

Addiction & The Humanities, Vol. 5 (10) - Beyond the family secrets in Mackenzie Phillips' *High on Arrival*

December 9, 2009

Several celebrities have recently published “addiction memoirs.” Carrie Fisher, Andre Agassi, and former child stars Jodie Sweetin and Melissa Gilbert have all written candidly about their substance abuse. (We reviewed Fisher’s *Wishful Drinking* in the [last edition of *Addiction & the Humanities*](#).) None of their stories has garnered as much attention as Mackenzie Phillips’ revelation of her incestuous affair with her father John Phillips, founder of The Mamas & the Papas, as detailed in her new memoir *High on Arrival*. Indeed, *High on Arrival* is replete with stories that illustrate the power of addiction to warp relationships. However, the most compelling aspect of Phillips’ story is not what happened during the depths of her addiction to cocaine and heroin. What is more interesting is her understanding of how she fell into the abyss, and how she got out.



Mackenzie Phillips was born into a world of fame, fortune, and serious drug abuse. She thought her father was distant and irresponsible, and he has admitted that he lived a life of drug-fueled hedonism during this time. As a child, Phillips believed that modeling her father's drug use could help her secure a place for herself in his world. As a result, she was rolling marijuana joints at age ten,

bringing cocaine to school while in the sixth grade, and regularly consuming LSD, Quaaludes, and cocaine by age thirteen. She never fit in with non-users; she writes that when around “normal” kids, she felt like an “oddly privileged outsider” (p. 15).

Although Phillips’ early drug use might shock many readers, she seemed to manage it during her early teenage years without major adverse consequences. She achieved success in the hit sitcom *One Day at a Time* and attended a high school for the performing arts. However, during her late teenage years, the frequency and quantity of drug use escalated. Drugs quickly became a disruptive force in her life. For example, she lost weight and was constantly late for work. Often, she showed up for work still reeling from the effects of the previous night’s abuses. Her job—what she saw as the most stabilizing force in her life—was in jeopardy. Here again, the drug use isolated her. Of her descent into the life of a drug addict, she writes, “I alone knew that I had crossed a line that people don’t cross, and it made me different. I was a fragment of a person, and my secret isolated me” (p. 168). She coped with her sense of isolation and shame by getting high. She was fired from her job and started injecting cocaine and heroin on a daily basis.

The bulk of *High on Arrival* is a graphic description of what happened next. For the next thirty years, over the course of three marriages, several trips to rehab, and the birth and rearing of one child, Phillips and those around her experienced the harmful consequences of her self-described out-of-control drug use. The consequences are innumerable and shocking. There was the incestuous relationship with her father, which she describes as “a series of twisted, blurry memories that I had no desire to see by the light of day” (p. 169). There is also the time that Phillips shot-up in front of her young brother, and the time she brought her own newborn son to a crack house in the middle of the night. Getting and taking drugs became more important than everything else.

These episodes in Phillips’ life have attracted the most media attention. And yet, for people who want to understand addiction and recovery, what really matters is Phillips’ quest for recovery and redemption. She seems to understand this. She writes that, “... the power of drugs is a given. The real questions are how far an individual goes, and why, and what, if anything, gives her the power to stop” (p. 172). For Phillips, recovery and redemption remain elusive. She attended rehab and attained sobriety for about a decade; during this time, she successfully transitioned into the life of a working actress and mother. But not long after her father’s death, she started to slip back into addiction. Before long she was living

with drug dealers, smoking heroin and shooting cocaine. An 2008 arrest compelled her to seek treatment again. In the conclusion of the book Phillips expresses a sense that she has attained long-term sobriety. She remains aware, however, that the “monster” of her addiction might re-awaken at any point.

There are many aspects of Phillips’ story that are extraordinary. She counts rock stars and television stars among her friends and family, and her sitcom salary financed her drug addiction. However, many aspects of her story are all too ordinary. For instance, as a child Phillips experienced family discord and a lack of parental supervision. Her family history also suggests she might carry a genetic risk for substance abuse. According to the [syndrome model of addiction](#) (Shaffer et al., 2004), these psychosocial and neurobiological risk factors increase the vulnerability to addiction. Because Phillips was exposed to drug use — as opposed to, for instance, gambling — and because she found the drug use pleasurable, she was especially susceptible to drug addiction. Some of the expressions of her addiction are specific to drug abuse: these include her track marks and dramatic weight loss. However, many of the consequences she experienced are not specific to drug addiction. For example, in terms of psychosocial consequences, people who experience chemical addiction (like Phillips) and people who experience behavioral addiction (e.g., pathological gambling) are both vulnerable to feelings of shame, guilt, and social isolation (as reviewed by Shaffer et al., 2004). Moreover, like Phillips, people with different types of addiction share a tendency to experience neuroadaptation (e.g., tolerance and withdrawal; Shaffer et al., 2004). During one of Phillips’ early stints in rehab, her counselors did not view addiction as different manifestations of the same underlying syndrome. Because the counselors viewed alcohol addiction as an entirely different disorder, they allowed patients with drug addiction to continue drinking alcohol. As a result, Phillips began to drink excessively. She writes that “the booze helped fill the hole that cocaine... had left. But the hole was deep, so it took a lot of booze to fill it” (p. 146). Now scientists know that it is common for people to “hop” from one addiction to another before successfully recovering from the root of their addiction (Shaffer et al., 2004).

In the end, the keys to Phillips’ current period of sobriety are probably not extraordinary. She attributes her recovery to the support of her family and friends and, perhaps more importantly, to her own developing awareness of the role that drugs have played in her life. *High on Arrival* will likely attract readers interested in its celebrity gossip and salacious family secrets. However, there is much in this

book that might offer insight and even hope to everyday people struggling with addiction and its various consequences.

-Heath
er Gray

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