in their lives, about 30 million adults abuse alcohol.

All too often, as Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens and Nicole Kosanke point out, loved ones do not know when or how to respond: they let the abuser "hit rock bottom" and/or grab the first and most restrictive option they hear about, "because it feels safest."

In "Beyond Addiction," the authors all of whom are affiliated with the Center for Motivation and Change draw on the key tenets of CRAFT (Community Reinforcement and Family Training) to help family members promote positive behavioral change in substance abusers.

The process begins with self-care. By tending to their own basic needs, the authors argue, loved ones can enhance equanimity, physical health, strength, stress tolerance, a capacity for perspective, an awareness of emotional triggers, happiness, resilience and a capacity to face challenges and setbacks.

Eschewing labels (including addiction), interventions and "tough love," they then recommend a host of supportive, motivational techniques to get users into treatment.

Although not always persuasive, their book, which is full of useful information and practical suggestions, is an important resource for families affected by drug and alcohol problems.

Intent on empowering friends and family, the authors argue that genes do not seal a person's fate. They estimate that the heritability of addictions varies from 40-70 percent. And they cite evidence that, with awareness, coping skills and medication, brains can heal and develop new behavioral patterns.

Foote, Wilkens and Kosanke also make a compelling case that confronting users engenders defensiveness and "is the archenemy of motivation."

They suggest that loved ones begin by trying to understand why the individual is engaging in a given behavior. And they provide concrete examples of communication that invites change; strategies to reinforce alternative, positive behavior; and rewards that might be given or withheld.

The authors, however, aren't always convincing. Unwilling to use the admittedly vague and stigmatizing term "addict," they often suggest techniques that seem more applicable to "users" than "hard core" abusers.

Nor do they adequately distinguish between strategies designed for adults and those more appropriate to
teenagers.

Even more problematic is their claim that a goal of abstinence is not always best because it can deter users from seeking help. They cite a 1970s study in which a group assigned a moderation goal had a much higher rate of total abstinence than the abstinence group.

But they also endorse abstinence for inpatient care and indicate that it "probably makes the most sense initially for many people, for any number of reasons." And they do not discuss the impact of "moderate" use on individuals with genetic tendencies to addiction.

That said, their recommendation that the best way to navigate this issue and many others involves having users take some ownership of the process makes sense. As long as you're ready with Plan B.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.